Japanese Students' Attitudes Towards the Use of Facebook in the EFL Classroom

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Facebook is the most widely used social networking site in the world. However, little is known of the views that Japanese students have towards its use to enhance language learning. This paper reports on a survey of students in Japan to determine their perceptions of the use of *Facebook* in four EFL courses. The participants were 41 students who were a part of the Faculty of Foreign Studies at a university in Japan. Students were divided into separate *Facebook* groups according to their class and were required to participate in weekly discussions through the site. The results revealed that the survey respondents had moderately favorable views of using *Facebook* to learn English. In particular, the site's ease of use, convenience, and low-stress environment were seen as distinct advantages. These findings illustrate that Japanese students perceive *Facebook* as a beneficial tool for language learning.

Facebookは世界中で最も広く利用されているSNS（ソーシャルネットワーキングサービス）である。しかしFacebookの言語学習への利用について、日本の学習者がどんな認識を持っているかはほとんど知られていない。本論では4つのEFLクラスでの、Facebook利用に関する日本人英語学習者の認識調査を報告する。対象者は大学の外国語学部に属する英語学習者41名で、クラスごとに別のFacebookグループに分けられ、週に1度Facebookを通じたディスカッションに参加した。その結果、英語学習のためのFacebook利用に関して、学習者は概ね好意的な認識を持っていることが示された。特に、サイトの使いやすさ、便利さ、ストレスの低い環境といった要因が大きな利点として挙げられた。これらの結果から、EFL学習者がFacebookを言語学習の有益なツールとして捉えていることが明らかになった。

Although numerous social networking sites have sprung up over the past decade, the most widely used one is *Facebook*. As of December 2014, the site had 890 million daily active users, with approximately 82% of them outside of the US and Canada (Facebook, 2015). Because of this, Blattner and Fiori (2009) state that language teachers "need to capitalize on the fact that *Facebook* is already an integral part of many students' e-routine" (p. 21). However, while online academic platforms such as *Blackboard* and *Moodle* have been used extensively at the university level, integration of *Facebook* has lagged behind despite its potential as a powerful learning tool.

Nonetheless, some believe that Web 2.0 technologies such as *Facebook* may not be appropriate or constructive in the context of formal language teaching and learning (Lohnes & Kinzer, 2007; Waycott, Bennett, Kennedy, Dalgarno, & Gray, 2010; Salaway, Caruso, & Nelson, 2007). Moreover, though EFL students' views of *Facebook* have been studied in other regions (Shih, 2011; Bani-Hani, Al-Sobh, & Abu-Melhim, 2014; Omar, Embi, & Yunus, 2012; Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi, 2012), little is known about the attitudes of students in Japan regarding the use of *Facebook* to learn English. Given this gap in the literature, the primary aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Japanese EFL students concerning the use of *Facebook* in the classroom.

Background

Not only have recent studies shown that *Facebook* can support foreign language learning, but students seem to have positive views of its use. Shih (2011) examined the effect of incorporating *Facebook* in an English writing class at a university in Taiwan. The 23 students who participated in the study were divided into three groups based on their English proficiency level: high, medium, and low. Each group was then further divided into two separate *Facebook* groups or sites where the learners were responsible for posting their weekly assignments, evaluating the writing of their peers, and giving feedback and comments. The participants were given pre- and post-tests of their English writing to determine the impact that the *Facebook* assignments had on their writing development. The results showed that the learners were able to develop their English organization, grammar and structure, content, vocabulary, as well as spelling through the activities.

In addition to analyzing the students' writing, Shih (2011) also investigated their attitudes towards the use of *Facebook* in a blended learning environment through a 30-item questionnaire. Each item was based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. He found that the students had moderately to highly positive views regarding the use of *Facebook* in the course. Moreover, the participants indicated that the blended learning approach could help improve the students' communication, trust, friendship, and

interaction with one another as well as enhance their motivation.

A study by Bani-Hani, Al-Sobh, and Abu-Melhim (2014) also looked at students' perceptions of *Facebook* in an EFL classroom. The 42 female Jordanian university students in the study were added to a *Facebook* group by the researchers and were instructed to brainstorm, write an entry, and then give each other corrective and formative feedback. According to the results of the 10-item survey created by the researchers, the participants viewed *Facebook* as being beneficial to the development of their English writing skills. Nevertheless, nearly half of the students preferred a traditional task instead of writing via *Facebook*. This is significant because it reveals that some learners may not perceive social networking sites such as *Facebook* to be appropriate for formal teaching and learning activities.

