

SNS for learners at beginner level: An alternative use of FB

Tiziana Carpi¹

Abstract. Despite that previous studies have shown that the implementation of Social Network Sites (SNSs) into the classroom may bring several learning benefits, the focus has been mainly restricted to learners at intermediate language level with a focus on use of SNSs for fostering communicative competence or as class management. This project, implemented on a voluntary basis in a class of 103 first year students of Japanese L2 at an Italian University, challenged the use that has been made of SNSs so far and integrated Facebook for simple authentic language tasks. The study investigated: 1) students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of Facebook (FB) to learn and practice Japanese script through digital devices, and 2) the potential benefits of FB in terms of language and cultural learning. Data were collected through questionnaires (pre and post project), language tasks and three language tests. Results show that students who participated in the FB project did not only provide very positive feedback but also performed better in the language test.

Keywords: social network sites, SNSs, Facebook, Japanese language learning, beginner students.

1. Introduction

In the last few years, SNSs have become part of today's learners' daily routine and an essential form of media literacy. With surveys reporting that 18% of Internet users are between 18-29 years old, and 90% of them have profiles on SNSs², it is

1. University of Milan, Italy; tiziana.carpi@unimi.it.

2. FB alone counts 800 million daily users (PewResearch Internet Project). Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>

How to cite this article: Carpi, T. (2014). SNS for learners at beginner level: An alternative use of FB. In S. Jager, L. Bradley, E. J. Meima, & S. Thoušný (Eds), *CALL Design: Principles and Practice; Proceedings of the 2014 EUROCALL Conference, Groningen, The Netherlands* (pp. 35-39). Dublin: [Research-publishing.net](http://www.research-publishing.net). doi:10.14705/rpnet.2014.000191

not surprising that in recent years the use of SNSs in second language education has drawn the attention of an increasing number of researchers.

According to previous studies, benefits have been found in the development of communicative and socio-pragmatic competence, motivation and interpersonal relationships (McBride, 2009). However, in contrast with previous research, where target learners are at intermediate level and where SNSs have been mainly integrated for class management or as tools to foster communicative competence (Hitosugi, 2011), the present study has exploited the features of one of the most popular SNSs in a radically different way. FB was implemented in a project which, firstly, addressed absolute beginners with no prior knowledge of the L2 (Japanese) and secondly, aimed at helping students familiarize themselves and exercise with a different script, which exposed them to authentic language through Japanese websites.

The project aimed at investigating: 1) students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of FB to learn and practice the Japanese script through digital devices, and 2) the potential benefits of FB in terms of language and cultural learning.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and the FB group

The participants of the project, which ran for ten weeks from October to December 2013, were absolute beginners ($N=103$, $M=20.06$ years) enrolled in the first year of a Japanese language course within the BA degree in Language and Cultural Mediation, University of Milan. The goal of the course (20 hours) was the introduction to the Japanese script: two *kana* syllabaries (*katakana* and *hiragana*), the first hundred *kanji* (chinese characters), and *rōmaji*, the system of transcription of the symbols into roman letters.

On a voluntary basis, the students were offered to take part in a project which included the use of FB in addition to class hours for activities related to Japanese language and culture learning. A closed FB group was created and half of the class ($N=48$) joined it.

2.2. Survey procedure

Data were collected in three stages: a) two questionnaires, one before and one at the end of the project, b) a total of 13 learning tasks posted on FB, and c) three

language tests. In order to avoid non-spontaneous responses, it was emphasized that replying to tasks was absolutely optional.

The first questionnaire was administered to the whole class ($N=103$) before introducing the project, to gather information about students' overall attitude and perception of technology use in general, and specifically of FB for L2 and culture learning. The second questionnaire, administered at the end of the course and to which more than half of the class replied ($N=58$, including FB members), replicated some of the questions introduced in the first questionnaire, and further explored whether students who decided not to participate in the FB group, would have liked to join in the future. It also investigated potential worries concerning the implementation of FB for Japanese language and culture learning. The last section of this questionnaire was addressed only to FB members and explored their perception of participation in the FB project.

A set of 13 tasks was carefully designed in advance and posted weekly on the FB page. Students were suggested to do the tasks regularly, with no obligation. Most of them required students to go to specific Japanese websites, available only in the Japanese language (fast food chains, travel agencies, karaoke song playlists), choose one's favourite item (e.g. fast food menu, honeymoon destination, song and singer, etc.), and report it on posts using katakana and rōmaji. The goal was to help students practice reading and writing authentic Japanese.

At the beginning of the course, all the 103 students were informed that three language tests would be submitted during the classes but their attendance was optional. Students were required to write the transliteration of sentences from one script to the other (kanji into hiragana and vice versa, and katakana into rōmaji followed by translation). Because tasks on FB focused mainly on katakana use, only results of the test section related to katakana were taken into consideration for the subsequent data analysis.

