

Use of Viber Platform as a Social Media Application in TEFLat Erbil Polytechnic University

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Abstract---*The use of social media platforms has become very popular in recent years. Academic institutions such as universities, colleges and institutes around the world have adopted such platforms into their educational systems for educational purposes. One of the popular and practical platforms providing such opportunities is Viber. This paper examines the usefulness of Viber as a social media platform for English language learners at the language centre of Erbil Polytechnic University (EPU). The study is conducted on 40 participants (24 males and 16 females) of two IELTS preparation courses with a pre-intermediate language proficiency level who wanted to take the IELTS test as part of the requirements for obtaining academic titles or joining postgraduate studies in Kurdistan Region Universities. The researchers adopted a quantitative approach to collect data from the participants. An original questionnaire was designed through the free online Google form that consisted of 18 Wh and Yes/No questions. The learners' thoughts about the usefulness of the platform were investigated in regards to motivation, L2 promotion and learning targets. Online access to the questionnaire was provided at the end of the preparation courses in order to give the learners a chance to express their perceptions on the progress of language learning. The results of the study show that the majority of the learners (32 learners out of 40) think that such platforms are effective and necessary in English language teaching (ELT) courses for encouraging learners to practice the target language and motivate them to be independent learners. A large population of this study were above the age of 30 years old, therefore, the most significant finding of this research is that not only the new generation of learners, but also senior learners (people over 30 years of age) are also interested in the use of social media in TEFL courses. This could provide help for English language teachers to implement the use of social media networks into their language classes.*

Keywords--- *Social media, TEFL, Viber application and English language.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Due to the increase of the use of digital technology in people's daily lives, social media has brought a new trend of teaching to the academia[25]. Academic institutions have transformed social media platforms into educational tools and have taken advantage of these tools to communicate with learners and attract the prospective ones. These institutions have created virtual classrooms for their learners through the use of social media and have incorporated a new way of learning, referred to as virtual learning. In fact, most learners of the digital age spend hours on the

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internet scanning information, socializing, entertaining and seeking knowledge [12,20, 26]. Therefore, the use of social media by educators can no longer be underestimated, because it brings learners closer, even if they have different views and cultural backgrounds [26]. These platforms provide access to extra activities and resources for learners at any time. They also offer autonomy for learners to be independent and look for individual needs. The main objectives of this trend of learning are providing an informal interactive platform for communication among learners and teachers, engaging them with online multimedia resources and encouraging them to reach their potential.

As a public educational institution, the Language Centre of EPU has incorporated digital technology to acclimatize with the new trends of teaching. The Language Center has adopted Viber as one of the communicative means to its course learners. This is because of its simplicity of usage and popularity among learners [4]. Such platforms can create useful activities in authentic contexts for learners [26]. They provide a collaborative learning environment for learners to practice the target language outside the classroom.

This paper, firstly, reviews the relevant literature on the use of social media. Then, the methodology of the research is presented in detail to illustrate how data was collected and analysed. Thirdly, the results and discussions of the study are presented to address the research questions. The study, finally, highlights the limitations, conclusions as well as recommendations for further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Technology and English language teaching

Over the years, English Language Teaching has changed in a way that teacher centred approaches do not dominate classrooms anymore [9]. The globalized world has made digital technology advance very quickly, making it necessary for people to be competent and have technical skills in all areas to survive [20]. Thus, the use of technology in education brought about different views of researchers as to whether it makes vital changes to the traditional method of teaching or not. Ríos and Campos (2015) [17] state that information technology has changed the way people communicate and learn languages. Kumar (2014, p. 43) [9] defines technology as 'a very broad term, which includes electronic gadgets, hardware and software applications'. He states that learners of today use a variety of educational tools for writing their assignments, projects and reports. The most popular applications used by learners these days are called Social Network Sites (SNS). Social Network Sites (SNS) are namely, Facebook, Academica, Viber, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Classmates, MySpace and Google+ [2]. These social media networks have created platforms and attracted millions of users based on shared interests through portable devices such as smart phones and mobiles [2,3]. These devices are claimed to have provided language learners with simultaneous integration, spontaneous interaction and real-time experience [5].