Another study that incorporated *Facebook* in an EFL context is Omar et al.'s (2012) investigation of English learners' use of *Facebook* groups in task-based activities. The 31 learners in the study were enrolled in an English language communication course at a university in Malaysia. Students were divided into seven groups, each based on a theme chosen by the learners and the instructor. After the conclusion of the task, the learners' participatory patterns were analyzed and their perceptions of *Facebook* were collected via an open-ended questionnaire. According to the results of their study, Omar et al. (2012) found that the students displayed a high-level of participation, with each student averaging 18 entries, three times the number that was required. Moreover, the authors discovered that 100 percent of the questionnaire respondents (n=28) had favorable views towards the use of *Facebook* in an information-sharing task. Notably, many of the students also expressed that the site allowed them to "communicate more freely and comfortably with their group members, especially those who were shy and lacked confidence for face-to-face interaction" (p. 71). This is an important finding as it suggests that *Facebook* can help lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) of L2 learners.

Suthiwartnarueput and Wasanasomsithi (2012) also carried out a study examining the use of *Facebook* in the L2 classroom. A total of 83 first-year university EFL students in Thailand took part in the study, which examined the effects that *Facebook* had on the writing skills of the learners. Pre- and post-tests were administered to assess the students' English grammatical and writing competence. The authors concluded that *Facebook* did indeed enhance competence in both areas. Moreover, in order gain more insight into the learners' views of the site, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 of the participants. According to Suthiwartnarueput and Wasanasomsithi (2012), all of them had positive perceptions towards its use. In addition, many of the interviewees noted the convenience that *Facebook* offered in communicating with their teacher and peers.

In summary, *Facebook* has been shown to be an effective tool in enhancing language learning in the EFL classroom. In addition, students seem to enjoy learning English through the unique medium of *Facebook* because it lowers learner anxiety, provides more opportunities for interaction, improves students' interpersonal relationships, and fosters motivation. Thus, the author decided to utilize *Facebook* in his classes to take advantage of these potential benefits and explore Japanese EFL students' views of its use.

Research Questions

This study examined the following research questions:

1. Did the students have prior academic experience of learning English on *Facebook*?
2. To what extent did the students make use of the class *Facebook* page to learn English?
3. How did the students prefer to access the class *Facebook* page?
4. What are the attitudes of Japanese students towards the use of *Facebook* in the EFL classroom?

Participants

The participants in the study consisted of 41 first-second- and third- year students in the Faculty of Foreign Studies at a university in western Japan. All of the students were enrolled in one or more of the four English language classes taught by the researcher, which utilized *Facebook* during the second semester of the 2014-2015 academic year. Students' proficiency levels ranged from low to intermediate based on their TOEIC Bridge and TOEIC IP scores.

Methodology
Utilization of Facebook *in the Courses*

Facebook was used as the medium for all written tasks and assignments in the four courses involved in the study. Students were divided into separate *Facebook* groups based on their class. Each group was closed, meaning that member posts were hidden from the public. Figure 1 below shows a screenshot from one of the class *Facebook* group pages.
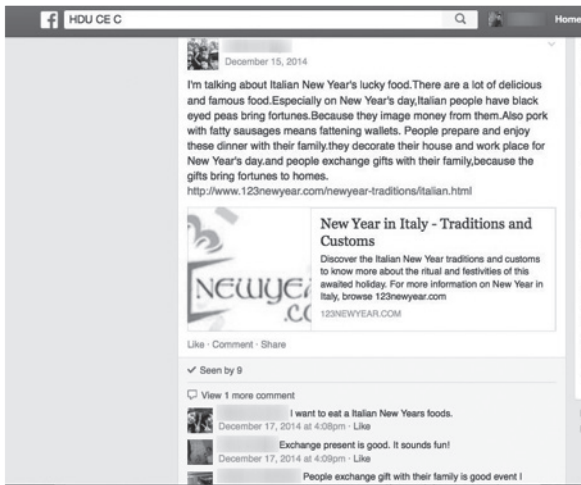
Figure 1. **Class *Facebook* group page.**

Students were required to write on a variety of topics in class and respond to other student entries either during or outside of class. They were also encouraged to share pictures, videos, and links in their posts. The researcher acted as a moderator and facilitated discussion through his own entries and comments. He also provided corrective and formative feedback on students' posts via the *Facebook* messenger or chat feature. However, this was not a significant part of the use of *Facebook* for this study as it was only given for major assignments.