3. Discussion

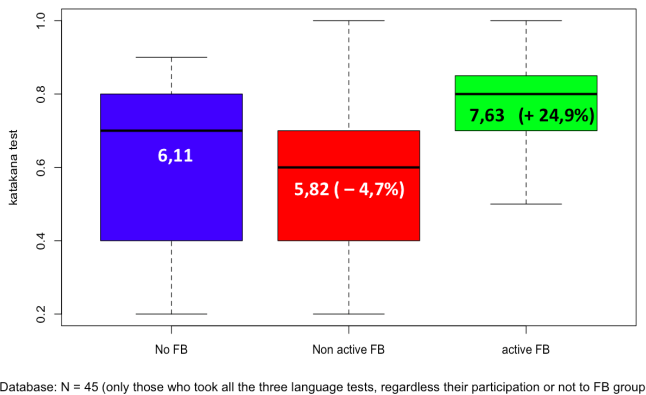
Data collected through the two questionnaires provide interesting clues about students' perception of FB use for language and culture learning. According to results from the first one ($N=103$), 92% of the students had a FB account. 72.8% said they were interested in using FB for learning Japanese language and culture and only a small percentage expressed to be doubtful (23.3%) or indifferent (3.6%) about it. While 56.9% of the total number of students took part in the FB group, 51.6% of the remaining students said they wished to participate in the future.

Furthermore, students declared an improvement on several aspects of language learning. Using a Likert scale, 78.8% of the participants fully or mostly agreed on saying that taking part in the FB project improved their language skills. Most of them (81.8%) thought that they deepened their interest in Japanese language and culture. 72.7% believed that they benefitted from participating to the FB group. 75.8% did not consider FB tasks took time away from their study and 79.8% did not think doing language practice with FB to be demotivating.

The majority (75.8%) reported that, thanks to FB, they improved the Japanese script using digital devices. In fact, while at the beginning only 38.8% declared they were able to write Japanese on the computer, at the end, the percentage raised to 79.3%. 78.8% asserted that FB helped them improve their ability to read katakana words as well as to memorize (75.8%) hiragana and katakana.

When asked whether students would have changed anything in the FB project, most answers reported their satisfaction over the task contents and delivery. Only a few mentioned the repetitive nature of some tasks.

Figure 1. Total score in the three katakana tests³



The most striking results emerge from the language tests. In this case, data were collected only from the students who took all the three tests ($N=45$). In order to evaluate the effect of participation in FB on learners' achievements, students were divided into three groups: those who did not join FB, those who did but were not

3. The results have been obtained through an ANOVA model controlling for gender, age, previous ability in reading and writing hiragana, katakana and kanji, computer skills and other individual characteristics to avoid pre-project bias.

active, and those who were active. Test results show that the total score in the three katakana tests obtained by the active FB members was 24.9% higher than those who did not join FB. However, those who joined FB but did not participate actively⁴ scored 4.7% less than those who did not joined at all (Figure 1).

4. Conclusions

This study examined the effect of FB usage on beginner students of Japanese L2 since the very early stage of their learning. Data analysis showed that, besides students' very positive attitudes towards the use of FB to learn and practice Japanese language and culture, remarkable conclusions can be drawn from the test results: active FB members performed consistently better than those who were inactive. Improvements in their writing skills on the computer have also been found. Despite the voluntary nature of the FB project, 69% of the participants were active in their responses to tasks. Participants to FB enjoyed the project very much and expressed their willingness to join similar activities in classes at upper levels.

This study may support what Blattner and Lomicka (2012) advocate: "SNS should be integrated as an extension of the classroom so that language development can continue in a fun environment when students are working from other places" (p. 17).

Acknowledgements. I am grateful for The Japan Foundation for supporting my research and the project through a Fellowship for Ph.D. Candidate. I would also like to thank Prof. Kohji Shibano (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) for his constructive comments.

References

- Blattner, G., & Lomicka, L. (2012). *Facebook-ing* and the social generation: A new era of language learning. *Alsic* [Online], 15(1). doi:10.4000/alsic.2413
- Hitosugi, C. I. (2011). Using a social networking site in Japanese class. In E. Forsythe, T. Gorham, M. Grogan, D. Jarrell, R. Chartrand, & P. Lewis (Eds), *CALL: What's Your Motivation?* (pp. 72-83). Tokyo: JALT CALL SIG.
- McBride, K. (2009). Social-networking sites in foreign language classes: Opportunities for recreation. In L. Lomicka & G. Lord (Eds), *The next generation: Social networking and online collaboration in foreign language learning* (pp. 35-58). CALICO Monograph Series, 8. San Marcos, TX: CALICO.

4. Participants to the FB group were considered "active" if they had accomplished at least 25% of the total tasks.