Social Networking in Higher Education: Perceptions of Teachers and Learners

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ABSTRACT

English language has become one of the most popular international languages that has been most widely taught, learnt, and used by millions of people. Therefore, many higher education institutions in Turkey provide compulsory English language education, but the students are less likely to get chances to practice the language outside the classroom. Language teachers also find it as a challenge to get their students to practice the language after school. To be able to cope with this challenge, social networks, such as Edmodo, which is a social network created for educational purposes, offer promising alternative social spaces that support social interaction and enhance fast and easy information exchange. Constructed in a mixed methods research design, this study, including teachers and students as both stakeholders, aimed to obtain in-depth data on the perceptions of Edmodo use in language classes. The survey given to the learners and interviews conducted with the teachers revealed similar positive perceptions regarding Edmodo. According to majority of the participants, networks like Edmodo provide opportunities for life-long learning, international collaboration, practical assessment, time and space independent communication, and easy performance monitoring.

Keywords: Social networking, Language learning, Edmodo, Collaboration, Social learning, Higher education.

Highlights of this paper
- Both from learner and teacher perspective Edmodo use in EFL teaching context was found to be advantageous.
- Social media can be considered as fruitful tools for improving the quality of learning and teaching in or outside the school environment by providing teachers and learners with advantages of sharing, collaborating, communicating and enabling social learning.
- Edmodo enhances the connectedness of this century and converts conventional teaching and learning into a collaborative, interactive, and motivating experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Language Teaching in the Age of Technology

English language has become a 'lingua franca'. This term explains the people who are not native speakers of English but who use English for intercultural communication and these people are the world's largest English-using population (Jenkins, 2015). Approximately about a third of the world's population is now able to communicate at a useful level in English (Jenkins, 2015). Therefore, English language has become a part of primary, secondary or higher education curriculum either as a required course or as an instructional medium in many countries such as, Japan, China, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and many other Asian countries (Butler, 2004; Matsuda, 2012; Sharma, 2018). This triggered educators to find innovative ways to enhance their teaching process in each country (Chodorow *et al.*, 2010) by embedding information and communication technologies (ICT) into their teaching "to create contemporary learning environment modernizing current teaching techniques, materials, methods, assessment tools and etc." (Ekmekçi, 2016). According to Dogoriti (2015) when educators use ICT tools in language learning process, they can integrate foreign language teaching approaches and technology in a more meaningful way. These technologies might help language teachers in many ways such as providing authentic learning environment, combining listening with seeing, combining reading, writing, speaking, listening in task-based learning (Padurean and Margan, 2009) assessing learner performance through e-portfolios and providing polls, alerts, quizzes and homework (Pop, 2013) providing assistance to scaffold between everyday language and academic language (Cruz, 2004) allowing learners to participate collaboratively, and offering many different functions that help teachers to extend their teaching processes beyond the classroom (Haygood *et al.*, 2012).

English as a foreign language (EFL) education is regarded as challenging for many educators as the students are less likely to get chances to practice the language outside the classroom in real life contexts. Language teachers also find it as a challenge to get their students to practice the language after school. To be able to cope with this challenge, social networks, such as Edmodo, which is a social network created for educational purposes, offer promising alternative social spaces that support social interaction and enhance fast and easy information exchange. This study, including teachers and students as both stakeholders, aimed to obtain in-depth data on the perceptions of Edmodo use in language classes. The data gained from the study might provide ideas for educators to make Edmodo more effective by revealing possible challenges with Edmodo use or its most preferred, most commonly used features.

1.2. Edmodo

Edmodo is a social networking platform designed for educational purposes. As a free and secure virtual learning environment, Edmodo lets teachers and students to communicate and collaborate outside the classroom. It has a user-friendly interface, which is quite similar to Facebook, another popular social networking platform. On Edmodo, teachers can open classes as closed groups, share the class code with their students for practical enrollment. Not only classes, but also many other closed subgroups for various purposes such as discussions,

sharing materials, collaborating etc. can be opened on the platform. Thanks to many handy functions of Edmodo, teachers can create exercises, quizzes, polls and alerts, and they can start discussions, assign homework, share links and files, store materials in their libraries and more importantly they can track progress of their students. Also, "E-portfolios of writing, speaking and listening contributions, which would be otherwise rather difficult to assess in real time by the teacher, can be uploaded on the platform and contribute to a finer, more objective assessment process" (Pop, 2013).

