

# Facebook as a support tool in secondary education English classes

## *Facebook como herramienta de apoyo en la enseñanza secundaria las clases de inglés*

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*Recibido: 27/11/2013  
Aceptado y Publicado: 30/12/2013*

### **Resumen**

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo principal conocimiento del uso de facebook como una herramienta en el aula de inglés, para dar a conocer sus ventajas y limitaciones dentro de la esfera educativa. Este estudio se ha llevado a cabo con alumnos de tercero de ESO y segundo de bachillerato, también los docentes han sido partícipes. Como docentes de lengua inglesa creemos que un acercamiento por parte del profesorado a la sociedad del alumnado podría facilitar el proceso de enseñanza- aprendizaje, siempre y usando se conozca esta herramienta social para un mejor uso y beneficio.

### **Abstract**

This research aims at unveiling the different points of view held by students and teachers on the potential use of Facebook as a useful tool for English courses. For this reason, questionnaires have been administered to students of third year of E.S.O. and second year of Bachillerato together with their English teachers. Results reveal that the majority of the participants regard Facebook as a potential positive tool that would facilitate the teaching-learning process.

**Palabras Clave:** Facebook, educación, inglés, comunicación, docente, estudiante.

**Key words:** Facebook, education, english, communication, teacher, student.





## 1. Introduction

In the past few decades, we have witnessed a proliferation of electronic technologies which have been integrated into every aspect of our lives, making it significantly much easier in a wide variety of aspects. These changes have also affected the education community who has incorporated never-before-seen technologies into the learning-teaching process. However, the adaptation to some of these innovations has not always been easy. This is the case of social networks such as Facebook.

As future teachers of English language and daily users of Facebook, we believe that this social network opens up a wide range of opportunities to improve instruction and consequently, the teaching-learning process of our subject. However, we believe that the potential of this social network has been largely underestimated within the education sphere.

Some literature has already been written on different perceptions that students and faculty have on the incorporation of social networks (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, etc.) into the classroom context. Yet, the majority of these articles focused on university level education. They also adopted a broad perspective on the subject; none of them studied the effect of social networks in ESL learning.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to reveal the different points of view that both secondary education students and faculty members have on the potential and suitability of integrating Facebook as a support tool into secondary education English classes. This study should be regarded as a piloting research previous to a possible incorporation of Facebook into secondary education English classes. Due to the limitations of our research (later on discussed), no design of an actual Facebook profile for our subject has been done.

As regards methodology, a series of surveys have been administered in two different high schools located in Zaragoza, giving light to a series of quantitative data that allowed us to draw very interesting conclusions on the potential of Facebook as a support tool in English high school classes.

Although bearing in mind the limitations of this research, we believe that the data gathered from this study can surely provide an overview on the issue that could be really useful for future and current teachers of English.



## 2. Theoretical background

In a world of fast evolving electronic technologies and 'digital natives', the education sphere seems to struggle when including some of these advances into their classes. Despite the fact that during the past few years, institutions and governments have introduced significant changes that favored the incorporation of new technologies into the classrooms (such as digital boards, PCs, wifi connection, etc.), there is still a large amount of faculty members who remain reluctant towards them. Some teachers seem to avoid the adaptation of their teaching methodology to technological innovations basing their position on ideas such as lack of convenience, technological formation, etc.

This is the case, for example, of Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook. This community - building resource has more than 618 million daily active users <sup>1</sup>, the majority of them being university or high school students, who use it to communicate with other subscribers, share personal information and joining group profiles. These possibilities offered by Facebook opened up a whole range of uses apart from just socializing with Facebook friends. Many institutions (mainly belonging to university level and located in other countries outside Spanish borders) have already started to create Facebook profiles for subjects in which teachers and students communicated, shared information and worked cooperatively.

This fact has called the attention of some researchers who have recently dedicated studies to the possibility of using Facebook and other SNS as an additional tool to support classroom work and foster educational communication.

