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Learning Languages in Social Networks

Deaf people's perception of Facebook as a
linguistic environment

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Introduction

The proliferation of Smartphones and PC Tablets is completely changing our lives and our communication. The success of Social Networks has led them to become part of our daily experience, allowing us to be constantly in contact with each other. They have revolutionized our communication to the point that they have started to be analyzed in relation to the learning processes and, according to their features, they appear to be in line with the latest constructivist and collaborative learning theories. Starting from the assumption that language learning is a process that involve an active participation of the learner and that people learn languages better when they interact with other learners or people in an authentic communicative environments, Social Networks appear to be particularly positive setting for such processes: they are available “anytime” and “anywhere”; they can favor the access to a rich linguistic input and the interactions through the target language with native speakers or other learners; they allow the user to communicate in a personal, multi-modal and motivating way, thus supporting the enhancement of the level of autonomy. For these reasons they can be considered as powerful tools for the informal learning but prejudices related to wrong uses prevent them from being integrated also in traditional educational settings.

Social Networks seem to be learning tools favorable especially for deaf people, who, due to their hearing impairment, sometimes, experience a linguistic and cultural isolation: the use of such tools can promote their integration and amplify the access to information through the use of the written language in contexts of real communication. The goal of the research is therefore to investigate, through a questionnaire, Italian deaf people’s preferences and usage

habits of Social Networks, together with their perception of such tools as possible language learning environments.

*In **Chapter 1** a very general theoretical framework on the process of language learning will be provided, with particular reference to those individual and social aspects which are relevant in order to better understand the potential of Social Networks for such a process.*

*In **Chapter 2** the role that technologies play in the process of language learning will be described as they offer to the language learner a huge range of opportunities. Social Networks, in particular, seem to possess the key features typical of a linguistic environment positive for the learning of languages, as their nature is that of relating the individual with the society or a community.*

*The **Chapter 3** will describe how Social Networks seem to be learning tools suitable for deaf people's specific needs, not only from a linguistic point of view, but also with regard to integration and to the accessibility of information.*

*The details of our research will be provided in **Chapter 4**, including the goals, the research questions, a description of the tool used and the participants.*

*The **last Chapter** aims to present an analysis of the data resulted from the questionnaires, and to explain them with reference to other similar studies.*

Chapter 1

Individual and social aspects of language learning

The main aim of this first chapter is that of providing a very general theoretical framework about the process of language learning, with particular emphasis to how such process is stretched between two opposite poles. On the one hand there are individual aspects, which refer to the singular learner, and, on the other hand, there are social aspects, which refer to the learner considered as part of a linguistic community. These two different aspects are, in a sense, the two sides of the same coin.

It will be analyzed the importance of the learner's autonomy in order to increase the language proficiency, as well as the relevance of taking an active role in the process, participating in the creation and sharing of knowledge and using the target language in situations of real communication. The following theoretical introduction can be useful to better understand the potential of Social Networks to support the language learning process, as they are characterized by the above mentioned double value. As it will be described in the next chapters, this is particularly relevant also in relation to the process of language learning of deaf people, in which both social and individual aspects can be considered as a limit.

1.1. The linguistic tool

The ability to communicate is a feature common to many living beings, but no other organism, during its evolution, has developed a system as complex as that of human languages. They are, on the one hand, the result of a biologically determined language faculty with which every human being is

equipped, and, on the other hand, a social product that develops and lives thanks to a community of speakers that can use it systematically.

The **definition of language** is quite complex and opened to different interpretations depending on whether you prefer to consider the aspects specific to the individual speaker, rather than the social aspects. Basically it is a code with phonological, morphological, syntactical and semantic properties, that allows you to create an unlimited number of linguistic messages using a finite number of elements combined through relatively few basic rules. It is the main tool through which we communicate: using the language we can establish, maintain and finish social relations. It allows us to express our thoughts, to describe ourselves and the world around us, to abstract concepts and to move them in space and time. No living language can exist without a community of speakers who shares the knowledge of its rules and meanings, and who uses it regularly to interact.

The individual aspect of languages is clear if we consider the variability within one language. Each of us, in fact, uses a different variety of the same language in terms of vocabulary, grammar and also pronunciation (in sociolinguistics this variety is referred to as *idiolect*). Language, in fact, is characterized by differences related to the singular use of people on the basis of extra-linguistic factors, such as their experiences, gender, age, but also the social background, the communicative context, the purpose to be achieved and so on...

As living entities, languages are at the same time mutable. The social nature of the linguistic tool is clear especially when we consider the changing process of languages, which can affect different levels. Changes at the level of the lexicon, for instance, are common and better accepted by the linguistic community of speakers. Other levels such as the morphological or syntactical ones, are instead more difficult to be modified and subject to a more severe judgment by the community of speakers. The linguistic change take place only when it is the whole linguistic community that starts to realize it widely, or at least, to accept it. The social nature of languages emerges also at the moment of

their extinction (or death), which occurs, exactly when any community of native speakers of such languages stop to exist.

The scientific study of human languages is referred to as linguistics. Depending on whether we consider or not the social context in which the given linguistic phenomenon occurs, it is possible to identify two different approaches: on the one hand there is the *formalism*, whose main aim is to outline a detailed description of the structure of languages and of the Universal Grammar, through the analysis of linguistic phenomena in isolation. On the other hand there is the *functionalism*, which considers each linguistic phenomena as part of the communicative situation in which it takes place. This last approach has led to the development of scientific studies such as sociolinguistics and to teaching approaches focused on the learner and its real communication needs. They have provided also the basis for important projects such as the production of the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages”¹.

As languages are social products with individual features, also their learning is characterized by the same double value. In the process of language learning not only the individual aspects of the learner must be taken into account, but also the importance of the group in which the learner is entered.

1.2. Individual aspects of language learning

Every child with regular cognitive and physical conditions, manage to reach naturally and quickly an “adult” competence in the language (or languages) she is exposed to. This is possible thanks to a biologically

¹ The “*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*” is a document created by the Council of Europe with the main aim of providing a method of learning, teaching and assessing common to all languages of Europe, in order to facilitate mobility in the educational and working field. It is articulated in 6 levels of competence used to describe and evaluate achievements of foreign language learners throughout Europe.

determined language faculty, called “*Language Acquisition Device*” (L.A.D.)² and through the constant exposition to a quantitatively and qualitatively rich linguistic input. There are, however, cases in which one of these two components of the process of language acquisition is impaired: when it is the biological language faculty to be damaged, there occur some cognitive problems that can affect the regular acquisition of the language (as it is the case of children with S.L.I.)³; but also the exposure to a wrong or poor linguistic input leads to problems in the process of acquisition of the first language. In the case of deaf people for instance, due to the hearing impairment, the linguistic verbal input they are exposed to is drastically reduced, and as a consequence, the normal development of linguistic competence is delayed or even prevented. This does not mean that they are not able to acquire a language but that they are exposed to the wrong input; in fact, when deaf children are exposed to a sign language since the birth, they succeed in acquiring it as their mother tongue, exactly as hearing children do with verbal languages.

It is reasonable to assume that the mechanism responsible for the process of first language acquisition drives also the second language learning process, or at least it should represent the most natural way to learn any language. Krashen (1981), starting from Chomsky’s LAD hypothesis, proposed the *Second Language Acquisition Theory (S.L.A.T.)*, in which he identified some elements relevant for such a process:

² The *Language Acquisition Device (L.A.D.)* (Chomsky, 1965) is an inborn hypothetical mechanism proposed by Chomsky in the 1960s to explain the process of acquisition of syntactic structures by children. According to Chomsky human brain is provided with a Universal Grammar which encodes principles and parameters common to all languages; the L.A.D. allows children to set correctly the parameters of the language they are exposed to and reach a complete acquisition of the syntactic structure of that language.

³ *The Specific Language Impairment (S.L.I.)* is diagnosed when a child does not succeed in acquiring normally the language she is exposed to, even if she does not show any hearing deficit, autistic disorder or brain damage. Usually the child with S.L.I. starts speaking late, and use an immature spoken language. Sometimes also the understanding of language may be impaired. These language difficulties lasts also during the school age.

1. One is the opposition between *learning* and *acquisition*⁴: while the first term refers to a conscious and voluntary process that leads to a non-definitive competence, the acquisition is unconscious and leads to a permanent knowledge.
2. Another important issue is that of the *affective filter* that means the inhibition of the process due to factors of stress and anxiety.
3. The *natural order of acquisition* refers to the existence of a sequence of acquisition for each linguistic system.
4. He also pointed out the importance of the *input*, that must be rich, authentic and consistent with the natural order of acquisition.
5. And, in the end, the *monitor function*, namely the control that the process of learning operates over the acquired language.

Unlike the process of acquisition of the first language, which does not require any special training and goes through the same steps for every child whatever language they are acquiring (sign languages included), the process of second language learning, is a neurologically and psychologically hard task. As it usually starts when the subject is older, it is not totally spontaneous. It requires a certain degree of effort by the learner and it may be slightly different from person to person. In the language learning, for instance, the **aptitude** has definitely a key role but it may differ from learner to learner: the term “aptitude” refers to a range of features of our mind and of our personality that make the learning of a new language easier or more difficult. The first kind of individual features is that proposed by H. Gardner in the theory of “*Multiple Intelligences*” (1983). According to Gardner, each person is equipped with different types of intelligence, (linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic and existential), which correspond to different ways of perceiving and processing information.

⁴ In this work the term “learning” usually refers more generally to the process of language learning, without making specific reference to the distinction proposed by Krashen.

They are all available in every person but with different combinations and dominances depending on the person itself, the culture, the environment and so on.. These intelligences contribute to outline the personality of the language learner, identifying what may support and what may contrast the process of acquisition. Another psychological aspect that influence the process of language learning is the “*cognitive style*” of each person, that is the way everyone think, organize and process information. For instance one learner may have an *analytical* way of processing information, more systematic and meditative, while another may be more *intuitive*. Someone probably prefer to recall theories and ideas more than who, instead, prefer to do exercises. Some others may be more or less tolerant of ambiguity, and so on. Also the “*personality features*” are relevant to define the individual profile of each learner, even if they are not specific for the process of language learning. They are peculiarities of each person that we usually refer to as “character”; among these features the most relevant are: cooperation or competition, introversion or extroversion, optimism or pessimism and the level of autonomy (see 1.2.1.). All these individual properties concur in defining the “*learning style*” of a person: this term refers to a set of features, attitudes, and preferences related to the learning process, including not only cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural aspects, but also physical, environmental and sensorial preferences. According to the peculiarities of the learning style, each learner develops personal “*strategies*” to reach a given goal. It is important to outline that all the “negative” features of the attitude of a learner that seem to make the learning of a new language harder, can be contrasted with appropriate methodological choices, which the learner can negotiate with the teacher or, better, use in the individual activities of autonomous learning.

The success in language learning depends only partially on the aptitude of the learner. Probably the most important role is that of “**motivation**”, the force that stimulate the action. According to Williams and Burden (1997) it is a “state of cognitive and emotional arousal, a state which leads to a conscious

decision to act and gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal (or goals)” (p. 120). Highly motivated people with a limited aptitude in learning languages can achieve better results than those learners who have a good aptitude but not enough motivation. In fact, learning languages involves an effort, and the energy to face this effort and drive this process comes from motivation. Balboni and Caon proposed a model which identifies three reasons that guide human actions: the duty, the need and the pleasure (Balboni, 2002). *The duty* is the weakest motivation, in the process of language learning it does not lead to acquisition; *the need*, when conscious, is a quite strong motivation, but it works just until the learner decides she has satisfied his needs. In the case of deaf people acquiring the verbal language in the later years and in the case of adults learning a second language, probably the importance of this kind of motivation is a little bit different. The willing they have to improve their competence is related, at first to the need to “survive” in the society, and later to the desire of integration. Very few of them wish to learn a language just for personal *pleasure*, even if it seems to be the strongest motivation of all. Certainly, amusing and entertaining learning activities help to increase motivation and, at the same time, to avoid the activation of the affective filter. Besides obvious social motivations that encourage people to learn new languages, what is more important is the individual aspect of motivation: each learner is, in fact, driven by different needs and may find pleasure in different kind of activities.

