

Japanese Students' Attitudes Towards Using SNSs for Learning German

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the usefulness of the social networking site Facebook (FB) for L2 German learners in Japan. Within a blended learning approach students of a regular university language course (CEFR level A2) were asked to perform FB tasks aimed at eliciting speech acts in order to improve their sociopragmatic competence. Task performance data as well as the results of pre- and postcourse surveys served to establish how adequate the network is to enhance L2 German learning in Japan. Most students performed well in the tasks and agreed that FB was an appropriate tool for L2 learning. However, concerns were also raised regarding privacy issues and difficulties in task performance, in addition to the use of the medium itself.

この論文の目的は、日本におけるL2としてのドイツ語学習者に対するソーシャルネットワークサービス (Facebook) の有効性について調査することである。本研究では、大学における通常の語学コース (CEFR level A2) の学生に対して、ブレンド型学習アプローチの枠組みに則ったFacebookによる課題を与えた。この課題では、学生の社会言語学的能力を向上させるようなスピーチアクトを引き出すことを目的とした。Facebookがドイツ語学習の補助としてどのように有効であるかを確認するために、実施した課題の結果や事前・事後アンケートの分析を行った。その結果、ほとんどの学生は問題なく課題に取り組むことができ、FacebookがL2学習のツールとして有効であると考えた。しかし、プライバシー問題の指摘や、ネットワークの使用そのものに慣れないために課題遂行に困難を覚えたという意見もあった。

Acquiring sociopragmatic competence in the L2 is a challenging task. However, the adequate performance of potentially face-threatening speech acts, such as requests, apologies, compliments, and so forth, is crucial when it comes to maintaining good personal relations with readers; nowadays most notably through Social Network Sites

(SNSs) such as Facebook (FB). For the classroom-based study outlined in this article, FB was chosen not only because the network is getting more popular among university students in Japan, but more importantly because it possesses unique functions. In particular, the *Group* application seems to be a suitable tool for students to engage in online social interactions, which often involve speech acts. Nonetheless, its potential for L2 learning has not been fully exploited yet.

Benefits of using SNSs for L2 learning have been identified in numerous studies; for an overview see Wang and Vasqu  z (2012) and Kent and Leaver (2014). Most of these predominantly descriptive and exploratory studies highlight increased student motivation, ease of the use of SNSs, and a positive classroom climate and suggest the enhancement of L2 learning. Some studies also attested positive effects on affective and collaborative learning (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012), an increased willingness to share data, information, and ideas (Kok, 2008), as well as the raising of students' sociopragmatic awareness (Blattner & Fiori, 2011).

The comparatively few studies on the use of SNSs in L2 teaching in Japan mostly praise its ease and convenience (Dizon, 2015) as well as the potential of SNSs for developing digital literacy (Prichard, 2013) and learner autonomy (Promnitz-Hayashi, 2013). However, Japanese users who are used to more "subtle" and "indirect" SNSs such as MIXI may be hesitant to use their real name or facial photo and share personal information beyond their inner circle (Fogg & Iizawa, 2008).

The aim of the classroom-based study outlined below was to examine how German as a foreign language (GFL) students in Japan respond to a blended learning approach involving FB. For that purpose a private FB Group was created, which served as a platform for the students to engage in various speech acts while sharing personal experiences with their classmates. The data consist of the students' posts and comments on the Timeline of the dedicated FB Group page, in addition to the results of pre- and postcourse surveys.

Data Collection and Analysis

The FB project was carried out in the spring term of 2015 in a voluntary German class (CFER level A2) with 11 students from different majors. The class had two instruction units of 90 minutes per week of which 20 to 25 minutes of each class were devoted to the FB project and the remaining time was used for textbook instruction. Participation in the project was voluntary and did not affect students' grades. Nine of the eleven students participated in the project. The two who chose not to participate were assigned alternative tasks to be submitted by email instead.