B. Current Perceptions on Social Media

The advancement of technology has made the use of social media a very popular culture among adults [26,20], especially language learners. To have a broader perspective on this topic, it is essential to review various studies conducted on learners' perceptions on the usefulness of social media in education and language learning. Current

studies carried out in Asia and Australia claim that advantages of social media for educational purposes outweigh disadvantages [17]. For example, Alnujaidi (2016) explored the relationship between EFL learners' perceptions, attitudes and experience toward the effectiveness of Social Network Sites. The results of his study showed that the participants had positive perceptions and attitudes toward these social media platforms. Ríos and Campos (2015) have also conducted a study on Facebook as a TEFL device for Costa Rican learners of English language courses. They concluded that the Facebook page was an engaging tool, and learners accessed it frequently, providing them with an opportunity to use it for learning purposes [21]. Studies claim that any teaching style that is preferred by learners promotes learner autonomy and conceptual learning. These studies have concluded that certain educational goals during instruction can be achieved through increased learner autonomy [7, 22]. Predictable indicators of learners' conceptual learning are preferred activities done in the classroom [8]. Therefore, According to Reeve and Jang 2006 [16], as cited in Jang 2016, learners' autonomy can be boosted in many possible ways (p, 688). For example, an effective strategy for achieving learner autonomy is taking learners' perceptions about the learning environment into account [6, 10].

C. Promoting language learning through Social Media

Social media is claimed to increase web-based interaction among teacher-learner and learner-learner outside of the classroom [17]. Seyyedrezaei, Kazemi and Shahini (2016)[18] believe that the use of social media platforms promotes learning styles and techniques, and it can redesign learners' perceptions, preferences and attitudes on teaching and learning. Research has proved that incorporating extra activities outside the classroom would bring positive results for learners since learners will be exposed to more input of the target language [17]. For instance, Liu (2013) [11] has conducted research on the use of blended learning. The results of this study claim that information technology has improved learners' academic writing and motivated them to improve their communication skills as well as decrease their levels of anxiety [14,15, 25]. Similarly, Thurairaj, et al (2015, p. 314) concluded that "the usage of SNSs such as Face book, Twitter and mobile phones enhances English proficiency as these SNSs can be accessed worldwide and thus allow people all over the world to post and share their thoughts, feelings, news and articles".

Through posted tutorials, videos and announcements, learners are motivated to prepare themselves for exams and assignments while they are offsite [2,19, 24]. It is therefore, claimed that the use of technology for educational purposes creates a vigorous setting irrespective of time, place and space, helping learners to be autonomous, have their self-study zones, profiles and collaborate with teachers effectively [1,17].

D. Teachers' contribution in Social Media

It is claimed that technology has brought many advantages for learners and has improved their learning experiences. Yunus, Salehi and Chenzi, (2012) believe that social media has a dynamic role in strengthening the relationship among teachers as well as teachers and students. However, this puts extra responsibility on teachers to guide learners on using these social platforms. Social media provides a virtual classroom where learners can easily compensate missed classes or complicated subjects [12]. Warschauer (2013) [23] believes that through virtual platforms teachers can provide support for learners by giving students access to shared and covered materials and

interacting with them. Thus, shared materials, knowledge, comments and responses benefit both the teachers and the students with less time wasted in the classroom [13].

E. Research Hypothesis

The Language Centre of EPU assigned the new version of Q: Skills for Success (2015, ed.) as a course book in the IELTS preparation courses. This is an interactive, academic and international book that promotes virtual learning, and it covers the four skills of English language. In addition to the online materials provided by the book, a Viber platform was created for each group of the participants.

It is the purpose of this research to examine the effectiveness of Viber in their language learning progress. It was believed that these platforms would help the learners to develop their language skills through the use of the pages by engaging discussions and sharing online materials such as videos, clips, articles and announcements. Therefore, the researchers designed a questionnaire to gather data from the learners to prove their hypothesis and address the following questions:

1. What are learners' perceptions of using Viber as a platform in English language learning?
2. Does Viber promote language learning?
3. What are learners' perceptions about teachers' contributions in social media platforms?

III. METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a quantitative approach to find out the usefulness of using Viber as a social media application in two pre-intermediate IELTS preparation courses. Twenty four males and sixteen females participated in the study who prepared to do the Academic version of the IELTS test sometime after completing the course. For each of the courses, a Viber platform (as a social media application) was created for the registered participants to provide informal communication outside of the classroom, so that they can practice English language more independently. The platforms were supervised by the teaching staff and were set as an online medium for assessing the progress of the participants' four language skills. The learners used the page for the whole duration of the course (3 months) and afterwards for communication and sharing materials inside and outside the classroom.

A. Research Tools

The researchers designed an original questionnaire through the free online Google form containing 18 Wh and Yes/No questions. Before uploading the questionnaire online, the questions were translated into Kurdish language and reviewed by another researcher to achieve clarity of expression, prevent complex language and avoid ambiguity. The questionnaire was provided at the end of the courses in order to give the students a chance to express their thoughts about the usefulness of the platform in their progress of language learning in terms of motivation, L2 promotion and learning targets. Online access to the questionnaire was given to the learners on the same Viber pages being investigated. This was done to achieve maximum responses from the learners of the two course platforms and give enough time for respondents to select their choices at their comfort.

Different types of questions were used to meet the aims set by the researchers. For instance, multiple choice questions were designed for single response items, whereas, checkbox questions were adopted for questions asking for choices of more than one response. The questions were carefully worded and logically ordered to provide a flow of required information to be answered by the respondents on the topic. Some of the questions are included in the analysis sections above the represented pie charts. Learners' responses were sent to the online questionnaire file represented by tables, colour grades and charts after submission from the respondents.

B. Research Population

This study was conducted on a total of 40 participants (24 males & 16 females) of two IELTS Preparation courses. The participants were Diploma, BSc., MA and MSc. and candidates pursuing higher education or academic titles in the Ministry of Higher Education of Kurdistan Region. They studied English language for three months (approximately 120 hours) and were specialized in different majors, such as engineering, accounting, business administration and English language (see Table 1).

Table1: Population of the Study in Numbers

<i>Description</i>	<i>Groups</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Age	21-25	7	17.50%
	26-30	7	17.50%
	31-35	12	30%
	36-40	10	25%
	Over 40	4	10%
Gender	Males	24	60%
	Females	16	40%
Specialty	Business & Accounting	14	
	Education & Language	8	
	Engineering	8	
	Sciences	6	
	Medicine	3	
	Law	1	
Degree	Diploma	2	5%
	Bachelor	13	32.50%
	MA & MSc.	25	62.50%
Required IELTS Score	Band score 5.0	34	85%
	Band score 6.0	6	15%
Total Participants		40	

C. Limitations of the study

The scope of the study is limited to the context of English language courses at the language Centre of Erbil Polytechnic University. Firstly, it is conducted on a specific number of English language learners. Secondly, gender differences have not been controlled for the learners' responses to the questionnaire. The number of male and female participants is not equal. Out of 40 respondents, 24 were males and 16 were females. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized for other contexts and TEFL classrooms. The questionnaire is the only tool used in this research; therefore, the findings of the study could have been changed if interviews were with the participants.

D. Findings

The forty participants of the two IELTS preparation courses were from different age groups, with the majority of them above 30 years old (see Table 1). The findings of this study show that the majority of the respondents were familiar with social media platforms. A total of 95% of the respondents (38 learners) reported that they were either good or excellent in using social media applications on a daily basis, and were satisfied with the Viber page created for them in the IELTS preparation courses. The responses indicate that all of the learners used the Viber page to study English language for approximately one hour a day. The significance of this study is that 26 out of the 40 participants were above the age of 30 years old which represents a large population of the study. This suggests that other than the junior generation, senior learners are also interested to see social media applications adopted into their TEFL courses (See fig 1 & 2).