One of these researches was carried out by Roblyier et al.(2010) at the University of Tennessee, after having acknowledged the fact that “almost 60% of students who use social networking talk about education online, and more than 50% talk about specific school work” (Roblyier et al. 2010: 135). Evidently, students did not only use social networks to socialize with others but they also perceived Facebook as something useful for their education. However, these group of researchers noticed that faculty members did not coincide with their students' views on the matter:

Students are much more likely than faculty to use Facebook and are significantly more open to the possibility of using Facebook and similar technologies to support classroom work. Faculty members are more likely to use more traditional technologies such as e-mail. (Roblyier et al. 2010: 134)





This perception reveals the fact that education community seems to struggle when incorporating such an innovation into their daily teaching methods, despite how familiar their students are with them.

After carrying out a series of surveys, Roblyier et al. concluded that “faculty and students differ somewhat in their current and anticipated uses of SNSs such as the currently-popular Facebook” (2010: 138). Their differences of perception were based on the perceived role of Facebook as a social rather than educational resource, despite the willingness of the students to integrate it into their classroom context. This research concludes with the idea that, unless faculty members change their view on the utility of Facebook as an educational tool, it will be almost impossible to incorporate it efficiently in higher education.

The study provides a good overview on the general issue of using Facebook as an educational tool. However, the position adopted in this case is too broad and does not specify in which subjects it would be better to work with Facebook or the way in which it should be integrated.

Another research which focused on SNS as educational tools was that of Zaidieh (2012). In this case, professor Zaidieh did a review of the possible benefits and drawbacks derived from using Social Networks with educational purposes. On the one hand, he pointed out the fact that social networks allowed flexibility, repeatable and accessible materials and communication. On the other hand, some drawbacks he outlined referred to privacy issues, taking up time and miscommunication problems. He also did a review on some literature written on the subject.

Once again, we find ourselves confronting the same problems as we did with the previous article: no appliance of the theory to any particular subject together with an adoption of a wide point of view on the matter. In addition to this, Zaidieh's study took a more theoretical perspective than the previous one as he did not carry a data-gathering process.

Furthermore, another study which focused on the use of Facebook as a support educational tool was that of Grosseck et al. “Dear teacher, what should I write on my wall? A case study on academic uses of Facebook” (2011). In this article, these researchers aimed at discovering “how students perceive the use of the social networking site Facebook for academic purposes and how/ if they integrate it in their learning, training or other (extra) educational activities” (2011: 1425) For this reason, authors administered an online questionnaire to the first year students of the University of the West Timisoara (Faculty of Sociology and Psychology) in Romania. The results obtained outlined the fact that students





spend more time on Facebook for social purposes rather than for academic reasons. Still, they stated that they often took part in discussions concerning their assignments, lectures, homework and class-related information.

There are some clear shared features between the studies that we have just reviewed. First of all, students participating in these cases clearly perceived some educational potential in Facebook although they mainly used it for socialization purposes. Another feature concerning all the articles previously mentioned is that participating faculty remained more reluctant than students when it came to regarding Facebook as a possible support tool. Furthermore, all of them adopted a general position as a consequence of the little research made on the topic so far. Many of these studies were barely piloting researches that required a follow-up sequence.

In addition to this, all of them focused on high education level and none referred to specific issues such as which curricular subjects would be more suitable to incorporate social networking as a back-up tool. Furthermore, neither of them referred to the specific way these new technologies should be integrated in the class.

For these reasons, we aim at adopting a more specific position on the integration of Facebook in English secondary education classes. We would like to know in which way students and teachers would incorporate social networking sites into the classroom context and how convenient they think it would be.

### 3. Study methodology

To gather a general idea on the perception that secondary education English students and faculty have on the uses of Facebook as a support tool to learn a second language, data was collected via a quantitative research consisting of two surveys filled in by a series of participants during the course of our Practicum III.

Choosing one method or another to carry a research is a crucial decision. As Jucker (2009: 1614) believes “the suitability of a method depends basically on the specific research question”. In this case, we have considered surveys to be the best instrument to gather the kind of data we were willing for.

#### 3.1. Instrument





Our corpus of data was gathered via two different surveys. Survey A was designed to be filled in by students and Survey B was elaborated for faculty members to complete. In the case of Survey A, two versions were elaborated: one in Spanish and one in English. The survey administered to the students was in Spanish, for the sake of clarity and avoidance of any possible misunderstandings.