To address students' concerns regarding privacy and safety, a private FB Group page was set up by the teacher. This page was expected to serve as a platform to observe authentic target language communication in other "open" groups and to engage in various speech acts while sharing personal experiences with their classmates. Throughout the 15-week course a total of 10 tasks had to be carried out as homework, prompting multiple exchanges between the class members and allowing for numerous speech acts to be performed. The incentive for each task was a post provided by the teacher, which also served as an example of how students could write their own posts. These tasks involved accounts of the students' experiences, feelings, or activities, with the purpose of eliciting different speech acts. Pre- and posttask activities in the lessons before and after the task homework served to ensure that students had time to practice the speech acts for the upcoming task and reflect on their usage afterwards as shown in Figure 1.

Pretask	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> teacher presents speech acts for upcoming task students practice speech acts orally based on provided contexts
Task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students write FB posts and comment on their classmates' posts expressing feelings, wishes, and opinions describing plans and activities reporting on experiences requesting / giving advice making / reacting to suggestions expressing (dis-)like, (dis-)agreement, surprise, doubt, etc.
Posttask	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students review posts and comments by reading them aloud in class teacher provides feedback on inappropriately performed speech acts

Figure 1. Weekly tasks.

As can be seen in Figure 1, pretask activities were carried out in class to ensure that students were familiar with the relevant L2 expressions to perform the speech act(s) for the tasks. The tasks themselves required the students to write posts concerning their daily routines on the timeline of the dedicated FB Group page and to comment on each other's posts. Each task was aimed at eliciting certain speech acts, allowing students to practice the speech acts taught in an interactive way. For example, in one task students were asked to make a post in which they requested advice for improving their German, following a model post by the teacher who requested advice on studying Japanese. These requests focused on prompting comments containing advice or suggestions from the other students. Students were encouraged to comment on as many posts as possible. The teacher also proactively engaged in the conversation to prompt students to write more and provide further examples of the speech acts.

In the lesson following the task homework, students were provided with some more time to review their classmates' posts and comments as well as to answer questions regarding their own posts. Then they were asked to read aloud their posts and comments that they had made on the timeline. In order to allow them to reflect on their mistakes, the teacher provided corrective feedback that placed particular emphasis on the correctness, adequacy, and appropriateness of the speech acts produced.

Apart from the students' posts and comments on the Group's timeline, the data analysed for this study also draws on the results of pre- and postcourse surveys with the purpose of gaining insight into the students' expectations and experiences concerning the project as outlined in Figure 2.

Precourse survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students' use of SNSs and digital media for communication students' precourse knowledge of L2 speech acts
Facebook timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students' posts and comments on Groups' timeline focus on grammatical and idiomatic correctness, and pragmatic appropriateness
Postcourse survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students' difficulties and enjoyment concerning individual tasks students' feedback on the project

Figure 2. Data collection.

The precourse survey (for an English translation see Appendix A) contained closed questions regarding the students' use of SNSs and digital devices. It also had open questions aimed at establishing their knowledge of L2 speech acts prior to the project. The students' speech-act performance during the project was evaluated by a quantitative analysis of the number of comments and speech acts they produced in the weekly tasks on the FB Timeline. In order to determine how adequate the tasks developed for this project were in eliciting speech acts, the frequency of speech-act occurrence per task was calculated. To allow for corrective feedback after task completion, the speech acts produced were scanned for grammatical, idiomatic, and pragmatic inadequacies. The postcourse survey (Appendix B) contained closed questions directed at assessing students' enjoyment and difficulties concerning task performance utilizing Likert scales as well as open questions to generate ideas for improving the project. Both surveys were conducted in Japanese. Quotes from the students' responses cited in this article were translated into English by the author.

Results

In this section quantitative results of the students' task performance, their ideas, feedback, and difficulties concerning the project will be presented. Regarding task performance, Table 1 shows the total number of comments and speech acts produced by the students in the weekly tasks and the averages produced by participants.

