

Research paper

Facebook for informal language learning: Perspectives from tertiary language students

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of *Facebook* for out-of-class, informal language learning. 190 New Zealand university language students (Chinese, German, French, Japanese and Spanish) completed an anonymous online questionnaire on (1) their perceptions of *Facebook* as a multilingual environment, (2) their online writing practices and (3) their views on the educational value of their experiences. Findings indicate that language students are using a range of *Facebook* features to expose themselves to the languages they study (L2) and to communicate in their L2 with native speaker *Facebook* friends. The use of the social networking site varied according to proficiency-levels of the participants (beginner, intermediate and advanced levels), strength of social ties with native speaker *Facebook* friends and personal attitudes towards the site. Learning experiences on *Facebook* were not perceived as useful for the formal language learning context which suggests the need for bridging strategies between informal and formal learning environments.

Keywords: *Facebook*, informal language learning, social networking.

1. Introduction

Facebook has developed into the largest social networking site worldwide in the last eight years. Network founder Mark Zuckerberg recently announced that one billion people used *Facebook* in a single day (*The Guardian*, 28 August 2015). This not only refutes media claims of dwindling user numbers - *More Than 11 Million Young People Have Fled Facebook Since 2011* (*Time*, 2014) - it also consolidates the position of *Facebook* as an established communication platform in today's society.

For many of our language students, *Facebook* is part of their everyday routine. Used to chat and following the social activities of friends, the social networking site enables people to manage many aspects of their social life in one place. No wonder that teachers are keen to tap into this resource, get their students' attention and use the communication tools in their courses. *Facebook* has quickly established itself in the world of education and while initially met with criticism (Madge *et al*, 2009) and banned in schools (Bramble, 2009) it is now widely used in academia (Leaver & Kent, 2014).

Language educators, who are also often "on *Facebook*", have found innovative ways of using the social networking site for language practice, exposure and communication (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Mills, 2011; Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011) or to train and prepare language learners for the appropriate use of *Facebook* in the

target language (Prichard, 2013; Reinhardt, 2013). While often conversational and informal in tone, the use of *Facebook* in educational settings is considered as *formal* (Meskill, Guan & Ryu, 2012). Embedded in the curriculum, *Facebook*-based tasks are part of a formal language assignment, requiring student participation and formal assessment procedures.

The *informal* use of *Facebook* on the other hand refers to learner-initiated use of the social networking site for communication with native speakers. These interactions are more difficult to track and quantify and have received less attention in the literature and are less well understood. White (2009) has produced some anecdotal evidence from an online tandem project where language students extended their interactions on *Facebook*. Similarly, Lamy (2011) reported that her distance students created a *Facebook* group alongside the institutional online discussion forum to bridge the time between teaching modules. Sockett and Toffoli (2010) found that language students use *Facebook* on study abroad to establish new contacts and also to maintain friendships with native speaker friends on their return. Sockett (2011) also reported that 30% of English-language students at a French university used *Facebook* to communicate with English native speakers.

It is the aim of this study to shed some light on the informal second language (L2) *Facebook* practices of tertiary language students. I will start with a short discussion on informal learning, followed by a description of *Facebook* as a toolkit for communication. The study itself analyses the use of *Facebook* features for language exposure and language use and the participants' evaluation of their L2 *Facebook* experiences for language learning.

2. Background

2.1. Informal language learning

Learning situations outside accredited institutions can be *non-formal* or *informal*. The term *non-formal learning* is commonly used to describe organised learning activities which take place in alternative learning environments, such as online or evening language classes. This type of learning is planned and is intentional from the learner's perspective. *Informal learning* on the other hand is usually unplanned and the result of everyday activities related to work, family and leisure (Cedefop, 2009).

According to Rogers (2008) informal learning is "the foundation of all the new learning and all education" (p. 137). Similar to Schugurensky (2007) he makes the point that informal learning "teaches each of us our place in the society we inhabit" (Rogers, 2008, p. 137). It allows us to "assimilate values, attitudes, behaviours, skills and knowledge which occurs in everyday life" (Sockett, 2014, p.10). And while people are often not aware of the acquisition of skills and knowledge at the moment, they might well develop this understanding retrospectively. Informal learning is by definition not only lifelong but also "lifewide" (Rogers, 2008, p. 113).

Rogers (2008) and Schugurensky (2007) differentiate between two types of informal learning, defined by their degree of intentionality. Incidental learning describes learning situations which are not intentional, but in which the learner is aware of learning. Rogers refers to this type of learning as *task-conscious learning*: "learning is not conscious but takes place while engaged in some activity and where achievements are measured not in terms of learning but of task-fulfilment" (p. 134). *Learning-conscious learning* on the other hand describes learning which is "intended and conscious and achievements are measured in terms of learning" (p. 134). In learning-conscious or self-directed learning, the learner is in control of the learning situation and might even include a 'resource person', but not an educator (Schugurensky 2007). Eaton (2010) points out that in language learning situations, such a person is often a more advanced

language learner or a native speaker. *Task-conscious* and *learning-conscious learning* present two ends of a continuum and learners are likely to shift in between the two. As Benson (2011) explains, "in 'self-directed naturalistic learning' the learner sets up a naturalistic learning situation with the intention of language learning, but once engaged in the situation, switches the focus of attention to communication, enjoyment or learning something other than the language itself" (p. 139).