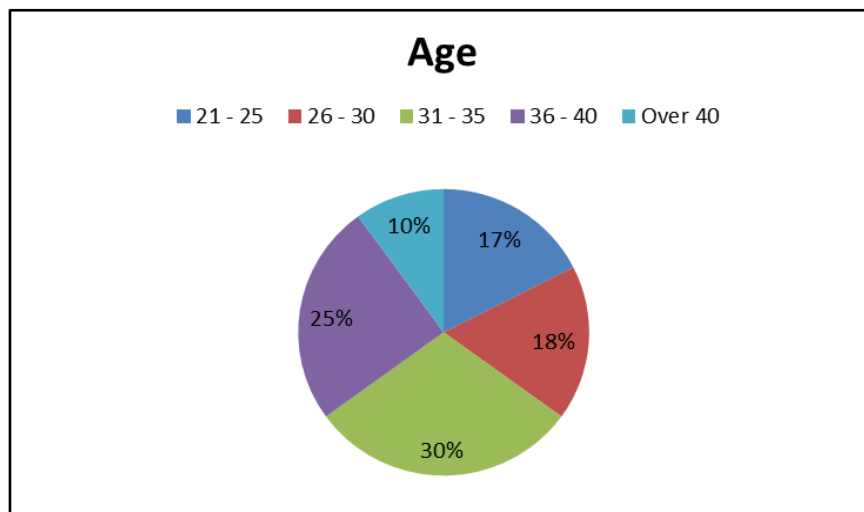


Fig 1: Learners' age groups

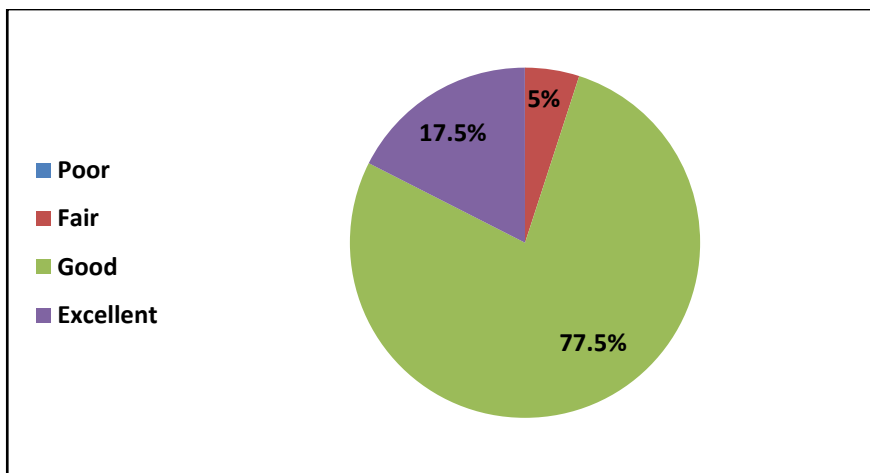


Fig 2: Learners' Social Media familiarity

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Learners' perceptions on Viber as a TEFL device

The results of this study shows that, 89% of the learners (32 out of 40) think that social media platforms are necessary in English language learning, and would like to have social media pages in any language course they wish to participate in the future. Similarly, the majority of the learners (67.5%) have reported that it was easy to use Viber for language learning, spending more than one hour on the application for learning (See fig 3 & 4). Apart from class hours, almost three quarters of the learners (75%) have also responded that they mostly used the Viber page in the evening and during the night hours sharing materials, reading comments and responding to other members of the groups. This suggests that learners' prefer using social media applications mostly in their comfort times. The findings of the study can have positive implications for EFL teachers to employ interactive social media platforms into their teaching programs and improve their quality of teaching, especially for adults, as suggested by Thurairaj(2015) and Yunus, et al(2016).