As Table 1 shows, an average of 47 comments and 50 speech acts were produced per task; divided by the total number of nine participants on average each task prompted five comments and six speech acts per student. The tasks *expressing wishes* and *describing plans for the vacation* generated the most comments and speech acts. Therefore these tasks can be regarded as suitable for enticing students to engage in online interaction. As the figures for the individual tasks also indicate, the tasks of *requesting advice on learning German*, *expressing wishes*, and *expressing one's opinion on an article* elicited more speech acts than comments. Comparatively fewer speech acts were found in *reporting on the spring vacation*, *expressing feelings*, *describing activities*, and *describing plans for the vacation*. Reasons for these different proportions may be found in the nature of the tasks themselves. Although descriptions and reports do not necessarily involve speech acts, expressing wishes, opinions or feelings invariably do. However, because most speech acts were actually found in the ensuing comments, there may be other forces at work, too, for example, how well students could relate to their classmates' posts and whether they had an authentic desire to express their thoughts and ideas or if they just wrote their comments because it was expected of them.

Table 1. Task Performance (N = 9)

No.	Task	Comments		Speech acts	
		Total	Ave./p	Total	Ave./p
1	Speech act search	---	---	57	6
2	Suggestions for a 'Group' page photo	43	5	34	4
3	Reporting on the spring vacation	38	4	28	3
4	Expressing feelings	47	5	35	4
5	Expressing one's opinion on an article	33	4	48	5
6	Describing activities	57	6	48	5
7	Expressing wishes	70	8	71	8
8	Reporting on an experience	42	5	42	5
9	Requesting advice on learning German	19	2	33	4
10	Describing plans for the vacation	71	8	103	11
Averages		47	5	50	6

Note. Ave./p = average per participant.

To illustrate students' task performance, some examples taken from the Groups' Timeline will be provided. Tasks in which students reported on their activities (3, 6, and 10) usually elicited speech acts in their classmates' comments, such as "That sounds interesting!", "I envy you!", "I am sorry to hear that!", or "Good luck!" Likewise, in Task 5, where students had to state their opinions concerning an article on Obama's visit to Hiroshima, their comments usually contained speech acts, as in "I think this was an important gesture," "I doubt that it will change anything," or "I wish it would change people's minds." Most speech acts, however, were found in the tasks that themselves had to be performed by a speech act. For example, in Task 7 students expressed their wishes ("I wish I could travel around Japan by car") and gave advice accordingly ("You should get a license first!"). Similarly, in Task 9 students made requests such as "Can anybody show me how to improve my pronunciation?" that in turn prompted suggestions like "You might listen to German music!" or "What about listening to news on the Internet?"

As far as the students' feedback to the FB project is concerned, the blended learning approach carried out in this class was rated with an average of 1.3 on a 2/-2 scale. This

satisfaction was also reflected in their comments: "It was a good chance to have more opportunities to actually use the L2" and "I really enjoyed the project, because I could learn German in an entertaining fun way." Other students positively noted, "I lost my prejudices against Facebook," "I used FB for the first time, and I learnt how to search for information and to communicate with others using this network," and "I think SNSs are useful for L2 learning, because they are really easy to use." Most students also noted an improvement in their relationship with the teacher and their classmates as their written comments suggest: "Since I normally don't talk to my teacher or classmates outside the class, it was a good chance for us to get to know each other better" and "It was interesting to find out what my classmates are doing in their free time and what they think on certain subjects."

However, some concerns were also raised: "What happens to students who do not want to use SNSs?" As far as this project is concerned, participation was voluntary, but the teacher also noted a division in class between those who participated in the project and those who received alternative tasks instead. Another student emphasized, "I found it important that there was no requirement to befriend classmates." This comment reflects students' wishes to maintain their privacy. Although some students readily befriended each other after the Group was created, others preferred to use only the Group site itself for communication with their classmates.

Regarding the difficulties and enjoyment of task performance, a 2/-2 scale helped to determine how difficult / enjoyable performance was rated. Table 2 lists the averages and the standard deviations (SD) for each task. The positive figures indicate enjoyment and ease, and the negative figures indicate less enjoyment and more difficulty.