The majority of human learning occurs in informal contexts (Eraut, 2000 in Rogers, 2008) and *Facebook* is one place or tool amongst many that increases the choices and opportunities for language learners to create naturalistic learning situations. Toffoli and Sockett (2013) claim that English-language students in France "spend more time learning English informally than they do in the classroom" and they suggest that this leads to "unexpected changes in language skills and repertoires" which they add are often "out of step with learning as envisaged by the teacher" (p. 1). Others are more critical. Kabilan *et al* (2010) found that university students consider *Facebook* as a useful learning environment to learn English. Nevertheless they consider the integration of predetermined learning objectives and outcomes necessary for learning experiences to be meaningful.

Facebook illustrates the concept of informal learning on a number of levels. First, for its informal setting. This makes it so appealing both for educational institutions and businesses who hope to create more direct and more personal connections with students and clients. While a website usually represents the formal and official side of a business or university, the *Facebook* page is often used to provide more personal insights of the organisation. Second, the language used on *Facebook* is usually informal and conversational. People write the way they speak and specific writing styles have developed, shaped by the affordances of individual communication features (status update, comment, private message or chat). And finally, most people have learned how to use *Facebook* by using it, rather than by reading a manual. They learn how to use individual features by trial and error or by asking friends, and adopt specific conventions and writing style by observing and copying their peers.

2.2. *Facebook: a communication toolkit*

Facebook offers a range of communications features, which have been expanded and refined since it was first opened to the public in 2006. For example, the status update line initially included the prompt *is* after the username, triggering users to write about themselves in the third person. This practice, referred to as the "Third-Person Epidemic" (Bazell, 2011) by some critics, continued for some time after the prompt was taken away. Writing in the third person had developed into a social practice – a way of writing associated with *Facebook*. Other features were introduced over time to create more options for status update feedback. Comments and replies to comments allowed for multiple conversation threads (sometimes in different languages!) developing from one status update. In addition, users are also able to show their non-verbal support of their friends status updates and comments by clicking on *like* the thumbs-up hand symbol placed underneath the text fields. Status updates and comments appear on the user's timeline and are public by default. However, the privacy settings allow a range of access levels, from open to everybody to selected friends on *Facebook*. Both status updates and comments can be deleted or edited by their authors.

Chat (introduced in 2008) and private messaging are used for private communications between two *Facebook*-friends. Other friends can be added, and depending on the privacy setting of users, it is also possible to chat and private message non-friends. Chatting, similar to texting (Chrystal, 2010), has engendered a number of writing practices, such as the use of abbreviations, emoticons and the asterisk to correct

spelling mistakes. Chatting and private messaging have impacted on traditional ways of communication. The chatting feature, for example allows friends to open multiple chat windows and to have several conversations at the same time. Private messaging, the asynchronous version of chatting, also referred to as "gmail-killer" (Gabbatt & Arthur, 2010) has replaced email for many people which ironically used to be perceived as an informal communication channel, and is considered now by many as a formal communication tool).

Groups are a *Facebook* feature which allows people who are not *friends* to communicate with each other and to share information. Groups can be public or private (open, closed or secret) and are widely used in education.

Facebook is used for communication, but also to follow the activities of others. A survey conducted by Pew Research in 2013 showed that *Facebook* was used by 68% of people to see what friends and family are up to, 62% use it to see photos and videos from family and friends and 28% to share photos or videos. A more recent study from the same organisation in 2015 reports that the majority of *Facebook* users (63%) say that the social networking site serves as a source for news about events and issues outside the realm of friends and family.

Finally, *Facebook* is not only a communication toolkit and a source for information, it is also a language kit. People all over the world can join the network and set it up in their language. Posts in others languages can be translated by clicking on the *translate this* link underneath foreign language status updates and comments. Also, users are able to *like* Facebook pages in any language. To *like* in this context means to subscribe to a page. Once a page is *liked* all posts from that page appear on the user's news feed.

Facebook is a versatile tool for communication and exposure to information. This exploratory study seeks to find out to what extent language learners make use of these functions in their L2. This investigation is led by three research questions:

1. Do language students use *Facebook* to create a multilingual environment? Are they aware and do they make use of the language tools on *Facebook* to expose themselves to their L2?
2. Do language students use their L2 to write and communicate on *Facebook*? If yes, which tools are they using and what are their online language practices?
3. How do language students evaluate their learning experiences on Facebook? How useful are they perceived for L2 exposure, L2 use and language learning?

