

Turkish Prospective Teachers' Perceptions of Social Network Sites on Their Professional Development

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Abstract

Former studies investigate how Web 2.0 technologies influence learning and found out that Social Network Sites such as Facebook and Myspace provide interactive environments where students have chance to communicate on their courses outside the classroom. More recent studies based on Facebook emphasized its usage on informal learning by pointing out that Facebook enables students benefit from each others' learning experiences. The purpose of this study was to investigate Turkish prospective EFL teachers' perceptions of Facebook on their professional development. This study was conducted on 29 EFL freshman students in a state university in Turkey. Data were collected with a Likert type questionnaire and results were analyzed using SPSS 16.0 statistics program. According to the frequency statistics, Turkish prospective EFL teachers were found to perceive Facebook as a collaborative environment enabling them to share both information about their courses and professional knowledge.

Keywords: Web 2.0, Facebook, Professional development, Prospective EFL teachers

1. Introduction

1.1 What is Web 2.0?

Web 2.0 can be defined as a web where people interact more socially and can add to and benefit from it equally (Anderson, 2007). Web 2.0 is not a specific website where one can visit and sign in. It is a notion referring to sites or developments that have shared features. Web 2.0 includes applications such as wikis, blogs, and social-networking sites. Moreover, because these applications have been present since nineties, Web 2.0 cannot be considered as a new web (Bartolomé, 2008). Instead, Web 2.0 is called "Second-Generation Web" differing from the first generation that includes e-mails, and msn messenger (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

1.1.1 Wikis

A Wiki is a site having flexible structure of pages that can be edited by any user requiring no HTML knowledge and the aim of Wiki sites is to be a common repository of information that expands in the course of time. Furthermore, wikis are significantly useful places in which collaborative projects can be carried out (Godwin-Jones, 2003). In education, people use Wiki sites in order to reinforce collaborative study, to generate a study corpus with teachers, students, etc. and to deliver updated information or materials to the students prepared by the teacher (Bartolomé, 2008).

1.1.2 Blogs

Blogs are pages enabling one or more authors to broadcast and have comments on their entries by visitors. New information added to blogs does not supersede the former ones (Bartolomé, 2008). Blogs can have personal or journalistic purposes. In addition, while wikis are quite collaborative, blogs can be considerably personal. However, there is an increasing concern in the usage of blogs in education. Especially in foreign language learning a student can see his/her process over time (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Since they do not require knowledge on HTML, blogs are highly favored by teachers in order to construct active learning environments. Moreover, blogs can be used instead of digital portfolios or like learning logs (Bartolomé, 2008).

1.1.3 Social-networking sites

As Greenhow and Robelia (2009) quoted in their article, Boyd and Ellison define SNS as:

"A web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi public profile within a bounded system (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections those made by others within a system."

Users can create profiles and share their photos, comments, interests, personal information, etc. While users can have access to others profiles, they can also open their profiles to the preferred friends (Selwyn, 2009). Mason (2006) states in Selwyn's article (2009) that SNS can have useful features for education technologies such as suitable social contexts for learning like school, university or local community and peer feedback. Moreover, these sites can encourage collaborative and cooperative learning (Ajjan and Hartshorne, 2008).

2 Facebook

Facebook is a considerably interactive SNS. A user can search for other users' pages and post messages on their walls which are some kind of discussion boards enabling users to communicate through Facebook network

(Mazer et al. 2009). Facebook has more than 400 million active users, 50% of whom log on to Facebook in any given day. An average user has 130 friends and people spend approximately 500 billion minutes each month on Facebook. People interact with more than 160 objects such as pages, groups and events. An average user creates 70 pieces each month and more than 25 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) are shared each month.

1.3 Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning bases on student activities in which students are in the center of exploration and application of the course material. Generally students work in groups and the teacher either stays out of the group and serves as a facilitator or works with the students (Smith and MacGregor, 1992). Collaborative learning activities enables students to think for themselves, compare and contrast their ideas with others, carry out research projects, study with their peers by using their higher level cognitive abilities (Noble et al., 2000). Smith and MacGregor (1992) assert that learning is intrinsically social. As they quoted in their article Golub (1988) points out that “Collaborative learning has its main feature a structure that allows student talk: students are supposed to talk with each other...and it is in this talking that much of the learning occurs.” In collaborative learning process students exchange ideas, give feedback to each other and try to derive meanings all together, so this contributes to their understanding (Smith and MacGregor, 1992).

