




## LEARNER-USERS' PERCEPTIONS: LANGUAGE LEARNING AFFORDANCES AND LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS



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### ABSTRACT

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Social networking tools are becoming vital tools in young learner's life. This article attempts to provide a review of the relevant literature in relation to current perceptions among learner-users in terms of the potential benefits and limitations of these tools for their informal language learning. It is important to understand how these applications have led to new innovations for virtual communal experiences. This article provides a more complete representation of the potential advantages and obstacles of these new practices of informal language learning. As presented, the social networking tools have many potentials for efficient language learning development, especially beyond the classroom. These tools are favored by language learner mainly for their online identities formation, their daily practice and trial of informal language learning, with regard to the improvement of both collective and individual learning. The article also shows that the perceived limitations are concerned with the aspects that might be discovered as a constraint, barrier or visual anxiety, but which can offer complementary and equally crucial opportunities for enhancing the informal learning among language learners.

**Contribution/ Originality:** The paper's primary contribution is finding that has identified a series of important areas of contribution by filling a knowledge gap. It has raised and discussed many opinions about the perceived affordances and constraints of the social networking tools that available to language learners towards self-direction.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Affordance has been increasingly applied to understanding the adoption of media technologies. Thus, there have been consistent calls for educators to consider the unique affordances and limitations of particular technologies when designing the appropriate learning experiences for learner-users based on their learning goals and situation-specific tasks (Van, 2000; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006).

### 1.1. The Notion of Affordances

The concept of affordance was first proposed by Gibson (1966). Later, in his book "The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception", Gibson (1979) noted that "affordances of the environment are what it offers animals, what it

provides or furnishes, either for good or ill ... It implies the complementarities of the animal and the environment" (p. 127). To illustrate, an affordance of a chair is that it provides one with a place to sit and to stand on if extra height is required or a shield to avoid being injured if taming a lion. In a sense, the discovery of an affordance is the detection of the "meaning or value" of the objects of the environment relative to the goals, intentions, and influence of the individual (Gibson, 1979). A similarity must hold between the properties of the environment and the potential actions of the perceiver for it to be possible for an affordance to be recognized. Thus, affordances refer to the actionable properties (functions and usability) between the world and an actor. When perceived, in this way an affordance allows actors to take actions that may satisfy certain needs and a user can imagine what the object can allow them to do.

Moreover, affordances of technologies have been defined as the "capabilities and limitations" (Gaver, 1991) they offer towards a dynamic perception and action (a direct relationship) that make technologies easy to learn and adapt. Gaver (1991) explains:

An affordance of an object...refers to attributes of both the object and the actor. This makes the concept a powerful one for thinking about technologies because it focuses on the interaction between technologies and the people who will use them. (p. 79)

Others have extended the original idea of affordances to include the capacities of a media technology in facilitating or limiting different kinds of language learning (Van, 2000; Van, 2004; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Ngah, 2007). Similar to Lantolf and Thorne (2006); Van (2000) defines an affordance as: "the environment [particular property] that is relevant to an active, perceiving organism in that environment. An affordance affords further action. What becomes an affordance depends on what an organism does, what it wants, and what is useful for it?" (p. 252). This notion of affordances is closely connected to the sociocultural view of learners as active agents and provides a conceptual framework for examining the relationship between the interactional environment and an active learner-user. From an ecological point of view, "if the language learner is active and engaged, he will perceive linguistic affordances and use them for further action" (Van, 2000).

Later, Van (2004) suggested the term of "affordance" is defined as the "relations", "possibility", "opportunity", "immediacy" and "interaction" (p. 91). This author explains that "it is action in potential and it emerges as we interact with the physical and social world" (p. 92). More specifically, affordance refers to how social networking tools enable or restrict the communication and interaction between the student and lecturer in an online class (Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich, 2007; Ullrich *et al.*, 2008). Another central thought of educational affordance is a connection between organism (learner) and the nature that supports a potential or awareness of action (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006) towards their learning goals. Interestingly, in relation to this, Van (2004) notes that "language affordances, whether natural or cultural, direct or indirect are relations of possibility among language users" (p. 95). The educational affordance of the technological tool is available and perceived by learner-users, enabling them to accomplish particular goals.

In this article, it is acknowledged that social networking technologies play an important role in enabling specific opportunities for the learner-users to learn English as a second language outside of the classroom. Hence, affordances refer to the positive benefits flowing from the choice of social networking tools for achieving the informal learning for English as a second language purposes (Wan *et al.*, 2014). Limitations refer to the opposite, namely the restrictions presented by the chosen technological tools. Apparently, "perception, action and interpretation are part of one dynamic process" (Van, 2004). A probe into what users expect of the technology and how they juggle with the technology will reveal social and cultural assumptions, which in turn shed light on the practice pattern of the social networking usage. The following sections elaborate on the negative affordances and limitations of social networking tools towards an informal learning framework.

