The effect of engagement in social networking application on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate in English

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Abstract

Motivating EFL learners to communicate in English has been a long-lasting challenge for English language instructors. However, the EFL learners are reluctant to communicate in English. In fact, communicative competence and authentic use of the English language are directly related to learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). Combining the social networking engagement with language learning context may provide opportunity for learners to communicate more than before. This study aims to find the impact of engagement in social networking applications on Iranian EFL learners' WTC in English. The sample of the study included EFL learners (*N* = 21) participating in TOEFL preparation course. The experimental group has joined the social networking group in Telegram to communicate in English out of the class. The pre-treatment and post-treatment survey design has been applied to compare the study groups WTC level before and after the treatment. The findings indicated the positive effect of engagement in social networking on WTC.

Keywords: Communicative competence, social networking, willingness to communicate (WTC).

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1. Introduction

Motivation for applying to foreign countries educational programmes has been combined with a necessity of communication in English for a global citizen who is eager to communicate and benefit from it. These demands for learning English have just led to cumulative willingness to participate in English language programmes (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, TOLIMO, MSRT, conversational courses, etc.). However, the amount and type of engagement and the exposure seems to be not adequate in order to motivate learners toward communicating in English. Regarding the importance of communication in English, meaningful and effective communication, especially out-side-of the class ones has not gained its place in countries such as Iran. There is a very less and limited context of communication in English, so learners who try to enrol in private institution classes require a financial source.

Thus, a typical involvement in English-language communication for Iranian EFL learners is unfortunately not adequate at all. This engagement may increase as they enrol in post-graduate programmes or travel abroad. Less exposure to suitable input in the English language not only hinders their mastery of skills in the English language but it also does not lead to a good level of willingness to communicate (WTC) in English. In fact, learners less WTC in English might have root in their lack of knowledge in vocabulary, grammar knowledge, exposure, anxiety or fear, self-confidence, communication skills such as fluency, etc. (Cheng, 2000; Hamouda, 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Iranian EFL learners have always complained about their inability in communicating in English, even communicating with their limited learned language from school (Akbari, 2015). In fact, this is not their lack of language knowledge but rather it is their unwillingness towards communicating in English as a result of less opportunity to do communication. A justification for this claim can come from simple evidence that learners often avoid from everyday simple classroom communication including greeting.

For the first time, McCroskey and Richmond (1987) and McCroskey and Baer (1985) have conceptualised WTC. Related to learning a language, they have explained WTC as 'the individual's personality-based tendency toward the initiation of communication when has the choice to do so' (McCroskey, 1992). Therefore, in a brief and simple language, they have defined it as the 'underlying tendency to talk to others which is rooted in a personality variable'. Considering that successful interaction relies on WTC (MacIntyre, 1994), the problem of Iranian EFL learners in less WTC in the English language becomes crucial.

A number of factors such as motivation (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Donovan, 2002), perceived communicative competence (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000), communication anxiety (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Clement, Baker & MacIntyre, 2003), social support and learning context (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Clement et al., 2003) and international posture (Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004) have been identified as predictors of WTC. Among these factors, it seems that learning context can be controlled within the classroom context, so a researcher might be able to control the treatment. In fact, the rate of learning support inside the classroom and even outside of the classroom can be handled by the instructor. Kang (2005) adds that as instructors, we can increase L2 learners' WTC by creating opportunities that might create an environment in which learners feel comfortable to initiate communication because learners with a higher WTC are more likely to use L2 in authentic communication. To do this, recent technologies in social networking application might come in handy.

Recent technological advances have changed the classroom so that interaction has come to mean not only spoken interaction but electronic interaction as well (Chapelle, 2001). Electronic interaction encourages students to interact in the language classroom (Freiermuth, 2001; Negretti, 1999). Considering the possible potential of new technology in social networking applications which have connected billions to each other, the present study tried to investigate whether and how it can be applied to increase learners' WTC in English.

