Student Willingness to Use Social Networks

Todd Hooper
Kwansei Gakuin University

With the growing ubiquity of social network services (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter, educators have been excited by the opportunity for authentic social interaction in English that such services may provide for their students. However, are students equally as excited? In this study I explored whether students were willing to use SNSs as part of an English course. Nearly half of all participants reported that they were not willing to do so. The primary concerns of the participants about SNS use are examined and recommendations for how to address these concerns are discussed.

フェイスブックやツイッターのようなソーシャルネットワークサービス (SNS) の遍在性が増していくとともに、教育者たちはそのようなサービスが学生たちに与えるであろう英語での本格的な社会的対話の機会に興奮を覚えてきた。しかし学生たちも同じくそうだろうか。本研究では彼らが英語学習の一環としてSNSを使うことをいとわないか否かを探求する。驚くべきことに、調査に参加したおよそ半分の人がそうすることに後ろ向きであると答えている。彼らがSNSの利用について抱いている主な懸念を考察し、その懸念にいかに対処するべきかという提案について議論する。

THE NUMBER of communication tools on the Internet has been increasing steadily. One tool that has grown exponentially over the last few years is Social Network Services (SNSs; Brenner, 2013). More and more people are using these services to communicate with everyone from close friends to potential customers. As these services are becoming so widely used, it is perhaps necessary to consider the use of these tools in EFL courses.

SNSs are Internet services that allow users to create profiles, which often include a list of social connections—people or groups with whom users wish to share content. Users are generally able to decide whether their profiles are open to the general public or not (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In essence, SNSs are content-sharing sites with a social element.

Since the introduction of SNSs, there has been a lot of interest in their educational potential. In the EFL field, interest has centered on using such services in order to provide opportunities for students to use English naturally. However, despite the interest, there may be some concerns about their use for educational purposes. It was the aim of this study to discover how willing students are to use SNSs in their English courses.

Literature Review

The Benefits of SNS Use in Education

In recent research, a wide range of benefits has been attributed to SNS use in education. One such benefit is that SNSs may be a successful platform for teacher self-disclosure. In two studies, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2009) showed that teachers can access the benefits of teacher self-disclosure through Facebook; that is, students may perceive teachers as more caring and trustworthy. In addition, students may show higher levels of motivation and affective learning and may give a higher evaluation of the classroom environment (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Students may feel closer to their teachers when they realize that they have similar interests, likes, and concerns. By self-disclosing on SNSs, teachers can expedite the growth of the teacher–student bond, saving more time for content in class.

SNSs may also increase communication between students when compared with more educationally purposed tools, such as Blackboard. In a study by Alshahrani and Al-shehri (2012), students found educationally purposed sites to be inconvenient and too formal. They frequently only logged in to such sites when they had to submit assignments. Using SNSs, students found it easier to participate more regularly. Also, students found it easier to communicate in the informal and social atmosphere of SNSs.

Another benefit is that SNSs can help create a classroom community. By their very nature, SNSs are collaborative. In order to participate, users need to create content, not merely view it (Ushioda, 2011). SNSs thrive when users interact with other users' content. This interaction increases the amount of communication between students. By participating, users are building a community that they control themselves. This sense of self-direction may lead to higher levels of student motivation.

The Concerns with SNS Use in Education

Despite the benefits that can be reaped from SNSs, there are some concerns about using these services for education. First among these, as Jared Stein described, is the *creepy treehouse* phenomenon (as cited in McEwan, 2012). This situation occurs when persons or institutions in a position of power create an artificial environment in which those working or studying under them are compelled to socialize. Most people feel uncomfortable when forced to socialize with superiors (Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison, & Wash, 2011). If teachers enter their students' social networks, those students may find the situation awkward.