Given the individual differences of each learner in terms of aptitude and motivation, and considered the short time usually spent in frontal lessons, it is clear how difficult it is for the teacher to manage to organize the program so as to meet the needs of every learner. It is therefore very important that everyone learns to know himself, in order to develop individual strategies and to identify enjoyable activities, useful and effective for the process of language learning, which can be done in autonomy even outside scholastic settings and in unconventional environments. This is particularly relevant for deaf people who,

as it will be described, are very heterogeneous in terms of linguistic competence, learning experiences and strategies. Probably, the current formative and scholastic settings are not the most suitable for their learning, in particular with regard to the verbal languages. That is why it is necessary to integrate their experiences with autonomous activities. In the next paragraphs it will be described the importance of the autonomous use of unconventional tools to support the process of language learning also outside the traditional educational settings.

1.2.1. Constructivism and learner autonomy

For a long time the concept of “learner autonomy” has been related to adults who learn on their own, and in particular to the use of self-access learning systems. In the last years, as a consequence of the development of new learning theories, the concept of autonomy had to be readapted. “Learner autonomy now seems to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves” (Little D. 2007 p. 14). The learner autonomy has to be considered not just as a way of studying, but rather as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” that means being responsible for the one’s own education and taking control of the learning process. The importance of learner autonomy has spread in contexts of teaching and it has become one of the goals of scholastic programs.

According to the latest constructivist theories, an unintentional and unconscious construction of knowledge has to be preferred in formal learning environments. This is possible through the use of explorative, interpretative and participative practices which are in contrast with the mere transmission of contents. Such procedures allow learners to play an active role, different from the traditional one, helping them to take control of their own learning process and encouraging at the same time the reflection on contents and on the learning process itself. From this point of view, also the traditional role of the teacher has to be rethought. The teacher becomes a guide, a learning facilitator, who does not

impose choices, but recommends and suggests what is considered to be the best option for the learners.

As regards learning languages, being autonomous learners means being able of taking advantage of the linguistic resources naturally provided by the extra-scholastic environment, in order to further increase the own linguistic competence. According to Little (2007) the success in the process of language learning is determined by three principles that interact with each other:

- 1. The learner involvement:** the learner has to become responsible of the learning process and take part in the choice of programs, activities and materials. This is particularly relevant in the case of adults, who have specific communicative needs, and usually want to take part in the planning of their training course.
- 2. The reflection:** the learner gradually become aware of the linguistic learning process and can recognize its own cognitive style and type of intelligence, so as to be able to identify more suitable materials, timing and methods. Also the reflection on the underlying mechanism of languages is important in order to better acquire and use them.
- 3. The use of the target language:** the target language must be the mean through which all the activities are carried out, in order to be surrounded by authentic linguistic input and situations of real communication. That means that the improvement of the communicative and linguistic skills of the learner (and the autonomy as well) is linked to the possibility of interaction with the teacher but, most of all, with other learners.

1.2.2. The informal learning

The changes in which the society has been involved, especially in the last years, have led to a growing of interest in the education of adults in the perspective of the lifelong learning, which is of strategic importance with regard

to the professional development of the person. The term “lifelong learning” was first proposed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development to refer to an individual and voluntary process powered by personal or professional reasons. This concept is based on the assumption that learning is a process that lasts for the entire life of people. It starts at the birth, before beginning the school, it continues during the scholastic period, and keeps on also in the adulthood. It is not confined only in classrooms but it takes place in different situations and settings. The same organization defined, in fact, the distinction between three different kind of learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning. The first one is that kind of education typically provided by formal scholastic institutions, characterized by an intentional process from the learner’s point of view. The second one refers to educational and organized activities such as workshops, conferences, Boy Scouts, etc. which take place in formal educational settings but are not formally recognized. Most of people’s knowledge, however, comes from an informal learning: this process may occur in different situations, at home, at work, through interactions and relationships... As Conner pointed out in her blog⁵, the informal learning may be intentional, when the person want to learn something and explore voluntarily and independently procedures and activities to reach the objective (reading books, searching information..), or it may be unexpected (accidental), when it derives from daily experiences and lead to the learning of something that the person had not planned (as it is the case for the acquisition of the first language). These three learning modes are complementary but, as Cross (2006) suggested, formal learning is more suitable to who has just began the process of learning, while, as the learner become more autonomous and expert, it is the informal mode that results more effective.

⁵ <http://marciaconner.com/resources/informal-learning/>

1.3. Social aspects of language learning

Languages are mainly social tools. As analyzed in paragraph 1.1. they develop and live thanks to a community of people that regularly use them to establish, maintain and interrupt social relations with other people. This social feature of languages implies that their acquisition is inherently social too. In paragraph 1.2., in fact, it was discussed the inclusion in a linguistic community as one of the two conditions required to acquire the first language. It is therefore obvious that, if the goal is also for the Second Language (or the verbal language for the deaf people) the acquisition rather than the learning, as proposed by Krashen, the process cannot take place in isolation. In fact, if on the one hand the constructivist theories recognize the fundamental value of the individual with his background of experiences and knowledge, his needs, styles, intelligences and strategies, on the other hand they focus also on the social aspect of the learning process: people learn and build knowledge through dialogues and communication, through the cooperation and collaboration in the accomplishment of authentic and motivating tasks. Everyone, thanks to their experiences, possess skills and knowledge which can be put together to build new knowledge. From this point of view, an important aspect is that of “learning by doing”, theorized by Dewey (1915), who argues that when learners play an active role in the process of learning, they can achieve better results.

The approach in which the students are encouraged to reach common goals by working together rather than with the teacher is called “collaborative learning”: it involves a real interdependence between the group members in achieving a goal, a commitment in the mutual help and a sense of responsibility towards the group and the goals. Working in groups, however, raises some relational problems that may affect the process of language learning. Knowing each own personality is useful to succeed in this kind of activity, to manage themselves in the tasks and to understand and respect the other learners’ character. This approach allow the learner to reach a higher level of autonomy,

taking the responsibility for the own learning process and for that of the other learners. As it was said, in fact, to be autonomous language learners does not mean necessarily learning alone but rather discover how to become responsible for the own learning process and to take advantage of the linguistic environment. The possibility of being involved in situations of real communication is therefore very important: beside supporting the skills improvement, it can also strengthen the motivation and favor the autonomy of the learner.

1.3.1. Social networks: the connectivism by G. Siemens

The last years development and innovations in technologies have brought to a redefinition of learning needs and styles; the process of language learning can no longer be confined inside classrooms, but it must be supported by new tools and opportunities, which the learner can easily find on the internet and that can be used both in formal and informal environments.

In recent years, the Internet network has undergone a development that led to a change also in the organization of society: the Web 1.0, characterized by a passive use of the contents provided by the network, has evolved into the Web 2.0 which offers to the people the opportunity to take part in the process of creation and sharing of contents and services. The opportunities of real interaction and communication provided by the Web 2.0 make it a tool that, besides affecting the organization of society, promotes the process of learning, especially of languages. Nowadays, in fact, the network has to be considered not only as a mean of transmission of learning materials but also as a learning "environment", characterized by a high level of interactivity. Learning online firstly means to establish a network of social relations, and just secondly a computer network. As a consequence, the role of the teacher also changes. She must be able to plan, manage and operate an educational project based on these networks, leaving the explicit teaching and slowly taking the role of facilitator.

To try to explain a new way of learning based on networks, recently it has been proposed a new theory of learning in the digital age, called **connectivism**, formulated for the first time by George Siemens (2004). He refers to the *web metaphor* to explain how learning takes place: according to Siemens it is a process that spreads in networks, through the connections that link a node to the others: images, information and data. Therefore, learning takes place through connections. The Principles of connectivism proposed by Siemens are the following (2004):

- Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known
- Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision.

Siemens' theory has been criticized from several fronts: Verhagen considers it a pedagogical vision rather than a learning theory, as it describe "how we learn" and not "what and why we learn"⁶. According to Kerr, instead, the currently existing theories are sufficient to explain the process of learning in the digital age⁷. Despite the criticism, the connectivism reflects the awareness of how technology nowadays radically affect learning environments, emphasizing how the network itself provides ideal situations and environments of learning.

In the second chapter it will be analyzed the role that technology plays in the process of language learning, with particular reference to the potential of Social Networks such as Facebook, which seems to be a linguistic environment

⁶ Pløn Verhagen (2006): "Connectivism: a new learning theory?" (University of Twente)

⁷ Bill Kerr (2007): "Which radical discontinuity?"

rich in opportunities, motivating and easily accessible, especially with regard to deaf learners who need linguistic input and integration.

Chapter 2

Learning languages in Social Networks

The social and individual aspects of language learning described in the first chapter can be promoted using web technologies. The main aim of this second chapter is, in fact, that of analyzing the role that such technologies play in the process of language learning, especially in the perspective of lifelong learning. Web technologies offer to the language learner a huge range of learning opportunities which can be used “anywhere” and “anytime”. Besides being easily accessible tools available also outside the formal educational settings, web technologies are also rich in contents and motivating; they encourage the learner to take an active role in the process of learning, developing the level of autonomy and supporting the informal learning; moreover they favor the interaction between the learner and other learners, with a tutor or simply with the linguistic community of reference.

Social Networks, in particular, seem to possess the key features typical of a linguistic environment positive for learning, as their nature is that of relating the individual with the society. As it will be discussed in the third chapter, they are very useful tools especially for deaf people, who, due to their hearing impairment, suffer for a linguistic and social isolation, which can be avoided through the use of such tools.

2.1. The potential of the web for the language learning

Several years have passed since technologies have entered traditional educational environments. However, despite the recent technological development, the trend of teachers is still to propose a superficial use of them, especially in offline mode, through programs such as Word or Power Point, and

through the use of audio or video files. The online mode, instead, is still limited to the mere research for authentic materials of which the Internet is rich. Learners, therefore, at the end of their training, or at least outside the traditional educational environments, do not always know how to take advantage of the many opportunities offered by the web to maintain or improve their linguistic skills. This fact affects also the development of the learner's autonomy, an important aspect from the point of view of the lifelong learning.

The most important practical advantage brought by the Internet technologies to language learning is the possibility to use them "anytime" and "anywhere": the diffusion of highly interactive tablet PCs and Smartphones, today more than ever, enables a constant connection to the network, facilitating not only the web surfing and the communication via e-mail, but also, the interaction through Social Networks, or through instant messaging and VoIP⁸ software and applications. The web is showing a gradual process of enlargement of the opportunities offered to the learners. On the one hand it is easily accessible, it reduces all those restriction linked to the location and to the time in which the process of learning takes place. On the other hand it offers many possibilities and many activities that can meet different learning styles. Thus learners can decide their own timing, modalities, materials and activities according to their preferences.

In addition to promoting the development of the autonomy, the use of web tools for language learning has emotional – relational implication too. They allow you to create and use rich and diversified learning environments and to interact with other peers or with a tutor in a motivating and less stressful way. Therefore they help to reduce anxiety and stress, and to create a comforting condition of learning.

Using online learning methods allow learners to take advantage of a motivating and effective linguistic environment, to improve the language skills,

⁸ VoIP are technologies which allow users to have a phone or video-phone conversation, through the internet connection.

and to become autonomous learners, able at every stage of their life to improve the mastery of a language, to set the autonomous acquisition of new languages and to seek help from a teacher, tutor or a peer.

2.1.1. *Web tools for language learning*

The technological development has led to the creation and diffusion of websites and applications that can greatly enrich the range of tools at disposal of the learners. Such tools can support and, in some cases, replace the textbook. As it was said in section 2.1., their variety allows learner to choose in autonomy the material for themselves according to their needs, preferences and learning styles. At an early stage, however, it is the teacher's task to find, evaluate and choose resources: in fact, online are available both generic-purpose material (such as newspaper articles), and resources specifically conceived for language learners. The first ones sometimes may be too difficult for the learner's language level and thus be readapt by the teacher, the second ones, instead, are drawn up by editors or by other teachers, and available for every level of competence and on different aspects of the learning.

Besides promoting the autonomy and being motivating and enjoyable, the main purpose of using web tools and internet resources is to develop the linguistic skills. Online in fact a huge amount of material suitable for *reading* activities is available: through an appropriate use of search engines it is possible to recover authentic texts, which can be combined with pictures, found on the internet too, to help the comprehension. Furthermore there are many websites that offer interactive games (such as clozes, quizzes and crosswords) both for children and for adults, whose aim is to improve the lexical and morpho-syntactic competence, and, at the same time, to develop the reading skills.