Thus, the present study has approached the Iranian EFL learners' problem with less WTC in English through engagement in social networking application named Telegram. Therefore, it was aimed to see

whether engagement through social media (Telegram) could have any effect on the Iranian EFL learners' WTC. Accordingly, the only hypothesis of the study included:

H0: Engagement in social networking application does not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' WTC in English.

1.1. Review of the literature

The emergence of Communicative Language Teaching has made an emphasising interest in learning, through communicating (Ellis, 2008). However, sometimes the accomplishment of successful communication is a big issue for learners and instructors. Regardless of language competency, the reason for learners' unwillingness to communicate may have root in their less WTC. In fact, as Dornyei (2003) adds the ability to achieve a successful interaction may not fulfil unless the learners' have enough WTC.

Being conceptualised as an unwillingness to communicate by Burgoon (1976), later just the antonym, WTC, was conceptualised and defined by McCroskey and Baer (1985) in first language acquisition. According to Burgoon (1976), unwillingness to communicate was 'enduring and chronic tendency to avoid or devalue oral communication'. In contrast, McCroskey and Baer (1985) defined the opposite phenomenon as 'a steady inclination towards communication when a person feels free to communicate'. Later in 1996, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) tried to apply the model for the second language (L2 here refers to any language other than the first language, so it covers the EFL one here).

Thus, by integrating WTC concept into L2 language, McIntyre, Clement, Dornyei and Noels (1998, p. 547) defined WTC as a 'readiness to enter into discourse at a specific time with a specific person or persons, using a second language'. It is generally believed that more interaction leads to more development in language learning (Kang, 2005), and in fact, this is the function of WTC. MacIntyre (2007) adds that WTC represents the psychological readiness to apply the second language. Not only it is regarded to be the principal reason for the frequency of L2 use (Yu, Li & Gou, 2011) but it is also 'a part of becoming fluent in a second language, which often is the ultimate goal of L2 learners' (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, those L2 learners who are seeking communication opportunities are willing to communicate. By the way, communication has got many forms nowadays. Emerging technology has created many different forms of these types of communication.

Social networking as a sub-product of the Internet and online technology has been introduced into society and education in the last two decades. In comparison to traditional learning methods which provided limited opportunities for developing learners' own learning activities, learning methods based on social media have increased this control on learning (Raut & Patil, 2016). In addition, social networking not only aims at enhancing both collaborative study and social interaction but it also helps to acquire knowledge through enduring relationships (Raut & Patil, 2016). It has affected social interaction by changing the way we interact face-to-face, how we receive information and the dynamics of our social groups and friendships (Asur & Huberman, 2010).

Social networking applications, such as Telegram has introduced new features into networking ideas which makes it different from their earlier siblings such as Facebook or Twitter. In fact, Telegram has the feature of creating groups for sharing special information within a special group. Therefore, an individual may contribute to as many groups as possible. In this way, the special audiovisual data are shared with lots of people with same interest.

Based on the statistic from 'Top 20 Internet Countries' (2018) last update for June 2017, Iran is among the top 20 Internet users with almost 56 million users from about 80 million population (see Appendix A). Also, based on Azali (2018), about 40 million Iranians are using Telegram social networking application. However, the dramatic statistic (Appendix B) shows that only less than 5% of users are applying Telegram for purposes such as education and learning. It shows that education in Iran has not successfully gained its quota from this social networking app.

Researchers have been seeking opportunities to integrate learning with CALL or MALL, for example, Dehghani, Sadighi and Seyari (2015) have introduced online grammar checker to the participants through the social network, or Xodabande (2017) has integrated teaching pronunciation within the Telegram group. In short, researchers have already indicate MALL or CALL's positive effect on learning pronunciation (Talebi & Teimoury, 2013; Xodabande, 2017), learning vocabulary (Seyyedrezaei, Kazemi & Shahhoseini, 2016), improving grammar in writing (Dehghani et al., 2015), creating positive attitude towards listening and reading (Talebinezhad & Abarghoui, 2013). However, investigating the effect of using smartphone on communication in English and WTC, Luo, Lin, Chen and Fang (2015) have reported that unless there is any positive effect of using cellphone on the participants' vocabulary and structure learning, there was not any significant effect on their WTC and comprehension as well. In their study, a web-based application called Let's Talk with Information Gap activity was administrated. The finding of this study is more related to the application of a smartphone rather than the application of social networking application.