This may lead to *digital crowding* (Joinson, Houghton, Vasalou, & Marder, 2011). Digital crowding occurs when people feel that they are losing control of their social interactions online. One factor in this loss of control is that the boundaries between different social groups become unclear. In the real world, people exert a great deal of effort in order to maintain these boundaries (Peluchette, Karl, & Fertig, 2013). However, on many SNSs, different social groups are present in the same digital space. This makes it difficult to communicate with members of different social groups in the appropriate way. Some users, rather than trying to figure out how to interact with all of these groups simultaneously, may simply withdraw from social contact. SNSs recognize that this may be a problem and offer tools that allow users to separate their connections into separate groups, but it has been estimated that up to 80% of users do not use these tools (Peluchette, Karl, & Fertig, 2013).

Another factor of digital crowding is that users may become overloaded with continual updates of personal information from friends and acquaintances. This may also lead users to withdraw in order to relieve this onslaught. In effect, SNSs may discourage users from communicating, which is the exact opposite effect from the one English teachers may be looking for.

Finally, when using SNSs, educators must consider the issue of privacy. The services that SNSs provide are not really free. In exchange for using these services, users are paying with their personal data, which SNSs use for marketing, advertising, and other such business ventures. If teachers require students to sign up for these services, there are a few ethical issues that need to be taken into account (Weber, 2012).

First, the environment that SNSs create is one of sharing. Users may get the impression that everyone is sharing personal data online. This encourages them to share information about themselves that they normally would not share in a real-life setting. People who spend more time on SNSs tend to share more information (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009).

To add to this, the default privacy settings of many SNSs have been trending towards making personal data more open. In one study, 47% of participants believed that Facebook could not sell or share their personal data to other companies, which is not the case (Comer, McKelvey, & Curran, 2012). In fact, the same study showed that 89% of participants had never read Facebook's privacy policy. In general, users are not really aware of how personal information is collected and used or how it can be abused (Lawler, Molluzzo. & Doshi, 2012), so we cannot assume that students are making informed decisions about their use of SNSs. Although most SNS users express concern about privacy, the way that they use SNSs does not really reflect that concern (Madden, 2012).

Is it appropriate to use SNSs as a component in an EFL program? How do students themselves feel about using SNSs for an English course? Are they willing to use them? Surprisingly, although there are many studies on the benefits or concerns of SNS use for EFL classes, there is actually very little research on whether students themselves are willing to use these tools for education. In fact many studies are conducted through post-treatment questionnaires. Such questionnaires may be subject to expectation bias or attention bias (Tess, 2013). Also, when answering post-treatment questionnaires, students may attribute benefits to SNS use rather than to other factors if SNS use is made a primary focus during the treatment. This may lead to an overestimation of the benefits of SNS use and may also distract educators from considering the importance of student willingness to use such tools.

Research Questions

As there has been little research in the area of student willingness to use SNSs in language courses prior to treatment, the aim of this study was to examine the following three questions:

1. Are students willing to use SNSs as a part of an English course?
2. What positive points of using SNSs as a part of an English course do students perceive?
3. What negative points of using SNSs as a part of an English course do students perceive?

Methodology
Participants

There were 95 participants in this study, 72 male and 23 female students. All participants were undergraduate students at a 4-year university in Japan taking a compulsory 1st- or 2nd-year four-skill English course. These courses did not utilize SNSs, so any SNS use the participants had experienced happened outside of the course. The average age of the participants was 19.34, with a range of ages from 18 to 22.

Procedure

Two questionnaires were administered at the beginning of the second semester of their yearlong course. The first questionnaire

was a Computer Access Questionnaire consisting of 5 yes-no items and 2 short-answer items. The aim of this questionnaire was to determine how many of the participants had access to Internet capable devices and how many students were already using SNSs outside of their courses. The second questionnaire was a Social Network Services Questionnaire consisting of 2 yes-no items and 8 short-answer items. The aim of this questionnaire was to determine the number of students willing to use SNSs for an EFL course and to discover what the participants considered to be the benefits and the drawbacks of using such services.