As far as the difficulty of the individual tasks is concerned, there are considerable differences between the tasks. Although *making suggestions for a "Group" photo* and *describing plans for the vacation* were perceived as rather easy, *requesting advice on learning German* and *expressing one's opinion on an article* as well as the *speech act search* were considered quite difficult. As for the enjoyment of the tasks' fulfilment, an average of 1.2 indicates that on average the tasks were seen as rather enjoyable. The notable exception is the *speech act search*, which was rated as least enjoyable. Comparatively high values for enjoyment were attained by the tasks of *describing plans for the vacation* and *reporting on the spring vacation*. As the SD figures indicate, students' opinion was divided as far as the difficulty and enjoyment of *expressing feelings* and *reporting on experiences* is concerned. To a slightly lesser extent, this also accounts for the difficulty of *describing activities* and the enjoyment of *requesting advice*. As the students' comments further revealed, most difficulties stem from a gap between their desire and their ability to express themselves

in the L2: "I always used the same expressions, because I wasn't really sure how to choose from so many new expressions," "I found it hard to decide which expressions are appropriate and which are not," and "Not only did I find it difficult to express my own feelings, but also more objective opinions."

Table 2. Evaluation of Task Difficulty and Enjoyment (N = 9)

No.	Task	Ease		Enjoyment	
		Average	SD	Average	SD
1	Speech act search	-0.1	0.9	0.3	0.7
2	Suggestions for a "Group" page photo	1.7	0.5	1.4	0.5
3	Reporting on the spring vacation	0.7	0.7	1.7	0.5
4	Expressing feelings	0.4	1.3	1.0	0.8
5	Expressing one's opinion on an article	-1.2	0.4	1.0	0.5
6	Describing activities	0.3	1.1	0.9	0.7
7	Expressing wishes	0.0	0.8	1.2	0.6
8	Reporting on an experience	0.0	1.3	1.0	0.9
9	Requesting advice on learning German	-0.2	0.8	1.3	0.8
10	Describing plans for the vacation	1.4	0.5	1.7	0.5
Averages		-0.3	0.3	0.8	0.7

Note. Figures represent average results obtained from ratings on a 5-point scale (-2, -1, 0, 1, 2): -2 equals difficult / not enjoyable and +2 represents easy / enjoyable.

Because students were also given time in class to fully complete their task homework, they were asked in the postcourse survey whether they preferred to do FB tasks at home or in class. As the quantitative results reveal, six students prefer to do the tasks in class, two at home, and one student was undecided. Reasons provided for doing the tasks in class mainly referred to the immediate opportunity for feedback: "If you don't understand, you can ask immediately," "You can clarify about the usage of the expressions provided," and "I found it very entertaining when everybody was working on the same task at the same time, because we could get immediate responses on our posts and comments."

Students who preferred to do the tasks at home mostly mentioned time and convenience issues: "At home, I have more time to think about what I want to write and what expressions to use," "It is a good chance to use everyday German outside the classroom," and "Logging into the CALL-room computers is very time consuming and the operating systems provided make it rather difficult to write with the German alphabet." That is why all of the nine students preferred to do the tasks on their own devices; six on their mobile phones, two on their computer at home, and one on a tablet. One student noted, however, "Since I normally don't use FB, I found it hard to get into the habit of checking the newsfeed regularly and to comment on my classmates' posts." When asked how much time they spent on their task homework, one responded less than 5 minutes, two spent 5 to 10 minutes, four 10 to 15 minutes, and two needed more than 15 minutes.

As far as the pretask activities are concerned, most students underlined the importance of task preparation in class, as the following comments suggest: "In order to complete the tasks at home, we need to get appropriate instructions in class" and "It is important to be taught how to use the expressions for the upcoming task correctly." However, for some students the time allocation for task preparation was not sufficient: "Since I did not know many of the expressions taught, I would have liked to have more time in class to explore and experiment with them." Regarding the posttask activities, some students wished to obtain more feedback on their task performance in the dedicated lesson: "There should be more focus on the feedback, as on what mistakes were made and how to use the expressions taught more appropriately."