As factual data were presented, not only English but also other fields have not yet successfully absorbed the learners' attention towards the educational benefits of social networking applications. In fact, we are still far from collaborative learning. Therefore, still, there is room to investigate whether and how it is possible to add learning into social networking applications since it has abundant users in Iran.

2. Methods

The present quasi-experimental study included pre-treatment and post-treatment measure of Iranian EFL learners' WTC in order to investigate the possible effects of social media engagement on it. In the present study, Telegram application was selected as a social networking application, since all of the participants were applying it, and as a matter of fact, it is the most favourite one in Iran.

2.1. Participants

Participants of the present study were EFL learners attending in TOEFL preparation courses (summer, 2017) in Avaye Danesh Language Institute in Ahar (East Azerbaijan, Iran). The placement administrative has assigned the names of participants to two classes based on their preference of time (odd days or even days). The convenience sample included 21 EFL learners (male = 9, female = 12) in two classes which later has been identified as a control group (*N* = 10, male = 4, female = 6) and experimental group (*N* = 11, male = 5, female = 6). Table 1 summarises the study sample's gender, number, age and academic degree information.

Table1. Description of the study sample

Study groups	Number of participants	Gender		Age mean	Degree	
		Male	Female		High School	Diploma University
Control	10	4	6	18.5	7	3
Experimental	11	5	6	18.1	9	2

2.2. Instrumentation

Homogenising test: A sample of TOEFL test was applied in order to homogenise the study groups. The mentioned test was provided by ETS ('TOEFL iBT® Test Questions', 2018) including four major skills measurement. The institute administrates this test to compare the learners' performance before and after the course. The test administration took almost 5 hours during two sessions. Learners' were expected to answer the reading, writing and listening to questions on the paper. Their speaking was recorded and two institute instructors scored the speaking performance of the learners.

WTC questionnaire: In order to identify the learners' WTC, a modified WTC questionnaire from MacIntyre, Baker, Clement and Conrod (2001) was administrated. The questionnaire included 20 items

based on five Likert scale (see Appendix D). MacIntyre et al. (2001) has reported over 0.81 (based on Cronbach's alpha) reliability for different sections of the original questionnaire. Zarrinabadi and Abdi (2011) have modified the questionnaire by omitting some items and they have reported over 0.78 reliability for the modified one. In order to check the reliability of the modified WTC questionnaire, the researcher evaluated its reliability in a pilot study in the same study context. So doing the reliability test based on Cronbach's alpha indicated the reliability level of 0.80.

2.3. Procedure

After selecting a convenience sample which included two classes of TOEFL preparation course, one of the groups was selected as an experimental and the other one as a control group. Prior to the treatment, study groups were compared regarding their language proficiency and WTC. The same instructor taught both groups on different days (odd or even days). The course material included Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL iBT Test by Phillips (2015), 504 Absolutely Essential Words by Bromberg, Liebb and Traiger (2012) and instructor's handouts for grammar instruction. The instructor researcher has followed the same lesson plan for both classes.

The participants in the experimental group were invited to join the Group in Telegram social networking application. The instructor asked them to just use English for communication in the Telegram group without having any concern about grammatical or spelling errors. They have been also told that their participation in this social media is volunteer action without any positive or negative effect on their course score. Therefore, the teacher or students set the time to communicate in the groups.

