

How Students Perceived Social Media as a Learning Tool in Enhancing their Language Learning Performance

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ABSTRACT

Social media like Facebook has been used for teaching and learning for quite some time. Since it allows for better participation in the learning activities, a fundamental English course at a private university integrated Facebook as a learning platform making it possible for students to do self-study, exchange ideas, give comments, and submit the assignments in order to improve their grammar knowledge and writing ability. This study investigated to see how students perceived Facebook in terms of ease of use, usefulness, and attitude toward the use of Facebook for doing the activities and examined whether these factors were correlated. The participants were 86 first-year students who took an English course in the first semester of 2015 academic year. This study employed the proficiency test and the questionnaire to collect data. The results reveal that overall mean scores of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness were at a high level, and students had a positive attitude toward the use of Facebook for doing the activities. It was also found student learning performance was positively correlated with perceived usefulness of Facebook and attitude toward doing the activities in Facebook. The perceived ease of use had positive relationships with perceived usefulness of Facebook and attitude toward doing the activities in Facebook. Moreover, attitude was related to perceived usefulness while no relationship was found between perceived ease of use and learning performance. The concluding remarks suggested the possibility to integrate social media in future courses with an awareness of some factors that may facilitate or obstruct learning via online learning environments.

Keywords: Facebook, writing ability, social media, learning activity

INTRODUCTION

As a tool to relay the writer's thoughts to the reader, writing is a skill that is hard to master because it requires learning and understanding, social factors, and necessity in one's daily life (White & Arndt, 1991). It is not an innate skill, but one that has to be academically acquired (Silva, 1993). Students have to study and practice writing in order to be well-versed in it (Kitchakarn, 2013). However, writing can be used as an indicator of a student's English proficiency. Students doing a writing task are often faced with obstacles. First, they have difficulty translating their thoughts into words as they do not know how to select the correct words (Cimcoz, 1999; Silva, 1993). Second, because of their lack of a workable knowledge of , they tend to makes a lot of grammatical mistakes in their writing. Third, for students whose ideas or language competency are wanting to begin with, writing can be a traumatic learning process (Warchauer, 2011). Different methods and approaches have been tried to develop students' writing skills, one of them being teaching via technology.

Technology is currently being used to make teaching and learning more engaging and stimulating. We see more and more websites and applications such as Facebook and email becoming part of the teaching and learning process. Probably the most widely used social networking site in the world, Facebook enables people to share and get in touch with other people who make up their network (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). They also serve to facilitate online communication, interrelation and cooperation. A large number of students rely on Facebook as a means to get in touch with friends. Wise et al. (2011) found that freshmen mainly used Facebook about an hour daily to socialize with friends. This shows what potential Facebook has as a method for online learning. Ranked in the top 20 countries with the most Facebook users, the social networking site is now an essential aspect of daily life (Cloete, Villiers, & Roodt, 2009). Apparently, Facebook is highly likely to prove advantageous to students should it be capitalized on as part of the learning process.

Facebook as a Learning Tool

One of the most effective ways to learn a foreign language is to use that language in daily life. But when such an opportunity is not available, websites like Facebook can prove rather effective in helping in enhancing learners' proficiency. Vigotsky (1978) found that apart from serving as a means for communication, using a language also

helps learners create their own knowledge. This is also applicable to Facebook, which provides a great opportunity and space for expression through writing. Facebook users can share whatever written materials they want such as exchanging lecture notes, documents, and assignments (Mazman, 2009; Ractham, & Firpo, 2011). They can also offer feedback and comments. They actively engage themselves in learning activities (Alm, 2006). There are researches pointing out the advantages of Facebook in improving language learners' proficiency (Lockyer & Patterson, 2008; Nakatsukasa, 2009). Wang, Lin, Yu, and Wu (2012) found that, with the help of Facebook as a joint learning tool, students performed better, and displayed more participation in and contentment with their studies.