3. Method

3.1. The participants

190 university language students of beginning (24.1%), intermediate (37.2%) and advanced (38.7%) levels participated in this study. Of the 143 female and 48 male participants 23 studied Chinese, 72 French, 41 German, 35 Japanese and 62 Spanish (some students studied more than one language). Half (50.3%) of the students were aged 17-19, 35.1% were 20-22, 9.9% 23-25 and 4.7% older than 26.

3.2 The instrument

A questionnaire was developed in discussion with seven advanced language students learning French, German, Japanese and Spanish. As active users of *Facebook*, they were able to bring in their own experiences, suggest questions and clarify *Facebook* related terminology.

The questionnaire was structured in three parts and addresses 1) the multilingual appearance of the student's *Facebook* profile (through language settings, liking pages,

groups, sharing, native speaker *Facebook* friends), 2) language practices on *Facebook*, such as writing status updates, commenting, chatting and private messaging, and 3) the participants' views on the educational value of their online experiences. A range of answer choices (multiple-choice, Likert-type scale and open-ended) were selected to enable participants to indicate preferences and to elaborate on their views and practices. In addition, demographic data was collected about gender, age, enrolment in language courses and participation in language exchange programmes. The questionnaire was piloted with a small group ($n = 10$) and ambiguous questions were reworded. The final questionnaire consisted of 33 items.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

An email with a link to the online survey was sent to all 698 students of the language department, explaining the purpose of the study and encouraging students to participate even if they were not using the SNS in the language they study or if they were not *Facebook* users. 190 responses were received (response rate 27%), including 12 from non-users.

The data was collected with *SurveyMonkey*, an online questionnaire tool. Preliminary analyses were also conducted on *SurveyMonkey*, such as comparisons of language groups and proficiency levels. As the differences between language groups seemed most significant, I decided to take a closer look at the beginner, intermediate and advanced language levels and exported data files for each level to *Excel*. The means and standard deviations of each item were calculated and the open-ended answers thematically coded. For further analysis the whole data file was cleaned and exported to SPSS. ANOVA was used to analyse the differences between the three groups (beginners, intermediate and advanced). Further, Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to measure the strength of association between the variables of part one (7 items for L2 exposure, Cronbach's Alpha .786, with deletion of the item on translation, which showed the reverse pattern, .857 and the evaluative item of part three, and then again between the variables of part two (4 items for L2 use, Cronbach's Alpha .859) and the corresponding item of part three.

4. Findings

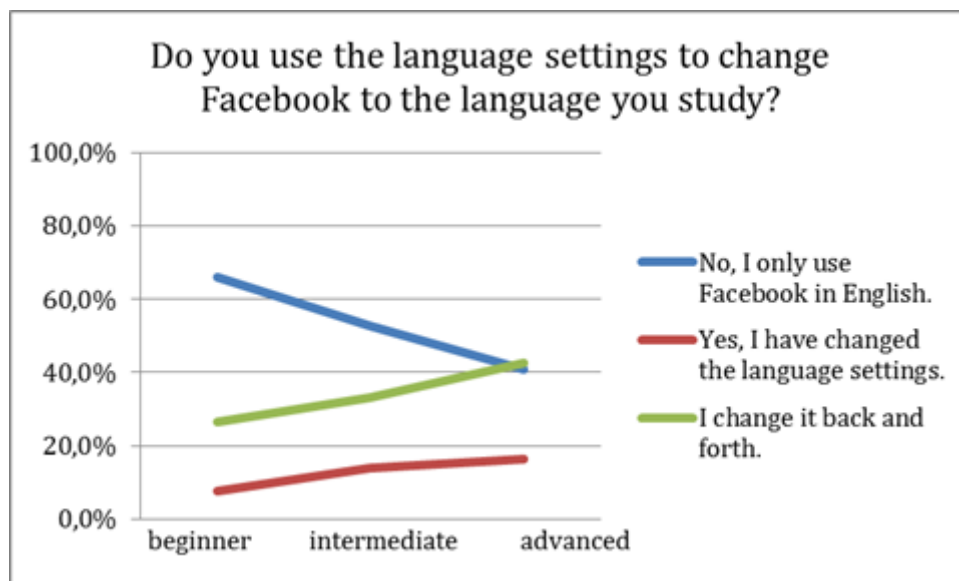
4.1. The perception of *Facebook* as a multilingual environment

Part one of the questionnaire addressed the first research question and sought feedback on the participants' perception of *Facebook* as a multilingual environment. They were asked if they made use of the language features, such as changing the language setting to the language they study, subscribing to L2 *Facebook* pages by *liking* them and by joining L2 *Facebook* groups. Further, I was interested to find out if they had native speaker *Facebook* friends and how they met them, if they followed their activities by looking at their photos and videos they share, if they read their friends' status updates, and if they used the *Facebook* translation tool to understand their friends' messages.

