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Social Network Services in EFL Courses: Perceived Benefits and Concerns

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Abstract

Social network services (SNSs) are changing the way in which people communicate. However, it is not yet clear whether they are appropriate for classroom use in EFL courses. In this study, seventy undergraduate students ($n=70$) at a four-year Japanese university participated in a course in which they used LinkedIn, a social network service for professionals. The participants' agreement with eight perceived benefits of and eight perceived concerns with using SNSs for an English course were measured through pre- and post-treatment questionnaires. The participants' willingness to use SNSs for their course was also measured. Participant responses indicated that SNS use had an overall positive effect on perceptions of class quality and opportunities to communicate with instructors, and a negative effect on perceptions of class difficulty, the opportunity to use English, and privacy. Additionally, results suggest that a majority of the participants are not interested in using SNSs as a part of their courses. Examining the students' responses, three recommendations for improving student willingness to use SNSs for their courses are suggested: (1) make SNS use easier; (2) make SNS use more interactive; and (3) give students more control over what they write.

Keywords: social network services; EFL; benefits; concerns; willingness

Social Network Services in EFL Courses: Perceived Benefits and Concerns

Social Network Services (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter have become a part of daily life, particularly for university-aged students (Brenner, 2013). Such services are changing the way in which people connect with and communicate with each other. Since these tools are so ubiquitous and their effect on society is so large, language educators may feel a need to include them in their courses in order to keep them relevant to the future language use of their students. However, whether such tools are appropriate for classrooms or not is still a subject of much debate.

Literature Review

Benefits of SNS Use

A wide range of research on the use of SNSs in both L1 and L2 settings has been conducted and several benefits have been attributed to the use of such services. SNS use, through teacher self-disclosure, may improve students' perception of their teachers and their classroom environment (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). As students discover interests or concerns which they have in common with both other students and their teacher, a stronger bond may form between them. This closer connection can lead to an increase in motivation.

SNSs are collaborative communities which are created by their users. By becoming content creators, students can become creators of their own educational environment. This creates a strong sense of classroom community and ownership, which often contributes to a higher level of motivation (Ushioda, 2011). Students using SNSs for their courses may collaborate more than students in classes that do not use such services. Additionally, SNSs may also help students become more engaged in their courses by promoting increased communication between students and their teachers (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011). This higher level of engagement may also lead to improved class performance.

Drawbacks of SNS Use

While there are many benefits attributed to SNS use in educational settings, there are some drawbacks which must be noted. First, being required to socialize with superiors is an awkward situation for many people (Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison, & Wash, 2011). The same holds true for teachers who require students to socialize with them on SNSs. Even if teachers create a group separate from students' existing networks, the students may still feel uncomfortable if social interaction outside of the classroom is compulsory (McEwan, 2012).

Digital crowding (Joinson, Houghton, Vasalou, & Marder, 2011) is another factor that may discourage the use of SNSs for educational purposes. It occurs when SNS users feel a loss of control in their social interactions. This may lead users to withdraw from SNS use. Digital crowding may occur when users feel that the boundaries between their different social groups are blurring or when they feel that they are overloaded by the large amount of information generated by social contacts in their networks.

Perhaps the biggest ethical issue in regards to using SNSs for education is privacy (Weber, 2012). SNSs foster an environment of sharing, and users of SNSs tend to share more personal information than non-users do (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009). Students may feel that they are being compelled to share

personal information with their teachers and classmates, which they may feel uncomfortable doing. Additionally, their personal data and the content which they create may be used by SNSs for marketing, advertising, and other business purposes. This may raise serious ethical issues since many users are unaware of how their data is collected and used by SNSs (Lawler, Molluzzo, & Doshi, 2012).

As educators, it may be difficult to decide whether the benefits of using SNSs for education outweigh the drawbacks. In order to make a well-informed decision, it is vital to also consider the perceptions students have of using such services in their courses.

Research Questions

The aim of this study is to examine student perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of the educational use of SNSs. In a previous study (Hooper, 2014), only 53.7% of participants reported that they were willing to use SNSs for their English courses. As a part of that study, eight perceived benefits of and eight perceived concerns with using SNSs for English courses were identified. To explore these perceptions in greater detail, this study will examine the following three questions:

- RQ1 Which benefits showed the largest changes in agreement after participants experienced using an SNS in their English course?
- RQ2 Which concerns showed the largest changes in agreement after participants experienced using an SNS in their English course?
- RQ3 Will using an SNS in an English course change students' willingness to use SNSs for such courses?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Seventy second-year students ($n=70$) at a Japanese university participated in this study. All participants were enrolled in a compulsory four-skill English course and were studying English as a foreign language. A questionnaire consisting of seventeen Likert-type items was administered to the participants both before and after the treatment. Eight items measured the participants' agreement with eight perceived benefits of using SNSs for an English course, and eight items measured the participants' agreement with eight perceived concerns (Hooper, 2014). The final test item measured the participants' willingness to use SNSs for an English course. Participants responded using a 6-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree). The questionnaire was administered in Japanese to ensure that it was comprehensible to the participants. For the interpretation of the results,

responses from 1 to 3 were merged under the label “disagree”, and responses from 4 to 6 were merged under the label “agree”, forming a 2-point scale.