Results

Before considering whether to use SNS for an English course, it must be determined whether students have adequate equipment and Internet access to participate. The results of the Computer Access Questionnaire (Table 1) showed that all of the participants in the study had the required equipment and Internet access. Although 6% of the participants did not have Internet access at home, all participants reported that they had an Internet capable mobile device (iPhone, Android, or tablet computer), so they would be able to use SNSs outside of the classroom.

Table 1. Question Regarding Computer and Internet Access, N = 95

Statement	Yes
I have a computer at home.	95
I have Internet access on my home computer.	89
I have an Internet capable mobile device.	85

Next, the familiarity of students with SNSs was examined (see Table 2). Of the participants, 81% reported that they were currently using SNSs, with 60% reporting that they were using two or more SNSs. The two most popular services were Facebook and Twitter (see Table 3). Teachers using either of these two SNSs may expect that a majority of their students will be familiar with these services, which would make them easier for students to use. However, nearly one in five students reported that they were not using any SNS.

Table 2. Question Regarding SNS Use, N = 95

Statement	Yes
I am currently using SNSs.	77
I am currently using two or more SNSs.	57
I am currently only using one SNS.	20
I am currently not using SNSs.	18

Table 3. Question Regarding Most Commonly Used SNSs, N = 95

SNS choice	Yes
Facebook	59
Twitter	58
Mixi	47
Other	3

Note. More than one answer was possible.

All of the participants have the equipment necessary to use SNSs and a majority of them are familiar with these services, but

are they willing to use SNS as a part of an English course? The results of the survey were surprising. Nearly half of the students were not willing to use SNSs as a part of an English course (see Table 4).

Table 4. Question Regarding Student Willingness to Use SNSs for an English Course, $N = 95$

Statement	Number
I am willing to use SNSs as a part of an English course.	51
I am not willing to use SNSs as a part of an English course.	44

Although the large number of students who were not willing to use SNSs is discouraging, there were slightly more students who were interested in using SNSs, which leads into the second research question—what positive points of using SNSs as a part of an English course do students perceive? Of the 51 students who expressed a willingness to use SNS, 44 provided a comment on why they would like to use these services. These comments were coded into eight main categories (see Table 5). Of particular interest is that participants felt that using SNSs would make an English course more interesting. Also, participants seemed to be more interested in communicating with each other than with the instructor. Finally, a large number of participants envisioned SNS use as a method of receiving formal information about the class such as homework assignments and information about exams and classes. Some students may be more open to more formal uses of SNSs rather than using them as an informal social platform.

Table 5. Question Regarding Perceived Benefits of Using SNSs for an English Course, $N = 44$

Benefit	Number
It would make the course more interesting.	12
It would become easier to get information and announcements about the class.	11
It would give more opportunities to communicate with classmates.	6
It would make the class easier since I am familiar with SNSs.	5
It would improve English skills.	4
It would provide more opportunities to use English.	3
It would improve the quality of the class.	2
It would provide more opportunities to communicate with the instructor.	1

Despite these perceived benefits, many participants were not willing to use SNS, which leads to the final research question—what negative points of using SNSs as a part of an English course do students perceive? Of the 44 students who expressed that they were not willing to use SNS, 30 provided a comment on why they would not like to use these services. These comments were coded into eight main categories (see Table 6).

The primary concern expressed by the participants was that SNS use would make the course difficult. Another concern was that they wished to use SNSs for social purposes only. Also, some believed that using SNSs in an English course would lead to distractions or to a reduction in the quality of the course.