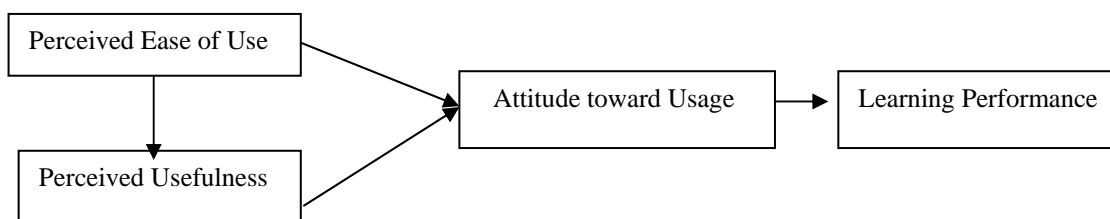
Many studies have dealt with the uses of social networking sites and learners' opinions toward them, most of which were favorable. Tashir, Al-Dheleai, Harun, and Shukor (2011) concluded that students evaluate the use of social networks as part of their eLearning activities quite positively. According to Valenzuela et al. (2009), students who were also Facebook users were more satisfied with their lives and displayed more engagement as members of their society. Lewis and Nichols (2012) found that students viewed in-class social media favorably. Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, and Liu (2012) found that students were satisfied with the integration of Facebook into the course because it has the same functions as a Learning Management System. One study showed that students were convinced that with the use of Facebook, learning English could be made easier (Kabilan, Almad, & Zainol, 2010). Consequently, using Facebook as a learning tool should be promoted since the language used on Facebook is genuine English, and it also encourages students to learn and augments their language proficiency. Even though these researches revealed that students viewed Facebook favorably as an online learning tool, more studies should be conducted to find out whether and to what extent Facebook can help improve students' English competency in the long run.

Theoretical Framework

This research used the adapted model of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by Davis (1989). TAM was developed to predict the adoption of new technologies in various situations and in different contexts (Park, 2009; Teo, 2009). The three factors used were Perceived Usefulness (PU), Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), and Attitudes Toward Usage (ATU) (Davis, 1989). PU is the notion of a person that technology has benefits. For instance, it can enhance his/her proficiency. PEOU is a person's notion of how easy it is to use technology. ATU is a person's notion of how technology is viewed. According to Ajzen and Fishbein (2005), attitude is referred to the way that individuals respond to or ignore an object. The model suggests that how a person views technology is influenced by PEOU and the benefits of technology. The three factors are related. As revealed in a study, ATU was affected by PEOU (Park, 2009; Chang, Yan, & Tseng, 2012). PEOU had a significant effect on PU (Adwan, Adwan, & Smedley, 2013; Shroff, Daneen, & Ng, 2011).

The current study set out to study undergraduate students' views toward social media as a tool for learning and activities. Technology, Facebook included, that was incorporated into a course had to be easy to use, or it would be viewed as obstructive to learning. Students' willingness to engage in activities relies significantly on how easy or difficult it is to use the technology involved. This study also emphasized students' views toward Facebook and PU. New technology may cause problems for some students and it proves advantageous if their ideas and viewpoints are collected and taken into consideration. One other element, learning progress, was incorporated into the model because this research also put emphasis on technology-induced language competency. It is hoped that this study will answer the question of whether the factors above facilitate or obstruct learning via technology.

The conceptual framework in this study was adapted from TAM as follows:



Research Questions

1. What are the students' perceived ease of use and usefulness of Facebook?
2. How do the students respond to doing the activities in Facebook?
3. Are there any relationships among the students' learning performance, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness of Facebook, and attitude toward doing the activities in Facebook?