With regard to the development of the *writing* skills, it is possible to reorganize some information found on the internet in a written text, for instance producing a touristic guide; but even more interesting are those opportunities related to the interactivity of the network: blogs and Wikis are,

from this point of view, two important resources. They are platforms set by a user in which several people can interact. The main difference between these two tools is that in blogs each person can participate entering a post⁹ and the other users can only comment on it; while in Wikis everything that is entered by a user can be modified by the others¹⁰. Both these tools may be used autonomously by the learner, and are, at the same time, suitable to an educational use: there are, in fact, websites which allow the free creation of blogs and Wikis, which the teacher can take advantage of to promote activities of collaborative learning.¹¹

The web also offers many opportunities to expand the activities of *listening and speaking*: it is possible to download mp3 files and save them in the own PCs or players in order to be able to listen to them almost everywhere. They may be of any type: radio recordings, dialogues, songs... they can be designed for the general public, or created specifically for learners. The video files available through channels such as Youtube¹², facilitate the listening comprehension through the video support and, in some cases, the transcription of the texts. There are also several applications for the voice recording, suitable for the exposure of short texts, which enable the user to send the recorded file via e-mail.¹³

One of the key aspects of the Web 2.0, as it was said in section 1.3.1., is the high level of interactivity. The internet is an important tool for the development of *verbal and written interaction* skills. The field is that of C.M.C. (Computer Mediated Communication), that is a kind of communication that takes place through the use of a technological tool. It is clear that the means influence the way in which the message is perceived and product: in particular, this type of communication can take place in a synchronous (at the same time)

⁹ Posts are entries provided with a title and chronologically organized, which may include a text, images, videos or links to external websites.

¹⁰ Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) is probably the most famous example of Wiki.

¹¹ www.blogger.com to create blogs and www.wikispaces.com to create Wikis.

¹² www.youtube.com

¹³ www.vocaroo.com or www.voxopop.com

or asynchronous way (in different times), through the written or verbal language. The written mode, in its synchronous and asynchronous forms, is still the most widespread (chats, e-mails, forums..), although, new applications are developing, which allow to incorporate texts and images to an audio-video message (Skype¹⁴), leading to a more “complete” kind of communication. The e-mails are suitable for all levels of competence as they allow the learner to communicate with the tutor, other learners or native speakers, using the target language, but they leave the necessary time to process the information received and to produce the output. Chats, instead, are characterized by a real-time communication: this factor involves a high cognitive effort, making them more suitable for advanced learners. Anyway, from a psychological point of view, the opportunity of mediating the interaction through the use of technological tools, besides making the learning process more enjoyable and motivating, helps reducing the stress and anxiety typical of a face-to-face communication.

In the context of the linguistic interaction, the Social Networks are also relevant, but their potential for the learning process will be analyzed in detail in section 2.2.

2.1.2. *Online Informal learning*

The recent development of the Internet has also led to an evolution in the concept of the web itself. From a vision of the web as a “storehouse” of contents and information passively accessible (web 1.0), it has become a place of participation and collaboration in the process of sharing and creation of knowledge (web 2.0). Today, in fact, it is spreading the idea that the network’s effectiveness in the learning process is due, not only to the possibility of transmitting and finding materials, but mainly to the opportunity of creating real learning environments, in which the learners can act and participate from their own homes, workplaces etc.. The network itself is considered as a learning

¹⁴ www.skype.com

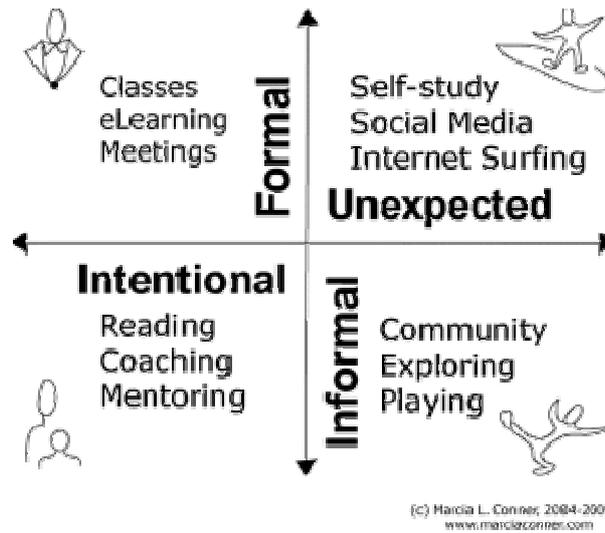
environment, or at least, a tool that, characterized by a high level of interactivity, enriches the linguistic experience of the learners as never before. Today, learners have the possibility of taking part in online courses, structured, organized and managed by a tutor, who plays the role of guide and facilitator of the interaction between the participants. Online technologies can also be used inside traditional learning environments: the teacher, guiding the students in the discovery of the opportunities offered by the web, makes the process of language learning motivating, pleasant and authentic, besides helping them increasing their level of autonomy.

Before this recent spread of use of technology, formal and informal learning were well distinguished: the first one was related to specific places and time, while the informal learning could take place almost everywhere and in every moment. The diffusion of technology, however, has contributed to blur such distinction. The e-learning courses, for instance, do not require the presence of the learner in a specific place and time, but can they be considered forms of informal learning? Marcia Conner, in her blog¹⁵, proposed a framework to explain such distinction, taking into account also the influence of the internet in the process of learning: putting in x-axis the intentional/unexpected aspect, and in y-axis the formal/informal aspect, she gets four quarters in which she identifies some learning situations (see picture 1).

According to the author, e-learning courses are *formal-intentional* learning situations, the internet surfing and the individual study are forms of *formal-unexpected* learning, as they are considered as a consequence of the canonical formal intentional learning. Reading or researching are due to the intentionality of the learner and thus *informal-intentional* activities, while the free time, online games and the use of Social Networks are *informal-unexpected* learning situations, as there is no awareness by the learner. Up to now, the online learning experiences took place mainly in formal and intentional

¹⁵ <http://marciaconner.com/resources/informal-learning/>

contexts; but the informal and unexpected quarter, including therefore Social Networks environments, turns out to be actually the most interesting, because this kind of settings allow the learners to develop learning forms closer to the spontaneous ones.



Picture 1

2.2. Social Networks

The spread of the Web 2.0, in the last years, has led to the creation of an ambiguity regarding the term *Social Network*. The social network is, in fact, a physical network more than an Internet application: this term, from the ontological point of view refers to a group of people connected by links of different type (affective, professional, religious, cultural, political...). It is only recently that the concept of social network has expanded, involving the internet world, identifying also those sites of online services that manage exactly these people networks.

Boyd and Ellison (2008), define as Social Networks those “web-based services that allow individuals to:

1. Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system;
2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection;
3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”

According to Massarotto (2011) the social networking websites, usually referred to as Social Networks, are websites whose main function is to facilitate the management of a part of the social relationships via internet, through the creation and sharing of contents, conversations and the use of other tools. He identifies some features typical of many social networks: the creation of a personal profile; the function of connecting and relating users; the opportunity of uploading, organizing and sharing contents; of sending private messages and chatting; the possibility of commenting, evaluating and sharing others' contents; of creating groups and communities and of connecting different social networks... all activities that help to maintain social relations.

In the last ten years, the development of such services, both in number and in typologies, has been great. Nowadays It is possible to identify mainly four types of Social Networks: *generic Social Networks* are the most used worldwide, they do not have a specific subject or aim, besides that of socializing (for instance Facebook and Twitter¹⁶...); *thematic Social Networks* are built around a specific subject (in the case of LinkedIn¹⁷ is the business); *functional Social Networks* are general in the subject, but based on a specific type of content (videos for Youtube, photos for Instagram¹⁸...); *user generated Social Networks*, at last, are created by private users to build communities around a chosen subject.

¹⁶ www.twitter.com

¹⁷ www.linkedin.com

¹⁸ www.instagram.com

The growth and spread of online services of social networking reflects the evolution that internet has undergone in the last years, the passage from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, the possibility of interacting, sharing and building knowledge. As social tools, they also can be interpreted in the ambivalent way that characterizes languages and language learning: on the one hand it becomes particularly important the concept of identity, the creation and management of the personal profile, the image that people want to give of themselves, of their own thoughts, of their ideas. On the other hand there is the social aspect of such tools, that is the possibility they offer to link the individual with a network of people, putting it into a community, to connect thoughts, ideas and experiences, conveyed through words, pictures, videos or links...

According to data published in "*Wave 6: the Business of Social*"¹⁹, Social Networks are taking an increasingly important role in many people's life. Despite a certain degree of concern about privacy, more than 50% of respondents believe that they are essential for their social life, and more than 40% are worried about losing something if they do not visit their Social Network daily. The research shows that despite a decrease in the number of new profiles created, the trend is for an increase in the time spent in such systems, at the expense of other types of platforms such as websites and emails or other media such as television. The 2011 data show, in fact, that the time spent in Social Networks is much more than in previous years, and it has also increased the management of the profiles. Even the number of contacts that users can keep active through these tools has growth. Regarding the use of Social Networks, the data show that messaging with friends is the main activity (64% of respondents), followed by uploading the profile (62%), uploading photos (59%), finding old friends (59%), updating status (49%) and finding new friends (49%)... Moreover, the Social Networks seem to satisfy the users'

¹⁹ "*Wave*" is probably the world's most important research on Social Networks: in particular it studies the effects that these tools have on society and on the global market. The research is conducted annually using the same methodology since 2006. Wave 6, was published in 2012 with datas collected in 2011.

needs in different ways depending on the culture. In the West (Europe and United States) they are primarily used for fun; in the Eastern Europe (Russia), for the connection and the creation of communities; in eastern countries (China and Hong Kong) for self-improvement, while in the middle east mainly for enablement.

The last years success of Social Networks, as it was said, has led them to become part of the daily experience of many people, also thanks to the proliferation of smartphones and tablet PCs. What is happening now is a real revolution from the point of view of communication, which, besides being analyzed in the economic field, must be taken into account also in the educational area.

2.2.1. Learning in Social Networks

The last few years have been marked by an exponential growth in the popularity of Social Networks among young people but not only. The awareness of the potential of these communication tools has made them an object of study in different fields, from the business marketing to that of education.

Recently, there have been carried out several studies on the possibility of using social networks to support the learning process in traditional educational settings. Selwyn (2012), underlines the differences between the potential of social networking platforms to support learning and the reality of their use: these tools are definitely motivating, but she claims that assuming that they could attract all learners in the same way is a mistake, mainly because of cultural and socio-economic differences in the access to these platforms. In line with the latest learning theories, she recognizes their importance for collaborative – participative learning experiences and for forms of personalized learning, but she argues that the construction of common knowledge is not guaranteed, as most of the interactions do not seem to be related to academic studies. From her considerations, thus, emerges the need to identify how to better integrate the use of these tools in the educational projects especially with

reference to young and inexperienced learners. it is up to the teachers to find how to support their self-directed learning effectively through such platforms.

Ligorio and Barile (2012), investigated, through a survey, the Social Networks users' habits, in order to find methodologies to ensure their effectiveness in educational settings. By identifying some typical profiles that characterize users, they come up proposing some guiding principles related to:

- *The valorization and description of oneself*: identifying in Social Networks "windows" in which learners can propose their own ideas and ask for comments and feedbacks;
- *The focus on the social aspect*: proposing activities to support the collaborative learning, even just using such tools to do the homework in groups or to share information and contents among classmates;
- *The need to establish temporal frames*: in order to reduce the risk of dependency and problems in managing the activity.

Besana (2012), through a survey to define the perception that people between 19 and 50 years old have of Social Networks, gets to claim that they are already mature environments for the supply of learning experiences and for the management of the learning process, at least, with regard to adults. The research shows that users are aware on the possibility of using such tools for the management of information and knowledge flows. With regard to the aspects most closely related to learning, despite an image of the process still tied to the transmission of knowledge, emerges the awareness of the opportunity of exploiting such platforms in favor of a collaborative learning of the constructivist type.

Despite the many doubts on the possibility of integrating the use of Social Networks in traditional educational settings, there is an awareness on the part of adult users of the potential that these tools offer to support the learning process. So, if on the one hand it emerges the possibility of using them in informal learning situations such as in corporate environments, on the other hand it arises the need to set procedures, methods and projects to educate

young students (still inside traditional scholastic environments) on a thoughtful and responsible use of such tools, in order to allow them to exploit such opportunities in the adulthood or outside educational settings.

