Learners' perceptions on using social networking sites to reinforce their linguistic performance

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Abstract

The unprecedented progress in digital appliances nowadays resulted in increasing reliance on the use of technology, which facilitated construction of knowledge including the acquisition of languages (Thorne, 2010). Formal education has developed drastically and neither educators nor classroom input is perceived as the only source of information; unlimited resources exist for learners to construct knowledge (Benson, 2007). Online applications foster learners' autonomy and independence and encourage them to practise the target language in authentic situations using different tools like Social Networking Sites (SNSs). Recent studies signal how SNSs increase learners' motivation (Aydin, 2014), interaction and socialization (Ryberg & Christiansen, 2008), and pragmatic and linguistic proficiency (Blake, 1998). The more language learners have opportunities to use them effectively; the greater improvement in their multiliteracy and digital skills is (Chartrand, 2012). This study aims at investigating the perceptions of undergraduate learners on SNSs and the extent to which they benefit from them to reinforce their linguistic performance. The data are collected from a survey questionnaire through closed-ended and open-ended items. The analysis shows the participants' perceptions that SNSs can help improve oral and communication skills, yet they could not get the much benefit from these platforms in improving writing techniques and knowledge of grammar. The data also signal the participants' concerns and limitations in using language-learning applications like Livemocha, iTalki, Lang-8, Hello-Hello, Duolingo, Palabea, and other relevant ones. They attributed this to lack of training on using these resources. This study provides implications of using these digital platforms.

Keywords: social networking sites; linguistic performance; learner autonomy; motivation; online applications

1. Introduction

Foreign Language learning has been an inspiring enterprise that attracted the attention of educators, psychologists, and linguists for decades. Behaviourism, innatism, and interactionism represent the theoretical underpinnings of language learning approaches from which different methodologies and techniques are extracted. While recent trajectories of language representations aim at promoting learner

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autonomy, independence, and interdependence (Benson, 2007); recent research has shown involvement of many interrelated factors in directing and impacting foreign language development as well. From a sociolinguistic perspective, users of a foreign language who share similar socioeconomic conditions have varying levels of using the language (Al Ghazali, 2018a). There might be significant factors other than conventional language teaching tracks that account for such a linguistic variation. One of these factors is "Social Networking" that impacts language development both at the macro and micro levels (Chartrand, 2012).

At the macro side, "a social network is an abstract mechanism that denotes the social relationships an individual contracts with other individuals in a society" (Chambers, 1995, p. 67). In a high-density social network structure, the individuals' integration in the social norms and values including those norms related to language use are intensified. Therefore, the more they are integrated into a social network; the greater opportunity they adhere linguistically to the norms of language use of this community. Conversely, at the micro-technical level, the linguistic variation is influenced by usage of Social Networking Sites (SNSs); given the unprecedented advancement in science, technology, and media. Enhancing the linguistic level of learners not simply relies on the traditional language class structure; rather, usage of SNSs could offer alternative avenues for language learners to explore by themselves what increases their proficiency and fluency in learning the language (Chartrand, 2012).

This proposal does not claim that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) may be learnt completely through SNSs nor these tools substitute formal language-learning platforms. Conversely, SNSs create more interactive learning environment and a space for language use in an informal context (Samano, 2014). These interpersonal online applications enable EFL learners to collaborate with other learners, teachers, and professionals on the website. They also encourage informal, spontaneous, and fluent speech in topics that do not necessarily underlie academic background. The significance of SNSs is possibly due to the prominent advancement in technology that "can play an important role in fostering second language acquisition by electronically increasing learners' contact with a wide array of authentic materials" (Blake, 1998, p. 210). They provide different opportunities for users to find by themselves what fosters their linguistic performance. Some linguists distinguish between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. For Chomsky, the linguistic competence refers to the innate linguistic knowledge that allows native speakers of the language to match the sounds they produce or hear with the intended meanings these sounds carry. It also refers to the speaker's or hearer's knowledge of his own language; whereas the linguistic performance refers to the actual use of language in concrete meaningful situations regardless whether it is the speaker's native language or the target one (Chomsky, 1965).