The activities that the teacher considered for them ranged from online pronunciation, everyday discussion topics, etc. (see Appendix C). Participants' were free to communicate with each other any time they like. Some participants launched online games in the group or discussed different everyday topics. They were talking about their families, daily activities, class homework, their school or university issues, etc. If there was any material or handout, the instructor provided that for the control group on the paper, also. The outline of the course budget for both groups are presented in Appendix D. The treatment lasted for 4 weeks, including 12 sessions. Then, the participants' were supposed to fill the WTC questionnaire again. In all steps of study, SPSS statistical software (version 20) was applied to do the data analysis. Independent samples *t*-test was applied in order to compare groups' WTC before and after the treatment.

3. Results and discussion

In order to compare the study group's language proficiency in the English language, a sample TOEFL test was administrated. The descriptive statistics of the mentioned test is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of study groups' simulated TOEFL test

	Grouping	*N*	Mean	SD	Standard error mean
TOEFL Test	Control group	10	44.30	2.11	0.66
	Experimental group	11	43.90	2.11	0.63

To compare the study groups' performance in TOEFL sample test, an independent sample *t*-test was applied to understand the possible differences between them. Table 3 shows the result of the test.

Table 3. The results of independent samples *t*-test of study groups' simulated TOEFL test

| | Levene's test for equality of variances | | *t*-test for equality of means | | | | | | |
| | F | Sig. | *t* | df | Sig. (two-tailed) | Mean difference | Standard error difference | 95% confidence interval of the difference | |
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.04	0.83	0.42	19	0.68	0.39	0.92	−.54	2.32
Equal variances not assumed			0.42	18.82	0.68	0.39	0.92	−1.54	2.32

As results in Table 3 indicates, there was not any statistically significant difference between control group (M = 44.30, standard deviation (SD) = 2.11) and experimental group's (M = 43.90, SD = 2.11) performance in TEOFL sample test ($t_{(19)}$ = 0.42, p = 0.68, $p > 0.05$).

Before administration of WTC questionnaire, it had been studied for its reliability. So doing a pilot study had been designed and the questionnaire was distributed among 15 advance level EFL learners in the study context. Cronbach's alpha method was run to gain the reliability of the instrument (see Table 4).

Table 4. Reliability statistics based on Cronbach's alpha for WTC questionnaire

Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha based on standardised items	Number of items
0.809	0.827	40

As Table 4 indicates, the reliability measure of 0.80 based on Cronbach's alpha was gained for this questionnaire which is in line with the previous studies which applied the same or original questionnaire (MacIntyre et al., 2001; Zarrinabadi & Abdi, 2011).

Descriptive statistics including means and SD of groups' WTC are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of study groups' WTC

	Grouping	*N*	Mean	SD	Standard error mean
Pre-treatment	Control group	10	137.90	15.16	4.79
	Experimental group	11	141.00	15.73	4.74
Post-treatment	Control group	10	138.20	15.06	4.76
	Experimental group	11	155.27	15.19	4.58

In addition, Table 6 shows the results of an independent sample *t*-test results for comparing the study groups' WTC before the treatment.

Table 6. The results of independent samples *t*-test of study groups' WTC before treatment

| | Levene's test for equality of variances | | *t*-test for equality of means | | | | | | |
| | F | Sig. | t | Df | Sig. (two-tailed) | Mean difference | Standard error difference | 95% confidence interval of the difference | |
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.56	0.81	−0.45	19	0.65	−3.10	6.75	−17.24	11.04
Equal variances not assumed			−0.45	18.9	0.65	−3.10	6.74	−17.22	11.02

As results of the *t*-test in Table 6 indicates, there was not any statistically significant difference between control group (*M* = 137.90, SD = 15.16) and experimental group's (*M* = 141.00, SD = 15.73) WTC prior to the treatment ($t_{(19)}$ = −0.45, *p* = 0.65, *p* > 0.05). It means that both groups enjoyed the similar level of WTC prior to the administration of treatment.