Among the potentialities of Social Networks that support the language learning, (besides those already analyzed related to motivation and collaborative learning), there is the possibility of taking advantage of a multi-modal communication, based not only on the written text, but also on videos and images. They allow the learner to access to different registers, from a refined linguistic style to the jargon, idioms, and the language of common use. They help the creation of contacts (social networks) with other learners, with native speakers, with tutors or teachers even outside the scholastic environment so as to support the autonomy of the learner who can improve the proficiency of the already known languages, set the acquisition of new languages or seek help. These considerations have led to the rise of some “thematic Social Networks” about language learning (such as Live Mocha, Busuu, Italki, Palabea, Lang8, Voxswap, and My Happy Planet²⁰) that make learning more fun, helping learners to come in touch with native speakers. Even more interesting for language learning are “generic Social Networks” such as Twitter or Facebook, much more widespread and used. As it will be showed in the following section, they offer and encourage linguistic experiences of different types, promoting forms of unconscious and informal learning, more similar to the natural ones.

2.2.2. Facebook as an online environment for language learning

Facebook²¹, founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, is the Social Network with the largest number of users in the world. It was originally designed as a

²⁰ www.livemocha.com, www.busuu.com, www.italki.com, www.palabea.com, www.lang-8.com, www.voxswap.com, www.myhappyplanet.com;

²¹ www.facebook.com

platform available only to the students of the Harvard University, but was soon opened to other students, and from 2006 to anyone aged 13 and over.

It currently has over one billion active users worldwide, who log in at least once a month. According to data available on the Italian edition of “*Socialtimes*”²², in September 2013 the active users in Italy are approximately 26.000.000, that is more than the 40% of the whole population; among these more than the 60% are aged between 19 and 45. The 64,6% of the accesses to the site is through mobile devices, while the remaining 35,4% through the web.

Users can access the site through a free registration, which asks for some personal information such as name, surname, date of birth and e-mail address. Later users can edit their profile with photos, information, lists of interest (books, movies, food...) and add friends to their network. Each profile has a “wall” called “timeline” (“diario” in the Italian version), in which users can update their “status”, publish different kind of contents (links to external websites, images, videos...) or share and comment contents posted by other people in the network. It is possible to create or join “groups” of interest where users can share contents with other participants. It also offers the possibility of using external applications such as games, and of importing contents from other social networks (for instance posting pictures from Instagram). Facebook offers also the possibility of private messaging, through a service that integrates a chat and e-mail messages. Many of the contents available in Facebook can also be accessed from the mobile application, making it a service of instant messaging similar to Whatsapp²³.

Through its multi-modality and thanks to the large number of tools and applications that it provides, Facebook offer to language learners a wide range of opportunities. It promotes the *written interaction* through the target language: users have the possibility to come in touch with native speakers, with whom they can communicate via chat or private messages (a kind of evolution

²² <http://it.socialtimes.me/stat/IT>

²³ Whatsapp is a famous application of instant messaging for smartphones.

of the *pen friend*); they can keep in contact with the teacher, classmates or other learners in order to share doubts and seek solutions. It also promotes *reading* activities: Facebook provides the opportunity to access a huge amount of linguistic information of any kind, through links to external websites, friends' posts or pages of interest (for instance it is possible to follow a foreign newspaper's page in order to read articles, or follow famous actors to see their news). It encourages to write in situations of real communication, both through chats and private messages, and in shorter forms. In fact, users can express their opinions commenting posts or updating their status. It favors the access to information and it allows learner to be updated with what happens worldwide: even politics and some news that usually do not capture the attention of learners can become interesting in this way. It also helps to understand aspects related to the culture of the other Countries, such as traditions and history...

The use of Facebook in traditional educational contexts is currently object of debate: on the one hand there is the awareness of the potential and the advantages for the process derived from the use of such platform. But, on the other hand there are some negative aspects, linked to the too much time spent in such platforms, to the privacy and to distractions... that make it difficult to find ways to help their integration inside scholastic environments. Nevertheless, on the web it is easy to find several activities and projects that teachers can propose to experience the advantages of this tool. For instance, in the blog "onlinecollege"²⁴ is available a post named "99 ways you should be using Facebook in your classroom" in which there are proposed, among other things, class projects such as following the activities of a politician, writing and sharing books reviews and so on, together with many practical suggestions for teachers.

It is clear, however, the importance of tools such as Facebook to favor informal and incidental forms of learning, especially with regard to adults. Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin, in 2010 published a research carried out in the

²⁴<http://www.onlinecollege.org/2012/05/21/100-ways-you-should-be-using-facebook-in-your-classroom-updated/>

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The main aim of the research was to “investigate if university students consider Facebook as a useful and meaningful learning environment that could support, enhance and/or strengthen their learning of the English language”. The authors developed a questionnaire in order to investigate the perception that students have of Facebook with respect to the improvement of language skills, motivation, confidence and attitudes toward English language. The results showed that most of the students are aware of the potential of Facebook and believe it could be used as an online environment to support the learning of English. The authors conclusions are that it is the teachers’ task to ensure the learners’ awareness of the potential of Facebook, through the integrated use of these tools in the educational projects. By doing so learners can develop their skills, improve their level of autonomy, self-confidence and self-knowledge.

All the web tools described in this chapter play a fundamental role for deaf learners, who, sometimes, experience a linguistic isolation and problems in the access to information. The purpose of chapter 3 is to point out how, in the case of deaf people, the use of such technologies, and of Social Networks in particular, can promote the use of the verbal language in real communication contexts, avoiding the activation of the “affective filter”, amplifying the access to information and supporting their integration.

Chapter 3

Social Networks as environments of language learning for deaf people

As analyzed in the second chapter, Social Networks can be considered as positive environments for language learning thanks to their main function, namely the opportunity of connecting the individual with society, and due to their variety and richness of applications.

After describing the characteristics which, according to the principles of educational linguistics outlined the ideal language learning environment for deaf people, and after a brief review of the deaf people's problems of integration caused by their communication problems, in this section it will be discussed how Social Networks seem to be learning tools suitable for their needs, not only from a linguistic point of view, but also with regard to integration and to the accessibility of information.

3.1. Deafness: linguistic, educational and relational aspects

Hearing is the main sensory channel in the transmission of verbal linguistic information. When this channel is blocked, as in the case of deaf people, the accessible linguistic input is drastically reduced and poor, so as to delay or even prevent the complete development of the linguistic competence. For a long time deaf people have been considered stupid and not educable. In fact, due to their hearing deficit often they are not able to understand what happens around them and to express themselves, with negative effects in the natural cognitive development of the person. Today, even though there still exist prejudices concerning their cognitive abilities, a general change in attitude

is taking place, and many different proposals are arising to help deaf people to develop a competence in the verbal language as similar as possible to that of hearing people. At the moment several educational methods can be used: the oralist methods, the mixed or bimodal methods, the bilingual education and logogenia²⁵. But they does not always allow deaf people to reach the goal and much work still has to be done to progress in this direction.

Below it will be analyzed the point of view of the educational linguistics on this issue. The term “Educational Linguistics” refers to that brunch of applied linguistics which considers languages in function of language learning. it identifies approaches, methods and tools useful to support the learning of new languages, including their teaching in scholastic environments and in other educational settings. Currently there are no teaching methods specific for deaf learners which ensure to them the full acquisition of the verbal language, but taking the point of view of the educational linguistics, as it will be discussed, it is possible to consider Social Networks as learning environments particularly favorable for their linguistic enhancement; such tools seem to counteract those limits identified in the principles described by Krashen, and meet perfectly the specific needs and skills of deaf people.

3.1.1. The linguistic competence of deaf people from the point of view of the educational linguistics

Despite the strong restriction of the linguistic input, all, or almost all the deaf people are able to acquire a sort of language during the childhood. This

²⁵The **oralist methods** are characterized by the complete exclusion of any kind of signs from the process of education to the verbal language. The **bimodal or mixed method** is so called as it exploits a dual modality: verbal and gestural. The vocal speech is then accompanied by the articulation of the corresponding sign, while keeping unchanged the syntactic structures of the spoken language. **Bilingual education** refers to the simultaneous exposure of the child to spoken and signed language. **Logogenia** is a method developed starting from theoretical basis of Generative Grammar, which aims to lead deaf people to acquire any verbal language in the same natural way as hearing people. Through the written language the child is given a selected linguistic input. which is, according to Logogenia, the minimum necessary to trigger the process of acquisition.

language is called "non-standard" as it is characterized by deviations from the target language. By observing the linguistic productions of deaf people clearly emerge a great individual variability in their competence, which is due to the age of onset of the deafness, the age of the diagnosis and of the beginning of rehabilitation, to the educational method, and to psychological, social and relational factors. Despite the variability of their linguistic competence, the errors they produce seem to be mainly of the same type. In fact, generalizing, deaf people tend to use a language made up of short sentences and simple syntactic structures if compared to the variety of structures used by hearing peers. Their vocabulary is poor and characterized by a certain degree of lexical rigidity. From the syntactic point of view they display great problems with relative clauses, with subordinate clauses and with passive and pronominal structures. Despite their problems extend also to several aspects of the language, the most evident difficulties are linked to the grammatical morphology.

Nuccetelli (2011), taking the point of view of the educational linguistics, tried to define the non-standard language typical of deaf people using the definition of *interlanguage*²⁶. According to the author, the linguistic systems of deaf people who learn a written language generally show some temporary, personal and partial features, which lead the author to consider them as the expression of an interlanguage. There are, however, problems with regard to the aspect of the interference²⁷. Actually, as stated by Chesi (2006), the development of non-standard linguistic systems in deaf children does not seem

²⁶ The *interlanguage* is a concept developed regarding the acquisition of the L2 and it refers to a continuum of temporary, personal and partial linguistic systems, which develop in the mind of the language learner. Such systems are the result of a competence characterized by the interference of the mother tongue, which gradually decrease.

²⁷ Nuccetelli (2011) affirms that it is clearly impossible to identify interference phenomena in deaf oralists, as for them the verbal language should be the mother tongue; However, as regards to deaf signers, the author states that the differences between the two modes make the interference phenomena difficult to be identified and not comparable to those between verbal languages. According to him it would be useful to define the temporary linguistic systems of deaf people taking into account the differences between deaf signers and deaf non-signers, in terms of interference. Thus supposing the existence of such phenomena in their linguistic productions.

to be affected by interference phenomena at all: when comparing the non-standard productions of deaf people and those of people learning a L2, only in the latter the interference of the mother tongue is clear (Volterra, Bates 1989 in Chesi 2006); Moreover, as revealed by the study carried out by the author himself (Chesi, 2006) there are no significant differences between the forms produced by deaf signers and those produced by non-signers, thus demonstrating that the partial and temporary features that characterize these linguistic systems are not due to interference phenomena.

The theories of the educational linguistics, as for instance the definition of interlanguage, at the moment seem to be not sufficient to fully explain the complexity of the linguistic problems of deaf people. However, it is important to stress that, while the concept of interlanguage is born in relation to the learning of a L2, the linguistic systems developed by deaf people are the result of the acquisition, hindered by the deficit and therefore in a sense incomplete, of what for many of them should be the mother tongue. The definition of such linguistic forms is certainly a complex problem, but it also significant if we assume, as suggested by the educational linguistics, that the developing of linguistic competence involves the gradual expansion and the progressive systematization of such systems.

This process of expansion and structuring of the temporary linguistic systems can be analyzed in the perspective that Krashen has taken in the S.L.A.T. (Second Language Acquisition Theory)²⁸ and therefore being characterized by some elements that, as it will be discussed, are quite relevant also in our context: the distinction between acquisition and learning, the issue of the affective filter, the natural order of acquisition, the role of the input and the monitor function. According to the mentioned perspectives of the educational linguistics the deaf people's problems in the development of language could depend on the fact that the specificity of the deficit expose them to an unsuitable

²⁸ See section 1.2

input, too poor and not linked to natural contexts of communication but rather connected to guided contexts, mainly scholastic and rehabilitative. As a result there is, on the one hand, the failure in the complying of the natural order of acquisition with a high prevalence of the “academic language”, and on the other hand the activation of the affective filter. As final result there is the prevalence of the learning rather than the acquisition and, therefore, problems with the monitor function.

3.1.2. Deaf learners autonomy

Learning is a complex process that expands well beyond the school environments occupying much of the socio-cultural life of people, even in adulthood. As discussed in chapter 1, it is the individual aspects of learning that lead each learner to find which strategies better suite their features: that is they have to learn how to learn. The work done at school by the teachers often is not enough to ensure to every learner the achievement of the goals: besides having to transmit the contents of the ministerial programs, they also have to take into account the individual features of each student who uses personal strategies and methods to reach the common goal, and this collides with the obstacle of the time. It is necessary for the students to develop this cognitive ability from an early age, even if guided by teachers, in order to take advantage of it in the adulthood.