The speaker's use of the language is enhanced following the use of different input resources. Currently, the expanding reliance and utilization of state-of-the-art facilities and smart phones has affected each feature in our lives, and education is no exception. In EFL learning, for instance, the Internet provides both learners and teachers with wide range of international resources and helps them to share ideas with other learners in different parts of the world; let alone the opportunity it offers in facilitating direct communication with fluent speakers of English. Using communication destinations like Facebook, Google, Edmodo, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. increases EFL Learners' abilities, self-confidence, self-knowledge, and lifelong learning. They foster their positive attitudes about English language learning (Aydin, 2014). Exchanging Electronic Mails (Emails) between learners and teachers also allows for more interaction between them and improves their writing skill.

This impact is evident in the Middle East and among Arab learners who seem to be addicted to using SNSs. Go-Gulf (2019) – an official website of statistics and trends in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – shows some figures that 88% of the Middle East online population use SNSs on a daily basis. 48% of them use English in search engines and communications; whereas 45% use Arabic language and 7% use

a mixture of both English and Arabic. From the 88%, 65% of them are male and 35% are female with around 68% of them are teenagers and youth aging between 18 and 34 years old. However, one of the striking figures is related to the popular topics approached by SNSs users. The greatest percentage (67%) is related to watching music clips and movies, and the least percentage (14%) is related to education and religious topics. While SNSs are diverse, Facebook lies at the peak with 94% users followed by Twitter with 52%. 46% of them use Google as a favourable search engine, 14% use Instagram, and only 6% have LinkedIn accounts. In the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia and the UAE make up 80% of Facebook users. Expectedly, LinkedIn (12%) outperforms Twitter (3%) most significantly in the UAE where the business-focused network reaches more than 12% of the population (Go-Gulf, 2019). Within the context of this study in the UAE, using SNSs has become inseparable part of the youth lives with the majority of them favour using Facebook (40.63%) followed by LinkedIn (12.78%) and Twitter (3.25%).

Based on the figures above, the UAE context is ideal for conducting this research particularly after the recent trend in UAE schools and universities to rely on online teaching and learning in parallel with classroom-based instruction. The recent pandemic (Covid-19) has encouraged learning from different online resources including the learning of English and the development of linguistic performance. The UAE has facilitated online learning through provision of high-speed internet connection and course materials supported with relevant websites that make learning at home more comfortable and accessible. Using SNSs is not an exceptional medium; rather it represents an alternative interesting source of improving language performance. Hence, this paper aims at investigating these two issues:

- Learners' perceptions on using SNSs for improving their linguistic performance; and
- The extent to which they are familiar with popular platforms such as Livemocha, iTalki, Lang-8, Hello-Hello, Duolingo, Palabea, or other relevant ones.

1.1. Literature review

The upsurge in the popularity of using SNSs at this decade may be attributed partially to the desire of individuals to interact and connect with new people, to share their ideas, and to have a window for self-expression and developing relationships (Thorne, 2010). This practice is driven by the sociological approach revived by Lantolf (2000) who followed the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978). They both praised the role of language in facilitating interaction with social artefacts and for constructing "taken-as-shared" knowledge (ibid: 1978). Likewise, SNSs offer virtual environment for sociocultural language exchange (Harrison, 2013) and allow for learning through observation, where learners can observe, improve, and refine their language output by noticing how others use the language (Ryberg and Christiansen, 2008). Karpati (2009) is found in agreement with Lantolf in arguing that SNSs are effective tools that allow educators for setting up collaborative learning, placing learners at the core of the learning experience, reducing teachers' interference, and promoting their roles as mentors and guides of knowledge construction and sharing. SNSs also allow access to authentic language learning materials and help learners to reinforce their linguistic performance in the target language. A number of studies supported this understanding.

Komatsu (2011) conducted a survey to explore the impact of SNSs on the improvement of the linguistic performance of EFL learners including the grammatical, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, phonological, and semantic competences. The study concluded that these platforms are potential forums of learning which promote autonomy, leaner centeredness, and collaboration. They also have remarkable impact on increasing the fluency of language users. Clark and Gruba (2010) and Chartrand (2012) also claim that SNSs can stimulate learners' enjoyment, motivation, and interest in language learning.