Hockly (2011) mentions the terms used for people of this century who spend time online as follows: "We have had digital or cybercitizens, netizens (from internet and citizens), digital natives, homo digitalis, digital youth, and generation Y, to name a few" (p. 322). Created by Nic Borg and Jeff O'Hara in 2008, Edmodo aims to combine connectedness of 21st century with teaching and learning (Shams-Abadi *et al.*, 2015). As today's learners are identified with social networking generations, integrating social networking in teaching and learning practices might be more effective, interactive and engaging in terms of pedagogy. Chen and Bryer (2012) state: "...networking technologies have significant potential to recreate the learning environment between student and teacher. Learning can be experienced as a uniquely social enterprise; course content can be co-created by a community of learners..." Edmodo, a social networking platform for educational purposes, is similar to Facebook in many ways, yet it is more secure and private for a learning environment because teachers can create closed groups as classes with a group code. This allows only teachers to create and manage accounts, and only those students with a group code can access and join the group.

According to foreign language theorists there are some vital factors that enhance development of productive skills in foreign language learning. These factors can be listed as comprehensive input (Krashen, 1985) facilitating comprehensible output (Swain, 1985) corrective feedback (Long, 2000) and motivation and attitude (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003). These factors require continuous teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction. At this point Edmodo seems to be a promising platform by letting learners and teachers keep interacting outside the classroom. " It helps students interact with each other and teachers through instant messages, thus enabling learners to cooperate and collaborate in virtual classroom environment" (Ekmekçi, 2016).

Recent relevant literature presents some findings in favor of this platform (Pop, 2013; Al-Kathiri, 2015). The study conducted by Enriquez (2014) revealed findings related to the perceptions of students regarding Edmodo's usefulness on their learning and education. Similarly, in some other studies students perceived Edmodo as a favorable learning platform to carry out online activities on their own self-paced learning styles and they pointed out that Edmodo had many features to enhance their learning and it enabled direct communication with the teacher and other students (Thongmak, 2013; Balasubramanian *et al.*, 2014). In another study conducted in a higher education institution, students pointed out that Edmodo was a suitable platform for English language learning because it had an interactive interface, appropriate assessment tools and it also brought a 'different' learning experience (Mokhtar and Dzakiria, 2015). Apart from learner perception, some studies focused on evaluation of Edmodo from teachers' perspective. Durak (2017) study revealed findings regarding the perceptions of teachers at 4 higher education institutions. The teachers recommended educators use Edmodo in their courses and they suggested that school administrations should encourage their staff to use Edmodo by giving seminars to introduce the platform. Similarly, teachers in Pop (2013) favored Edmodo's features that provided them with effective monitoring, timely guiding, and customization of the activities according to the learners' proficiency levels. They were also content with the safe platform where students could maximize their learning time.

1.3. Purpose of this Study

In relevant literature there is limited study focusing on both teacher and learner perception of Edmodo use in EFL classes. This study, including teachers and students as both stakeholders, aimed to obtain in-depth data on the use of Edmodo. The data gained from the study might shed light on the relevant literature on the use of social networking in the realm of EFL teaching and learning by taking the perceptions of learners and teachers into consideration. Also, thanks to the findings regarding possible challenges with Edmodo use or its most preferred, most commonly used features, teachers might make necessary adjustments to use Edmodo more effectively in their classes. The study intended to gather data related to the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of EFL learners on Edmodo use in language classrooms?
2. What are the perceptions of EFL teachers on Edmodo use in language classrooms?

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study was constructed in a mixed methods research design to serve the purpose of the research. According to Creswell (1999) in mixed method research, the researcher collects data by combining qualitative and quantitative methods, approaches and concepts in a study. The researcher combines these two sets of data and then makes comments based on the combined strengths of both data sets to understand research problems. In this study, the answers to the research questions were sought by combining the data obtained from the survey aiming to get the perceptions of students about Edmodo use in English lessons (quantitative data) and the data obtained from interviews with English teachers on the use of Edmodo (qualitative data).

2.2. Participant (Subject) Characteristics

The questionnaire was given to 8 lower-intermediate level classes each containing 20-25 students at Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages at the end of 2018-2019 academic year fall term. The students were of various departments of Anadolu University and they had been in an intensive language program for four months. They had Edmodo accounts and they had registered for their online classes at the very beginning of the semester. The participation was on voluntary basis so 176 students responded the questionnaire.