This need is even stronger with regard to the education of the deaf people. Not many of them have access to specialized educational structures, which offer opportunities tailored to their needs and to the specificity of the deficit. Most of them, on the contrary, are placed in educational contexts provided for hearing people, and not suited to their abilities. This does not apply only to scholastic education, but also to the training of adults. The training courses for deaf adults are, in fact, almost inexistent. From this considerations some features of the learning needs of deaf people emerge, such as the need to access to a shared knowledge and overcome the cultural, relational and

linguistic isolation, but also the need to become aware of the own abilities and exploit them in a lifelong learning perspective, in a motivating environment which does not cause stress. Taking into account the specific needs of deaf learners it is easy to realize that a context in which the learner is responsible for the own process of learning and for the own knowledge is what best suits their needs. Such a context can be provided using tools that allow the subject to learn in autonomy even if plugged into a community, that stimulate interest and curiosity, that offer the opportunity to discuss, to experience different strategies and to verify the results autonomously, in a real communication environment, which does not cause stress and decrease in motivation.

3.1.3. The linguistic and cultural isolation of deaf people

In the everyday life, deaf people are nestled in a community mostly made up by hearing people, with whom they have to interact in different settings and for several reasons. They live in a situation of linguistic and socio-cultural isolation: because of the their problems related to the spoken language, sometimes they are not able to understand what happens around them and to express themselves, thus displaying negative effects in the cognitive development. For these reasons they usually have a reduced access to high levels of education and they are often excluded from important professional roles. Sometimes it is also denied to them the access to information and to free time, artistic and cultural activities. However, the supply of some services by the hearing community may help deaf people to overcome communicative barriers and to reduce the handicap resulting from the hearing deficit, supporting their integration and the access to different kind of activities (for instance providing Sign Language interpreters in public offices, in schools and hospitals or the improving the subtitle service in television..).

- *School*: at present deaf children's parents have the opportunity of choosing whether to make their children attending public schools with hearing students, which have to provide a free service of

support, or schools specific for deaf people. Faced with these possibilities, parents have showed a preference for the inclusion of deaf children in “traditional” public schools, convinced of fostering the integration with hearing children and a higher level of education. Unfortunately, deaf children are usually one for each class and the special aid teacher, who in most cases have no specific competence on deafness, represents the only way for an integration project, (since there is no alternative or complementary activities that provide contents and methodologies best suited to the specific nature of such problems).

- *University*: regarding the possibility of going on with studies, there are very few deaf people who are able to attend university. In this case, the linguistic problems represent only one of many reasons. They hinder the understanding of textbooks and good results in written exams, but also the lack of attention by teachers who often explain while writing on the blackboard, classes taught in too large areas so that the lip-reading is hard, are some of the reasons that often discourage students from continuing studying.
- *Work*: as for the working world, the communication barriers reduce the career opportunities. All those jobs that require a constant contact with people are often precluded to deaf people because of the linguistic problems; also the possibility of getting on career is almost nothing as it is hard for them to participate in master classes or update courses. Beyond the opportunity of getting a rewarding job, another key aspect is the approach with the working environment and the relationship with colleagues, which is often hampered by the difficult communication.

In addition to the linguistic and cultural isolation observed in the mentioned areas of training and education, they meet many obstacles also in the everyday life, in those situations that are common and easy for hearing people

such as booking a holiday or a table at the restaurant. The communication of deaf people, being mostly visual, has always been based on the physical presence of the interlocutor, somehow reducing the social network with which the deaf person maintains relationships. The recent technological development, as it will be seen, has enabled deaf people to expand their network, helping them to relate on an equal footing with hearing people, supporting the communication, and favoring the access to information and the integration in society.

3.2. Deafness and Social Networks

In the previous section it was analyzed how deaf people, because of their hearing impairment and due to their low language proficiency, live mostly a situation of linguistic and cultural isolation. In this section, however, it will be shown how Social Networks may represent a way for their integration, favoring a constant access to information and a rich and complete linguistic experience. They can be used to create specific educational paths, or outside traditional scholastic settings as informal learning tools which, breaking down communicative barriers, support a peer to peer interaction.

Certainly the use of Social Networks is affecting the way deaf people are communicating. A research by Carchio and Zaghetto (2011) shows that the use and the perception of such systems slightly differ between deaf and hearing subjects, even though they show the same knowledge of the most important Social Networks (except for “ooVoo²⁹”, used only by the deaf sample, probably because of its visual nature). Both samples of subjects regularly use them to communicate with family and friends, to meet new people and to post photos. As far as the ability to express opinions, the 40% of the deaf sample claims to do it freely, compared with the 27% of the hearing sample, probably due to a more

²⁹ ooVoo is a free video chat (<http://www.oovoo.com>)

direct and less filtered communication by deaf people. Both groups show an active participation in communicative interactions but also to be passive observers sometimes, though hearing people consider more important, the active participation in conversations with respect to deaf people. It is also quite relevant what emerges in relation to the means of communication used on Social Networks: there is a crucial difference between the two groups: the hearing sample uses exclusively the written language, while the deaf subjects affirm to use mainly the webcam, even if it probably depends both on the type of Social Network and on the interlocutor.

Communication in Social Networks, and more generally through the Internet (including therefore also instant messaging systems), give to deaf people the opportunity to interact in an immediate way, avoiding the need to speak verbally. They can, through the internet, access to a huge amount of resources and interact with other people in the same way as hearing people. There are no more differences between deaf or hearing people. The communication barriers related to the deficit are broken, and this leads to consequences, as well as practical, also psychological, developing a sense of independence, control and self-esteem.

3.2.1. Technologies for deaf learners

As it was said in section 2.1., nowadays computer technologies are considered as fundamental tools to support the process of language learning. In this field computers have become certainly the most important tools. They allow the integration of different activities such as writing, reading or editing written texts, viewing or recording videos and listening to oral texts. When connected to the internet they become even more powerful: as well as providing a huge amount of materials, they can help the autonomous learning. At home and with personal choices, each person may have access to online resources, send e-mails, chat or make video calls, entering in contexts of real

communication that, as it was said, promote the acquisition with respect to learning.

The technological innovation and the spread of computer tools in almost every family have effects also on the education of deaf people. They have encouraged the planning and production of contents and courses designed for the specific needs and abilities of deaf users. Up to now, basically, there have been developed bilingual multimedia products (Sign Language – Verbal language), which exploit the intact sensory channel of the learners, the view, transmitting information through images, videos, and written texts. In addition to CD-ROMs and DVDs, in the last years there has been a slow swing in the direction of online learning, creating virtual platforms which focus on aspects such as cooperation and interactivity. An example is the DEAL project (Deaf People in Europe Acquiring Languages), funded in 2006 by the European Commission. The project has involved some important institutions that have been working for years in the field of deafness in Italy, Spain, Austria and the United Kingdom. The aim was that of creating an e-learning platform and a teaching model for Italian, Spanish and English as L2 courses addressed to deaf learners who are absolutely beginners in the target language.

3.2.2. Why to use Social Networks as tools for deaf people's education

Unlike e-learning platforms, Social Networks are, in a sense, more democratic, completely free, easily accessible and available to everyone. For these reasons they can also be used, as it will be discussed, even outside the traditional formal learning settings.

The most obvious reason why they should be considered as useful tools in the education of the deaf people is, in fact, related to the **logistic aspect**: as mentioned above, not many deaf people have the possibility to access educational structures specialized and equipped for their training. Most of them, on the contrary, are nestled in educational contexts provided for hearing people, often supported by teachers not prepared to deal with the needs that such a

specific deficit entails. While researchers keep on studying how to improve the effectiveness of rehabilitative and educative interventions, emerges also the need for deaf people to be provided with specific learning tools, able to attract the deaf learners community towards educational projects, which focus on the motivation and on the potential of collaborative learning. Another reason to use Social Networks in the education of deaf people is closely related to the **technological aspect**: the new forms of communication available in the internet are resources that also deaf people use every day with family members, friends or for business reasons, especially thanks to the multimedia aspect, to the predominance of visual content and to the possibility of integrating different kind of materials.

The heart of the matter emerges, however, if we look at the phenomenon from the point of view of the educational linguistics, and in particular with regard to the SLAT, whose principles seem to hinder the development of linguistic skills to deaf people. It seems quite clear that new forms of digital communication provide to deaf people the opportunity to join spontaneously and with strong motivation contexts of authentic interaction through the use of written language. The **motivation** of deaf people in the use of the written language become very high: it is the main means of communication to relate with other people in the same condition. Therefore, also Social Networks, constitute environments in which deaf people, even those with medium-low language skills, can improve their competence in situations of **real communication**, and not only in contexts of guided learning; this enables them to re-establish the balance between acquisition and learning. The written language, thus, becomes a means for the daily communication, to express needs and personal experiences, to plunge deaf people in contexts of real communication that allow a large exposure to the target language, similar to the that naturally experienced by hearing people (exposure whose restriction is itself the reason of the failure in the development of linguistic skills), and assuring to them a rich, constant, authentic and thus motivating linguistic input.

In contexts of guided learning the fear of appearing not good, causes the activation of the affective filter. In situations of virtual communication instead, the communicative intent prevails on stress factors caused by language difficulties, favoring the acquisition and ensuring the activation of the monitor function. A further aspect to support the use of Social Networks is linked to the **autonomy** of the learners, who can manage themselves, according to personal time and methods.

3.2.3. Social Networks inside and outside traditional learning environments

The ideal solution inside traditional formal learning settings is certainly that of using a digital platform which dynamically integrates communicative resources (such as chats) and multimedia contents, and to develop in such platforms learning paths structured and proposed by teachers, who, promoting an awareness of the potential of these tools, could aim on the one hand at the consolidation and widening of the linguistic and textual skills, and, on the other hand to the development of a high level of autonomy.

The issue of the linguistic education of deaf people is quite complex and the research is still far from finding a method that ensure to them the acquisition of verbal languages. Nevertheless it is possible to identify Social Networks as tools that, in addition to being fertile environments for language learning, help making contents accessible also to those deaf people who, placed in unsuited learning environments, experience a situation of cultural isolation. However, it is important to emphasize that a "tool" is merely a means to follow the directions of a "method" and reach the purpose of an "approach." Without an accurate method it is difficult to guarantee the acquisition of the language, and nowadays the research is quite far from finding a teaching model tailored to deaf learners.

Social Networks are, however, tools that ensure a constant access to the linguistic information, becoming in this way, useful also to those deaf adults who are outside the scholastic environments. Learning is, in fact, a process that

never ends, especially in the case of deaf adults, who show an incomplete acquisition of the language and the need of being constantly updated. In this sense Social Networks such as Facebook may become tools of informal learning, promoting on the one hand the access to information and the integration, and on the other hand different kind of unconscious linguistic activities which may increase and support the acquisition of language. In a Social Network such as Facebook for instance, an adult can read texts, taken from newspapers, blogs, posts and so on, about several topics and with different linguistic registers. When something is not clear they can search more information on the internet or ask explanations to someone more expert. They can join groups of interest or groups of people in the same situation and discuss; they can express themselves and their opinions simply updating the status or commenting others' posts, using the written language. They can also communicate through the sharing of videos and images, thus integrating the written language with images, or even messages in Sign Language. They can use chats and instant messages, which help to "speak" in a written modality. In conclusion they enter in a system of communication in which their deficit is not visible.

It would be interesting to see if deaf people are actually able to improve their linguistic competence through the use of Social Networks, and to identify what types of activities, possibly, lead to the acquisition of verbal language. In the research that will be presented in the following chapters we have simply investigate how deaf people use Social Networks and how do they perceive such tools from a linguistic point of view, in order to identify if they can be exploited for the process of language learning in educational contexts and to support the learning autonomy of adults even outside the traditional scholastic environments.

Chapter 4

The research

According to what was said in the previous chapters it is easy to identify the potential of Social Networks for the process of language learning. They seem to be favorable and fertile environments for such a process especially in relation to the specific problems displayed by deaf people in the access to the linguistic information.

The goal of this research is therefore that of identifying deaf people's preferences and usage habits of some technological tools of communication and to determine whether they perceive Social Networks, and Facebook in particular, as environments that support their linguistic learning process. In the last chapter the data resulting from this research will be presented, together with some conclusions and practical suggestion.