Stevenson and Liu (2010), in addition, find that SNSs facilitate language development and increase motivation for learning. They conducted an empirical research for exploring the pedagogical and

technical use of three language-related SNSs namely Palabea, Livemocha, and Babbel. The five participants were engaged in exploratory, closed-ended, and open-ended tasks using the three SNSs applications. This study showed that the five participants were highly interested and excited about their collaboration and direct contact with native speakers of English through SNSs. They perceived that this online engagement enabled them to overcome their language anxiety and apprehension to use English with fluent interlocutors. Moreover, it was outstanding that the participants' familiarity with these SNSs impacted their reactions and level of engagement (ibid: 2010).

Mitchell (2012), similarly, conducted a case study to explore the impact of using Facebook on the communicative ability of nine EFL learners. She found that those learners were not only able to communicate with friends worldwide but also improve their linguistic and cultural abilities. Like Clark and Gruba (2010), Mitchell (2012) found that the perceived user-friendliness of SNSs and the way they are designed may affect level of engagement with the learning materials but may not affect growth in the number of users. This could be attributed to the intrinsic motivation and internal preference of language users to explore untraditional streams of language development. Learners' autonomy is absolutely the guiding factor that makes the difference among EFL learners. Whereas their autonomy allows for conducting constant appraisal of their linguistic strengths and weaknesses; their independence allows for defining and approaching the appropriate resources that improve their language skills and abilities (Al Ghazali, 2018b).

In a further study for Harrison and Thomas (2009), they investigated the use of Livemocha with a number of EFL learners who used this application for an hour weekly. They noticed learners' significant engagement and interest in the diverse materials and the new experience. They accordingly proposed that Livemocha can "transform language learning, by providing environments that allow new modes of active learning" (ibid: 121).

Some existing studies by Cahyono and Mutiaraningrum (2016) and Hodges (2013) on SNSs and EFL learning applications investigated the extent to which these online platforms provide learners with access to information from different resources. They also studied their attitudes and perceptions of having direct communication with native speakers of English in an authentic-like environment. Yu et al. (2010), on the other hand, focused on investigating the correlation between using Facebook and learners' academic behaviour and achievement, the extent to which the course learning outcomes have been achieved, and the degree of learners' self-esteem, satisfaction with university life, and proficiency in English. These studies show that usage of SNSs has both direct and indirect benefits. They directly contribute to enhancing and promoting the linguistic performance and proficiency levels of participants through frequent engagement in authentic learning contexts. They indirectly provide EFL learners with social support that improves their mental health, enhances their overall academic performance, and increases their self-esteem and self-confidence.

In relation to learners' familiarity with SNSs, some studies concluded that the more EFL learners are aware of and familiar with relevant SNSs, the more they can improve their language skills. Kabilan, et al. (2010), for instance, investigated the extent to which Malaysian EFL learners are able to benefit from SMSs. They concluded that learners' familiarity with these platforms improved their confidence, motivation, and attitudes significantly. They became braver to use the language, became more motivated to use English in reading and writing, and maintained more positive attitudes towards using English in communication in general. Nevertheless, Kabilan, et al. (2010) proposed that these platforms should be integrated in the overall educational curriculum with pre-determined objectives and outcomes in order to bring promising results.

The above review indicates that the integration of SNSs in the daily teaching of EFL learners seems to have psycholinguistic, sociocultural, and ecological underpinnings. From a psycholinguistic

perspective, SNSs provide an appropriate context for social interaction and noticing. As argued by Long (1996), Krashen (1994), and Swain and Lapkin (1995), "language development is brought about by person-to-person communication and the linguistic interactions that take place". In support of this perspective, the recent research in CALL has advocated the acquisition and development of languages within an interactionist, psycholinguistic framework. It provides EFL learners with an opportunity to notice their errors, monitor the authentic use of language in meaningful situations, and use computer applications to improve their communication and language production (Chapelle, 1997). The sociocultural perspective advocated by Vygotsky (1978) and Lantolf (2000) supports the notion that interaction with social artefacts allows for constructing taken-as-shared knowledge. SNSs therefore can represent a virtual community for individuals to communicate since they combine many technological features in one platform. From an ecological perspective, using SNSs implies that an individual acts and interacts within and with his environment rather than the learning taking place in an isolated context. The authentic contexts therefore allow EFL learners more exposure to the target language and culture through SNSs.