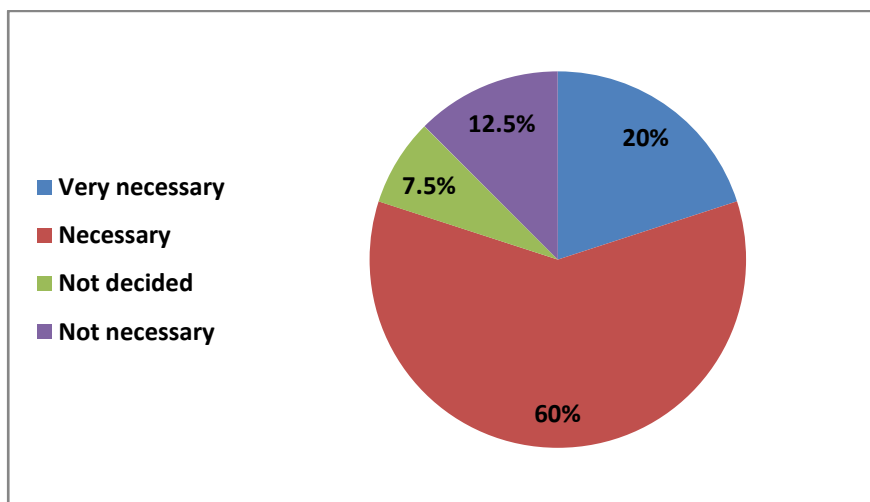


Fig 3: Perceptions on the necessity of social media platforms in TEFL.

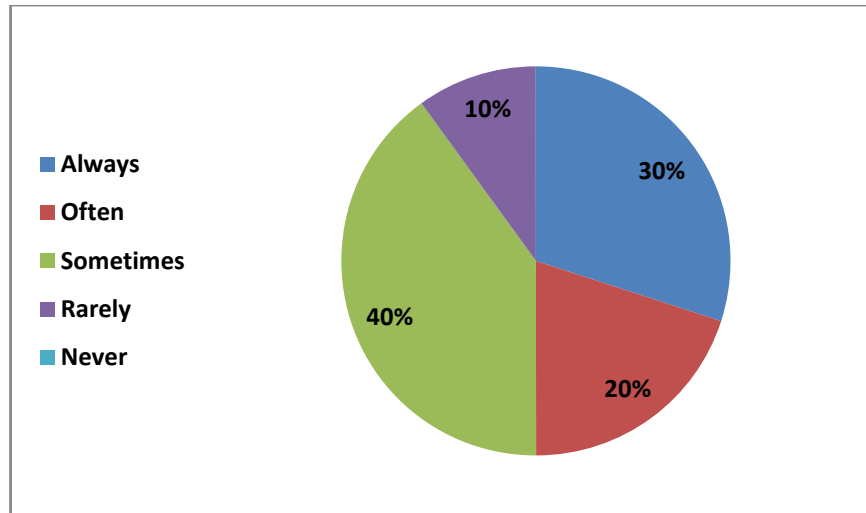


Fig 4: Learners' responses to reading and sharing materials on the Viber platform

B. Benefits of Viber in TEFL

The second part of this study was dedicated to investigate as to what extent the Viber pages helped the learners to achieve their targets in learning the language. In other words, it was aimed to find out whether the pages promoted language learning, or any new strategies or language skills were learnt. The response charts below show that, a large population of the participants have benefited from the page and improved all of their language skills. Overall, learners had a chance to learn new techniques in all of the four language skills. The same is true for the four language skills as a whole, with the writing skill recording the highest percentage (30%) among the four skills (See fig 5 & 6). However, with having more than one option to choose from, more than 60% of the learners got benefit from the Viber platform to learn new writing techniques, which could have positive implications for teaching writing techniques (See Fig5&6).

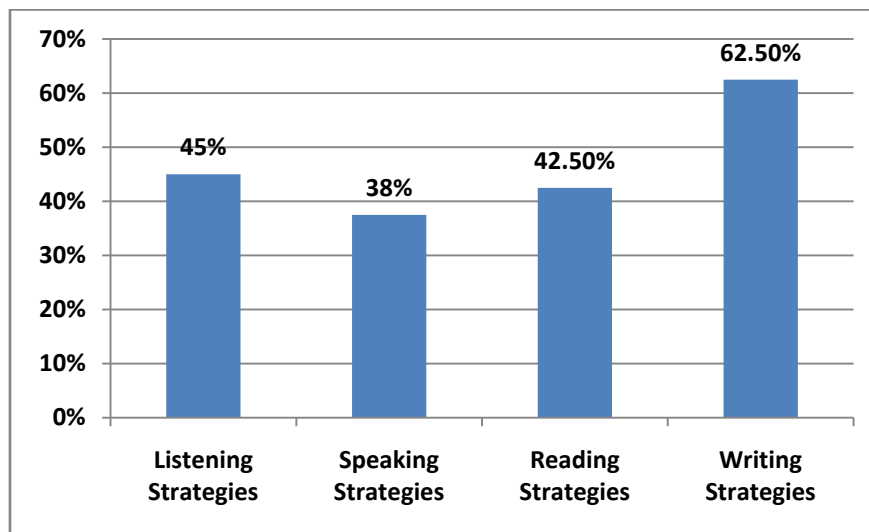


Fig 5: Learning strategies through using Viber.