Collaboration can also take place through computers. As Stahl, Koschmann and Suthers (2006) state in their article, computer-supported Collaborative Learning points out a collaboration through student interaction and learning by asking questions, teaching each other and observing how their peers learn by browsing on the internet. Furthermore, as Choo et al. (2009) state in their article Alavi and Dufner (2005) discovered that a student having higher level motivation and taking more pleasure from online discussions demonstrates higher level of learning.

1.4 Facebook and learning

Madge et al. (2009) found out in their study conducted on university students that students mostly use Facebook for the purposes of making new friends and keeping in touch with them and their families. However, they also infer that Facebook can sometimes be used informally for learning.

“... as the students became more embedded in university life, Facebook was increasingly used by some students for contacting other students to organize group meetings for academic project work, revision, and coursework queries...”

As stated in another study a lecturer using Virtual Learning Environments in order to convey his lessons found out that discussing that week’s coursework on Facebook is easier to gather students to the institutional VLE. Also, a humanities lecturer reported that his students were looking at course material in the VLE; however, they preferred Facebook to use discussion tools and discuss the course material and the content (Anderson, 2007).

With these issues in mind, this paper will try to investigate ELT freshman students’ conceptions on Facebook, a social-networking site, as an environment for collaborative learning in their courses. E-mails, discussion forums, chat are all known by teachers but web 2.0 applications that are recently have become widespread such as blogs and wikis might be less familiar. On the other hand, they provide significant opportunities for learners and teachers to collaborate online (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

In the light of this literature review, this paper will seek to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do Turkish freshman ELT students use Facebook for educational purposes?
2. Do Turkish freshman ELT students perceive Facebook as a collaborative/ cooperative environment contributing to their professional development?
3. Do Turkish freshman ELT students think that Facebook contributes to their relations with their lecturers?

2. Methodology

2.1 Population and sample

In this study, 29 freshman students studying at English Language Teaching Department in Faculties of Education at a state university were selected, and questionnaires were administered. 8 of these students were males and the rest were females. The age distribution of the participants is given in Table 1.

Table 1 Age Distribution

Age	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
17	1	3,4
18	18	62,1
19	6	20,7
21	1	3,4
23	1	3,4
26	1	3,4
27	1	3,4
Total	29	100,0

2.2 The instrument

The Likert type questionnaire used in this study was prepared by the researchers and reviewed by professors specialized in this area. This questionnaire includes two parts. The first part aimed to elicit participants' demographic information. The second part included Likert type questions in which 25 items were expected to be valued by the participants. They were to indicate the degree of their agreement to these items by marking one of the agreement options: "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree", "strongly agree". Cronbach Alpha coefficient of these items is .89.

2.3 The analysis of data

SPSS 16.0 packaged software was used in the statistical analysis of the data. Results were analyzed according to the item frequency levels. Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used in the analysis of items.

3.0 Results

In this part, the results will be presented under research questions used as subtitles.

3.1 Do Turkish freshman ELT students use Facebook for educational purposes?

Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 19, and 21 were directed to the freshman ELT students in order to find out whether students use Facebook for educational purposes. The students' agreement levels to these items are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 The frequency table of students' responses to the items related to the usage of Facebook for educational purposes

Item 1: I share course material with my classmates on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	29	100,0
Item 2: I talk about the course contents with my classmates on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	24	82,8
NEUTRAL	5	17,2
Total	29	100,0

Item 3: I ask questions about the courses I take to my classmates on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	26	89,7
NEUTRAL	2	6,9
DISAGREE	1	3,4
Total	29	100,0
Item 4: I find information about my courses on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	15	51,7
NEUTRAL	12	41,4
DISAGREE	2	6,9
Total	29	100,0
Item 5: Facebook enables me to share information about our courses with my classmates.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	27	93,1
NEUTRAL	2	6,9
Total	29	100,0
Item 6: I comment on my classmates work on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	18	62,1
NEUTRAL	10	34,5
DISAGREE	1	3,4
Total	29	100,0
Item 7: I follow upcoming events of our courses on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	23	79,3
NEUTRAL	6	20,7
Total	29	100,0
Item 10: I observe my friends work on their studies on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	21	72,4
NEUTRAL	6	20,7
DISAGREE	2	6,9
Total	29	100,0