## 1.2. Social Networking Technologies and Learning Limitations

This section presents limitations, obstacles or false attractions reported in the literature. As explained by Gibson (1979) and Gaver (1991) limitations or negative affordances are unpredictable results due to lack of information available or opposite consequences of perceived affordances (such as injuries and dangers). In this regard, it demonstrates inconsistencies or risks because the actual outcomes of the technology are different from the expected one and resulted only in superficial learning opportunities. **Review of this literature shows** various difficulties and constraints relating to social networking -based learning.

This literature suggests several obstacles to the conditions of good use of social networking tools and learner-users' ability to take up the affordances of the social networking tools. In fact, social networking-based learning environment expects a user to be an advanced learner and demands more responsibility and accountability. However, many young learners today are lacking motivation to engage with technology-based education (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006; Anderson, 2007). For some students, their preference is for face-to-face contact with their instructors and other students (Duke, 2010) consequently, they "have been slow to integrate technology into everyday learning" (p. 173). In relation to this, researchers have discovered social networking-based learning is mostly social and peer-based (Boudreaux, 2010; Gardner, 2011; Mills, 2011) so, it can bring negative aspects of the learner-users. For example, it causes low self-efficacy, an unwillingness amongst some learners to self-publish (Anderson, 2007) and fears around plagiarism, privacy and data protection (Franklin and Van, 2007; Ullrich *et al.*, 2008; Duke, 2010; Dillard, 2011). Indeed, student behaviour was sometimes seen as a barrier to the use of digital technologies. For example, the social networking tool was restricted to instructor usage due to the inappropriate use of the students, and some technically-minded learners had caused restrictions on student access (Starkey, 2010). Moreover, Ullrich *et al.* (2008) argue that having the learners engaged in an open community can be distracting. In their study, they found that during social networking tool usage in the classroom, learners sometimes posted messages in other languages that departed from the main goal of practicing English language. Additionally, immoderate contributions can be problematic if insulting content is posted. Within an online relationship, there are contradictory needs to be open and confidential because each social networking user may have a different level of comfort. As a result, "if the comfort levels are not the same within a relationship, it could lead to potential conflict or roadblocks for relationship maintenance" (Schultz, 2011). In this regard, although social networking tools offer the opportunity to motivate students in extended collaboration beyond the formal space, "they do not offer the richness and immediacy of face-to-face communication and, thus, may not fully engage students" (Duke, 2010). Thus, new technologies always require time and effort in order to take full advantage of potential benefits.

The social networking tools make it harder to access some types of educational response and information especially in the formal classroom. For instance, a lack of experience in using social networking tools to understand concepts or develop subject specific skills could be a barrier to using social networking technologies to create knowledge (Starkey, 2010). In addition, "meaningful social interactions", "error correction", and "negotiation of meaning", did not happen in the formal (Facebook) context (Mills, 2011). Jenkins *et al.* (2006) assert, "instead of focusing on narrowing attention, young people [required to] respond to a rich media environment by multi-tasking—scanning for relevant shifts in the information flow while simultaneously taking in multiple stimuli" (p. 35). As a result, the rate at which social networking technologies are evolving concerns some learners, leading to a fear of being left behind. They must make do with an effort to discover the technologies and how they can be utilized efficiently in learning. Starkey (2010) writes that it is challenging to apply updated lessons beyond virtual spaces, especially for teaching and learning outside the university. The use of external arrangements can mean that students have to make use of countless extra user terms and passwords and their user space becomes fragmented.

Another noticeable barrier is the potential for plagiarism and copying from other websites. At the same time, most social networking-based learners' work is about content sharing and repurposing that can easily be seen by learners as part of a new teenage copy-and-paste culture. Therefore, guidelines may need to be made, either to

redefine plagiarism, or to help learners overcome this culture in higher education environments (Franklin and Van, 2007). For instance, with the rich amount of free material available on the social networking, learners might find it easier to simply copy the material and put it in their Wiki as their own (Boudreaux, 2010). However, sometimes misinformation might have occurred because some contributors go beyond knowledge seeking and bring in inaccurate information, gossip or jokes. Furthermore, some works do not cite appropriate sources. As a result, it is hard to validate the quality, credentials of the work, and sources (Weinstein *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, because anyone can access and modify the information that appears on sites such as Wikipedia, students should never use these Wikis as sources of information to use or cite in an academic paper or research work (Boudreaux, 2010). Moreover, researchers also indicated that a social networking tool has space restrictions; for example twitter's 140 characters forces the learners focus only on the topic, but does not allow them to clarify views in detail (Ebner *et al.*, 2009).