However, few studies explored the attitudes and perceptions of undergraduate EFL Arab learners about using SNSs and how they contribute to the development of their linguistic performance. In addition, minimal studies investigated the familiarity of EFL Arab learners with SNSs, and the most popular ones they use to improve their proficiency in English. The significance of this current research resides in exploring the contributions of SNSs to the development of the linguistic performance of EFL Arab Learners. The scope of this research covers the perceptions of undergraduate EFL learners on using SNSs in the Middle East in general. It also contributes to enhancing our knowledge on how to foster EFL learns' autonomy and independence through digital resources and online appliances.

2. Method

The sample of this study is recruited from undergraduate students in four universities in Abu Dhabi. Given the nature of university education, students tend to follow more independent pathways either for reinforcing their comprehension of courses or for improving their English, which is the medium of instruction in all universities. The participants are recruited from different majors (Business, Engineering, and Social Sciences). They all passed the IELTS exam with a score of no less than 5.0 (or its TOEFL equivalent), which is the minimal score for admission at UAE universities. Regardless their majors, undergraduate students take around three English-related courses like "English for Developing Communication", "English for Academic Purposes", and "English for Technical Purposes". These courses are university requirements taught to facilitate students' communications and improve their academic language skills. They improve students' skills in English composition and technical writing. Around 25% of the delivery of these courses are classroom-based; whereas the rest of the work is project-based and assignments. Students often work in micro-groups and use SNSs to improve their linguistic performance and reading and writing strategies. These mediums represent alternative resources to students to work independently on their own pace. During the delivery of these courses, the instructors provide clues and links to students to utilize in the development of language skills. They also apply in-class practice on using language applications like Livemocha and Duolingo; however, most of the work is done by students independently.

The number of participants (N=350) consists of 180 female and 170 male students from different nationalities, given the multicultural nature of the UAE community. The instrument used in this study is a survey questionnaire composed of 15 closed-ended items following the five-point Likert format that ranges from (5) for "Strongly Agree" to (1) for "Strongly Disagree". A survey questionnaire is a simple, versatile, and reliable means of collecting quantitative data (Dörnyei, 2003). In these questions, the

participants are asked to express their perceptions about the opportunities SNSs provide to improve their overall linguistic performance in terms of fluency of speech, listening comprehension, correct use of grammar rules, acquisition of speech acts and fixed expressions, acquisition of reading comprehension strategies, and familiarity with different language genres. These items are:

Using SNSs for academic purposes helps me to:

- Access multiple EFL learning resources
- Communicate with native speakers of English
- Enhance acquisition of speech acts and fixed expressions
- Enhance my glossary of words in English
- Enhance my knowledge and use of grammar
- Enhance my overall listening & speaking skills
- Enhance my self-esteem and confidence
- Improve my overall academic writing
- Improve my reading comprehension strategies
- Increase my overall communication in English
- Learn English independently without a teacher
- Listen to different genres of English
- Reinforce my motivation to read about new topics
- Share ideas with friends and advisor deeply
- Use English in less stressful environment

In addition, two open-ended questions are added to allow students to express their views regarding the use of SNSs in language learning. These two open-ended questions are:

- "At what levels do you think using SNSs are useful to you as a university undergraduate?"
- "How do you see your familiarity with online applications like Livemocha, iTalki, Lang-8, Hello-Hello, Duolingo, Palabea, Babbel, or others to improve your English?"

The quantitative data are analysed statistically using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19 in which descriptive statistics are extracted. The participants' responses to the two open-ended questions are analysed thematically where common themes are identified as shown below.

3. Results

One of the demographic details requested from respondents in the questionnaire is their access to the Internet. 92% of them report that they have Internet access all the time; whereas the other 8% have Internet access when Wi-Fi connection is available at home, university, or Shopping Malls. Due to the constant development in the UAE, Wi-Fi connection is available at public places for facilitating social connection. Another demographic detail is related to the SNSs on which they have personal accounts including Facebook, Google, Edmodo, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Expectedly, the highest percentages are given to Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram respectively as shown below.