Research Hypotheses

After reviewing literature, the four research hypotheses are defined as follows:

- H1: Students' perceived ease of use is positively related to perceived usefulness.
- H2: Students' perceived ease of use is positively related to their attitude toward usage.
- H3: Students' perceived usefulness is positively related to their attitude toward usage.
- H4: Students' attitude toward usage is positively related to their learning performance.
- H5: Students' perceived usefulness is positively related to their learning performance.
- H6: Students' perceived ease of use is positively related to their learning performance.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants were 86 students who were enrolled in a bachelor's degree level course entitled 'English in Action' or EN0111 offered at a university in Thailand during the first semester in 2015. It was a 3-credit, 14-week compulsory course taken by the first-year students from all faculties. The selection of this course was based on the following reasons. Firstly, the course content such as grammar and writing tasks provided an opportunity to create activities in Facebook to improve students' language proficiency. This course was a pilot project of using social media to support language learning. Therefore, Facebook was used instead of the Learning Management System to connect with students. Students needed to follow up the course contents or announcements through Facebook. The last reason was that the first-year students were new at the university. They were rather active and energetic in doing the given tasks.

Teaching and Learning Process

This course made use of Facebook in teaching and learning process. Students were required to join the activities performed in Facebook which aimed to improve their grammar and writing, starting from week 2 to week 14. On the first week, students would be informed of the course syllabus comprising score allocation, assignments, especially the activities that they had to do in Facebook. The contents that would be improved through the activity were grammar and paragraph writing. At the end of the class on this week, they were asked to join Facebook provided by the teacher and created a group of 5-6 members.

On week 3, 5, 7 and 10, students were required to work together with their team members in Facebook. The teacher posted the content of grammar followed by an assignment. Students in each team had to do a self-study and completed the assignment together. They could use Facebook as a channel for discussion with friends. Then each team submitted it by uploading it in Facebook so that other teams could take a look at all submission. The teacher checked the answers and uploaded the answer key in Facebook so that everyone could notice their mistakes.

Regarding the writing tasks, the teacher posted the topic for writing in a paragraph of at least 60 words. Each student was required to compose the content and posted it in their group so that the members would read, correct, and give comments. The teacher got into each group to check whether they were able to make any changes in their written tasks. In this activity, the teacher acted as a facilitator who often read students' writing and gave suggestions about the grammar and mechanics of writing. If the writing was improved, they would be informed to write the content in a piece of paper and submit it in class. There were three pieces of writing to be done on week 4, 6, and 9. On week 12, all students had to take a grammar and writing test. The full score was 20 points.

Apart from the aforesaid activity, the teacher also made use of Facebook in posting announcements or educational issues such as reminding students of the upcoming presentation or informing them about resources or materials useful for their study. Sometimes, the teacher put links of websites regarding grammar or writing that were beneficial to them.

Research Instruments

The first instruments of this study were an English proficiency test that was given to the students on week 12. There were two main parts, each of which had 10 points. So, the total score was 20 points. The contents for testing students were written to cover EN 011 contents covering grammatical points and paragraph writing. The 10 questions in the grammar part were a kind of multiple-choice, and in the writing part students were given several topics, one of which they had to choose to write in at least 100 words. Time allotted for the test was 60 minutes.

The next instrument was a questionnaire comprising two main sections. The first section contained data concerning age and gender. Section two consisted of 21 items that measured "perceived ease of use" (3 items), "perceived usefulness" (10 items), "attitude towards usage" (8 items). A five-point Likert scale response format

was used with the following categories: 5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = undecided; 2 = disagree; and 1 = strongly disagree. Then the items in the draft questionnaire were examined and corrected by three experts in the English teaching field for clarity and accuracy. The values of congruence index for items in Section II (containing a five-rating scale) were proper. They were between 0.67 and 1.00. The experts' comments and suggestions in terms of the wording and statement of each description were considered for modification of the questionnaire. To investigate the internal consistency among all items, the questionnaire was administered to a test group of university students and was then revised and finalized based on their feedback. The reliability of the questionnaire of this study was .82 (Cronbach's alpha), indicating a high level of internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Data were statistically recorded and analyzed by SPSS/Windows program. Personal data of the participants and a survey of social networks use were calculated for frequency and percentage. Data concerning perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and attitude toward usage were analyzed quantitatively for means and standard deviations. The ranges were as follows: 1.00-1.50 = very low/ very negative, 1.51-2.50 = low/negative, 2.51-3.50 = moderate, 3.51- 4.50 = high/ positive, 4.51-5.00 = very high/very positive. The score gained from the proficiency test was calculated for mean and standard deviation. These factors were then calculated for relationships using Pearson Correlation Coefficients to test the hypotheses.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are the students' perceived ease of use and usefulness of Facebook?