Another challenge of social networking-based learning is resources (Selwyn, 2008). The technological issues concerning this kind of learning system such as the required equipment, software and skills, the learning standards as well as the financial factors should be considered. Even with today's increased access to computers, some students still do not have a computer to work with at home, and for some students going to the library or using a computer at school is not the most convenient choice to consider. For this reason, assigning an online compulsory assignment might prove to be problematic for these students (Franklin and Van, 2007; Boudreaux, 2010; Mortimer, 2010). The potentially supportive nature of educational technologies is also reduced by the restricted access of these social networking practices throughout broad populations worldwide (Selwyn, 2008). Consequently, these resource limitations will bring many difficulties, such as lack of student access and training, and shortage of support. This problem is usually an obstacle for schools, particularly in schools with more students with lower-socio economic status (Mortimer, 2010). Another potential barrier to social networking -based learning is the use of the tool for both social and formal purposes. Armstrong and Franklin (2008) while surveying the use of social networking technologies for content creation as part of informal learning processes in Higher Education, funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) reported:

The historically more certain boundaries where information and communications were controlled by universities are being lost ... Students have yet to discover the full consequences of their public representations. The mind sets and frameworks of reference that we have used hitherto are no longer adequate. Many boundaries have become blurred; virtual and physical localities, professional and social lives, formal and informal learning, knowledge consumption and production. (p. 2)

The inquiry found that most learners wish to separate their (formal) learning from their personal life because they share these tools with their peers mainly for their informal links and entertainment. Some respondents report that the adoption of social networking tools as regular components of the formal educational offerings is likely to take away their privacy, safety and free access, because of its institutionalization and the inevitable need for social networking regulations (Armstrong and Franklin, 2008; Dietel-McLaughlin, 2010). Because social networking is essential a stimulus for informal interaction, it would be inappropriate for instructors to integrate this practice in their formal lessons (Armstrong and Franklin, 2008). Learner values and beliefs have been found to be important issues for the operational use of educational technologies. A recent study, Tan (2009) mixed method research, explores the students' perception of the limitations and affordances of social networking tools when they engage with them as part of their daily schooling practice. On the whole, a majority of participants reported low usage levels, lack of perceived usefulness and an insufficiency of peer support in taking part in the learning media. These findings indicate that obstacles around social collaboration, learning technologies and academic expectation pressures influence students' involvement with the social networking tools for learning. These limitations were identified in terms of three integrated barriers in schools:

- (i) Social-reputational barrier such as cool/uncool judgment- the social unpleasant status, lack of popularity and network disadvantage of the social networking tools among peers;

- (ii) Institutional-pedagogical barrier - students' perceived the school culture and rules as authoritarian and punitive with negative effects on the student autonomy, motivation and engagement; and
- (iii) Academic performativity barrier- academic performance and good grades are the main expectation of all students. Moreover, academic performance pressures exist in a packed curriculum with tight timelines. As well, social networking-based learning was considered by the students as a waste of time and a potential distraction from real learning.

Overall, Tan's participants (primary school students) simply refused engagement with the social networking tools for learning. The students tended to blame school custom, lack of resourcing, and teacher conflict for low application of social networking technologies in schools. Essentially, the Tan's study recommends better frameworks for the construction of questionnaires and interview instruments in order that the pattern of learning and affordances of students towards social networking can be examined.

### 1.3. Conclusion

In sum, this article has explored the important affordances and limitations inherent in the social networking - based learning in influencing the learners' decisions on whether to use the tool in their learning. As presented, the social networking tools have many affordances for language learning opportunities, especially beyond the classroom. This presentation corroborates (Ngah, 2007) suggestion, "it is human communication and what we do with our technology that really counts ... it is about the transformation of our patterns of social interaction – how we live and work through, with and around the technology" (p. 6). In contrast, social networking tool's limitations (obstacles or impediments of learning opportunities) are illustrated through the vulnerable values and behaviours of the learners, lack of student participation, the uncertainties in higher education institutions, and the challenges faced in access, cost and technical knowledge for social networking-based learning. Overall, with these outstanding and wide-ranging affordances in mind, it is important to investigate the potentials and the limitations of social networking tools and how they may contribute to learning in the future.

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