4.1.1. Language settings

Over half of the participants (54%) indicated that they used *Facebook* in English (or their native language), a third (32%) changed the setting back and forth and only 14% used the settings in their L2. The response distribution, however, changed when responses were grouped into levels of proficiency (see graph 1). The more advanced in their language study, the more likely language students were to change the settings to the target language, and they were also more likely to change them back and forth between languages (42.6% of the advanced students, as opposed to 26.4% of the beginners). Changing the settings back and forth seemed to be the preferred choice of

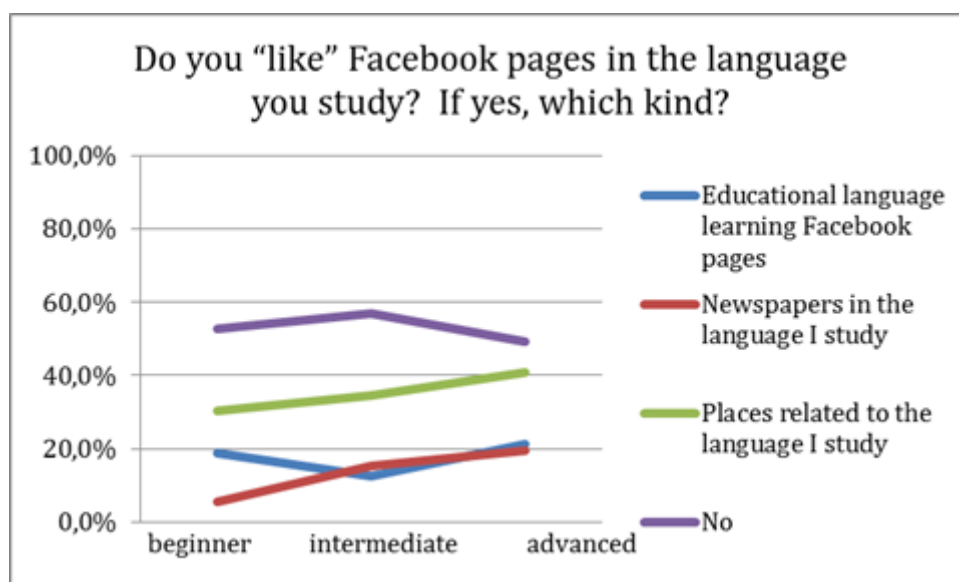
advanced language learners. Interestingly, not all participants were aware of this feature.



Graph 1. Language settings.

4.1.2. Liking pages

Half of the participants claimed to *like* pages, mostly pages that related to target language countries. The comments revealed that some of the participants did not know about this feature, never considered it for their L2, or abstained from liking content altogether. However, if they *liked* pages, they preferred entertaining and humorous content.

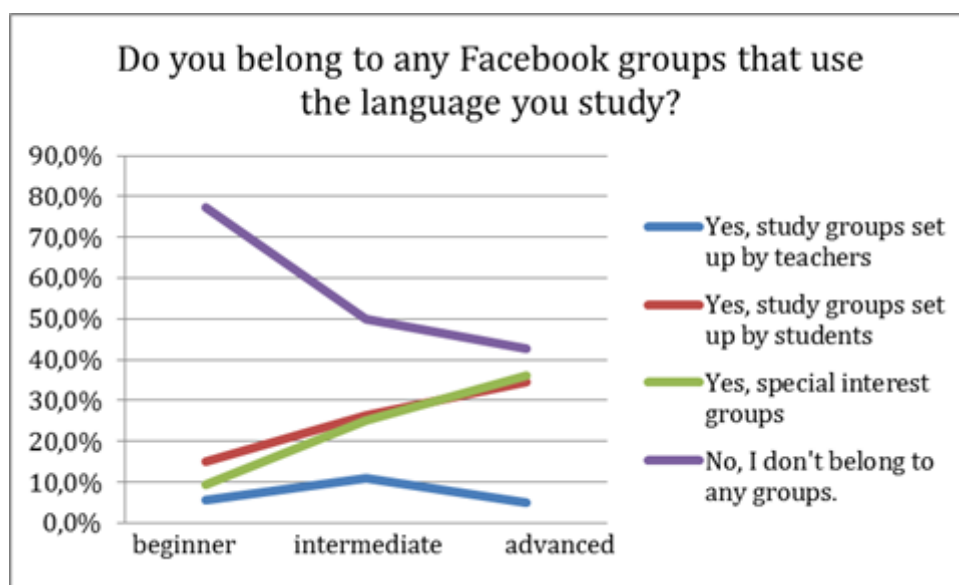


Graph 2. Liking pages.