In addition to the above mentioned results, the findings also show that such social platforms are to a great extent effective in motivating learners and encouraging them to practice the second language independently by making them more autonomous and creative in their study of the target language. For instance, around 42.5% (17 responses) of the participants reported that through the social media platforms they had chances for more language practice and doing extra activities. Similarly, more than 37% of the respondents have stated that their motivation for learning boosted through the use of the Viber page (Fig 5).

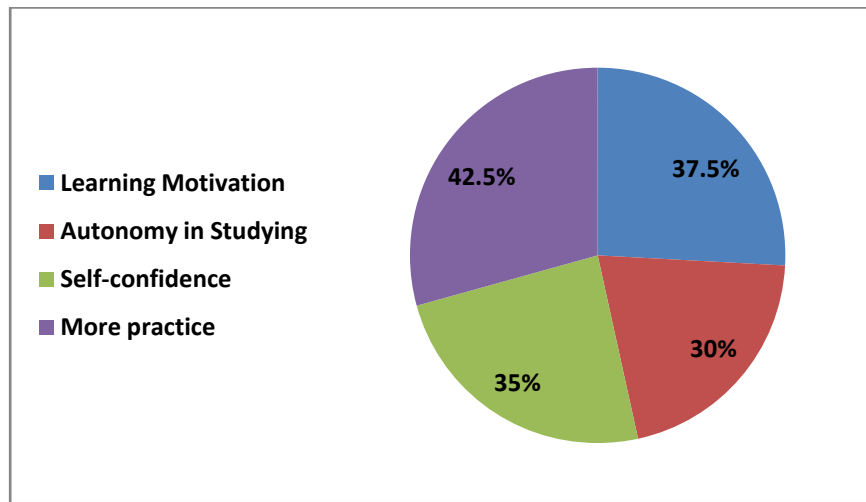


Fig 6: Advantages of using the Viber platform

C. Perceptions on teacher's contribution in social media platforms

Apart from the data collected on the usefulness of the Viber pages, the researchers also took the learners' perceptions into account on the teachers' participation in the discussions and dialogues in both of the group platforms. The results of the current study demonstrate that the majority of the learners (a total of 95%) think of teachers' contribution as a significant factor in improving their overall language skills during the course. For instance, 70% of the respondents (28 in 40) have reported that they either got good or best possible improvement through the teachers' comments and feedback provided to their comments and questions online (See fig 7& 8). This contributes to the fact that the teachers were highly active in their responses and feedback to the learners' questions and comments in the pages, which were the main reason behind the implementation of the social media platform outside the classroom. As a result, the platform helped more than 80% of the learners to get the desired ILETS mark through following the platform, and would like to have such communicative tools added to their English language courses in the future.