Table 1. Percentages of participants' personal accounts on SNSs by gender

Gender	Facebook	Snapchat	Instagram	Google	Twitter	LinkedIn	Edmodo
Female	85%	62%	49%	36%	1.5%	1.2%	0.3%
Male	80%	57%	46%	32%	2%	0.6%	0.1%

Around 75% of the participants report that they check their accounts on SNSs daily and they spend between one to three hours using these applications. The percentages also show that girls are more active than boys on using SNSs, probably due to their natural curiosity to explore and get engaged in new experiences. 90% of the participants report that English is used as the search and chatting language on these SNSs. The above figures could represent the general attitudes of the participants on using SNSs. The descriptive statistics of questionnaire items below express their perceptions on using the general SNSs and the English-related applications like Livemocha and Lang-8 to improve their linguistic performance and fluency in English. The percentages of participants' responses in addition to the Mean and Standard deviation of each item are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of responses

No	Items	Percentages (%)					Mean	SD
		5	4	3	2	1		
	Using SNSs for academic purposes helps me to:							
1	Enhance my overall listening & speaking skills	25.2	19.1	15.3	23.5	16.8	3.12	1.448
2	Enhance my glossary of words in English	51.2	13.8	6.9	22.9	5.2	3.83	1.392
3	Enhance my knowledge and use of grammar	11.9	18.0	13.6	43.6	13.0	3.67	1.454
4	Enhance acquisition of speech acts and fixed expressions	10.9	26.0	32.5	21.8	8.8	3.52	1.366
5	Enhance my self-esteem and confidence	28.3	36.1	14.7	5.4	15.5	3.64	1.412
6	Improve my reading comprehension strategies	15.9	32.7	17.6	11.7	22.2	3.08	1.401
7	Communicate with native speakers of English	18.9	33.3	12.8	17.4	17.6	3.19	1.392
8	Use English in less stressful environment	22.2	24.3	17.4	22.9	13.2	3.17	1.365
9	Access multiple EFL learning resources	19.9	29.3	18.7	15.5	16.6	3.20	1.368
10	Encourage discussion in English with advisors	32.1	22.8	19.7	18.5	6.9	3.55	1.295
11	Improve English skills independently without a teacher	18.4	19.5	11.1	18.2	32.9	2.92	1.390
12	Improve my overall academic writing	14.3	18.7	28.9	22.9	15.1	3.23	1.458
13	Reinforce my motivation to read about new topics	27.9	30.4	11.7	19.7	10.3	3.46	1.350
14	Increase my overall communication in English	24.1	32.9	16.6	17.8	8.6	3.23	1.383

15	Listen to different genres of English	24.9	23.5	25.2	13.8	12.6	2.90	1.519
	Average of Each Point	51.5%		14.6	33.7%		3.31	1.39

The emerging data in table 2 show different representations of the participants' perceptions about the contributions SNSs could add to their proficiency in English. The analysis of item one shows that 44.3% of them agree that SNSs enhance their oral skills in contrast with 40.3 who probably consider them as tools but not the only mediums through which English is improved. This view matches with the analysis of item two, which shows that 65% of participants believe that SNSs enhance their acquisition of new vocabulary probably through collaboration with fluent speakers of English. However, 56.6% strongly agree that SNSs do not enhance their acquisition of grammar rules significantly. This stance is never peculiar due to the nature of syntax that needs direct help and elaboration from more knowledgeable, experienced educators to facilitate understanding it. The analysis of item four shows proximity in the agreement percentage (36.9%), the disagreement percentage (30.6%), and the uncertainty percentage (32.5%). This confusion in part of it could be attributed to the participants' lack of knowledge on "what speech acts and fixed expressions are". Unlike item four, the analysis of item five shows the agreement of participants (64.4%) that SNSs enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Similarly, almost a half of the participants (48.6%) believe that SNSs improve their reading comprehension strategies. These online platforms help them to read different texts and allow them to apply different reading strategies like skimming, scanning, elicitation of meaning of vocabulary items, and understanding the implied meaning of certain sentences. As presented in the analysis of item seven, SNSs are perceived to encourage students to communicate with native speakers of English (52.2%) informally in a less stressful environment (46.5%) as given in item eight. This is possibly because using English outside classes opens new windows for exposure to authentic English and allows learners for using it in meaningful situations. In their response to item nine, nearly a half of them (49.2%) are strongly satisfied that SNSs allow them to access multiple language learning resources. They also encourage mutual discussion between students and their advisors in which English is the medium of communication (54.9%). The participants also view that these applications increase their motivation to explore new topics (58.3%) as shown from the analysis of item 13 and promotes their overall communication in English (57%) as given in item 14. The same is notable in item 15 where around (48%) of the participants view that SNSs allow them to listen to different genres of English and hence comprehend English as used by speakers of different social and academic ranks.