4.1.3. Facebook groups

Participants were also divided in regard to their use of L2 *Facebook* groups. Over 55% indicated that they did not belong to any group. This number was much higher for beginners, 77.4%, as opposed to 42.6% for the advanced students. The more advanced the language level, the more likely they were to be part of a study group set up by

students and to belong to special interest groups. Groups initiated by teachers were the least represented (only 4.9% for advanced) and the comments revealed that these groups were formed in high school or during school exchanges.



Graph 3. Facebook groups.

4.1.4. Native speaker Facebook friends (NSFBFs)

The question about their native speaker friends on *Facebook* was divided in two parts. The first part inquired if they had NSFBFs and the second asked more specifically how they had met them. The pre-defined answer choices from the questionnaire (language exchange, the university's buddy program for international students or holiday) were complemented by 60 comments with additional places. Overall, 87% had NSFBFs (77.4% beginners (B), 96.7% advanced (A)). Over 80% of the intermediate (I) and advanced students indicated that they had met their NSFBFs during a language exchange program and the comments showed that they referred primarily to high school exchanges. 50 of the 60 comments referred to meeting places in New Zealand: they had met native speakers during their exchange to New Zealand, at school and at university, while travelling or working, through friends and family, at parties, in church or at the tramping club - only one of them indicated that they had met them online or through other *Facebook* friends.

4.1.5. L2 News Feed

A Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*) was chosen to measure attention to L2 items in the participants' *Facebook* news feed, such as their friends' status updates, comments, photos and other items they shared. While all participants indicated some interest in L2 items in their news feed ($x = 3.5$), the mean differences between the language levels is significant ($p = .014$). Advanced learners paid more attention to all L2 items appearing on their news feed (see table 1).

4.1.6. Translation

Posts in a language other than the chosen language setting appear automatically with the link *see translation*. This means that this feature can only be used if the settings have not been changed to the target language. Participants made limited use of this feature ($x = 2.41$), and even less as they progressed in proficiency ($p = .041$). Interestingly, beginners did not comment on the feature. Intermediate and advanced learners explained that they usually did not need a translation, unless the language was

“very casual” or if they encountered languages other than the language they study. They also explained that they did not trust the *Bing* translation and found that the translations were often “inaccurate”, “incomplete”, “usually not correct” or “wrong”. If they used it, it was with caution, or for “fun”.

4.1.7. Sharing

Participants would pay attention and read L2 items of their news feed but they were less inclined to share this content on their own page ($x = 1.97$). The comments provided two reasons for this. They explained that it would exclude their L1 audience, or seem “pretentious”. Others explained that they did not use the sharing function generally and therefore saw no point for using it in their L2.

Table 1. L2 exposure at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels (descriptive statistics and ANOVA).

		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Attention to L2 items in news feed	Beginner	40	3.10	1.150	4.360	.014
	Intermediate	65	3.55	.830		
	Advanced	62	3.66	.974		
	Total	167	3.49	.987		
Follow reading	Beginner	33	2.88	1.317	3.477	.033
	Intermediate	60	3.37	1.207		
	Advanced	61	3.54	1.042		
	Total	154	3.33	1.188		
Follow photos	Beginner	34	2.68	1.471	2.751	.067
	Intermediate	61	3.05	1.296		
	Advanced	61	3.30	1.006		
	Total	156	3.06	1.248		
Follow videos	Beginner	34	2.26	1.399	.761	.469
	Intermediate	60	2.42	1.266		
	Advanced	61	2.57	.974		
	Total	155	2.45	1.191		
Follow articles	Beginner	33	2.00	1.275	2.368	.097
	Intermediate	61	2.28	1.227		
	Advanced	61	2.54	1.042		
	Total	155	2.32	1.178		
See translation	Beginner	40	2.78	1.291	3.258	.041
	Intermediate	65	2.43	1.212		
	Advanced	62	2.16	1.089		
	Total	167	2.41	1.204		
Share L2 items	Beginner	40	1.80	1.091	1.067	.346
	Intermediate	65	1.95	.991		
	Advanced	62	2.10	.970		
	Total	167	1.97	1.009		

4.1.8. Summary: Facebook as a multilingual environment

In response to research question one: The use of multilingual features increased with proficiency. Beginners operated mainly in their L1 on Facebook. While most of them had connections to native speakers and access to L2 materials, they made only limited use

of these resources. Intermediate learners used more L2 *Facebook* features to expose themselves to their L2. They used *Facebook* to maintain friendships with native speakers they met on high school exchanges and they used L2 setting, likes and groups. Most advanced students had a good idea of how to use *Facebook* to get more language input. They were aware of it and used a variety of features. Mostly, however, they used *Facebook* to communicate with their native speaker friends.

4.2. Facebook writing practices of language students

The second research question was concerned with the L2 writing practices of language students. The questions are divided into three parts. The first part deals with the use of L2 in the public space of *Facebook*, status updates and comments. The second part asked about the use of the communication features that are only visible to the involved communication partners, private messaging and chatting. Thirdly, they were asked to describe their L2 chat interactions and their use of online writing tools.