For the teacher perception, interviews were conducted with the participants who experienced the phenomenon the research focused on and who could reflect their experience first-hand (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). According to Sanders (1982) the number of participants should be limited to a minimum of three and a maximum of six while conducting a phenomenological investigation. By this way, sufficient information can be accessed through intensive interviews.

2.3. Sampling Procedures

The participation was on voluntary basis for the students. Therefore, convenience sampling procedure was followed for the student participants. As no inclusion criteria identified prior to the selection of subjects in convenience sampling, those students who voluntarily accepted to join the research were included in the study. For the teacher participants, purposeful sampling, which is a widely used technique in qualitative research (Patton, 2002) was applied. There were some criteria while determining the teacher participants. The participants should have at least 8 years of work experience as an EFL teacher and the second one is that the participant should have used Edmodo for at least 5 academic years successively. Therefore, 5 teachers were chosen among those who accepted the interview invitation. The teachers were from the same institution. The teachers' years of experience in

language teaching ranged from 10 to 21. All participants had been using Edmodo in their language classes for 5 years. The information about the teacher participants can be found on Table 1.

Participants	Years of experience
Teacher 1	12
Teacher 2	10
Teacher 3	16
Teacher 4	21
Teacher 5	19

2.4. Research Instrument and Procedure

Within the scope of the quantitative part of the study, a questionnaire compiled by the researcher was used. There were 2 yes/no questions each with an additional open-ended question in the questionnaire. The first yes/no question asked if the students were satisfied with the use of Edmodo. The question was followed with an open-ended question asking the reasons behind their opinion. The second yes/no question asked if they experienced any problems while using Edmodo. The question was followed by an open-ended question asking what kind of problems they experienced or what kind of strengths did Edmodo have depending on the answer they gave for the preceding question. For the qualitative data 30-45-minute interviews were conducted with 5 language teachers. Semi-structured interviews were carried out by adopting a phenomenological approach. The aim of phenomenological research is to define different ways in which people experience, interpret, understand and conceptualize a particular aspect of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1999). Individuals can show different understandings to the same phenomenon (Smith and Eatough, 2007). Although the teaching and learning in the field of education is a phenomenon known to everyone, our approach, understanding and perceptions might differ greatly. By applying phenomenological approach during the interviews, it was aimed to find detailed answers to the questions of what individuals experienced and how they experienced it. The recorded interviews were transcribed for text analysis, and then the important expressions were highlighted in order to clearly reveal the actual experiences. These expressions were grouped together to create meaningful units (codes). The same process was repeated for each participant and the texts were continuously revised throughout the process. After all the codes were obtained, the themes thought to define the phenomenon were formed.

2.5. Data Analysis

The questionnaire was delivered to the participants in the class hours and it took approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The participants' responses were analyzed descriptively by the researcher.

The interviews were scheduled according to participants' availability. The interviews included open-ended questions. Because the number of participants was not high, the researcher could conduct longer interviews for about 40 to 60 minutes in order to gather in-dept data. The participants responded to two open-ended questions during the dialogue-based, unstructured, interactive interviews. The questions focused on the strengths and weaknesses of using Edmodo in language classes. All interviews were transcribed and important statements that revealed real life experiences of the phenomenon were highlighted. The highlighted statements were grouped to create meaningful codes that were independent from each other. The same process was repeated for each participant while the texts were read repeatedly. In the end all codes were combined into meaningful themes that describe the ideas related to the phenomenon.

3. RESULTS

The quantitative data gathered from the students through the questionnaire was analyzed descriptively. Data analysis revealed that majority of the students in this study tended to feel satisfied with the use of Edmodo in their language classes with 87 %. The percentage of those who responded negatively was 13. For the question related to reasons behind their response, those who favored Edmodo stated practical use, timely feedback, longer retention, maintained interaction, effective learning, and user-friendly interface as the most frequently repeated benefits of Edmodo respectively Figure 1.
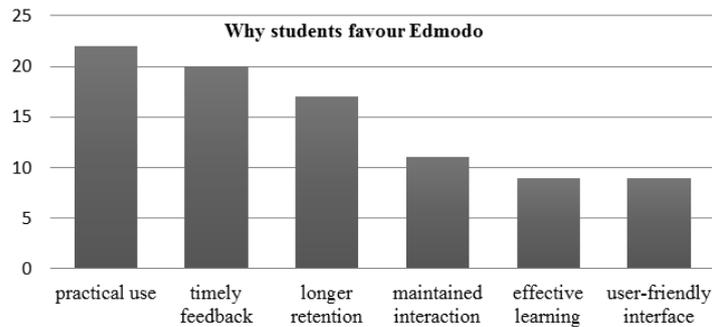
**Figure-1.** The reasons why students favor Edmodo.