4.1. Goals and research questions

The previous chapters have shown quite clearly the potential of Social Networks for the language learning process. In particular such systems seem to meet the specific needs of deaf people who, due to their hearing impairment, experience a limited access to the linguistic information and consequently a socio – cultural isolation.

The following study arises from the interest in understanding whether and how it is possible to take advantage of the potential of Social Networks in the field of deaf people's linguistic education. The **goal** of the research is therefore to investigate Italian deaf people's preferences and usage habits of Social Networks, and their perception of such tools from a linguistic point of

view. The main aim is to be able to determine, through their opinions, if they perceive Social Networks such as Facebook, as environments that support their language learning process. Such a study can be useful for trainers and educators to better understand how and to what extent the social networking can contribute to the process of language learning, in order to facilitate the identification of methodologies and activities that allow to exploit the potential of these tools both inside and outside traditional learning contexts.

For the elaboration of this research we have started from the following **research questions**:

1. *How important are communication technologies for Italian deaf people and which preferences do they show regarding the use of Social Networks?*

The hearing impairment, as it was said, implies mainly a visual type of communication, based not only on the Sign Language, but also on images, videos and the written language. The hypothesis is that such a kind of communication affects the perception and use of technological tools of communication. In addition to their importance as communicative tools, Social Networks represent also an easy and widespread way to access information. It is therefore also interesting to consider how the communicative and the informational – cultural aspects are perceived in the deaf world, and if one of these two prevails on the other.

2. *How do Italian deaf people actually use Facebook?*

With reference to Facebook, the most widely used Social Network in Italy, it would be interesting to identify the actual use of such a tool

by the deaf community, both in terms of frequency of access, kind of activities and opportunities offered.

3. *Is Facebook considered by Italian deaf people as a tool that support their linguistic learning process? If yes, how?*

On the basis of what was said in the previous chapters, the assumption is that Facebook represents a motivating environment, and that it is rich in potential to support the process of language learning, especially with regard to deaf people. It seems to offer several opportunities to improve writing and reading skills, as well as to expand the vocabulary, in a motivating and inspiring way. We also assumed that a communication filtered through a technological tool help to reduce the fear of making mistakes, thus increasing self-confidence.

4.2. *The methodology*

Starting from an analysis of the research carried out by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010), described in section 2.2.2.. we have tried to readapt to our target and to our goals some of the items of their questionnaire. The research conducted in Malaysia was designed for university students who learn English as a L2 and who probably have also a specific knowledge and awareness of the language learning process. In our case, despite the awareness of the potential of social networking for the process of language learning, while designing the items we have tried to maintain a position as neutral as possible, in order to avoid any influence on the answers. Also our research was carried out by administering a questionnaire, which was developed taking into account the specific features of the linguistic and socio – cultural situation of Italian deaf people.

4.2.1. The tool

For this research a semi – standardized questionnaire was developed, made up of both open-ended and closed questions. In this last case, according to the item it was used the Likert scale³⁰ with five levels of preference or the multiple choice mode, with a single or multiple answer. Although usually questionnaires should be administered in the mother tongue of the subjects, in the specific case of deaf people, this was particularly complex because of the heterogeneity of the linguistic competence, both in the sign language and in Italian. Faced with this choice we decided to use the Italian language, in its written modality, selecting simple structures and words of common use, and trying to propose a number of items which was sufficient to reach the goal, but not so high to discourage or to tire subjects. The questionnaire was completely anonymous and no questions were marked as compulsory.

The structure of the questionnaire³¹ was established according to the research questions described in 4.1.. The first section, made up of five items, was related to demographic information, such as gender and age, and linguistic information, regarding for instance the language preference, the type of school, attended and the type of education received (oralist, LIS, mixed or bimodal). The purpose was to try to get an overall picture about the features of the sample, and, if possible, to recognize correlations among data. The second section included some questions about the usage preferences of different communication technologies and Social networks, while the third section concerned the use of Facebook in particular, the frequency of access, some features of the social network of the subject (mainly deaf people, mainly hearing people or both) and the preferences of the kind of activities to do in such a

³⁰ The Likert scale is a rating scale commonly used in researches that involve questionnaires. Such procedure mainly consist in proposing some statements. Each statement is followed by a scale of agreement/disagreement, usually in 5 or 7 levels. The respondents are asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement with respect to each statement.

³¹ The questionnaire can be found on the appendix.

platform. The purpose of these two sections was, through the analysis of deaf people's preferences, to identify limits and strength of Social Networks, in order to understand in what ways such tools may, or may not, be included within educational contexts. The final part was linked to the perception of Facebook as a language learning environment: in this case the subjects were asked to express a preference in a scale of five levels (strongly disagree, disagree, I don't know, agree, strongly agree) with respect to a statement. The items concerned the possibility of using Facebook to improve linguistic skills such as reading and writing and to enlarge the vocabulary. Motivational aspects were also analyzed, together with the perception of the level of stress and self-confidence in the communication act. To conclude this section two open-ended questions were added. In the first one the subjects were asked if they consider Facebook as a tool that can support their language learning, and how does it happen. In the second question, they were asked if they think that such tools could be used in the field of deaf people's education.

4.2.2. Administration and participants

The questionnaire was built through an application of *google* called *google drive*³². We have chosen to use as the only way of administration the online mode, mainly for two reasons: firstly to reach a heterogeneous sample of subjects in terms of age, gender, education and geographical origin; secondly to facilitate the data's collection and analysis, which also took place through an online service linked to the mentioned application. For the circulation of the questionnaire it was used almost exclusively Facebook, both through the "word of mouth", and through the sharing of the link in pages and groups specifically related to the deafness field and the deaf culture. This fact made it impossible to select and manage the sample of participants, but the online application used for the research allow to select it further.

³² <https://drive.google.com/>

Having to analyze as well as quantitative data derived from the closed questions, even qualitative data from the open-ended questions, it was decided to close the questionnaire at about 43 answers.

The participants are all deaf people between 17 and 63 years old. The sample is quite heterogeneous in terms of age, even if most of the subject are between 17 and 35 years old (table 1), thus showing that the spread of use of Facebook, at least in the deaf community, is not exclusively related to young people.

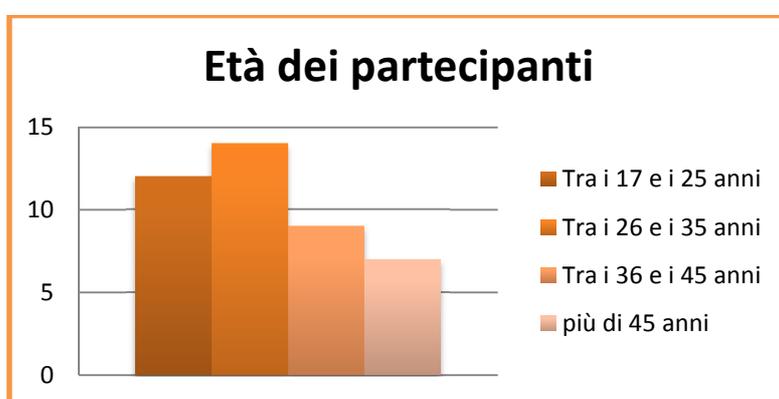


Table 1

The sample is made up of 18 (43%) male and 24 (57%) female subjects (table 2). They are mainly deaf people who received an oralist education (50%), the 13% affirm to have been educated with mixed methods (bimodal), while only the 7% with the Italian Sign Language (table 3). With regard to the education the sample of respondents is made up both by people who attended deaf students institutes and normal public school with hearing peers. One subject attended the bilingual school in Cossato and 7 are graduated or are studying at university.

However, the majority of the participants declare to prefer to communicate either using the verbal or signed language (63%), the 28% affirm

to prefer to use the verbal language, while only the 4% the exclusively use of the signed language (table 4).

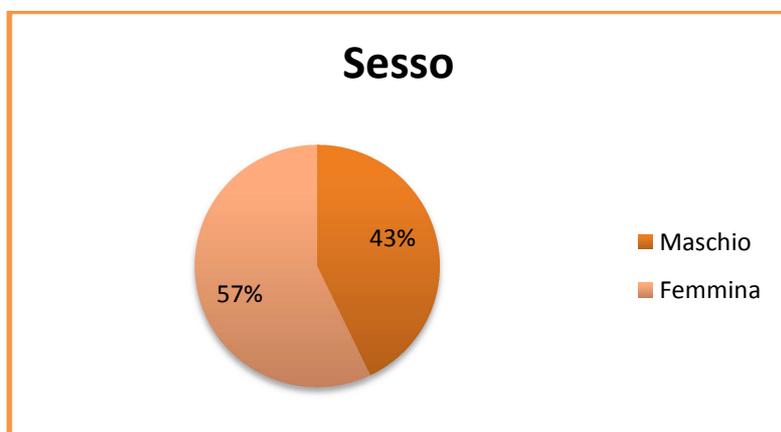


Table 2



Table 3

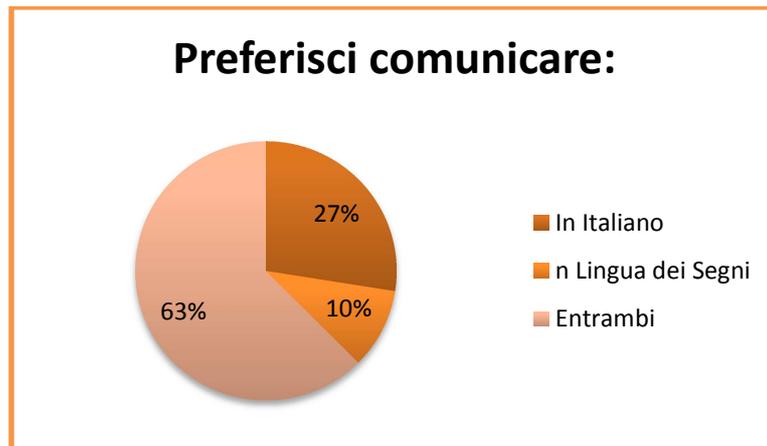


Table 4

4.2.3. Data analysis

For the analysis of the collected data it was used the software available in the same application exploited for the questionnaire itself (google drive). The data derived from the closed questions were analyzed as quantitative data, collected in graphs and tables and the evaluated through percentage. The open-ended questions, instead, were first analyzed through some “tag clouds³³” and then elaborated through a qualitative analysis.

³³ A *tag cloud* is a visual representation of the key words of a text.

Chapter 5

The results

In Chapter 4 we described the research in detail, including the goals, the research questions and a description of the methodology used. This last chapter aims to present an analysis of the data resulted from the questionnaires. When possible, the data are explained with reference to demographic data or compared to those deriving from similar studies. At the end of the Chapter some general conclusions and suggestions are presented.

5.1. Results analysis

The results are presented divided in three sections according to the research questions described in 4.1.. In the first section data regarding the sample's general preferences and practices of social networking are presented. These data are then followed by subjects' usage habits and perception of Facebook. The last part regards the sample's opinions with respect to Facebook considered as a language learning environment, including the possibility of improving language skills, their motivation and confidence through the use of such tool.

5.1.1. Research question 1: How important are technologies for Italian deaf people and which preferences do they show regarding the use of Social Networks?

The aim of this part of the questionnaire was to investigate the usage preferences of different communication technologies, including e-mails and instant messaging services, and then the preferences with regard to Social

Networks. The data collected show that the most used communication tools are systems of instant messaging such as Messenger and Whatsapp (35%), followed by Social Networks (Facebook, Twitter...) (22%) and then SMS (18%). The 8% affirm to prefer to communicate through e-mails, and only the 3% through Skype (table 5). This seem to be partially related to the age. Messenger and Whatsapp in fact appear to be used mainly by deaf people under 35 years old, SMS and e-mails are mainly used by people over 35 years old, while Social Networks seem to be more democratic and widely used at every age.

