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Foreign language learners' interactions with their teachers on Facebook



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ABSTRACT

There is a need to explore English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' interactions with their teachers in social networking media, as interactions that directly relate to the linguistic, social, and cognitive development of learners have not been examined within the EFL learning process. Thus, in the context of Turkish EFL learners' perceptions, this study aims to examine the level of EFL learners' interactions with their teachers on the social networking service Facebook and to determine the relationship between the level of their interaction and the variables of age, gender, and year of study. The sample group of the study consisted of 121 EFL learners at a Turkish state university. Before the frequencies, mean scores, standard deviations, *t*-test and analysis of variance were computed, a background questionnaire was administered that assessed the degree of their perception of these interactions. The results indicated that Turkish EFL students prefer passive behaviors regarding their interactions with their teachers and that age, gender and year of study are significantly correlated with some of the items in the scale. It is recommended that further research focus on factors that may impact the level of interaction between teachers and learners and on the perceptions of student–teacher interaction on Facebook from the teachers' perspectives.

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1. Introduction

This study aims to investigate the level of EFL learners' interactions with their teachers on social media and the relationship between the level of interaction and factors such as age, gender, and year of study. Several concerns motivated the research. First, there is a general lack of research on how social media contributes to education (Aydin, 2012). Second, no research was found on the level of interaction between EFL learners and teachers, while studies were found regarding both negative and positive effects of student–teacher interaction on social media in a general educational context. Moreover, research has mainly focused on peer interaction on social media rather than EFL student–teacher interaction. Third, there is a lack of research on age and gender effects on student–teacher interactions on social media in EFL contexts, including the Turkish EFL context. As student–teacher interaction is a significant issue with profound influence on the linguistic, social, and cognitive development of learners, this study will contribute to the field of EFL teaching and learning.

As Teclhaimanot and Hickman (2011) highlight, Web 2.0 technologies change the ways in which individuals interact and have the potential to impact education significantly. Facebook, a registered trademark of Facebook Inc., is an online social networking service and a Web 2.0 technology that has over 845 million active users (Protalinski, 2012). It not only allows

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individuals to create personal profiles, add friends, exchange messages, and chat online (Aydin, 2012) but also has the potential to positively impact education (Teclhaimanot & Hickman, 2011). In a broad review of the literature on Facebook usage within educational contexts, Aydin (2012) reports that research has mainly focused on the characteristics of Facebook users, the reasons people use it, its harmful effects, Facebook as an educational environment, its effects on culture and language, and the effects of individual variables on the use of Facebook. Aydin (2012) concludes that Facebook may be readily utilized as an educational environment. However, he emphasizes that there is a serious lack of research on its use as an educational resource.

As Ferdig (2007; cited in Teclhaimanot & Hickman, 2011) states, social networking promotes social interaction, supports active and social learning, and constructs knowledge within a constructivist environment, echoing Vygotsky's (1978) notion that society and culture influence cognitive growth. Moreover, Ferdig (2007; cited in Teclhaimanot & Hickman, 2011) notes that social networks connect learners with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978) within students' zones of proximal development, and more knowledgeable others are not limited to the classroom (Teclhaimanot & Hickman, 2011). Although Facebook has the potential to positively affect EFL learning, research on the interactions between EFL learners and teachers is lacking. In fact, while interaction is one of the main reasons for students' participation in Facebook (Aydin, 2012; Huang, Yang, Huang, & Hsiao, 2010; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), several studies focus on peer interactions (e.g., McCarthy, 2010; Robelia, Greenhow, & Burton, 2011), whereas only one study, conducted by Teclhaimanot and Hickman (2011), explores student–teacher interactions and age and gender effects on their interaction. Thus, EFL student–teacher interactions on Facebook, which constitute social contexts for language development and support learners in acquiring communicative intentions (Tomasello, 1999), have yet to be investigated.

The linguistic, social, and cognitive development of learners is closely and directly related to active participation in sociocultural events (Hall & Walsh, 2002) and environments. In this sense, classrooms are not the only places that shape learners' language development. Student–teacher interactions on Facebook, which provide social learning opportunities, may contribute positively to EFL learning experiences. In this context, the level of EFL learners' interactions with their teachers remains to be examined, and levels of interaction have not been clearly defined. How EFL learners perceive interactions with their teachers on Facebook must be researched before developing approaches to improve the use of Facebook in EFL teaching and learning activities.

1.1. Literature review

This section reviews the research on Facebook as a tool for interaction and communication between students and teachers, the effects of gender and age on such interactions, Facebook within educational contexts, and the effects of Facebook on teaching and learning a target culture and language.

Research shows that Facebook presents both positive and negative effects on social interaction and communication between students and teachers (Butler, 2010; Huang et al., 2010; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Pempek et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). For instance, Charlton, Devlin, and Drummond (2009) examined connections between college students' communication strategies and found that science students at two universities spent a great amount of their personal time on communication. A qualitative study by Ryan, Magro, and Sharp (2011) reported on how Facebook helped a subset of doctoral students who enrolled in a methodology course in the College of Business at a university in the United States to adapt to a Ph.D. program and life in a new culture and concluded that Facebook encouraged socialization and community building among students. In terms of interaction between teachers and students, Berg, Berquam, and Christoph (2007) found that Facebook was a means to build better relationships with students and personnel, and Sturgeon and Walker (2009) noted that faculty members created informal relationships with their students via Facebook. Similarly, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) found that the participants who enrolled in the basic communication course at a university in the United States emphasized negative associations between teachers' use of Facebook and teacher credibility. Specifically, teachers who practiced more self-disclosure on their Facebook profiles had more credibility than teachers who practiced little self-disclosure. However, research also shows that university students restricted access to their profiles for university staff (Kolek & Saunders, 2008) and that student use of virtual office hours via Facebook did not significantly differ from their use of traditional office hours (Li & Pitts, 2009). Most interestingly, Teclhaimanot and Hickman (2011) examined how both undergraduate and graduate students used Facebook to communicate with their professors and found that passive behaviors were more common than active behaviors. The participants in the study were students who enrolled in selected courses in the College of Education at the University of Toledo in the United States.

A limited number of studies show that students' gender is a significant variable affecting student–teacher interaction, while students' age is not. For instance, Hewitt and Forte (2006) reported that 73% of male students found the faculty presence on Facebook acceptable, whereas only 35% of women found it so. The participants in the study were in two undergraduate courses whose professors had established Facebook accounts. Similarly, Teclhaimanot and Hickman (2011) noted that male students found student–teacher interactions on Facebook more appropriate than females, while age was not a factor regarding teacher–student interactions. In a study that aimed to present a structural model explaining the utilization of Facebook for educational purposes among secondary, college and graduate students in Turkey, Mazman and Usluel (2010) also found that gender was an important factor shaping participation on Facebook and other social networking sites.

Although scholars examining student–teacher interaction have not reached a consensus, and research is lacking on the effects of age and gender, current literature reveals positive influences of Facebook on education in general. Facebook impacts

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