Research Instrument

Data was collected via a 13-item questionnaire consisting of closed- and open-ended questions (see survey at <http://surveymonkey.com/r/XFB2DH6>). The survey was created by the researcher based on current literature on blended learning and Web 2.0 technologies and their use in L2 contexts. The survey was arranged into four parts. The first section contained three closed questions related to the students' experience and use of *Facebook*; namely, prior academic usage of the site, access preference (PC vs. mobile), and frequency of class page access. The second and third portions of the questionnaire included eight closed questions, which examined potential linguistic (four questions) and affective advantages (four questions) of *Facebook*. The final section consisted of two open-ended questions, which asked students to comment on what they liked and did not like about the use of *Facebook* in the EFL courses.

Completion of the questionnaire was voluntary. Students were informed of the intentions of the research and were ensured that all responses would remain anonymous. The survey was administered

online via *SurveyMonkey* outside of class. In other words, class time was not used in order to collect data for the research in this study.

Results and Discussion

Out of the 45 students in the classes, 41 (91%) participants responded to the questionnaire. Items one through eleven were evaluated using descriptive analysis. Responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed based on the emergent methodology approach in which data is coded and analyzed to determine meaningful themes (Suter, 2012).

Have you used *Facebook* to learn English in another class before this course?

In response to prior formal learning experience with *Facebook*, 15 (36%) stated that they had some. While still a minority of the respondents, this number is somewhat surprising given that the social networking site has not been widely used in tertiary education (McCarthy, 2010). Language instructors may be resistant to using *Facebook* in the classroom, yet as Blattner and Fiori (2009) note, "As educators it is essential to take advantage of such technological tools to enhance autonomous language education and abandon our pre-digital instinct and comfort zones" (p. 25).

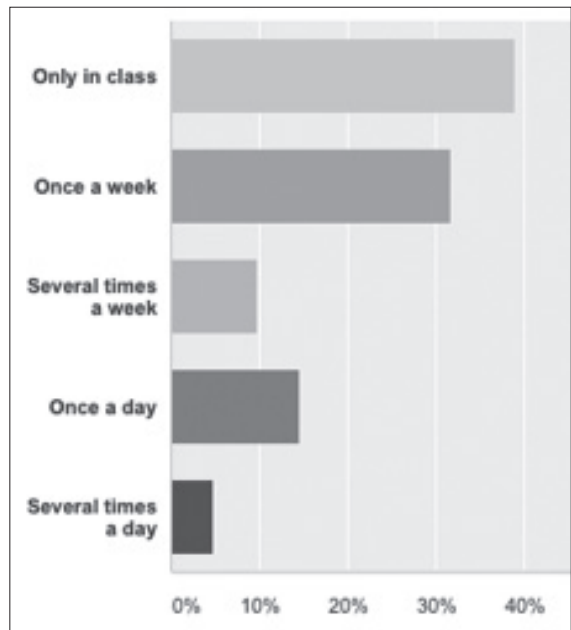### How often do you view the class *Facebook* page?

Figure 2. **How often students state they use the Facebook page.**

Figure 2 shows how often students report using the Facebook page. Although *Facebook* may have offered more opportunities to use English, the majority of the students (71%) accessed the class page once a week or only when required to during class. Therefore, it can be concluded that most of the learners did not take full advantage of the extra opportunities to use the target language outside of the classroom. With that said, eight of the respondents (19%) frequently visited the page, viewing it at least once a day. This disparity illustrates the variability between learners when incorporating computer-assisted language learning (CALL), particularly in less-controlled environments such as the Internet (Fischer, 2012).

How do you prefer to access the class *Facebook* page?

Regarding question three, more than half of the respondents (56%) preferred accessing the *Facebook* course pages via a mobile device as opposed to a PC. This preference for mobile technology represents the current shift from PC's to mobile devices (Walters, 2012). According to Jee (2011), mobile technology "affords second or foreign language learners and teachers ever greater opportunity to practice the target language" (p. 162) regardless of time and place. Thus, as the ownership rate of internet-enabled mobile devices continues to grow, so does the need for teachers to leverage their usage and utilize them to help foster language development.