The treatment consisted of a two-week project with LinkedIn, an SNS focused on professional development and promotion. LinkedIn was chosen for this study for two reasons: (1) none of the participants had previously used it, so concerns about infringing on the participants’ existing social networks were reduced, and (2) participants would start looking for jobs in the following year, so the practicality of the project would be easier to recognize (McBride, 2008).

At the beginning of the treatment, participants attended a class in which LinkedIn was introduced. They received instruction on how to register for the service and how to use it. Additionally, they were able to spend part of the class to start writing their profiles. Instruction on how to write about education, work experience and future career goals was provided in class. Between the first and second class, participants had one week to complete their profiles. Additionally, participants were required to add five classmates to their connection list and endorse the skills of those students. The interaction was limited in order to reduce the possibility of participants experiencing digital crowding. In the second class, participants received feedback as a group from the instructor on their profiles. Participants had one more week to edit their profiles. To complete the project, a printed copy of their profiles was submitted to the instructor at the end of the second week.

Results

Regarding the perceived benefits of using SNSs for an English course, only two areas showed more participants in agreement in the post-test than in the pre-test. The percentage of students who felt that using SNSs would improve the quality of the class rose from 22.9% to 37.1%. Also, the percentage of students who agreed that it provided more opportunities to communicate with the instructor rose from 67.1% to 70.0%. There were three areas that showed a large decrease in the number of participants in agreement. Fewer participants thought that SNSs would make it easier to get announcements about their classes (from 72.9% to 54.3%), provide more opportunities to use English (from 54.3% to 42.9%), and make the class easier for them (from 28.6% to 17.1%).

Table 1. Questions Regarding the Perceived Benefit of Using SNSs for an English Course, $n = 70$

	Number of participants			
	Pre-test Disagree	Pre-test Agree	Post-test Disagree	Post-test Agree
Improve my English skills	42	28	44	26
Give me more opportunities to communicate with my classmates	18	52	23	47
Improve the quality of the class	54	16	44	26
Make the class more interesting	30	40	35	35
Provide more opportunities to use English	32	38	40	30
Provide more opportunities to communicate with the instructor	23	47	21	49
Make the class easier for me	50	20	58	12
Be easier to get announcements about the class	19	51	32	38

Regarding concerns about using SNSs for an English course, only two areas showed a decrease in the number of concerned students. The percentage of participants who felt that using SNSs in their classes would be a distraction to English study fell from 22.9% to 14.3%. Also, there was a slight decrease from 17.1% to 15.7% of participants who felt that using SNSs would reduce the quality of the class. Four areas showed a large increase in the number of concerned participants. More participants felt that registering for SNSs was troublesome (from 51.4% to 72.9%), and that using SNSs made the class more difficult (from 34.3% to 47.1%). There was also a large increase in the number of participants who felt that it was difficult to keep up with the amount of messages and posts when SNSs were used (from 44.3% to 60.0%). Finally, there was an increase in the concern for privacy after using an SNS in the course (from 34.3% to 44.3%).

Table 2. Questions Regarding Concerns about Using SNSs for an English Course, $n = 70$

	Number of Participants			
	Pre-test Disagree	Pre-test Agree	Post-test Disagree	Post-test Agree
I am not interested in using SNSs in any situation.	67	3	62	8
Using SNSs in this class would make it more difficult.	46	24	37	33
Registering for SNSs is troublesome.	34	36	19	51
If we use SNSs for this class, I would be worried about my privacy.	46	24	39	31
I only want to use SNSs for my private social life.	37	33	33	37
Using SNSs in this class would be a distraction for English study.	54	16	60	10
It would be troublesome to keep up with the amount of messages and posts if we used SNSs for this class.	39	31	28	42
Using SNSs in this class would reduce the quality of this course.	58	12	59	11

Table 3. Student Willingness to use SNSs for an English Course, $n = 70$

	Number of Participants			
	Pre-test Disagree	Pre-test Agree	Post-test Disagree	Post-test Agree
I would like to use SNSs for this English course.	34	36	42	28

It is interesting to note that the pre-test shows that only a slight majority of 51.4% of participants were willing to use SNSs for their English courses. However, in the post-test, only 40% of participants said that they would be willing to use SNSs for their English courses.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study show a decrease in the perceived benefits of and an increase in the perceived concerns with using SNSs for an English course. While this may seem discouraging at first, there are some valuable points that can be learned. The first aspect to consider is difficulty. After undergoing the treatment, participants reported an increase in concerns with this area. More participants felt that registering for SNSs was troublesome, that SNS use made the class more difficult, and that it was difficult to keep up with the amount of messages and posts on SNSs. While an attempt was made to reduce these concerns by showing participants how to register and use LinkedIn in class, and by keeping interaction to a minimum, unfamiliarity with the service may have been too large a factor to overcome in such a short treatment period. When using any new service, it is natural to expect that it will take some time to become accustomed to using it, so perhaps these concerns would not have increased as much if the treatment had been conducted over a longer period of time, thus allowing participants to get used to using the service.