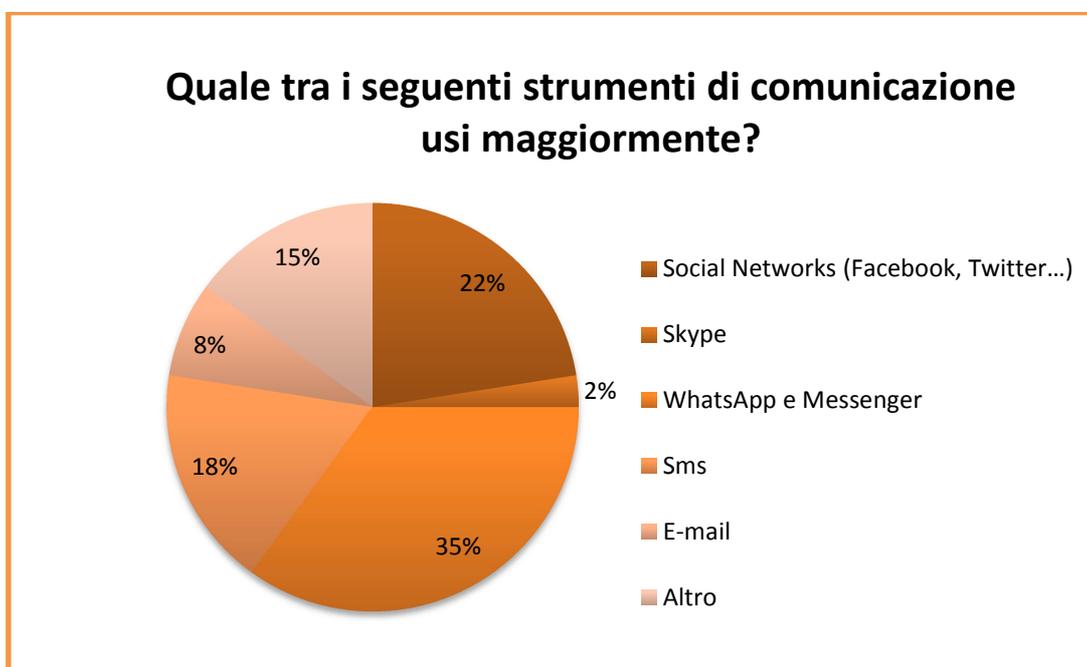


Table 5

We have also tried to understand how do they have access to Social Networks: the 22% affirm to use exclusively the computer, the 15% exclusively a mobile device, while the majority of the sample (63%) access Social Networks both with mobile devices or PC. Thus showing that at least the 78% of the respondents have a mobile phone that allow to surf the internet (table 6).

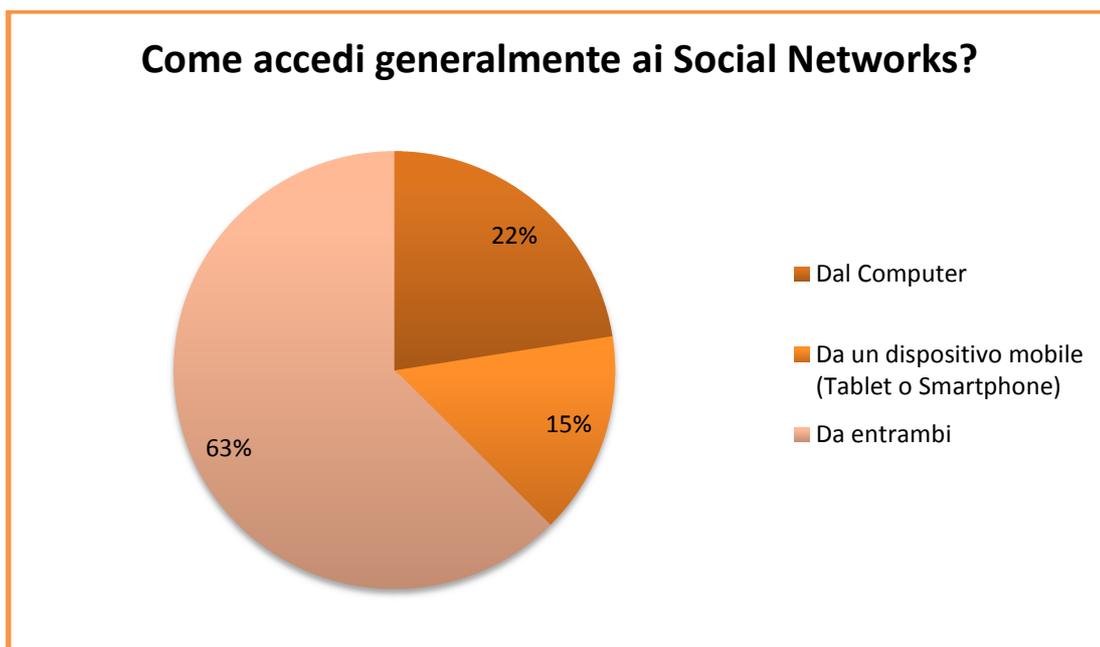


Table 6

We have then investigated which are considered to be the strengths and weaknesses of Social Networks according to deaf people. In order to identify the strengths, the subjects were asked why do they use Social Networks and in this case they could give more than one answer (table 7). According to the results the main reasons are of three different kind: to maintain contacts with friends (26%), to be updated with what happens around them and have access to information (24%) and to share contents such as photos, videos and materials with friends (20%). Another quite important aspect is that of having fun and relax (11%), while less important, according to the sample, are the possibility of meeting new people (6%), of letting friends know what they do (3%), knowing what friends do (3%), or just because almost everyone uses such tools (3%). These data are in line with those presented by Besana (2012) and, with regard to our research question and hypothesis (see 4.1.) they contribute to show how both the linguistic-communicative and the cultural-informational aspects of Social Networks are equally relevant for deaf users.

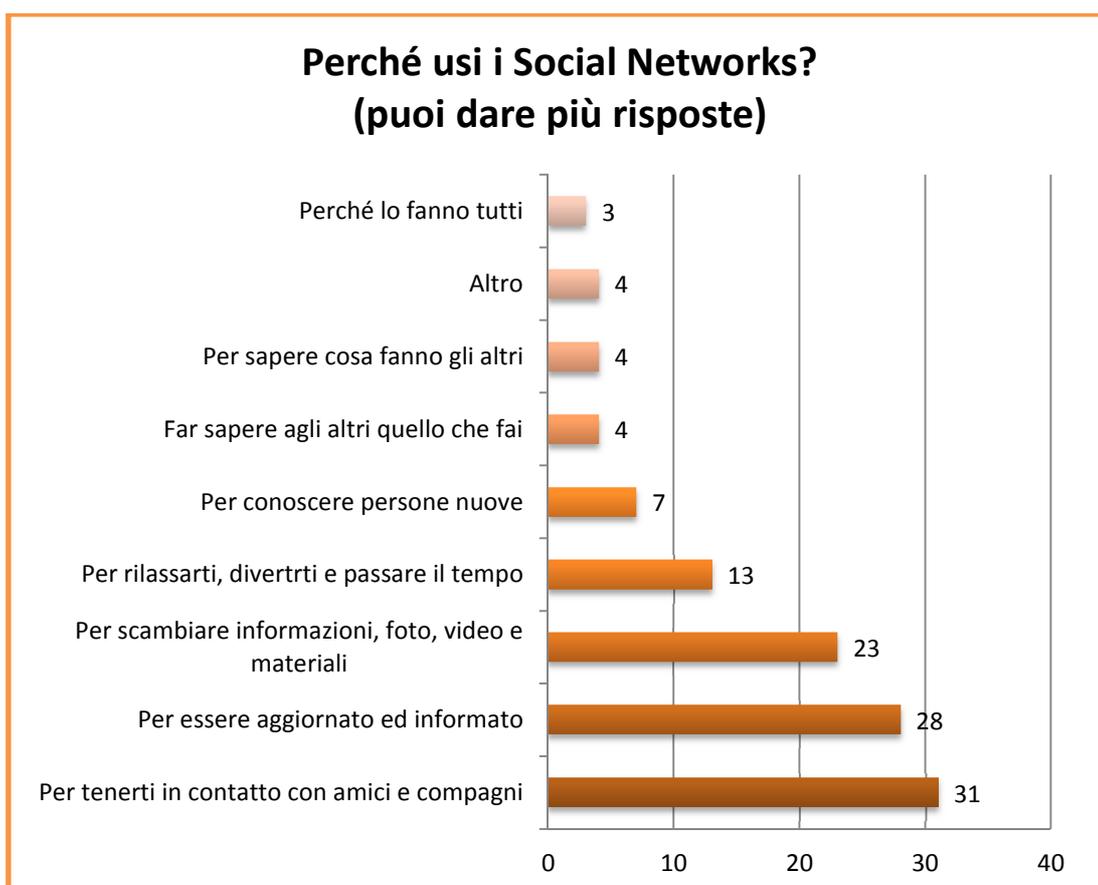


Table 7

In order to identify the negative aspects of Social Networks the subjects were asked to express themselves about what they do not like of such tools, and also in this case they could give more than one answer (table 8): only the 17% affirm to be worried about the privacy, which instead, as showed by *Wave6* (see 2.2.) and by Besana (2012) is the main inconvenience according to the hearing community. According to deaf people the worst aspect of Social Network is the fact that often wrong or equivocal information are spread (27%). Thus confirming again the importance they give to such tools with regard to the access to information and the possibility of being updated with what happens in the world. Another important negative aspect is related to the difficulty in managing the time while using such tools (24%).

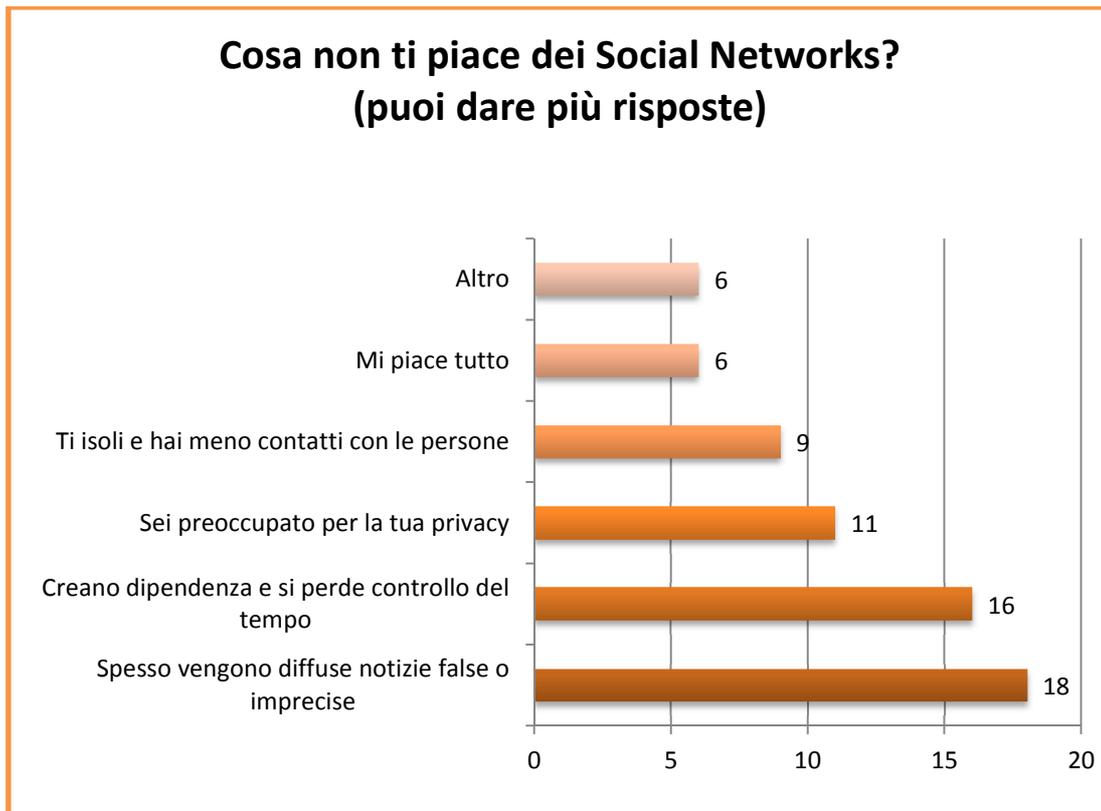


Table 8

We also asked through an open-ended questions which was their favorite Social Network and why, in order to understand which features typical of such systems they consider as more important and attractive. The answers were first analyzed through the creation of a tag cloud (see picture 2). This image allow us to capture at first sight which are the most frequent words and therefore the relevance they give to certain aspects: *Facebook* appear to be the favorite Social Network for the majority of the participants. Other important aspects are linked to the opportunity of *communication*, and to concept of *friends* and *contacts*. *Whatsapp*, *Messenger* and *Skype* seem to be relevant too even if they are more technological communication systems than Social Networks. Also some aspects related to the visual communication emerge through words such as *photo*, *video*, *LIS*, *vedere*...