Linguistic and affective advantages of *Facebook*

The eight items related to the linguistic and affective advantages of *Facebook* had mean scores ranging from 3.46 to 3.80 on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree) with standard deviations between 1.01 and 1.23, indicating the students generally agreed with the statements (Table 1). Item eight, "I enjoy learning English through *Facebook*," received the highest level of agreement with a mean score of 3.80, suggesting that the students perceived writing on *Facebook* to be a fun and engaging activity. Equally important, items nine and eleven (Table 1), which were related to stress and comfort-level when writing on *Facebook,* received relatively high scores as well (3.63 and 3.68), signifying that the site helped support an open and comfortable setting for language learning. This echoes a statement made by Jee (2011) regarding one of the affective benefits of *Facebook*, "The friendly, fun environment of *Facebook* can help to reduce foreign language learner anxiety, especially in early stages of acquisition" (p.

168). Moreover, these findings correspond with the opinions held by the participants in Shih's (2011) study who viewed *Facebook* as an interesting and low-stress method to learn English.

Table 1. Results for Questions 4-11

No.	Statement	Mean	*SD*
4	My use of English grammar is better because of *Facebook*.	3.56	1.01
5	My use of English vocabulary is better because of *Facebook*.	3.59	1.06
6	My English reading skills are better because of *Facebook*.	3.63	1.12
7	I can express myself more easily in English because of *Facebook*.	3.46	1.23
8	I enjoy learning English through *Facebook*.	3.80	1.19
9	I feel less stress writing in English on *Facebook* than pencil-and-paper writing.	3.63	1.14
10	I am more motivated to write in English on *Facebook* than pencil-and-paper writing.	3.56	1.17
11	I am more comfortable communicating with my classmates and teacher on *Facebook* than pencil-and-paper writing.	3.68	1.20

Written answers

In response to the first open-ended question, "What do you like about using *Facebook* to learn English?" several students remarked about the ease of use and convenience of the site:

> "It's easy and I can see it anywhere at any time."

> "English on Facebook is really near to me so I can enjoy and use English through SNS easily. Moreover it is really practical English."

> "Easy to writing and we can search on the Internet."

> "It is good to write easily."

> "I can easily comment."

In addition, a few students mentioned they enjoyed using the site because it was a modern way to study English:

"It looks modern, and it is useful. I should print out my report in another class. Therefore, I think *Facebook* is better."

"It's interesting and modern!"

Concerning the second open-ended question, "What do you not like about using *Facebook* to learn English?" many students complained about the poor performance of the computers and the inability to respond to others quickly:

"PCs are very slow."
"I hate it when my PC is very slow."
"I cannot fast comment."

This sentiment may have contributed to more students preferring mobile devices to PC's when accessing the class *Facebook* page.

Also significant, one student stated that he or she did not use *Facebook* and as a result, would have preferred an alternate way to complete the writing tasks:

"I don't *Facebook* so I prefer other something."

This is a reminder that although social networking sites are very popular among young people, there may be a few students who either do not use them or dislike communicating with their teacher and peers over the Internet. Therefore, it is essential for instructors to help all learners understand the benefits that *Facebook* and other Web 2.0 technologies can offer them (Blattner & Fiori, 2009).

To conclude, the participants in the study had moderately favorable attitudes towards the use of *Facebook* in the EFL classroom. According to the results of the questionnaire, the learners enjoyed using the site to learn English. Specifically, they liked the convenience of *Facebook*, which allowed them to easily comment and respond to others anytime and anywhere. However, the majority of the learners did not frequently visit the course *Facebook* pages outside of class, illustrating the fact that students may not take advantage of the opportunities given to them. Furthermore, several students stated that they had issues with the speed of the computers and Internet connection at the university. Thus, the availability and performance of computers or mobile devices, as well as a reliable Internet connection both inside and outside of class, need to be taken into account when incorporating *Facebook* into the classroom.

Conclusion

Facebook has the ability to transform language learning and extend communication outside of the confines of the classroom. The convenience it provides affords learners opportunities to communicate synchronously and asynchronously, while also decreasing the anxiety of students who may be too timid to use the L2 in a face-to-face setting. Hence, based on the findings of this study, the author supports using *Facebook* in the classroom to enhance foreign language learning. While skepticism and resistance to the incorporation of Web 2.0 tools will inevitably remain, social networking sites do and will continue to play an important role in many students' lives. Therefore, teachers must be aware of *Facebook*'s potential to foster language development by affording learners additional opportunities to meaningfully interact in the L2 in a low-stress environment.

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