4.2.1. Public communications

4.2.1.2. Status updates

Very few participants wrote status updates in their L2. Those in the beginner category did not comment but the mean of 1.9 indicates that they only rarely used their L2 for this purpose, possibly because of their lack of language. However, intermediate learners also had a low mean of 1.84. Their reasons for not posting were similar to those for not sharing L2 content: they did not want to exclude or alienate their L1-speaking audience. Some considered posting in a foreign language as “rude” or “weird”. One participant explained that she wrote on her friend’s wall to avoid this issue. However, both intermediate and advanced learners explained that they wrote status updates in their L2 during their stay in the target language country. Two participants commented that they were not using the feature in general.

4.2.1.3. Commenting

Commenting was only slightly more popular than writing status updates ($x = 2.54$). Some beginners ($x = 1.84$) said that they commented on each other’s timelines out of fun. Intermediate ($x = 2.69$) students said they commented occasionally on the posts of their native speaker friends but found it, as one participant put it “a bit embarrassing”. The advanced students ($x = 2.8$) were a bit more forthcoming in their public interactions with native speakers and said that they responded to statuses, commented on photos and left birthday messages.

4.2.2. Private communications

Participants seemed to prefer to communicate privately with their friends, either synchronously via chat, or asynchronously by exchanging private messages.

4.2.2.1. Private message

Beginners ($x = 1.82$) found it difficult to engage with native speakers, not only because of the language barrier but also because they had fewer NSFBFs or they did not know them well enough to contact them directly. Learners at the intermediate ($x = 2.71$) and advanced level ($x = 3.07$) had a closer connection to their NSFBFs and used private messaging to maintain relationships from their school exchange and to communicate with their host brothers and sisters and other native speaker friends.

4.2.2.2. Chatting

Chatting also increased with proficiency. While the means are lower for chatting ($x = 2.64$) than for private messaging, the comments suggest that chatting was the preferred communication channel of all interaction types *Facebook* offers. Yet, it was

more difficult to achieve, in particular for students of European languages due to the 12 hours' time difference between New Zealand and Europe.

Table 2. L2 use at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels (descriptive statistics and ANOVA).

		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Status Updates	Beginner	38	1.84	.886	.689	.504
	Intermediate	64	1.84	1.042		
	Advanced	61	2.03	1.016		
	Total	163	1.91	.996		
Comments	Beginner	37	1.84	.898	11.825	.000
	Intermediate	64	2.69	1.037		
	Advanced	61	2.80	1.030		
	Total	162	2.54	1.070		
Private message	Beginner	38	1.82	.926	15.543	.000
	Intermediate	63	2.71	1.170		
	Advanced	61	3.07	1.109		
	Total	162	2.64	1.189		
Chat	Beginner	37	1.81	.967	4.625	.011
	Intermediate	63	2.19	1.162		
	Advanced	59	2.53	1.180		
	Total	159	2.23	1.152		

4.2.2.2.1. Chatting practices

The second question on Facebook chat was open-ended to allow for a broader range of responses on chatting practices. Some beginners of Spanish and intermediate learners of Chinese and Japanese used chat to practice their L2 with their classmates. Their conversations would often revert back into English, but participants made a point of using greetings and short phrases in the L2 at the beginning of a conversation.

Intermediate level learners explained that their conversations with native speakers varied depending on the nature of their relationship (just as in their L1) and on the language abilities of their friends. If their native speaker friend spoke their language, they sometimes mixed the languages, by starting in the L2 and carrying on in the L1 for more detail, by swinging back and forth "sometimes in the same sentence", or by taking turns so that both partners had a chance to practice their L2. Some friends corrected them, while others did not in order to keep the flow of the conversation. Some participants expressed their frustrations with L2 accents and auto-correction programs, whereas others avoided the problem by changing the language settings on some of their electronic devices to communicate in the L2.

The advanced learners provided similar responses but tended to use their L2 more exclusively. Some participants explained that chatting gave them the opportunity to apply the language they learned during their time in the target language country.

Intermediate and advanced learners reported the use of abbreviations (L2 texting conventions), although some made a point of spelling words out properly and also to correct their sentences. The use of emoticons was usually reflecting habits in their L1, except for Japanese, where emoticons were perceived as a cultural convention.

4.2.3. Use of online writing tools

The use of dictionaries was quite low ($x = 2.2$) irrespective of proficiency level. However, as comments revealed, the type of dictionary used varied. Beginners seem to use more random dictionaries (or rely on the *translate me* function) whereas more advanced language learners listed a range of established dictionaries such as the online versions of *Larousse* for French or *Pons* for German.

Google was slightly more popular ($x = 2.9$) but again, no increase or decrease between levels. However, beginners and advanced language learners used *google* differently. Whereas beginners entered words and phrases in *google translate* to get translations, some advanced learners used the *google search engine* to check the accuracy of their own phrases and expressions by counting the number of hits.