Survey A included 9 questions which covered all significant information needed for our study. They ranged from personal information (age and whether or not the participant owns a Facebook profile) to their perceptions on the convenience of this resource as a tool to learn English.

In the case of Survey B, it focused on some similar aspects but it also covered features such as faculty' feelings on the integration of new technologies into the classroom, any possible drawbacks derived from using a social network in the classroom and whether or not they believed Facebook to be a useful support tool for their work.

### *3.2. Informants*

Participants in this study belong to two different high schools located in the city of Zaragoza: Escuelas Pías and El Pilar Maristas. These high schools were not randomly chosen as they were our placement schools during the course of our Practicum II and III.

For the data collection procedure, we administered the surveys to 3<sup>rd</sup> year of E.S.O. (a total number of 56 surveys) and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Bachillerato students (61 surveys in total). In addition to this, teachers completed a total number of 12 surveys.

The choice of two different age groups responds to the initial hypothesis that students closer to university level are more likely to use Facebook, as the studies above commented and recent reports have shown<sup>2</sup>. Faculty members who participated in the survey taught in the levels previously mentioned so that the information they provide is in correspondence to that from the students.

### *3.3. Data collection procedure*

The data collection procedure was led and carried out by the two authors of this research. Such a limited number of data collectors has its benefits but also several drawbacks. On the





one hand, the reduced amount of data-collectors allows a higher degree of objectivity when processing the results and responding to any possible questions participants might have. On the other hand, this also means that the amount of information two people can collect is likely to be more limited than if more data-collectors participated in the research.

For this particular case, students' surveys were administered during the course of Practicum III. Permission was asked to our Practicum tutors to submit surveys at the end of one English lesson (this was done on a span of three days as a consequence of schedule issues). Once all the students' surveys were completed, teachers were asked to fill in their corresponding survey. This part of the data collection procedure took 5 days.

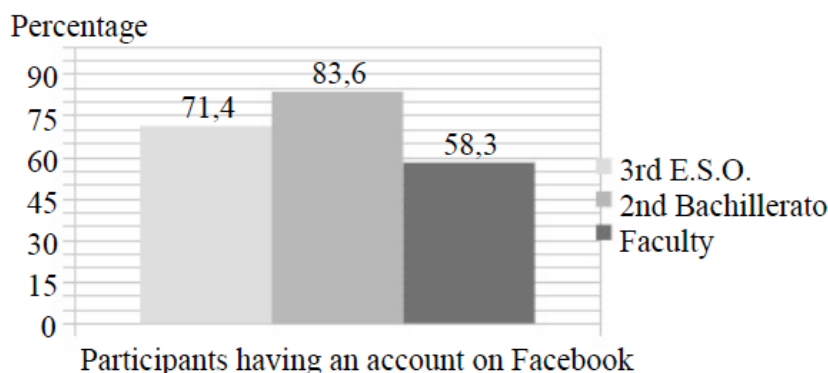
Once all surveys were collected administered, all the information was put together and made a tally of the results. To make this procedure easier, blank surveys (one corresponding to each group) were taken as a basis for notation. In every question of the blank survey, authors noted down the amount of responses submitted by the students/teachers. Afterwards, percentages were

calculated with a rule of three, noting down which was the most and least popular option for each question. Then, after having organized the results, an extensive analysis was carried out in order to draw some conclusions.

#### 4. Results

After having analyzed all the surveys, results show that the majority of the participants have an account on Facebook:

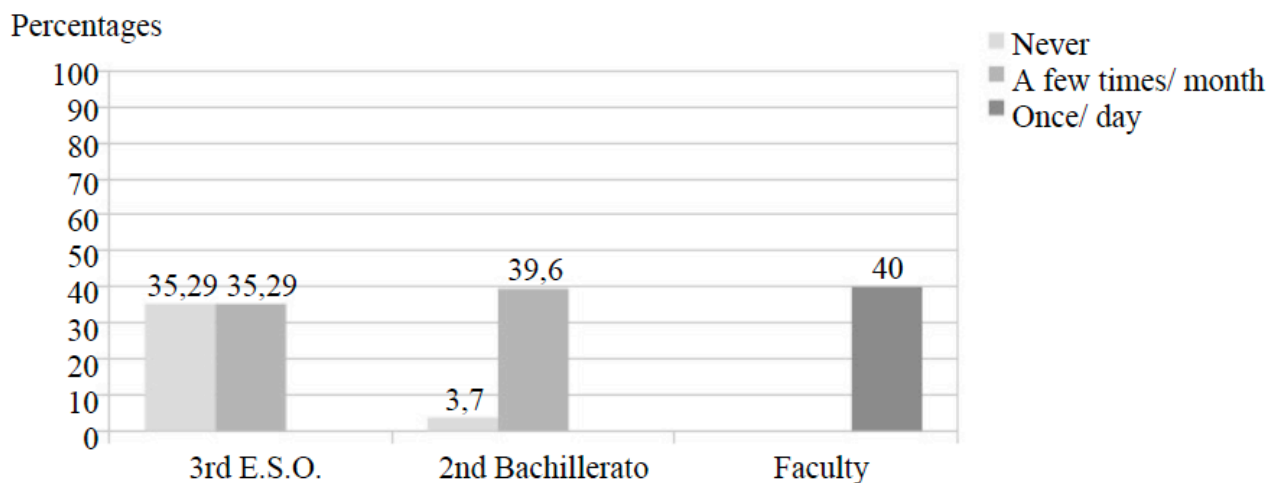
Figure 1. Facebook membership



This data revealed that Facebook is a common tool, well-known by most of the participants, especially by the youngest ones. Data also showed that Facebook is not so popular among faculty members for several reasons that will be later on discussed.

Related to the frequency of use, the majority of the participants from the students group log into Facebook just a few times per month. Percentages show that there is a direct correspondence between age and frequency in the case of students: the older students are, the more often they use this social network. This is also supported by the fact that teachers use Facebook more often than any other group:

Figure 2. Frequency of use of Facebook.



Related to the purpose with which participants log into Facebook, the majority of participants from all the groups coincided in using Facebook with social purposes (speaking with friends, looking at pictures, videos, songs, etc). Yet, some of them admitted to use Facebook to speak with English natives and talk about school matters.

Furthermore, related to whether or not participants are conscious of the potentiality Facebook holds for educational purposes, just a few participants confirmed to be part of Facebook groups dealing with English learning:







Figure 3. Membership in Facebook groups related to English learning.

	3rd E.S.O.	2nd BACH	Faculty
Percentages of membership	0,00%	6,77%	18,18%

As results shown, there is an obvious increase in the membership rate directly in correspondence with age. This evidences the fact that older participants are more aware of the educational possibilities offered by the social network.

Moreover, when students were asked about what kind of aspects they would include in a Facebook profile designed for the English subject, almost all the students coincided. In the case of 3rd year of E.S.O., 19% of students said that they would like the page to include a chat or forum where they could discuss doubts and 17 % of 3 rd E.S.O. wanted this page to include videos, songs, etc. in English. For students of 2 nd Bachillerato, 15.88% of students wanted this profile to include videos, songs, etc. and a 15. 57% of them preferred links, Tv series, etc. Furthermore, both groups agreed on the aspects they would like the least for their Facebook groups: debates and receiving feedback from their classmates on their work.

In addition to this, teachers declared that the possible benefits driven from having a Facebook group for their subject were that students would be more motivated towards the subject (16.66%) and that they could include more appealing materials into the classroom context (18.75%).

Moreover, related to the possible drawbacks derived from having a Facebook page for the group, students of 3rd E.S.O. declared that they would feel as if they did not disconnect from the school context (25.2%). Students of 2nd Bachillerato declared that they would not like the rest of their classmates to see their work (28.3%).

Furthermore, both groups of students (a 72.3% of 3 rd year of E.S.O. students and a 56% of 2nd year of Bachillerato) stated that they would find Facebook as a tool that would improve communication between students-students and students-teachers.