Table 1 demonstrates the overall mean score of students' perceived ease of use which was at a high level (Mean = 4.18). When considering each item, it was found that the three items could be arranged from most to least as follows: ease of accessing from mobile phone (Mean = 4.38), ease of making a post, uploading pictures and videos (Mean = 4.31), and ease of finding school-related information (Mean = 3.86). These three items were at a high level.

Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviation of Students' Perceived Ease of Use of Facebook

Statement	Mean	S.D.	Level
1. Facebook is easier to access from my mobile phone.	4.38	.79	high
2. It's easy to make a post, upload pictures and videos on Facebook.	4.31	.77	high
3. Facebook is easier to find school-related information.	3.86	.72	high
Total	4.18	.62	high

Table 2 shows the overall mean score of perceived usefulness of Facebook which was at high level (Mean = 4.00). The first highest mean score fell on item no. 1 (It is a good place to keep in contact with other students in class, Mean = 4.35), followed by item no. 8 (It is a good place to access links to resources provided by the teachers, Mean = 4.08), and item no. 3 (It is a good place to check class notes or homework posted by the teacher, Mean = 4.06). The lowest mean score was on items no. 9 (It is a good place to read articles and prepare for next class, Mean = 3.69). It is interesting to see that all of the items were at high levels.

Table 2 Mean and Standard Deviation of Students' Perceived Usefulness of Facebook

Statement	Mean	S.D.	Level
1. Facebook is a good place to keep in contact with other students from class.	4.35	.73	high
2. Facebook is a good place to contact my teacher outside classroom.	3.96	.66	high
3. Facebook is a good place to check class notes or homework posted by the teacher.	4.06	.76	high
4. Facebook is a good place to ask for help about homework assignments.	3.96	.75	high
5. Facebook is good place to check for class-related information and notices.	3.90	.74	high
6. Facebook is a good place to discuss different topics with classmates.	4.05	.78	high
7. Facebook is a good place to post writing assignments.	4.04	.75	high
8. Facebook is a good place to access links to resources provided by the teachers.	4.08	.71	high
9. Facebook is a good place to read articles and prepare for next class.	3.69	.70	high
10. Facebook is a good place for classmates to review or edit writing assignments.	3.90	.72	high
Total	4.00	.50	high

Research Question 2: How did the students respond to the use of Facebook for doing activities?

Table 3 shows that the overall mean score of attitude toward doing the activities in Facebook was positive (Mean = 3.72). The first highest mean score fell on item no. 7 (feeling actively involved in all activities, Mean = 4.01), followed by item no. 5 (saving time when submitting writing tasks, Mean = 3.86) and item no. 6 (increasing vocabulary usage and grammar knowledge, Mean = 3.78). The lowest mean score was on items no. 2 (increasing productivity, Mean = 3.49). Nearly all of the items were positive except no.2 which was at a moderate level.

Table 3 Mean and Standard Deviation of Students’ Attitude toward Doing Activities in Facebook

Statement	Mean	S.D.	Level
1. Doing the activities in Facebook is convenient.	3.56	.69	positive
2. Doing the activities in Facebook can increase my productivity.	3.49	.66	moderate
3. Doing the activities in Facebook provide me with a motivating learning environment.	3.66	.67	positive
4. Learning new vocabulary and grammar in Facebook is helpful for my study.	3.74	.76	positive
5. Submitting writing tasks in Facebook helps me to save time.	3.86	.74	positive
6. I increase my vocabulary and grammar knowledge through the activities in Facebook.	3.78	.71	positive
7. I feel actively involved in all activities in Facebook.	4.01	.70	positive
8. I become prudent after a practice of writing in Facebook.	3.66	.61	positive
Total	3.72	.41	positive

Research Question 4: Are there any relationships among students’ learning performance, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness of Facebook, and attitude toward doing the activities in Facebook?