The last category, the use of native speaker phrases ($x = 2.91$) increased with proficiency levels and is significant between beginners and advanced learners (LSD post-hoc test $p = 0.028$). This indicates that advanced learners are most likely to use phrases they see used by native speakers when writing in their L2 on *Facebook* (see table 3).

Table 3. Use of writing tools at different levels (descriptive statistics and ANOVA).

		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Use dictionary	Beginner	36	2.22	1.37	.730	.484
	Intermediate	64	2.07	1.14		
	Advanced	60	2.33	1.08		
	Total	160	2.20	1.17		
Use Google	Beginner	38	2.97	1.42	.794	.454
	Intermediate	64	2.76	1.30		
	Advanced	61	3.04	1.18		
	Total	163	2.92	1.29		
NS phrases	Beginner	38	2.60	1.46	2.631	.075
	Intermediate	64	2.84	1.37		
	Advanced	60	3.20	1.08		
	Total	162	2.91	1.30		

4.2.4. Summary: L2 writing practices on *Facebook*

To summarise the findings of the second research question: Participants were reluctant to use their L2 in the public spaces of the social networking site. Public posts are written with readers in mind and while most participants had L2 friends, they related more strongly to their L1 friends. The interactions with native speaker friends happened in the private channels on *Facebook*, both chat and private message, and increased with proficiency and number of close native speaker friends.

4.3. Perceptions of usefulness

The first two parts of the questionnaire investigated the participants' use of *Facebook* for L2 exposure and L2 use. The third part addressed their perceptions on the usefulness of their experiences. Two questions asked them to rate the degree of usefulness for 1) L2 exposure and 2) L2 use on a 5-point scale, 1 standing for *not useful at all* and 5 for *very useful* (table 4). The responses to these questions were compared with the responses from part one and part two to establish if perceived usefulness and actual (self-reported) use correlated. Finally, for the last open-ended question

participants contrasted language learning situations on Facebook with their classroom experiences.

Table 4. Perceptions of usefulness at different levels (descriptive statistics and ANOVA).

Useful ...	Level	N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
to be exposed	Beginner	35	2.69	.900	2.95	.055
	Intermediate	63	2.86	.877		
	Advanced	59	3.14	.955		
	Total	157	2.92	.924		
to apply and practice	Beginner	35	2.66	.968	2.84	.061
	Intermediate	63	2.81	.931		
	Advanced	59	3.14	1.12		
	Total	157	2.90	1.02		

4.3.1. Useful to be exposed to L2

As expected, more advanced language learners found Facebook more useful for L2 exposure than less proficient learners ($p = 0.55$). Spearman's rank-order correlation between the variables *attention to L2 items in newsfeed* (part one) and *useful to explore* was strong at the advanced level ($r_s = .689$, $n = 56$, $p < .01$), weak at the intermediate level, but still statistically significant ($r_s = .265$, $n = 63$, $p < .05$) and very weak and non-significant correlation at the beginner level ($r_s = .131$, $n = 34$, $p > .05$). This suggests strongly that more advanced language learners who rated the usefulness of Facebook for language learning higher also used Facebook more extensively for L2 exposure.

4.3.2. Useful to apply and practice L2

The correlations for L2 language use (*status updates, comments, chat, private message*) and the *useful to apply and practice* variable confirmed that beginners are least likely to use the communication features in their L2. The correlations for intermediate and advanced learners were statistically significant, but not for beginners (see table 5).

Table 5. Comparison of correlations between language use variables and use to apply & practice variable at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels.

		Useful to apply and practice		
		Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Status updates	Correlation Coefficient	.277	.378**	.541**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.112	.002	.000
	N	34	63	56
Comments	Correlation Coefficient	.192	.456**	.565**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.285	.000	.000
	N	33	63	56
Private message	Correlation Coefficient	.159	.539**	.564**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.368	.000	.000
	N	34	62	56
Chat	Correlation Coefficient	.108	.574**	.514**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.549	.000	.000
	N	33	62	54

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). / * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

4.3.3. Facebook learning situations

The replies to question three exposed the participants' views on the usefulness of *Facebook* for language learning. The comments could be grouped into three main categories, informal environment (less pressure), observations of native speaker activities and their conversations, and conversations with native speakers, about interesting topics, using relevant language.

4.3.3.1. Informal environment (Less pressure)

Participants across all languages and levels indicated that there was "less pressure" to produce language on *Facebook* (private message or chat) compared to the classroom. Beginners were afraid to make mistakes in front of their teachers and peers and felt more confident to try out new words and phrases in private interactions with their native speaker friends. The more casual and intimate environment provided an alternative venue for shy students who were reluctant to participate in class discussions. This was expressed by an intermediate-level learner:

I am a shy person so I would hardly interact in class discussions. I usually get left out because many of them speak Spanish fluently. Facebook is a good method for me to learn the language where I get to follow my fellow Spanish friends.