In order to test the hypothesis of the study 'Engagement in social networking application does not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' WTC in English', independent sample *t*-test was run to compare the study groups' WTC after the treatment phase. The result of the *t*-test is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. The results of independent samples *t*-test of study groups' WTC before treatment

| | Levene's test for equality of variances | | *t*-test for equality of means | | | | | | |
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (two-tailed) | Mean difference | Standard error difference | 95% confidence interval of the difference | |
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.04	0.84	−2.58	19	0.01	−17.07	6.61	−30.91	−3.23
Equal variances not assumed			−2.58	18.84	0.01	−17.07	6.61	−30.91	−3.23

As results of *t*-test indicates, there was a significant difference between the control group (*M* = 138.20, SD = 15.06) and experimental group's (*M* = 155.27, SD = 15.19) WTC after the treatment ($t_{(19)}$ = −2.58, *p* = 0.01, *p* < 0.05), which means that the null hypothesis of the study is rejected and there is a significant difference between study groups' WTC after the treatment. Therefore, it is found that participants who engaged in social networking (Telegram) have shown increased WTC in contrast to the participants who did not participate in social networking.

The positive effect of social networking application on WTC in English has not been investigated (as a best of researcher's current knowledge). However, previous findings (such as Freiermuth, 2001; Negretti, 1999) have indicated that online interaction improves learners interaction. Social networking is an opportunity to gather the learners around each other outside of the classroom, and this is its biggest advantage, especially for EFL learners who suffer from less English communication. Being afraid of making mistakes in addition to less opportunity for such interaction causes less WTC among EFL learners.

4. Study limitations and delimitations

As social media provides a more peaceful and appropriate situation for communication, it is almost undeniable to provide and communicate more feedback. Therefore, regarding language input, it is clear that participation in the treatment has provided more input to the experimental group. So this issue was not controllable and it is considered as a study limitation. However, there were delimitations too. The researcher selected TOEFL course learners and the researcher instructor had polled the participants' membership in social media (Telegram) and it was curtained that all the participants are its appliers; however, they are not part of any English speaking group there.

5. Conclusion

EFL learners' WTC is a key feature which is directly related to their motivation or demotivation for communication in the English language. Therefore, it is necessary to help learners' to raise their WTC. The present study found participation in social networking application as a useful way which leads to this aim. However, what is important is how to have learners' engage in a virtual social setting. However, it seems that mere creating a virtual social setting through a social networking application might not be enough to get the participants involved in communicating with target language (here English).

Learners often prefer to communicate with their first language (or official language of their country) which they have in common. This reason may be because of learners' anxiety and fear of making mistakes in spelling (in chatting context), pronunciation, vocabulary choice, grammar or inability to communicate their intended message. Providing peaceful context in social networking group seems to be easier than a classroom context since classroom context has been associated with producing correct forms of language; however, social networking context is considered as non-educational context. To benefit from this expectation of learners' from a social networking context, instructor's participation and supervision is essential. The role of the instructor is also essential in introducing people into the social networking group and providing a stress-free atmosphere by setting group communication rules (e.g., ignoring mistakes in spelling or grammar is welcome, using only English to communicate unless the person wants to know what or how something is uttered in English language, respect each other's knowledge and personality, use polite and softening language for arguing the topics, etc.). To be more specific, the teacher's participation accredits the group activities and learners find themselves in teacher-supported context. In addition, in the present study, the engaging activities such as free discussions, volunteer tasks and games were all managed by both participants and instructor researcher. Individual differences are less considered in classroom context; however, in the virtual group, individuals may prefer to participate in different activities in which they feel they have more self-confidence. Through continuous engagement, the learners may notice how natural and authentic the language learning context is.

Thus, providing comfortable, supported and stress-free context in which learners are considered to communicate regardless of their grammatical, spelling or other problems in English helps to increase learners' WTC.

