



# Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in foreign language learning through Facebook



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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to explain differences between a group learning English on a Facebook page and a face-to-face group in terms of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT focuses on three main variables, which improve self-determination and motivation outside but also inside the classroom: autonomy, competence and relatedness. The main research question was: how can we explain differences between a face-to-face group (FTF) and a Facebook group learning a foreign language in terms of autonomy, competence and relatedness? The results indicate that there was a significant difference between the two groups in terms of learning outcomes as well as in the three SDT variables. Students in the Facebook group felt more autonomous, competent and related. All three SDT variables correlated with learning outcomes. There was, however, almost no relationship among the SDT variables with learning outcomes within the two groups. The strongest predictor of the difference in learning outcomes proved to be relatedness, followed by competence.

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## 1. Introduction

Online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Linked-in have recently attracted millions of people all over the world; they have resulted in significant changes in the field of communication and cooperation. They not only make it possible to easily send, receive and share information, but also to facilitate communication, interaction and cooperation with different people, companies and organizations in different parts of the world using various modalities such as writing, pictures, video or link sharing, and voice or video chat. In addition, these sites have become an important part of most students' lives (Boyd, 2007; Lomicka & Lord, 2011; Van den Beemt, Akkerman, & Simons, 2010; Yapıcı & Hevedanlı, 2014). Many universities and colleges having created various group profiles in these networks in order to keep up with students' needs, interests and demands. As a result, in recent years, researchers have investigated the potential of these networks in different teaching and learning fields (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Armstrong & Franklin, 2008; Jones, Blackey, Fitzgibbon, & Chew, 2010; Tiryakioglu & Erzurum, 2011).

Yu, Tian, Vogel, and Chi-Wai Kwok (2010) argue that an on-line social network has a direct impact on students' learning while also

assisting them in adapting to the university culture, and thus gaining social acceptance from others. Jones et al. (2010) asserts that social networks can enhance formal learning, and become part of the educational ecosystem of students. Similarly, Greenhow and Robelia (2009) support and reinforce this idea by stating that online social networks serve as a complementary learning activity. In fact, online social networks, as a new technology, have been utilized in education due to their ease of application, simple accessibility, and individual affordance (Alexander & Levine, 2008).

Stevenson and Liu (2010), Godwin-Jones (2008) and Lloyd (2012) all argue that one of the most important functions of social networks is that they engage learners in authentic communication in meaningful contexts. Generally speaking, social networking from a theoretical viewpoint is well-established, can offer an effective eLearning setting (De-Marcos, Domínguez, Saenz-de-Navarrete, & Pagés, 2014), and have a high influence on learners' performance (De-Jorge-Moreno, 2012).

Given the fact that online social networks provide users with an easy way of interacting with speakers of various languages, as well as wider access to native speakers of the target language, online social networks can play an important role in the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

Lomicka & Lord (2011), who investigated the role of social networks in language learning, argue that the use of these networks is very helpful in language learning, but that, their theoretical and empirical perspectives have yet to be studied. Harrison

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and Thomas (2009) also concluded that social networks such as Livemocha environments provide new conditions of active learning. Brick, 2011a, 2011b also mentioned that, apart from the fact that social networks provide positive conditions for language learning, a major weakness was the poor quality of the learning materials. Blattner and Lomicka (2012) also argued that social networks can be a viable resource in language learning if students are taught the strategies to integrate them in the classroom. Lamy and Zourou (2013) note that, although social networks are attractive to learners and teachers, if we want them to work to the benefit of language learners, networks should focus on communities and the socialization of language learners. Lomicka and Lord (2011) and Sturm, Kennell, McBride, and Kelly (2009) also emphasized the importance of socialization and communication tools in social networks and believe that together they promote language learning. Moreover, a variety of facilities and capabilities of these networks, including the combination of many Internet-based communication instruments previously in wide but disconnected use, may be utilized to improve different linguistic skills (Brick, 2011a, 2011b). Many authors (e.g., Baralt, 2009; Clark & Gruba, 2010; Godwin-Jones, 2008; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Lomicka & Lord, 2011) believe that these networks may effectively contribute to foreign language learning; that is, they offer efficient improvement of linguistic competencies and skills. However, there is not yet much empirical evidence that supports these claims.