Finally, students were also asked whether the project had any benefits for their L2 learning. Most students noted an increase in their vocabulary and in their ability to express themselves: "I got more familiar with using modal verbs, which often appeared in the expressions taught," "I learnt many new expressions that are essential for everyday communication, which so far I haven't found in textbooks." Some comments also explicitly referred to the acquisition of speech acts: "I learnt how to express wishes and how to give advice accordingly," and "I learnt how to express my opinion and how to react to my partner's utterances." Another student noted an improvement of her interaction skills: "Thanks to my classmates' comments and questions, I learnt to express myself in a way that is intelligible to others." In view of these mostly positive comments, the project seems to have contributed to students' L2 learning.

Summary and Discussion

Based on the results obtained from the analysis of students' task performance as well as their responses from the pre- and postcourse surveys, it can be concluded that the

blended learning approach described in this paper had some positive effects on the participants' L2 learning. However, due to the informal nature and the limited scope of the data collection and analysis, one has to bear in mind that these findings cannot be generalized and that the approach used in this project may yield different results when applied in other teaching contexts.

As for the learner group in this study, the tasks developed seem to have been appropriate for eliciting a large number of different speech acts, allowing students to use these expressions in context, for which textbook-based instruction is not sufficient. Judging from the students' feedback, most tasks were rated as enjoyable because they related to their interests and activities. Only the speech act search, which was intended to raise students' pragmatic awareness, was perceived as rather difficult. Yet overall these results confirm Blattner and Fiori's (2011) findings that FB's Group function is an adequate tool for students to observe and practice speech acts in authentic L2 contexts. In the postcourse survey, students also mentioned having difficulties choosing the right expressions and using them correctly in context. Such difficulties are certainly an integral part of the L2 acquisition process, and it has to be ensured that students have ample opportunities to experiment with newly introduced expressions before they actually use them on social media as well as sufficient time to discuss and reflect on their usage afterwards.

As far as the use of the medium FB for L2 learning is concerned, the participants of this study seem to have enjoyed the project as is shown by their posts and comments on the Groups' timeline, their active participation in pre- and posttask activities, as well as their overwhelmingly positive comments in the postcourse survey. Students felt encouraged to share personal information with their classmates and enjoyed completing the tasks collaboratively. This increased their motivation and led to a positive classroom climate, confirming observations made by Kok (2008) and Blattner and Lomicka (2012). However, students who had not had any experience using SNSs voiced difficulties concerning the use of the network, in particular checking and responding to their message updates regularly. In this regard, it had to be ensured that all participants were not only familiar with the technical functions of the network, but also with the social implications the use of SNSs imply. There are certainly challenges and opportunities for learners to develop more autonomy as they take more responsibility for their L2 learning process and progress.

Due to the growing popularity of SNSs such as FB, it is increasingly likely, and indeed also desirable, that students engage in such interactions and continue to practice and improve their acquired L2 skills even after they completed their institutional language

study. In pedagogical contexts, however, it has to be ensured that SNSs are used not only legally and ethically, but also in socially and culturally appropriate ways as pointed out by Prichard (2013). Clearly, more research is needed in order to arrive at an understanding of how learners might be best assisted in their endeavour to utilise such technologies for their L2 learning. Questions that might be addressed in this regard are (a) how to integrate FB tasks meaningfully in the progression of a textbook-based class, (b) how to ensure that students who do not wish to participate in using SNSs can equally profit from a blended learning approach, and (c) how to strike a balance between allowing students to harness as many opportunities as possible for L2 learning that the network offers, while maintaining a necessary degree of students' (and teachers') privacy and safety.

The limited scope and exploratory nature of the study outlined in this article could only scratch the surface of such research ambitions. To make more general claims about the usefulness of SNSs for language learning and to arrive at a deeper understanding of how this affects students' L2 acquisition more empirical research would be desirable.