Nevertheless, the analysis displays some domains that reflect the participants' disagreement. In addition to item three in which they believe that SNSs do not necessarily improve their knowledge of grammatical items, more than a half of them (51.1%) believe that they could not rely completely on SNSs to improve their English independently without assistance from a teacher. A possible interpretation of this is because there are some aspects of English that may not be acquired without direct instruction from more educated individuals. Moreover, analysis of item 12 shows that more than a third of the participants (38%) believe that SNSs do not develop their overall academic writing probably due to the nature of composition and the mechanics of writing that need direct guidance and orientation from instructors on the different writing styles and organization. For the researcher to verify that the participants take the questionnaire seriously, a check-item is added. It can be seen that item seven "*SNSs help me to communicate with native speakers of English*" and item 14 "*SNSs help me to increase my*

overall communication in English" almost reflect the same idea. The participants' responses on both items show almost compatible results with (52.2%) and (57%) respectively.

In addition to the 15 closed-ended items of the questionnaire, two open-ended questions are added to give opportunity for participants to reflect on other areas pertaining to the use of SNSs in language education and the participants' familiarity with these applications. The first question is "*At what levels do you think using SNSs are useful to you as a university undergraduate?*" The participants report that SNSs help them to follow up on the daily academic commitments and meanwhile allow them to improve their communication and fluency in English. The responses could also reveal that this is mostly done unintentionally and subconsciously. Some of their answers are:

"SNSs help me to be in touch with other classmates and get any updates about university"

"I often use SNSs for discussing class assignments and projects"

"Chatting with classmates on SNSs indirectly improves my overall communication skills"

"I began to learn new expressions and my fluency improved greatly"

"My composition improved through noticing the writing production of other classmates on SNSs"

The above responses could say that SNSs are used by university students to facilitate communication and get updates from instructors about deadlines, submissions, or grades of assignments and projects. Meanwhile, the responses could show that SNSs provide informal avenues to EFL learners to improve their linguistic performance subconsciously. They find these platforms helpful to improve their fluency, acquisition of new expressions, and writing mechanisms. The second open-ended question is "*How do you see your familiarity with online applications like Livemocha, iTalki, Lang-8, Hello-Hello, Duolingo, Palabea, Babbel, or others to improve your English?*" The feedback from respondents shows that they are familiar with some of these applications but not to the degree that brings the maximum benefit. Some of their answers are:

"I tried Livemocha App. and found it good for beginners not for advanced levels. It does not allow for live chatting or direct communication with native speakers of English."

"I tried iTalki App. for some time. It gives a chance to talk with native speakers of English and improve fluency, yet it is a bit expensive to afford. Paying $15 each hour exceeds my budget."

"Some Apps are not user-friendly, and I need to sign-in every time I access them."

"Instructors should integrate these Apps in the presentation of the course. I favour spontaneous unplanned communication with fluent speakers of English."

"We didn't get enough training on how to use these Apps with each language skill"

"These Apps often focus on oral communication rather than reading comprehension strategies and writing mechanisms."

The above excerpts could express the perceptions of EFL Arab Learners on using certain English language-related applications for improving language performance. For those who tried Livemocha, for instance, find it suits beginners rather than advanced learners. It is also based on stages and does not allow for practitioners to move to a higher stage unless they pass the initial, simple stages: something that could be boring, discouraging, and frustrating to learners with advanced levels who look for knowledge at a certain level. In addition, they find that this application is not dynamic and does not allow for direct interaction with fluent speakers of English. On the other hand, the iTalki application avails these merits which are not available at Livemocha. However, it is too expensive for learners to afford since the chatting hour ranges from $10 to $15. Another participant reports that some applications are not user-friendly and need to login every time they access them. For these applications to bring the utmost benefit, other participants find that they should be integrated in the course syllabus and learners need to get enough training on how to utilize the materials on these applications for improving each

language skill. A common feature of these applications, in addition, is that they often focus on the listening and speaking skills rather than reading and writing strategies. These restrictions could be the reason that encourages some participants to favour spontaneous, unplanned, impromptu communication rather than structured learning from online applications.