5.1. Pedagogical implications

The findings of the present study are highly recommended for consideration of language instructors. They can provide such opportunities for their learners' to benefit from by combining new technology to education on one side and from increasing their psychological factors such as WTC on another side. Social media networking is a big opportunity for educational settings, such as language learning in order to get learners involved in out-side-of-classroom activities in one hand and provide more language exposure in another hand. Nobody can deny the importance of exposure to the

authentic language, and social media networking has made it possible for instructors to provide extra material (e.g., listening, reading, etc.) to their learners.

5.2. Suggestion for further research

The previous studies which have indicated the positive effect of social networking application on different language skills have less focused on the method of administration and procedure of engagement. It is suggested to do more research on the effect of social media networking by proposing new administration methods which can add more cooperation and collaborative tasks through these applications. Furthermore, individual differences are also important in language learning, so further research can investigate the role of individual type, motivation type, language level and gender in contribution to engagement in social networking.

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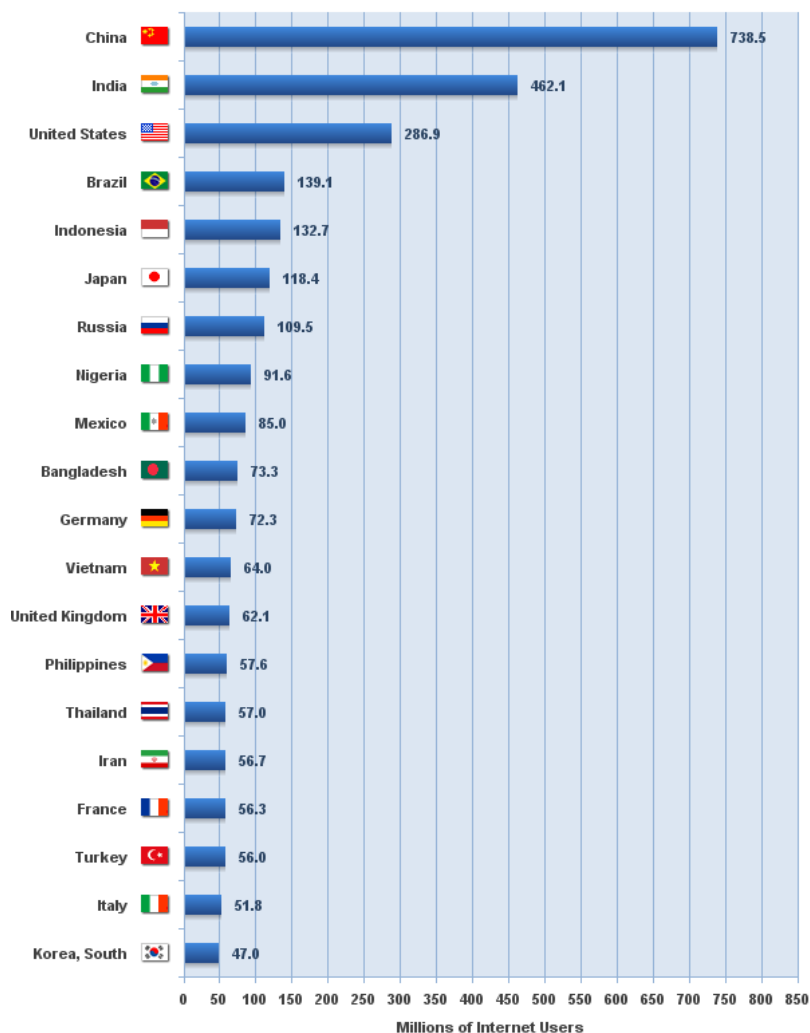
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Appendix A. Top 20 countries with the highest number of Internet users ('Top 20 Countries', 2017)