Item 11: I see my classmates progress on their studies on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	17	58,6
NEUTRAL	9	31,0
DISAGREE	3	10,3
Total	29	100,0
Item 12: I catch up events in our courses when I miss one on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	23	79,3
NEUTRAL	6	20,7
Total	29	100,0
Item 13: Facebook enables me be aware of what is going on our courses at school.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	25	86,2
NEUTRAL	4	13,8
Total	29	100,0
Item 15: My classmates comment on my posts related to our courses on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	23	79,3
NEUTRAL	4	13,8
DISAGREE	2	6,9
Total	29	100,0
Item 17: I share useful videos related to our courses with my classmates on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	21	72,4
NEUTRAL	5	17,2
DISAGREE	3	10,3
Total	29	100,0
Item 19: I hear the latest news about our courses on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	26	89,7
NEUTRAL	2	6,9
DISAGREE	1	3,4
Total	29	100,0

Item 21: I share my ideas about courses with my friends on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	22	75,9
NEUTRAL	7	24,1
Total	29	100,0

When these results are analyzed it is noteworthy that all of the participants agreed to item 1 indicating they share course material with their classmates. Items related to retrieving and sharing course information with various ways from Facebook also show a high percentage of agreement. Furthermore, ELT freshman students agree that Facebook enable peer observation.

3.2 Do Turkish ELT freshman students perceive Facebook as a collaborative/ cooperative environment to their professional development?

In order to find out Turkish freshman ELT students' perceptions of Facebook as a collaborative/ cooperative environment to their professional development items 14, 18, 22, 23, and 25 were directed to the participants. The students' agreement levels to these items are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 The frequency table of the perceptions of Facebook as a collaborative cooperative environment to their professional development

Item 14: Facebook helps me in my Professional development.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	11	37,9
NEUTRAL	13	44,8
DISAGREE	5	17,2
Total	29	100,0

Item18: I work with my classmates for our course requirements/ projects/ activities on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	22	75,9
NEUTRAL	5	17,2
DISAGREE	2	6,9
Total	29	100,0

Item 22: I share contents related to English language teaching on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	21	72,4
NEUTRAL	7	24,1
DISAGREE	1	3,4
Total	29	100,0

Item 23: My classmates share contents related to English language teaching on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	22	75,9
NEUTRAL	6	20,7
DISAGREE	1	3,4
Total	29	100,0

Item 25: Facebook enables me to study with my friends for our courses.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	22	75,9
NEUTRAL	6	20,7
DISAGREE	1	3,4
Total	29	100,0

Table 3 shows that although Turkish ELT freshman students are not quite sure whether Facebook helps them in their professional development, they agreed on the interactivity that Facebook provides when they are working together. Moreover, students indicated that they share and observe contents related to their professions while they stayed neutral to item 14.

3.3 Do Turkish ELT freshman students think that Facebook contributes to their relations with their lecturers?

Items 16, 20, and 24 were directed to the participants to elicit their opinions on whether Facebook contributes to their relations with their lecturers. The students' agreement levels to these items are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 The frequency table of the perceptions of Facebook as an environment contributing students' relations with their lecturers

Item 16: Facebook enables me to have more intimate relations with my lecturers.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	19	65,5
NEUTRAL	10	34,5
Total	29	100,0

Item 20: Our lecturers share useful educational content on Facebook with me and my classmates.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	21	72,4
NEUTRAL	5	17,2
DISAGREE	3	10,3
Total	29	100,0

Item 24: My lecturers share contents related to English language teaching with us on Facebook.		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
AGREE	24	82,8
NEUTRAL	5	17,2
Total	29	100,0

As it can be seen in Table 4, 65, 5% of Turkish ELT students participating to the study agree that they Facebook help them more intimate relations with their lecturers. In addition, the participants also agreed highly to the items 20 and 24 indicating that their lecturers share contents which are helpful to their educational and professional development.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Web 2.0 tools (wikis, blogs, social networking sites) have affected people's way of interaction including our students and the new era require students to be "adaptable" and "analytical" in order to use these new tools with new strategies in teaching and learning (Solomon and Schrum, 2007). The results of this study show that Turkish ELT freshman students have adopted this new style and they are using Facebook for their courses in various ways. As Davies and Merchant (2009) stated in their book, the freshman ELT students' widely usage of Facebook for educational purposes apart from their daily activities can be the result of its both being popular and contagious.

Professional development has been an important issue in education rooting back to ancient Greeks (Guskey, 2000). As Zepeda and Georgia (2008) assert that in professional development of teachers, peers play a significant role. The collaborative environment of schools' enable teachers to benefit from each others' experiences. In this study, although participants stayed neutral to whether Facebook helps their professional development, they do agreed on that they share and be interested in English language teaching content on.

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Notes

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