Very few students among those who responded negatively stated reasons which were about technical problems, no internet access, virtual content and faulty mobile application Figure 2.
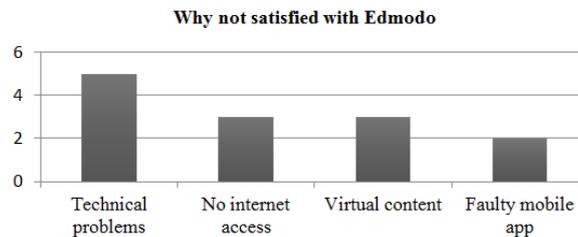
Figure-2. Why students are not satisfied with Edmodo.

For the second question the responses by 82 % of the participants revealed that they did not experience any problems while using Edmodo. Regarding the responses related to the strengths of the platform, the participants listed on time feedback, sense of community, easy access, easy submission of the assignments, more convenient, no waste of paper, encouragement for systematic study and technology integration as the top strengths of Edmodo Figure 3.
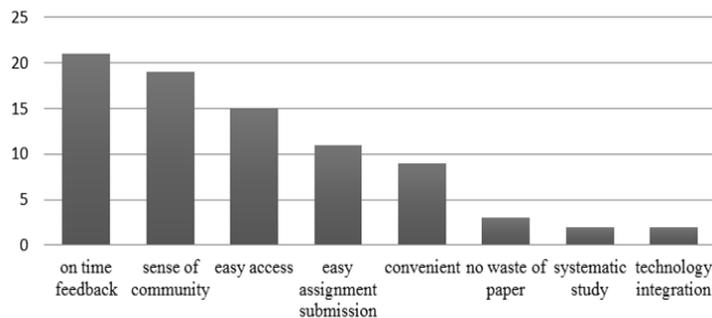
Figure-3. Strengths of Edmodo.

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The percentage of those who responded as having experienced problems was 18. and their responses related to weaknesses of the platform were lack of internet access, difficulty in using the platform, technical problems Figure 4.
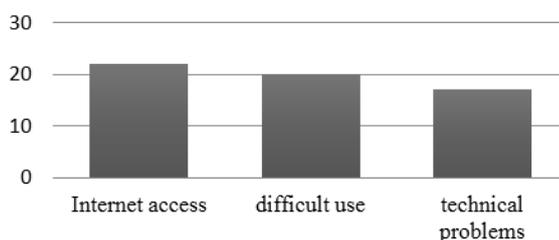

Figure-4. Problems with Edmodo.

Table-2. Teacher responses.

Important statements	Codes	Themes
It is very easy to use.	Easy to use	
It helps me connect with my students.		
Technology allows us to transverse distance and allows us an opportunity to come closer.	practical platform	practicality
Any device would be ok to use Edmodo, it can be used on mobile devices and this is a great convenience for my students.	easy to access works on any device distant learning opportunities	accessibility
Some of my students have to quit for some reasons but they keep using Edmodo to continue their lessons with their classmates. It is a great opportunity to make distances closer.	provides interaction with other colleagues world wide	collaboration
		professional development
This platform fosters interactivity, collaboration and participation.	good for professional development	
In our institution we use Edmodo for our teacher group, it is the best way of sharing information.	interaction with students	interaction
Edmodo lets teachers all over the world contact, reach across the ocean, learn and collaborate with teachers around the world.		participation
Thanks to Edmodo I can easily assign tasks for my classes. That's great!	fosters collaboration	
	fosters participation	task assignment
It is an amazing resource. Teachers can use it anywhere in the world. I have shared lots of course materials with many colleagues around the world so far and they have shared with me their materials, experiences, lesson tips and sources.	easy task assignment	assessment
Edmodo is a good application. My students and I enjoy using Edmodo. It makes everything easier. I can easily give feedback to my students' work and they learn about my feedback thanks to instant notifications.	enjoyable application easy feedback and quizzes	feedback
It is a platform that you will never regret to use as a teacher. I love this platform. My students enjoy using this platform very much. Easy and manageable to use. Handy for giving feedback and quizzes.	makes teacher- student connection easier	fun
Thanks to Edmodo, my lessons became more active and connecting with students is better.	easy to manage courses and assess learner progress	
My all classes really enjoy the ease of sharing work on Edmodo. We are able to do quizzes and other assignments using it. Students can easily share resources with each other.		group work
Edmodo has enhanced my classroom in more ways than one. I can share course materials, useful links, important files and interesting videos with my students in seconds. Highly recommended for all language teachers.	easy to share course materials of any type	keeping track of learner progress
My students do projects for the class and they can easily share their work with each other at any time outside the class. It is a great platform for learner collaboration, team work. It is also great for us to keep track of our students.	convenient for group work, class projects	
Edmodo makes teaching more accessible and fun.		