TOP 20 INTERNET COUNTRIES - 2017
With the Highest Number of Internet Users

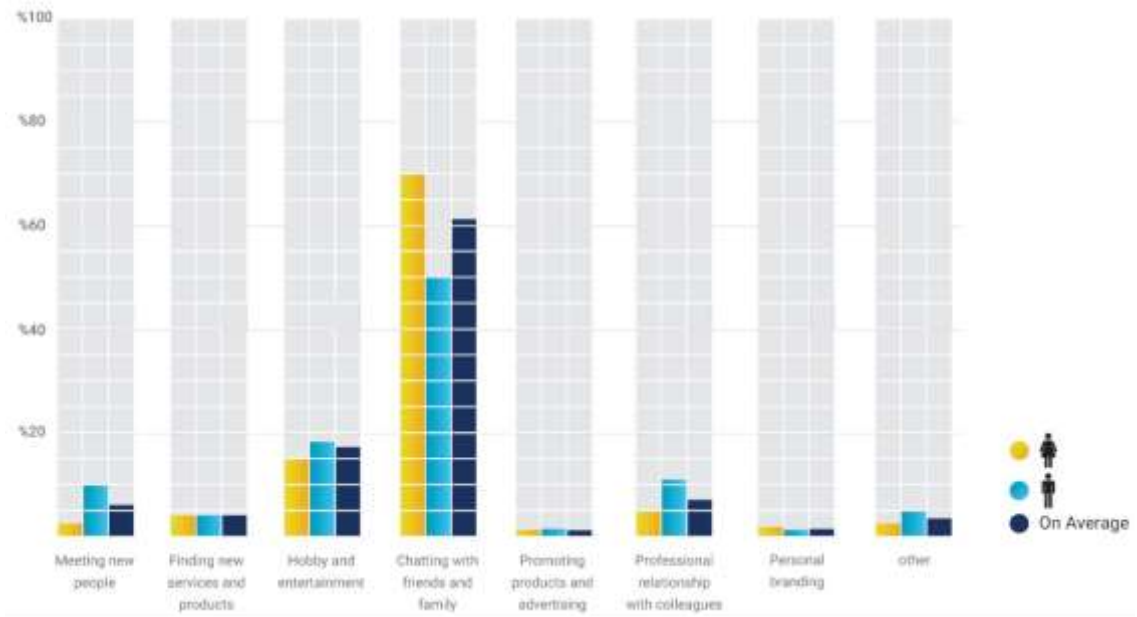| Country	Millions of Internet Users
China	738.5
India	462.1
United States	286.9
Brazil	139.1
Indonesia	132.7
Japan	118.4
Russia	109.5
Nigeria	91.6
Mexico	85.0
Bangladesh	73.3
Germany	72.3
Vietnam	64.0
United Kingdom	62.1
Philippines	57.6
Thailand	57.0
Iran	56.7
France	56.3
Turkey	56.0
Italy	51.8
Korea, South	47.0