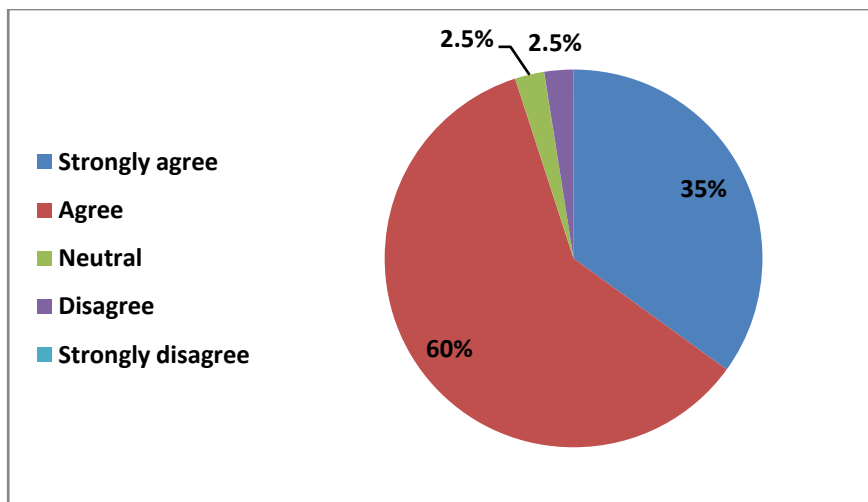


Fig 7:Importance of teachers' contribution in Social Media platforms

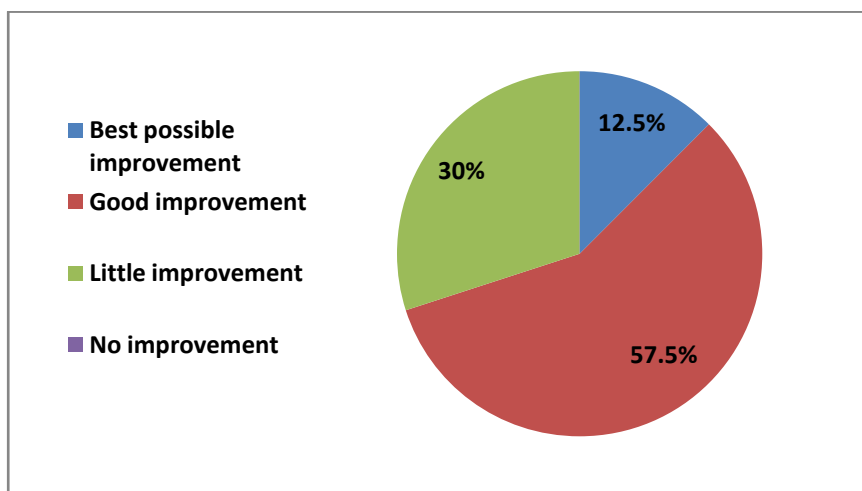


Fig 8:Improvement of English language skills through the teachers' contribution in the platforms

V. CONCLUSIONS

This research focused on the usefulness of Viber as a TEFL device in two IELTS Preparation courses. The study employed a quantitative approach to gather data from the learners to identify their perceptions, attitudes and beliefs on the use of Viber as a social media platform. Teachers' contribution in this new trend of learning, being the main focus of the research was also investigated. It was found out that regardless of age groups and gender, the majority of the course participants preferred having the Viber pages and believed that it is necessary to incorporate social media in English language courses. After thorough analysis of the data provided, the results suggest that the majority of the respondents thought that Viber, as a communicative tool, is easy for language learning purposes. It is worth noting that a large population of the study (26 out of 40) were above the age of 30 years old. This suggests that not only the new generation of learners, but also senior learners are also interested in the use of social media in TEFL courses.

The findings also indicated that social media has helped the learners to be more independent and feel self-confident in doing extra activities online. As a result, three quarters of the learners wished to have a social media platform incorporated to any future courses they would like to participate. However, further research is recommended to gather qualitative data from learners to find out how and in what ways social media promotes language learning experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research findings can be greatly influenced by research tools. Use of various tools might present a wider picture of the topic being investigated. However, a questionnaire was the only source of data collection in this research. It would have been better for the researchers to adopt a wider methodology. In fact, questionnaires are practical because they can be administered in many ways, such as emails, forms or in person, but questionnaires have many disadvantages as well. First of all, respondents might not have interest in answering the questions seriously, thus, choices might be selected randomly and/or driven by gender differences. Secondly, questionnaires are good devices for quantitative data collection, though they do not provide enough qualitative data for the research. An interview with the learners might have solved this issue; hence, interviews are time-consuming and not practical at all times. As a result, the findings might not represent the whole picture of the topic being investigated. Further research, therefore, is recommended in this regard.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors of this research are currently working at Erbil Polytechnic University, and are involved in teaching English as a second language in its Language Centre and colleges. They have also actively been involved in the social media platforms created for the participants of the two IELTS preparation courses being investigated in this research.

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