### 1.1. Contribution and purpose

Thus, our first aim is to empirically show that an online learning platform such as Facebook can be an effective environment to learn a foreign language for a specific group of students (see Section 3). Specifically, the purpose of the current study is to analyze differences between a group learning English through Facebook and a group learning English face-to-face in a classroom, in terms of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This theory has been selected because different studies (Gunawardena, 1995; Howland & Moore, 2002; Mills, 2003; Tait, 2003) suggest that SDT is a suitable framework for analyzing student engagement and motivation in online learning environments. Furthermore, Noels, Pelletier, Clement, and Vallerand (2000) emphasize that the three orientations (autonomy, competence and relatedness) may also predict learning outcomes. As explained more fully in the next section, we hypothesize that an online network, such as Facebook, can help students feel more autonomous, competent and related to other students than in regular class environments and that the fulfillment of these three needs together help students to learn better. Although this seems plausible in theory and is mentioned by several authors, we did not find any empirical research that related SDT to the learning effectiveness of online learning environments. Our second contribution is to fill this gap: providing research on the relationship between motivation in terms of SDT and learning outcomes. Our third contribution is a theoretical one: elucidating the ways in which Facebook motivates students for foreign language learning and how this improves their learning outcomes.

## 2. Theory background

The main theory behind our research is SDT. Self-Determination Theory is a general theory of human motivation and personality (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which focuses on the dialectical relationships between growth-oriented human beings and social contexts that facilitate or impede people's motivation to actualize their potential (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). In their 1994 study, Deci and Ryan specified three factors that improve self-determination in the classroom: autonomy (self-

determination in resolving what to do and how to do it), competence (developing and implementing skills for the manipulation and control of the environment), and relatedness (association with others through pro-social relationships). We highlight these three concepts in more detail in the next section and relate them to foreign language learning in a Facebook environment.

**Autonomy:** Autonomy refers to the degree of choice that students have when they perform academic tasks, as well as the degree of choice they have regarding when and how to perform them (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Autonomy is present when students can solve problems in their own ways (Valas & Solvik, 1993). This also happens through the choices they can make during the learning process (Brophy, 2004); these choices help them become more independent and self-directed in making decisions regarding their learning.

We expect that the Facebook environment, which is free from time and space limitations and makes access possible to various people and resources, helps students solve their problems in their own time, to learn via a choice offering method and to learn independently. Our first hypothesis is as follows: *Students learning a foreign language on Facebook feel more autonomous than students in a face-to-face group.*

**Competence:** Individuals need to feel a sense of mastery through effective interaction within their environment, and to be able to deal with and control their environment (White, 1959). SDT defines competence as the need to be effective in interactions with the social environment while experiencing the opportunity to express and implement one's capacities and abilities (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Students' feelings of competence increase when they are sure that their learning activities and tasks match their knowledge and skills. Moreover, the activities students are required to perform should be both demanding and challenging in order to increase students' motivation. Tasks should also provide students an opportunity to actively respond and to receive immediate feedback (Brophy, 1981). A student who has the feeling of having control over his/her learning, will engage in more meaningful and deep learning activities and will get to higher levels of achievement (Linnebrink & Pintrich, 2002). In this way, when other students or a teacher asks different questions, students are stimulated to discuss and share their views on the causes and effects of a particular issue.

We expect Facebook to be highly influential in the improvement of feelings of competence because the context of online social networks is free from some of the problems existing in face-to-face classrooms. For example, students who dare not speak in front of others can act more readily in this environment. Moreover, students have enough time to express their standpoints and views or even to check their correctness, and thereby to more confidently act and engage among peers and classmates. The second hypothesis is: *Students learning a foreign language on Facebook feel more competent than students in a face-to-face group.*

**Relatedness:** Relatedness refers to a need for belonging to or depending on a certain group. Classrooms satisfy this variable through providing various opportunities of collaboration and interaction for students. Collaboration is in fact, one response to the need of relatedness in students and makes it possible for them to discuss an issue and to help and constructively criticize each other, thereby increasing their self-confidence (Kennedy, 2007).

It is obvious that one of the most important functions of online social networks is establishing communication and social interaction (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). Communication in these networks, other than being free from time and space limitations, is possible with a variety of formats such as audio, visual, written, and short messages that are easy to use. Therefore, one may expect that the use of these networks will increase feelings of relatedness in students. The third hypothesis is thus: *Students learning a foreign*

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