Bio Data

Axel Harting wrote his PhD on German and Japanese email writing and is teaching German at Hiroshima University. His research fields are L2 writing, L2 didactics, and pragmatics.

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Appendix A Precourse Survey

1. How often do you use the following devices for communicating with your friends?

	0	1	2	3	
a) smartphone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	0 = less than once a month
b) tablet	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	1 = at least once a month
c) computer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	2 = at least once a week
					3 = at least once a day

2. How do you communicate with your friends?

	0	1	2	3
a) by phone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b) by E-Mail	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c) through LINE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d) other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. Do you have a Facebook account?

Do you have a Facebook account?	O no		O yes	
	0	1	2	3
a) How often do you check the newsfeed?	O	O	O	O
b) How often do you check your notifications?	O	O	O	O
c) How often do you chat with friends?	O	O	O	O

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- d) How often do you write messages? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
- e) How often do you update you status? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
- f) How often do you comment on friends' posts? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
- 4a) Have you ever used SNS for studying foreign languages?
☐ No. ☐ Yes, privately. ☐ Yes, within a language class.
- 4b) If yes, how did you use SNS for studying?
- 5) Do you think you might benefit from using SNS in foreign language tuition?
- 6) Which German expressions do you already know for ... ?
- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| a) excuses | k) compliments |
| b) thanks | l) well-wishes |
| c) greetings | m) congratulations |
| d) leave-takings | n) expressing compassion |
| e) suggestions | o) expressing anger |
| f) requests | p) expressing happiness |
| g) accepting requests | q) expressing sorrow |
| h) declining requests | r) expressing fear or unease |
| i) expressing likes | s) expressing surprise |
| j) expressing dislikes | t) expressing regret |
2. Did you prefer to do the SNS tasks at home or in class? Why?
3. How much time did you spent on the SNS tasks? Per task on average ...
- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> no more than 5 minutes | <input type="radio"/> 5 to 10 minutes |
| <input type="radio"/> 10 to 15 minutes | <input type="radio"/> more than 15 minutes |
4. What are (dis)advantages of doing the tasks at home / in class?
5. How useful was the task preparation in class?
6. How much time of a language class should be devoted to SNS related learning?
- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> 5 to 10 minutes | <input type="radio"/> 10 to 15 minutes | <input type="radio"/> 15 to 20 minutes |
| <input type="radio"/> 20 to 30 minutes | <input type="radio"/> 30 to 45 minutes | <input type="radio"/> more than 45 minutes |
7. On which device do you prefer to do SNS tasks?
- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> my computer at home | <input type="radio"/> on a University computer |
| <input type="radio"/> my mobile | <input type="radio"/> my tablet |
8. Which of the following study aids did you use for the SNS tasks?
- | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> dictionary | <input type="radio"/> internet | <input type="radio"/> handouts provided in class | <input type="radio"/> help of friends |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
9. How enjoyable / easy were the tasks?

Appendix B
Postcourse Survey

1. Do you think it was useful that this class contained a SNS project?

	-2	-1	0	1	2	
not useful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	useful

	difficult ↔ easy					boring ↔ enjoyable				
	-2	-1	0	1	2	-2	-1	0	1	2
Task 1 (Speech act search)										
Task 2 (Suggestion for a 'Group' page photo)										
Task 3 (Reporting on the spring vacation)										
Task 4 (Expressing feelings)										
Task 5 (Expressing opinion on an article)										
Task 6 (Describing activities)										
Task 7 (Expressing wishes)										

Task 8 (Reporting on an experience)									
Task 9 (Requesting advice on L2 learning)									
Task 10 (Describing plans for the vacation)									

10. Did you have any difficulties in doing the SNS tasks?

11. What did you learn through the SNS project?

12. Do you have any wishes or suggestions of how you'd like to use SNS in language classes?

13. Did the project change the relation to your teacher or the other students?

14. Did the project change the way you use SNS?

15. Do you have any concerns regarding the use of SNS in language classes?