Class participation can be related to proficiency but it is also a personality issue. Individual differences are well documented in second language acquisition research (Dörnyei, 2005) and people's individual preferences can also be observed on *Facebook*. As opposed to the classroom situation, language learners are able to participate at their preferred pace, as pointed out by an intermediate learner:

Less time pressure, I can write things when they come to me instead of sitting down and thinking about what to say. ... No pressure about how often or the extent to which you contribute e.g. some people are more happy to go through reading everything on Facebook without ever writing a comment and others love to write comments on everything.

Chatting itself was perceived as "high-pressure", but in a positive way, "chatting to natives, when you need to respond quickly, makes your brain work quite hard". Another advanced student placed the pressure experienced while chatting on a continuum between assignment and real interaction "more pressure than homework assignments but less than face to face conversation".

4.3.3.2. Observing native speakers

Facebook (news feed) was perceived as a good place for observing native speaker interactions. It allowed participants to get a feel on how they "interact in their daily lives" and "use colloquial terms and slang when casually conversing with friends". Some appreciated the authentic language input, "reading conversation between two native speakers not making the language easier for u to understand", an opportunity to learn colloquial language in context, "in class or if a native speaker is speaking to you directly, they would try not to use these colloquial terms and phrases". Observing their native speaker friends' interactions and activities enabled them to experience parts of their lives, "their culture, what they are interested in, the music they listen to, the videos they watch, photos of them travelling around France etc."

Interestingly, however, some of those who had regular exposure to the L2 through *Facebook* still felt that it did not support their language study, as expressed by a participant at intermediate level: "It's good enough to keep the wheels turning, as I am still intaking something at all times, but not that useful compared to actually studying it."

4.3.3.3. Talking with native speakers

Facebook creates opportunities to observe and to participate in real conversations. One advanced learner explained, "this brings my language learning into a more real and applicable light". Advanced learners generally enjoyed the variety of topics they are exposed to, "We talk about a whole variety of things". These conversations enabled them to use the colloquial language they learned during their exchange and to pick up "new words and conversational techniques or phrases".

4.3.3.4. Summary: Usefulness of L2 Facebook for language learning

The findings of part one and part two strongly suggest that L2 *Facebook* use – both passive and active – is related to language proficiency. However, the results also show that overall use, even among advanced language learners is not great. The average score of 3 (*sometimes*) on a 5-point scale indicates that the majority of advanced language learners considered *Facebook* moderately useful for L2 exposure and practice. Interestingly, even the more active participants felt that their informal language engagement was not perceived as useful in the context of formal language learning. The implications of these findings for formal language education are discussed in the conclusions.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the use of *Facebook* as a tool for informal language learning. The analysis revealed that advanced language students in particular can be skilful users of the social networking site in their L2. *Facebook* enables them to be active L2 users, even in a place as remote as New Zealand. We have also seen that established *Facebook* routines in students' L1 impact on their L2 use, and that some are opposed to using the social networking site, or some of its functions in any language. At either side of the spectrum language learners display a high degree of agency in their use of and attitude towards *Facebook* and any pedagogical approach involving the social networking site has to take this into account.

Whereas some participants provided reasons for not using *Facebook* in their L2, others were simply not aware of their options. Language learners of all levels, but mostly beginners, did not know about the language settings, and had not thought of *liking* L2 pages or joining L2 groups. Beginners were most likely to use *Facebook* exclusively in their L1 and to rely on the *translate me* function to deal with posts in other languages. Some of these participants indicated that the questionnaire made them aware of the features and their usefulness for L2 learning. It seems therefore reasonable to suggest that language learners should be made aware of the language options on *Facebook*, such as changing language settings, joining L2 groups, and liking L2 pages.

The crucial factor for L2 engagement on *Facebook* was the presence of native speaker *Facebook* friends. Beginners often lacked NSFBFs or if they had any, they often did not feel close enough to initiate or to participate in a conversation. Some intermediate learners expressed similar views. Most of their friends were English speakers, which reduced their exposure to the L2 in their news feed. Advanced learners had the highest proportion of NSFBFs with 96.7%. In addition, these contacts were often well-established through time spent in the target language country, often with host-families. These students used *Facebook* to keep in touch with their NSFBF – by following their activities on their news feeds and by communicating through chat and private messaging. Established contacts with native speakers can be a good asset for the formal language context. They can be used as a resource for language learners to find relevant materials (through pages and groups and other shared information) or for personal opinions on current issues (private channels). In addition, observing L2 interactions provides a relevant resource for the analysis of language use.

Informal language learning has long been perceived as second rate learning (Eaton, 2010) to the extent where even students do not value their own experiences as language learners. As language educators, we should start acknowledging and encouraging the out-of-class language engagements of our students and design learning activities that allow learners to draw on their experiences as language users.

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