4. Discussion

The findings of this research allow for understanding how SNSs are perceived and utilized by undergraduate EFL learners. Whereas the questionnaire figures provide direct responses on fixed items like grammar, speech acts, and language proficiency, the open-ended questions offer an opportunity for respondents to express their perceptions and views in more detail. The emerging results of this research are not conflicting with the findings of previous studies in relation to the positive sides of using SNSs. Among the key areas signalled by the participants in this study are the opportunity SNSs provide for potential socialization and communication with people from different cultural backgrounds in which English is the medium of discourse. Karpati (2009) and Thorne (2010) view that these are significant merits of SNSs. Given that English is a popular language nowadays, it is commonly used as a means of communication among youth. This is reflected in the responses of participants who believe that SNSs enhance their communication skills, fluency, and acquisition of new glossary of words. They can approach different language learning resources and communicate with native speakers of English in less stressful context. However, this merit is only workable following the availability of learning materials on SNSs and learners' awareness of how to benefit from them. This proposition is in agreement with the argument of Clark and Gruba (2010) who view that language educators should not lag behind technology. Rather, they need to integrate these tools in their teaching techniques.

An additional merit of using SNSs is their positive impact on reinforcing learners' self-esteem and self-confidence. They can receive positive feedback from interlocutors, and this increases their motivation and encourages them to overcome language anxiety and apprehension as argued by Samano (2014). A further finding of this research is the possibility SNSs add to promoting the autonomy and independence of learners. They do not have to rely on limited input received in classes. Rather, they can access unlimited resources online and choose the materials that strengthen each language skill (Benson, 2007). SNSs, moreover, encourage introvert EFL learners to express themselves using computer media away from peer pressure in the classroom (Kroonenberg, 1995).

The emerging statistics, furthermore, reveal that the participants of this study identify that using SNSs provides different avenues for improving their linguistic performance. However, they do not have conscious and direct access to the resources and applications that foster their linguistic levels and language skills. For them, they possibly believe that English gets improved indirectly the more they do classroom assignments and projects or through email messages and constant communication with course instructors. This feature could be attributed to either lack of resources available on Facebook, for instance, or lack of knowledge on how to use these resources in the most effective way. Both cases can affect level of interaction and utilization of SNSs. The findings of this research are not conflicting with the results of a further study conducted by Villano (2007) who argues that SNSs are perceived to impact academic settings for learners and teachers. Blattner and Fiori (2009) also point out that these applications encourage competition in EFL learning and allow for learning vocabulary items. Raising EFL learners' cognizance in using Facebook, for instance, improves their communication skills and fluent interaction with native speakers of English. Furthermore, it has positive effects on increasing learners' motivation to approach unlimited resources informally and in less stressful settings (Mills,

2009). While the impact of SNSs on language development is remarkable, the provided data also revealed some aspects that SNSs cannot improve solely.

On the other hand, other relevant studies – like that of Almarwaey (2017) in Saudi Arabia – are in agreement with the results of this research. She argues that SNSs should not be considered as complete substitute of formal instruction and that the role of language instructors could not be marginalized. The responses of participants in this research show their perceptions that SNSs are not effective tools for improving some language skills that need technical assistance from instructors like knowledge of grammar and techniques of writing. The respondents in this research view that process writing, for example, is a dynamic approach that depends on the composition of a piece of writing and getting feedback from educators. Some websites provide hints on how to improve academic writing skills, yet the role of an instructor is necessary in situations when learners need guidance on how to use compound or complex sentences, for example. Grammar is another aspect the participants find impossible to acquire through SNSs. This is possibly because learning grammar rules is cumulative in which acquisition of "*Conditional Clauses*", for instance, requires knowledge of other grammar aspects like tenses, modal verbs, and subordinators. Hence, familiarity in using applications like Livemocha and Lang-8, for example, could contribute to improving listening and speaking skills rather than reading strategies and writing techniques.