This research question was to examine the relationships among four factors. Apart from data from the questionnaire, the result from the test was calculated as an important factor. Student learning performance was measured by the grammar and writing test score earned out of 20. It was found that the mean score was 13.51, with S.D. of 2.33. Several analyses were, therefore, performed using Pearson Correlation Coefficients to find out whether any relationships existed. Findings revealed that student learning performance was positively correlated with perceived usefulness of Facebook ($r = .273, p = .014$) and attitude toward doing activities in Facebook ($r = .348, p = .002$). That is, the more students perceived usefulness of Facebook and the more they had positive attitude toward doing activities in Facebook, the higher learning performance they gained. However, there was no correlation between student learning performance and how they perceived ease of use ($r = .185, p = .101$). In addition, it is noted that the perceived ease of use had positive relationships with perceived usefulness of Facebook ($r = .660, p = .000$) and attitude toward doing activities in Facebook ($r = .283, p = .011$). That is to say, the easier Facebook was, the more useful they perceived it and the more positive attitude toward doing the activities they had. The results also indicated that students’ perceived usefulness of Facebook was correlated with their attitude toward doing the activities in Facebook ($r = .566, p = .000$). The detail was presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Intercorrelations among Variables

	Ease of Use	Usefulness of Facebook	Attitude
Language Performance	.185	.273*	.348**
Ease of Use	-	.660**	.283*
Usefulness of Facebook		-	.566**
Attitude			-

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5 summarizes the results obtained from testing the research hypotheses. Five hypotheses were accepted while only one hypothesis was rejected. Based on findings, perceived ease of use was found to have relationships with usefulness and attitude toward usage, thus H1 and H2 were accepted. Hypothesis 3 proposed that perceived usefulness had a positive relationship with attitude toward usage, and the result found the relationship with $p < .01$. Therefore, H3 was accepted. Moreover, students’ learning performance could be explained by the two significant factors comprising perceived usefulness and attitude toward usage since relationships were found.

Therefore, H4 and H5 received support. However, perceived ease of use was not related to their learning performance with $p > 0.05$, thus, H6 was rejected.

Table 5 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Relationship between Factors		Results
H1	ease of use	usefulness	supported, $p < .01$
H2	ease of use	attitude toward usage	supported, $p < .05$
H3	usefulness	attitude toward usage.	supported, $p < .01$
H4	attitude toward usage	learning performance	supported, $p < .01$
H5	usefulness	learning performance	supported, $p < .05$
H6	ease of use	learning performance	not supported, $p > .05$

DISCUSSION

The first discussion is about the two factors comprising perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness which are at high levels. The findings indicate that students felt comfortable when social media was used as a learning tool in the course. One of the reasons may have been the use of Facebook, which is undeniably the most popular social networking site they use in daily life. As a result, they found it rather easy to communicate with one another on Facebook. Regarding the high level of perceived usefulness, Facebook was viewed as a good place where members could either learn alone or learn together. The functions of Facebook itself made learning more meaningful. Apart from that, there were many other elements of the learning context involved that they might consider useful such as subject content, communication, and learning tasks. Interestingly, perceived ease of use had positive relationships with perceived usefulness of Facebook. The finding was consistent with previous studies in that perceived ease of use had the strongest significant influence on perceived usefulness (Adwan et al., 2013; Shroff et al, 2011). We might conclude that comfort with Facebook usage enabled students to see the importance of it. The more they were comfortable with Facebook, the more they perceived its usefulness. Facebook is not a difficult tool since they always use it in daily life. It is rather user-friendly. As a learning tool for language development, Facebook has ample space for anyone who wants to put materials and post explanations so that others can get more detail and have better understanding.