Table 6. Question Regarding Concerns About Using SNSs for an English Course, $N = 30$

Concern	Number
It would make the course more difficult.	9
I want to use SNSs for social purposes only.	5
It would be troublesome to keep up with the amount of communication generated.	4
Registering for SNSs is troublesome.	3
It would be a distraction to English study.	3
I am not interested in using SNSs in any situation.	3
I am concerned about privacy.	2
It would reduce the quality of the course.	1

Limitations

Two limitations may have influenced the results of this study. First, the questionnaires were in English only. Although it was explained that participants could respond in Japanese, they may have felt compelled to respond in English. This may have resulted in fewer comments from students to the short-answer questions. If the questionnaires had included Japanese translations, it is possible that more comments from the students could have been elicited and they may have responded in more detail.

The second limitation was the gender imbalance of the sample. Women marginally favored using SNSs for an English course over men (57% of women in favor, 53% of men in favor). Also, the minimal concern about privacy may be attributed to the small number of women participants, as women tend to have more privacy concerns when using SNSs than men (Hoy & Milne, 2010).

Discussion

Several interesting points are raised by this study. First, even though the use of SNSs may be widespread among students, teachers should not assume that students will be comfortable using SNSs for educational purposes. Because nearly half of the participants were not willing to use SNS for an English course, educators may need to reconsider the use of SNS. Students may not have a clear idea of how SNS use could be educational. Teachers who want to use SNSs would need to be careful to make the educational merits of using SNSs clear to their students to overcome this concern.

Therefore, an English program incorporating such services may require great effort on the part of the teacher to explain why SNSs are being used. Furthermore, the number of students in this study not using SNSs was nearly one in five. Something as simple as registering, which teachers might assume takes less than a few minutes, could end up taking much longer. If there is a lack of instruction and support for using these tools, this could lead to frustration, which may cause some students to give up on the assigned tasks. Therefore, using class time to help students register and to teach them how to use these services, which would reduce the amount of time dedicated toward course content, may become necessary. It is important to remember that the difficulty of using these services is one of the primary concerns of students. Instruction in using these services should be an integral part of any course that incorporates SNSs. However, this may lead to classroom management challenges as students who are familiar with these services may become disengaged during this instruction.

It is also necessary to recognize and address the other concerns that students have. Students may be concerned with the awkwardness that may arise if their teachers are suddenly a part of their social networks without their true consent. This may lead to issues of digital crowding, as students may feel that

they would lose control of their social interactions. Their social networks may become flooded by content generated by their teachers and classmates, reducing the usability of such services. Additionally, educators should keep in mind that some students may not appreciate feeling compelled to share contact information with classmates they would rather not communicate with.

For students who would like to use SNSs for social purposes only, it may be better to avoid using Facebook, Twitter, or other social networks that students are already using. Rather, educators might elect to use SNSs with a narrower focus, such as LinkedIn, which focuses on professional development and presentation, or Edmodo, which focuses on educational use. Comparatively fewer students are using these SNSs, so there would be less overlap with existing social connections, thus avoiding the issue of digital crowding. In addition, becasue these SNSs have a narrower focus, it may be easier for teachers to highlight the educational purposes of activities using them (McBride, 2008). For example, students may be more likely to understand the purpose and educational benefit of creating a professional profile on LinkedIn rather than socializing with classmates on a platform like Facebook. This may also address the concerns of those students who show a lack of interest in SNSs and those who feel that SNSs would be a distraction to study or would reduce the quality of the course. Also, a more targeted use of SNSs would reduce the amount of content that students would have to create and keep up with, which would reduce the concerns of students who feel that they would not be able to keep up with a constant flow of content.

Finally, despite the low number of students in this study who seemed to be concerned about their privacy, teachers must take steps to protect the privacy of their students. Students may not be aware of how their private information is collected and used, and as they use SNSs more regularly with relatively few negative experiences, they will be more apt to share personal information online (Christofies, Muise & Desmarais, 2011; Lawler, Molluzzo, & Doshi, 2012; Madden, 2012).