Should we consider the contributions of SNSs and language applications are not optimal, this could be attributed to the "limited regulated learning environments to blend SNSs as a part of e-learning or traditional classes" (Almarwaey, 2017, p. 252). She also found that there is "generation gap" between faculty and the young generation of undergraduates. While the former are not proficient in using new technology, the latter find the traditional teaching techniques are less motivating and do not meet their needs. Hence, undergraduate students in the Gulf Region seem to share common traits in relation to the use of SNSs and technology in academic settings.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this research reflect the common interest among undergraduate learners in the UAE that using SNSs could be useful tools for the academic and linguistic performance of EFL learners. They are familiar with some but not all English-related applications; however, their usage of them is minimal. They attributed this either to the inappropriate materials to their linguistic level, the limitations they have to access these applications, or the money they have to pay in order to chat with fluent speakers of English. In order to enhance learners' knowledge on how to use these applications in the most optimal way, tailored training and tutorials should be given to raise their awareness on how to use these applications to improve the communicative competence and overall proficiency. Having done this is likely to foster learners' autonomy and independence and encourages e-learning concepts and innovative ideas. However, this innovation may not succeed unless learners are empowered with technical skills to benefit from online resources and SNSs applications for reinforcing their linguistic performance. It seems that virtual learning still needs more pushes in the UAE universities, and learners need to be educated on how to benefit from online applications for doing things that are not limited to facilitating daily communications. Given the fact that English has become almost a second language in the UAE due to its multicultural nature, virtual language learning should be maximized. Understanding that the UAE represents the hub of technology in the Gulf region implies that this advancement should academically profile educational practices as well. Language educators, in addition, need to realize that they are not the only source of knowledge and learners should be educated to explore what they find interesting and relevant to their area of learning. EFL presentation in the UAE context should be

liberated from the authoritarian duty of language teachers who still abide with the traditional conventions of language teaching. Distance learning, online learning, and open universities are recently attracting large numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate students who have work commitments and time limitations that prevent them from attending daily classes. Following the spread of Covid-19, online learning has become the main and only medium of learning at UAE schools and universities.

6. Ethics Committee Approval

Acknowledgements

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Öğrencilerin dilsel performanslarını güçlendirmek için sosyal ağ sitelerini kullanma konusundaki algıları

Öz

Günümüzde dijital cihazlardaki benzeri görülmemiş ilerleme, dillerin kazanılması da dahil olmak üzere bilginin inşasını kolaylaştıran teknolojinin kullanımına olan güvenin artmasıyla sonuçlanmıştır (Thorne, 2010). Örgün eğitim büyük ölçüde gelişmiştir ve ne eğitimciler ne de sınıf girdileri tek bilgi kaynağı olarak algılanmamaktadır; öğrencilerin bilgi inşa etmeleri için sınırsız kaynaklar mevcuttur (Benson, 2007). Çevrimiçi uygulamalar, öğrencilerin özerkliğini ve bağımsızlığını geliştirir ve Sosyal Ağ Siteleri (SAS) gibi farklı araçları kullanarak özgün durumlarda hedef dili uygulamalarını teşvik eder. Son çalışmalar SAS'lerin öğrencilerin motivasyonunu (Aydın, 2014), etkileşim ve sosyalleşmeyi (Ryberg ve Christiansen, 2008) ve pragmatik ve dilsel yeterliliği arttırdığını işaret etmektedir (Blake, 1998). Ne kadar çok dil öğrencisinin bunları etkili bir şekilde kullanma fırsatları olursa; çoklu-çekicilik ve dijital becerilerinde daha büyük gelişme olur (Chartrand, 2012). Bu çalışma, lisans öğrencilerinin SAS'ler hakkındaki algılarını ve dil performanslarını güçlendirmek için onlardan ne kadar yararlandıklarını araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Veriler bir anketteki kapalı uçlu ve açık uçlu maddeler yoluyla toplanmaktadır. Analiz, katılımcıların SAS'lerin sözlü ve iletişim becerilerini geliştirmeye yardımcı olabileceği yönündeki algılarını göstermektedir, ancak yazma tekniklerini ve dilbilgisi bilgisini geliştirmede bu platformlardan çok fazla yararlanamamışlardır. Veriler ayrıca katılımcıların Livemocha, iTalki, Lang-8, Hello-Hello, Duolingo, Palabea ve diğer ilgili uygulamalar gibi dil öğrenme uygulamalarını kullanma konusundaki endişelerini ve sınırlamalarını göstermektedir. Katılımcılar bunu, bu kaynakları kullanma konusunda eğitim eksikliğine bağlamışlardır. Bu çalışma, bu dijital platformların kullanılmasının sonuçlarını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: sosyal ağ siteleri; dilsel performans; öğrenci özerkliği; motivasyon; çevrimiçi uygulamalar

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