The second issue for discussion is about students having positive attitude toward the use of Facebook for doing the activities. The result was similar to previous studies which also found positive attitude toward social media as a learning tool (Lewis & Nichols, 2012; Tashir, 2011). This is probably because all of the activities to be done in Facebook allowed them to notice the benefits of social media as a learning tool. It facilitated their learning in many aspects. They could learn and work together very well. Facebook provided a great opportunity and space for expression through writing. They were able to share whatever written materials they want such as exchanging lecture notes, documents, and assignments (Mazman, 2009; Ractham, & Firpo, 2011). Based on the findings, attitude had positive relationships with perceived ease of use. This may be concluded that a positive attitude comes from the comfort with Facebook. Students usually use Facebook for social activities. In this regard, choosing the right social media or the one that students are familiar with is likely to enhance their attitude. The findings were found to be similar to the previous studies in that perceived ease of use had the strongest significant influence on attitude towards use (Chang et al., 2012; Park, 2009).

The next important issue is about learning performance. After doing the activities for 12 weeks in Facebook, it was worthwhile to assess their ability. It is strongly believed that the activities students did in Facebook enabled them to learn more about grammar and writing. The finding showed the average mean score of 13.51 from the full score of 20, which was rather high when compared to other classes taught by the traditional way only. This was in accordance with Wang et al (2012) who used Facebook as a valuable tool for students to learn and work together, and the results revealed students' achieving better grades. This is probably because doing a self-study and tasks in Facebook were not boring since it provided students with a platform for writing and expressing opinions. In this kind of environment, students were encouraged to become active participants in a learning community (Alm, 2006). Getting the feedback and comments from peers provided them with more ideas, knowledge and skills to process. The way they learned together could solve the problem of inadequate ideas for students with low writing proficiency.

In this study, learning performance was found to have positive relationships with perceived usefulness and attitude. This was supported by the study conducted by Lee & Lee (2008) which found that perceived usefulness was defined as the user's belief that the technology will improve their performance. This showed that the more students perceived useful, the higher their learning performance was. Moreover, the more students demonstrated their acceptance of Facebook to be used for doing the activities, the higher their language ability was. Therefore, when designing the course, the teacher needs to think carefully about how to make good use of the feature that

Facebook offers. The learning objective of each activity needs to be clear, focusing on benefits that students will gain. In addition, promoting attitude can be done by pointing out the efficiency of social media that it is not only employed for social connection, but it is also useful if used as a learning tool for language learning. It can make learning more interesting and not boring. Based on the finding, it may conclude that attitude towards technology is one of the key factors in the learning performance. That is, positive attitude leads to better grade.

CONCLUSION

The results from this study will be useful for any teachers who want to integrate social media in future courses for language development. There are two issues to be addressed. Firstly, even though Facebook can be used to facilitate students' learning in English to increase students' grammar knowledge and writing skills, there are many factors to be considered when creating any learning tasks. In this study, it is found that student learning performance was positively correlated with perceived usefulness of Facebook and attitude toward doing activities in Facebook. Students' perceived usefulness of Facebook was also correlated with their attitude toward doing the activities in Facebook. Therefore, the selected activities or tasks should be beneficial and helpful to improve learner's language proficiency. This will certainly motivate them to learn. In addition, choosing the right social media has a huge impact on participation. Facebook is suitable for the course as the features of Facebook are user friendly, so students tend to have positive attitude toward learning through Facebook. In this regard, students can increase other skills such as cooperative working skills and interpersonal skill. For teachers, it is very easy to design any tasks which require learner contributions in groups. Facebook can be a platform of supplementary materials that teachers provide for learners to study outside class in order to gain knowledge. This allows them to have more time for other contents in class.

LIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH

The results of the current study should be interpreted with some limitations. First, the participants were restricted to university students in Thailand; therefore, the results may not generalize to students of younger ages or in other countries. Second, in this study Facebook was selected to facilitate language learning. It was the only one platform used for mutual learning. Since students' perceptions on other social media were not investigated, it is rather difficult to conclude that Facebook is the most effective learning tool. Therefore, future research should include other types of social media in the course in order to find out which tool students perceive the most effective in enhancing their language proficiency.

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