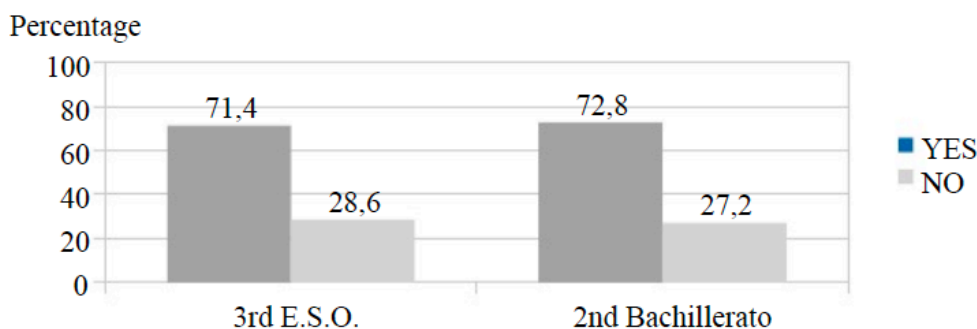
In the case of teachers, 90,9% of the total declared to feel comfortable with the integration of new technologies into the classroom context. However, teachers also declared that they should have some kind of formation prior to the integration of Facebook into their classes (90.9%). Furthermore, only 58,3% (as figure 1 shows) have a Facebook account which is a



much inferior number than students' results. Yet, those who do have one, check it more frequently than students (40% of teachers check their profile one time per day).

Finally, and perhaps the most important results drawn from this study, the majority of the students (from both age groups) stated that they would find as a positive improvement to have a Facebook profile for their English subject:

Figure 4. Responses to: "Would you find useful to have a Facebook profile for the English class?"



## 5. Discussion

Data collected in this piloting research enabled us to reach some interesting conclusions on the topic of our research.

First of all, Facebook is a widely known resource by almost all of the participants. This is a revealing fact as all the studies we reviewed on the state of the art section of this paper focused only on university and college levels. Students participating in this study were all high schoolers and the majority of them already had a Facebook profile. This was also the case for teachers: although numbers were much lower than those from students (58.3% in the case of teachers), more than half of the faculty participating in this research had a Facebook profile. These results gave a hint of the potentiality Facebook has as a support tool for English learning at secondary education levels.





Yet, results also showed that students are still quite reluctant towards the use of Facebook on a regular basis; the majority of them logged into the social network only a few times per month (due to several reasons that could be studied on a further research) whereas teachers did it more frequently. This was an interesting discovery as, in contrary to what Roblyer et al 3. stated in their research, both students and faculty seem to be open to the use of social networks and similar technologies to support classroom work. However, the truth is that teachers in this corpus of data, revealed to experience some kind of barriers when integrating Facebook into their classroom methodology. Some of them admitted not to fully understand the functioning process of the social network and wished for some formation on the subject. Therefore, it seems that both groups (students and teachers) would need some kind of instruction prior to the introduction of Facebook as a support tool into English classes context.

Furthermore, these results also pointed out that, should Facebook be used in the teaching-learning process of English, some kind of agreements have to be reached between faculty and students. First of all, it would be highly advisable to reach a consensus on the rules needed to be followed when using it. In addition to this, it would also be important to agree on the role given to Facebook within the class (whether active participation would be considered as an optional or compulsory task, if activities posted on Facebook would be assessed or just considered as support materials, etc). Agreeing on the importance ascribed to this new tool could foster its use on a more regular basis and with some order and control.

In relation of the contents this hypothetical Facebook profile should have, results showed that the majority of participants still regarded Facebook as just a way to socialize with other people. Thus, it would be advisable to begin the introduction of Facebook into English classes with a use similar to that which students are already familiar with. For example, students could begin to use

the Facebook profile of their English class a site in which they could post doubts that would be solved by the teacher (on a chatroom, forum, etc.) or other classmates. Then, other uses could progressively be introduced once students are accustomed to its use (e.g. graded activities, writing samples, etc).

This Facebook profile should be created in a way that students are motivated to use it and find it useful. Hence, it would not be convenient to make of this innovation just another piece of homework. Students should regard it as a support tool that would help them achieve success in their learning process of English and from which they can profit.