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The content analysis of the interview responses revealed the teacher participants' ideas about the use of Edmodo in EFL context. Table 2 shows positive important expressions of teachers on the use of Edmodo, and the codes and themes created by the researcher based on those expressions.

4. DISCUSSION

This study intended to gather ideas from both learners and teachers about Edmodo use in foreign language learning context. Involving both stakeholders in the study would create a better picture of the effect of Edmodo use in EFL context. From the learner perspective, Edmodo was found to be an advantageous as the survey findings revealed mostly positive ideas. This finding is consistent with the literature on use of social networking for educational purposes (Enriquez, 2014; Evans *et al*., 2014; Al-Kathiri, 2015; Oyelere *et al*., 2016; Insani *et al*., 2018). Participants of this study highlighted timely feedback, practicality, creating sense of community and enhancing retention as the most favorable features of the platform. As the learners of networking age, the participants rejoiced the easy access and practical use of the platform on their mobile devices anywhere anytime. Unlike most research in relevant literature (Buescher, 2010; Redman and Trapani, 2012; Chandler and Redman, 2013) the participants of this study did not mention about learner collaboration, group work opportunities, class discussions, or peer tutoring on the platform. The reason behind this might be not providing the learners with enough collaborative tasks that they can engage in groupwork outside the classroom. Even though collaborative learning has been accepted to be an effective instructional method inside or outside the classroom (Bernard and Rubalcava, 2000) the participants seem to have had mostly individual tasks and assignments. When considered within the scope of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) teaching and learning contexts should provide learners with opportunities to learn from one another. Social networking sites like Edmodo seem to create a promising channel for interaction and collaboration for educational purposes. Similarly, the teacher perspective revealed positive opinions regarding Edmodo use in language classrooms. The participants underlined practicality, collaboration, easy monitoring and feedback as some of the favorable features of Edmodo. Teachers' responses indicated that the platform makes it possible to access their teaching content, course materials and learners anytime anywhere. They also pointed out the convenience of keeping track of their learners and communicating with them outside the classroom. This is an important point as in EFL context most teachers find it as a challenge to motivate their learners to practice the language outside the classroom. The teacher participants also claimed that the platform provided them with the opportunity of collaborating with other colleagues around the world, which might foster professional development by keeping teachers up to date with the recent ICT tools and classroom applications for language teaching. The participants stated that they were content with the convenience of sharing useful links, videos, interactive course materials, quizzes, messages, making announcements and giving assignments on Edmodo. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that social media can be considered as fruitful tools for improving the quality of learning and teaching in or outside the school environment by providing teachers and learners with advantages of sharing, collaborating, communicating and enabling social learning. Edmodo, as a social learning space enhances communication between teacher and learner in many ways like giving and receiving feedback, sending messages, sharing course materials. Even though every classroom has diverse environments with different learner needs, educational networks like Edmodo might help overcome limitations of conventional teaching by providing practical solutions for the needs of networking generation. Edmodo enhances the connectedness of this century and converts conventional teaching and learning into a collaborative, interactive, and motivating experience. Based on the relevant literature, Edmodo offers various benefits for teachers and learners and there is more yet to come. Further research might look into learner perception in a more detailed approach, such as conducting interviews with the learners in order to uncover

what goes well and what needs improvement. Also, future research might focus on the effect of Edmodo use on learner achievement and motivation in language classrooms.

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