The second area to examine is class quality. This area is more encouraging, as the percentage of participants who felt that using SNSs would reduce class quality decreased and was quite low, and the percentage of those who felt that using SNSs would improve class quality increased. This may come from the relevance of SNSs to the students' lives. Language learning activities that have more relevance to learners tend to be more highly valued by them (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Additionally, there was a large drop in the number of participants who felt that SNS use would be a distraction in the class. This may show that participants were better able to understand how SNS could be used as a teaching tool than they were prior to the treatment.

Unexpectedly, SNS use did not show a strong improvement in the area of communication. Fewer students reported that they thought using SNSs would provide themselves with more opportunities to use English. While the project was conducted entirely in English, participants may have interpreted "use English" as "interact in English". If this were the case, then perhaps the drop in this area may be attributed to the use of LinkedIn. Participants may have been expecting to use a more casual and interactive SNS such as Facebook. LinkedIn, on the other hand, is more formal and presentational in tone, with limited opportunities to interact. This may have given participants the impression that they were not "using English." Also, fewer students felt that using SNSs would make it easier to get announcements about the class. This may again be due to the more presentational format of LinkedIn. Whereas other SNSs make it easy to see the posts of others, LinkedIn focuses on the content created by profile owners, so students may have

felt that it was not an ideal platform for making class announcements.

One area of communication that did show improvement is that slightly more students felt that using SNSs made it easier to communicate with the instructor. This was surprising since there was no online interaction between the participants and the instructor during the treatment and participants only received feedback as a class in the classroom. No individual feedback was provided during the treatment period. So, why did more participants feel that using SNSs provided more opportunities to communicate with their instructor? One possible answer is that they were able to view the profile of the instructor as an example when making their own profiles. This online self-disclosure may have influenced students' perceptions of their instructor as more approachable, and they may have evaluated their communication with their instructor more positively even though there was no increase in the amount of interaction (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007).

However, participant concerns about privacy did increase after undergoing the treatment. In creating a professional profile, which included information about their education, work history, and career goals, they may have felt that they had little control over the content, and some may have wished to keep this information private. While one of the reasons LinkedIn was chosen was that it did not infringe on students' existing social networks, the lack of control over the content which they posted may have increased their privacy concerns anyway. In order to better address student concerns of privacy, they should be allowed to have more control over the content that they choose or choose not to post.

Finally, student willingness to use SNS decreased after undergoing the treatment. At the end of the treatment, only 40% of participants were willing to use SNSs as a part of an English course. While they felt that communication with the instructor improved and had few concerns about the quality of the class, it appears that the drawbacks of using such services outweighed the benefits.

Is there anything that can be done to make SNSs more acceptable to students? This study suggests three steps: make it easy to use; make it interactive; and give students control. Making a service easy to use can be simple: be sure that students have sufficient time to become accustomed to using it, especially when using a service that they are unfamiliar with. In this study, participants only used LinkedIn for two weeks, which was not a sufficient amount of time to become accustomed to the service, so it is understandable that students felt using the service made the course difficult. If participants were given the opportunity to use LinkedIn for a longer period of time, their concerns about the difficulty of using SNSs would likely decrease.

Students expect that using SNSs means interacting with others, so it is

important to meet this expectation when planning to use such services for a course. In using LinkedIn, participants encountered a more formal and presentational style, which did not match their expectations. A better balance must be maintained between the level of interactivity that students expect and the content load that students can handle. By using a more interactive service or by demonstrating more clearly the interactive aspects of LinkedIn, the students may have perceived more opportunities to use English.

Giving student more control over what they choose to post or not is an important step towards protecting students' privacy. When students have a choice, they will feel more secure knowing that they are not posting information that they wish to keep private. Additionally, giving students more control would increase their sense of ownership, which in turn would increase their motivation (Ushioda, 2011). In hindsight, LinkedIn did not provide an ideal platform for student control.

Conclusion and Future Study

While SNSs have achieved wide-spread use in society, educators should be aware that not all students may be ready and willing to use these tools as a part of a course. Special care should be taken to address the concerns of students, in particular their concerns about difficulty, opportunity to communicate, and privacy. In order to better address these concerns, more research is required.

One area of research that deserves attention is how the length of a program using SNSs would affect students' perception of course difficulty. This could be done by conducting a pre- and post-treatment questionnaire with students who have used SNSs in their courses for differing lengths of time. This would give educators a basis for planning the length of such programs. Another area to look at would be to compare the perceived benefit of having the opportunity to use English with the perceived drawback of being overwhelmed by the number of posts on an SNS. Measuring student reactions when they are given different types of assignments or when using different services could guide educators in planning effective programs that can meet students' expectations for interaction while not overwhelming them. Finally, a deeper understanding of the role of autonomy in SNS use needs to be developed. How these services can be used in EFL education will depend on developing an understanding in these areas of concern.

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