Facebook offers the possibility of having a site for group discussions, sharing information, uploading materials, posting links, videos, pictures, etc. which, with an appropriate use, could have a very positive effect on the development of the subject. This is also perceived by the majority of the participants (especially students) who declared that Facebook could be an improvement for their English classes. Students are ready and willing to incorporate such a tool as part of their ESL learning process but prior to do so, some substantial changes have to be undertaken.

The incorporation of ICTs (within which social networks could be placed) has been a recurrent topic of much discussion among education experts. It seems that schools and education institutions in general have rushed to integrate many technological devices into the classroom context. Some of these have resulted to be very beneficial and useful but others have not had such positive results. In addition to this, other technological advances (such as social networks) have not received the importance and credit they would deserved and have largely been underestimated. Institutions and governments have spent large amounts of money on devices that perhaps could have not been needed if others had been taken into consideration.

One of these largely underestimated tools is Facebook, which offers a free and safe way for students and teachers to connect and collaborate. Despite its original design as a network for socialization with no practical goal, Facebook could also be considered as a support tool for education that would get students excited about the subject, allow teachers and students to connect more easily at any place and at any time, provide the appropriate platform for information sharing and amplification of lessons and a large number of other applications.

## 6. Conclusions

The characteristics of current students of high school levels differ greatly from those of a few decades ago. Classrooms are now filled with alumni who own cell phones, laptops, iPads and an almost infinite number of technological gadgets. These students were born almost at the same time as the Internet; their growing up process has taken place in parallel to the expansion of an almost infinite number of technological changes that have affected every aspect of our lives.

One of the aspects that has experienced an incredible transformation as a consequence of the advances made in technology is that of education. Governments and institutions have made tremendous efforts to incorporate ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies)





into the classroom context wishing to improve traditional methodology and successful results on the part of students. However, these innovations have not always resulted as expected; some of these technologies were highly expensive and unprofitable and others, which were much cheaper, were underestimated.

That is the case of social networks (such as Facebook) applied to education. Not much literature has been written on the topic and those researches which have in fact been undertaken, limited themselves to university level and adopted a broad vision on the subject. For the elaboration of this paper, we confronted the problem of a lack of information on the incorporation of Facebook into English secondary education classes.

Bearing this in mind, the study carried out in this paper wished to serve as a piloting research for a further more extensive research. In our case, we wanted to provide an outline on the perceptions a certain amount of high school teachers and students had on the incorporation of Facebook as a support tool in English classes.

Therefore, we undertook a research in which 117 students (56 from 3º E.S.O. and 61 from 2º Bachillerato) and 12 teachers were asked to fill in a survey. Data was collected and processed, giving light to a series of revealing findings.

Results showed that the majority of informants were aware of Facebook and even had a profile on the site. Yet, data also revealed that they were still experiencing some kind of obstacles that made them remain reluctant towards an often use of the site. One of these reasons (especially in the case of teachers) was the little knowledge participants had on how to use Facebook. Therefore, some kind of formation (both for teachers and students) would be needed prior to the incorporation of Facebook into English secondary classes.

Furthermore, because participants were not used to using Facebook on a regular basis, some agreements on both behavior rules and the role assigned to this support tool should be reached between teachers and students. Contents should be appealing to the students and the incorporation of this support tool into the classroom context should be done in a way that students will start to engage themselves in its use. Almost all informants agreed on the potential of Facebook to improve the process of English learning. Yet, some substantial changes have to be made prior to its incorporation.

Therefore, Facebook has the latent power of becoming a very successful support tool for English secondary education classrooms providing the opportunity to enhance communication between teacher and students and between the students themselves,





encourage information partaking and the introduction of appealing materials into the classroom context.

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### Forma de citar este artículo en bibliografías

MORTE MARCO, A. y PERALTA MATEO, M. (2013) “Facebook as a support tool in secondary education English classes” se encuentra publicado en *Revista PANGEA* (ISSN: 2172 – 3168); Año 2013, N° 2, en páginas 223 a 235. Red Académica Iberoamericana de Comunicación. Recuperado el \_\_\_\_ de \_\_\_\_\_ de 2\_\_\_\_ de: <http://www.revistapangea.org>