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm
2,818,277,245 Internet users in the Top 20 countries as of June 30, 2017
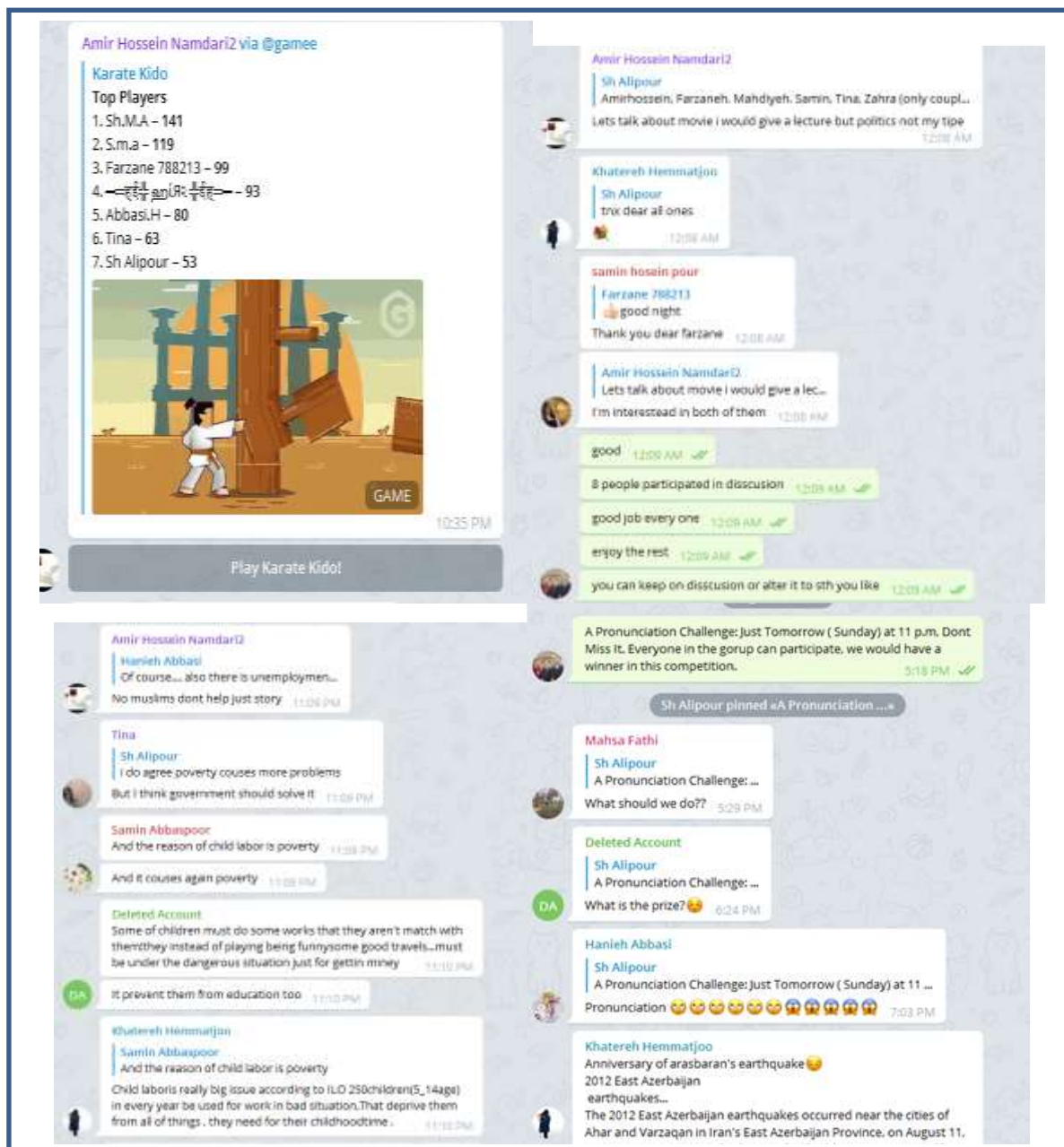Copyright © 2017, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Appendix B. Purpose of Iranian Telegram users (Azali, 2010)

Alipour, A. (2018). The effect of engagement in social networking application on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate in English. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching. 8*(4), 165-178.

Appendix C. Sample of participants' engagement in Telegram

Alipour, A. (2018). The effect of engagement in social networking application on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate in English. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching. 8*(4), 165-178.

Appendix D. Course plan

Session	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Course Book Skills	Reading Skill 1 Understanding context	Listening Skill 1 Gist Question	Speaking Skill 1 Question 1	Writing Skill 1 Question 1	Reading Skill 1 Practice	Listening Skill 1 practice	Speaking Skill 1 practice	Writing Skill 1 Practice	Reading Skill 2 Understanding Referents	Listening Skill 2 Detail Question	Speaking Skill 2 Question 2	Writing Skill 2 Question 2
Vocabulary (504) (units)	1	2 & 3	4		5&6	7	8& 9		10	11 & 12	13 & 14	
Grammar Topics		Nouns & Pronouns		Articles				Adjective & Adverbs				Verb Tenses