If teachers address the concerns that students have with SNSs, perhaps students will be more willing to use these services in the future. This opens the door to accessing the benefits that students perceive in SNS use. Many participants indicated that using such services would make English courses more interesting. This interest could lead to higher levels of motivation in students (Ushioda, 2011). Using SNSs may be a way to engage students with low motivation who do not feel engaged by traditional language study. Also, using SNSs to encourage student-to-student communication may be one way of encouraging students to play a larger role in their own education, rather than depending solely on teachers. This may lead to higher levels of motivation and autonomy for students. Therefore, the concerns students have about SNSs should not be considered roadblocks, but teaching opportunities. Teachers opting to use SNSs should not use these services just to teach English, but rather also to teach how to use the services. Students will then be able to make informed and responsible choices as members of the digital English community and will be able to access the educational benefits that these services may provide.

Bio Data

Todd Hooper is an instructor in the School of Economics at Kwansei Gakuin University. He has an MA in Linguistics (TESOL) from the University of Surrey. He has been teaching in Japan for 18 years. His current research interests are in social media for English education and in critical thinking.

References

Alshahrani, K., & Al-shehri, S. (2012). Conceptions and responses to e-learning: The case of EFL teachers and students in a Saudi Arabian university. *Monash University Linguistic Papers*, *8*(1), 21-31.

Boyd, D., & Ellison, N. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*, 210-230.

Brenner, J. (2013). *Pew internet: Social networking*. Retrieved from http://pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/March/Pew-Internet-Social-Networking-full-detail.aspx

Christofides, E., Muise, A., & Desmarais, S. (2009). Information disclosure and control on Facebook: Are they two sides of the same coin or two processes? *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *12*, 341-345.

Comer, R., McKelvey, N., & Curran, K. (2012). Privacy and Facebook. *International Journal of Engineering and Technology*, *2*, 1626-1630.

Hoy, M., & Milne, G. (2010). Gender differences in privacy-related measures for young adult Facebook users. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, *10*(2). Retrieved from http://jiad.org/article130.html

Joinson, A., Houghton, D., Vasalous, A., & Marder, B. (2011). Digital crowding: privacy, self-disclosure, and technology. In S. Trepte & L. Reinecke (Eds.), *Privacy online. Perspectives in privacy and self-disclosure in the social web* (pp. 31-45). New York: Springer.

Lampe, C., Wohn, D., Vitak, J., Ellison, N., & Wash, R. (2011). Student use of Facebook for organizing collaborative classroom activities. *Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, *6*, 329-347.

Lawler, J., Molluzzo, J., & Doshi, V. (2012). An expanded study of net generation perceptions on privacy and security on social networking sites (SNS). *Information Systems Education Journal*, *10*(1), 21-36.

Madden, M. (2012). *Privacy management on social media sites*. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Privacy-management-on-social-media.aspx

Mazer, J., Murphy, R., & Simonds, C. (2007). I'll see you on 'Facebook': The effects of computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure on student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate. *Communication Education*, *56*, 1-17.

Mazer, J., Murphy, R., & Simonds, C. (2009). The effects of teacher self-disclosure via Facebook on teacher credibility. *Learning, Media and Technology*, *34*, 175-183.

McBride, M. (2008). Classroom 2.0: Avoiding the "creepy treehouse." Retrieved from http://melaniemcbride.net/2008/04/26/creepy-treehouse-v-digital-literacies/

McEwan, B. (2012). Managing boundaries in the web 2.0 classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *131*, 15-28.

Peluchette, J., Karl, K., & Fertig, J. (2013). A Facebook 'friend' request from the boss: Too close for comfort? *Business Horizons*, *56*, 291-300.

Tess, P. (2013). The role of social media in higher education classes (real and virtual)—A literature review. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(5), 60-68.

Ushioda, E. (2011). Language learning motivation, self and identity: Current theoretical perspectives. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *24*, 199-210.

Weber, A. (2012). Considerations for social network site (SNS) use in education. *International Journal of Digital Information and Wireless Communications*, *2*(4), 37-52.