- (1) “con la nuova tecnologia come Whatsapp, SMS ed Email ci ha cambiato molto la qualità di vita per poter affrontare con qualsiasi persona, in confronto del passato, la grande sofferenza per la mancata comunicazione, dovrei chieder a qualcuno di fare la telefonata ed ora non piu' uso indipendentemente affrontare tutto da solo. La gran felicità per me !!!”

“facebook - skype - email - fax perchè mi consentono di comunicare a mio agio essendo io sorda con persone sorde e udenti”

“Uso molto e-mail per comunicare con tutte le persone se è una cosa lunga mentre più breve uso sms. Sono tutti i mezzi di comunicazione molto versatili per noi Sordi. Skype lo uso raramente e so che tra i Sordi si adopera molto perché dà possibilità di comunicare in Lis”

- (2) “Facebook. Utili per info anche di usare molto i video con la LIS, ASL, LSF e anche Lingua Segni Internazionale.”

“non ce una preferenza, ci si adatta visto che le barriere di comunicazione per sordi sono limitate e ristrette, si cerca sempre una soluzione saltellando da un network o una app all'altra per cercare di avere più comunicazioni visive con la nostra amata e preziosa LIS”

“Facebook, perchè è più divulgativo con immagini e video”

Besides the communicative aspect, the possibility of sharing contents and materials appear to be important too (3), together with the opportunity of being updated and to have large access to information (4). Also the popularity and the simplicity of the Social Network seem to be features attractive for deaf people (5).

- (3) “Facebook, messenger .. Perché è comodo di comunicare, scambiare dei confronti, dei materiali”

“Facebook per la condivisione con gli amici di foto, link, notizie”

- (4) “Facebook: ricca informazione”

“Tutti perché è comodo contattare facilmente e anche informazioni culturali e ricevere le notizie interessanti”

- (5) “Facebook, mi piace perché ho la possibilità di essere in contatto con molte persone ed avere molti eventi in segnalazione”

“Facebook, entro in contatto facilmente con gli amici... soprattutto da quando ci sono smartphone, è possibile trovarli costantemente collegati.”

“Uso sempre su Facebook perchè è molto popolare...”

“twitter. facile e usato da molti personaggi noti (arte-teatro-politica)”

To conclude, in relation to the first research question, the data collected show the relevance that communication technologies have in deaf people's lives. They are tools that allow them to communicate both with hearing and deaf people thus favoring their socialization, integration and autonomy in the daily life. As we had assumed the communicative problems of deaf people affect the use and perception they have of such tools. Therefore visual aspects of the communication become very important: the opportunity of sharing contents such as videos and images, but also the opportunity to use the Sign Language to communicate. With regard to Social Networks, their use is quite spread among deaf people of different age, probably because they allow not only a wide communication with hearing and deaf people, visual or written, but also because they favor their access to information and update.

5.1.2. Research question 2: How do Italian deaf people actually use Facebook?

As the questionnaire was administered through an online module and it was spread through pages and groups in Facebook, we know that all the respondents have a profile in such Social Network.

The subjects were first asked how often do they access Facebook (table 9). The 80% of the sample affirm to access every day or almost every day, while the 17% few times a week and only the 3% few times in a month. Thus confirming that this Social Network has fully entered the daily habits of many people, deaf community included. In order to better understand their usage habits of Facebook and the features of their communication we have also tried to investigate their network of friends (table 10). Most of them affirm to

communicate both with hearing and deaf people (69%), the 26% mainly with deaf friends, while only the 5% exclusively with hearing friends.

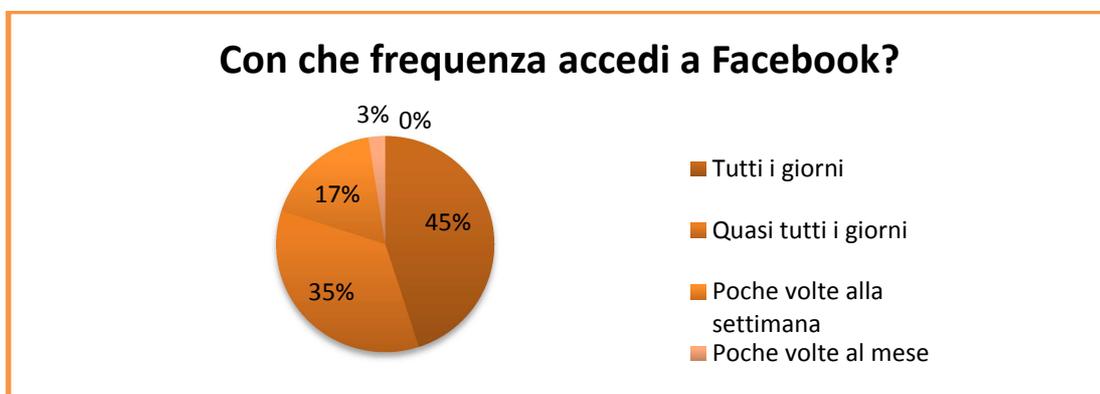


Table 9

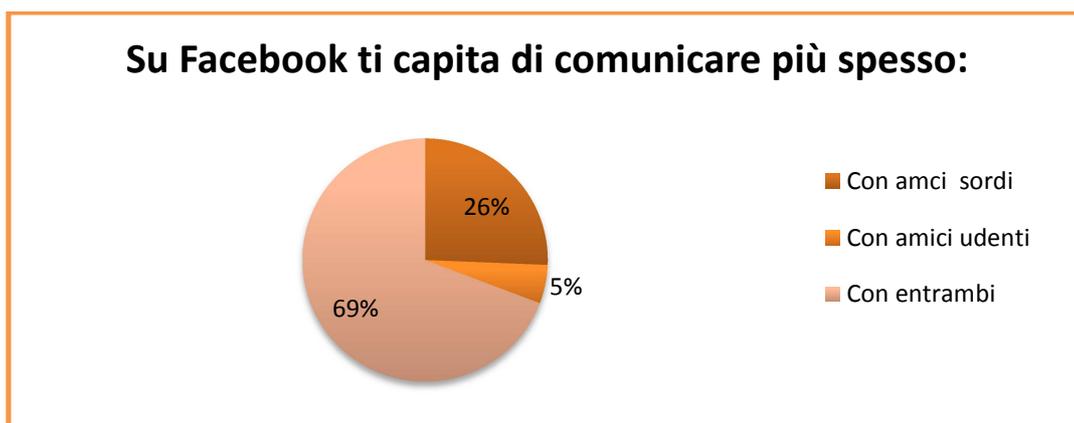


Table 10

The subjects were then asked to express themselves about the favorite activities they do in Facebook, and in this case they could give more than one answer (table 11). The results are quite interesting. On the one hand the main extent to which Facebook seem to be used is to chatting and messaging with friends (18% of the answers), thus confirming what was reported also in Wave6. On the other hand another important aspect that was already mentioned in 5.1.1. emerges, that is the possibility of being updated and sharing

contents. In fact, at the same level there is the activity of reading and sharing news and information (17% of the answers). Thus demonstrating the importance of such a tool to favor deaf people's access to information. With the 15% of preferences there is the possibility of commenting friends' posts, and with the 13% the passive observation of their activities. Find old friends (11%) and share videos and photos (10%) then follow, while meet new people (6%) update the status and profile (4%), and play (4%) seem to be only marginal.

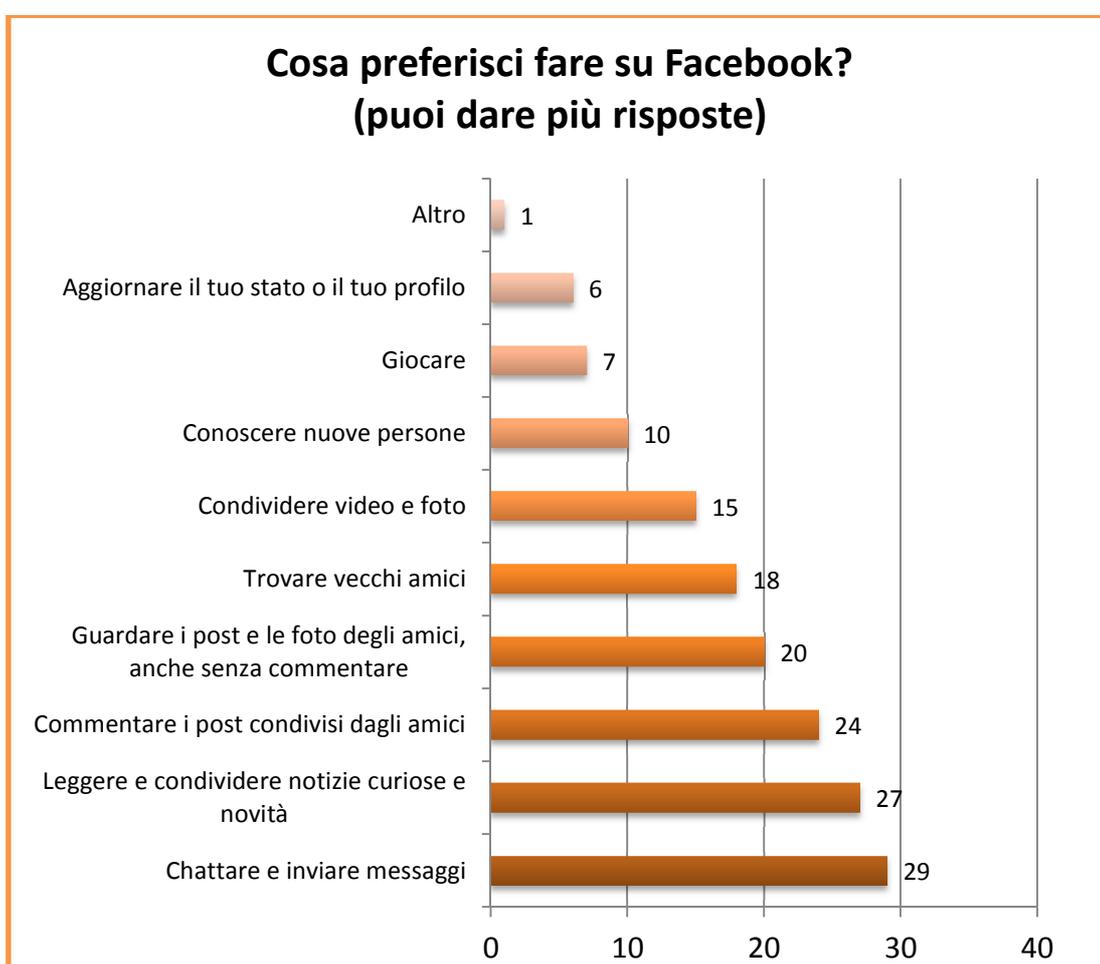


Table 11

To conclude Facebook is very popular also among deaf people. It is mainly used to communicate both with hearing and deaf people, as it allow to

communicate via chat, to integrate written messages with visual contents (photos, videos...) or to use directly the Sign Language. But it is also used as a tool to access information, to read and share news, to comment and express the own opinions.

5.1.3. Research question 3: is Facebook considered by Italian deaf people as a tool that support their language learning process? If yes, how?

In the previous chapters we assumed that Social Networks are positive settings for the process of language learning. We started from the assumption that language learning is a process that involve an active participation of the learner and that people learn languages better when they interact with other learners or people in an authentic communicative environments. This assumption is supported by data deriving from the research of Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) (see 2.2.2.), who showed that Malaysian university students are aware of the potential of Facebook for the process of language learning, and they believe that it could be used as an online learning environment.

We also proposed that Social Networks could be particularly relevant for deaf people as they seem to suit their specific communicative problems. So, taking the above mentioned research as a model, we tried to investigate the deaf people's perception of Facebook as a language learning environment. The sample was asked to express a preference in a scale of five levels (two positive, two negative and one neutral) of agreement/disagreement with regard to three aspects: the possibility of improving language skills, motivation and confidence. Some general items about the perception of the process of learning were also proposed. This part was then concluded with two open-ended questions.

With regard to the possibility of **improving language skills** we wanted to investigate the writing and reading activities, and the opportunity of learning new words. The data collected show that the 68% of the sample agree in considering Facebook as a useful tool to practice the *writing skills*, while only the 15% disagree (tables 12 and 13).

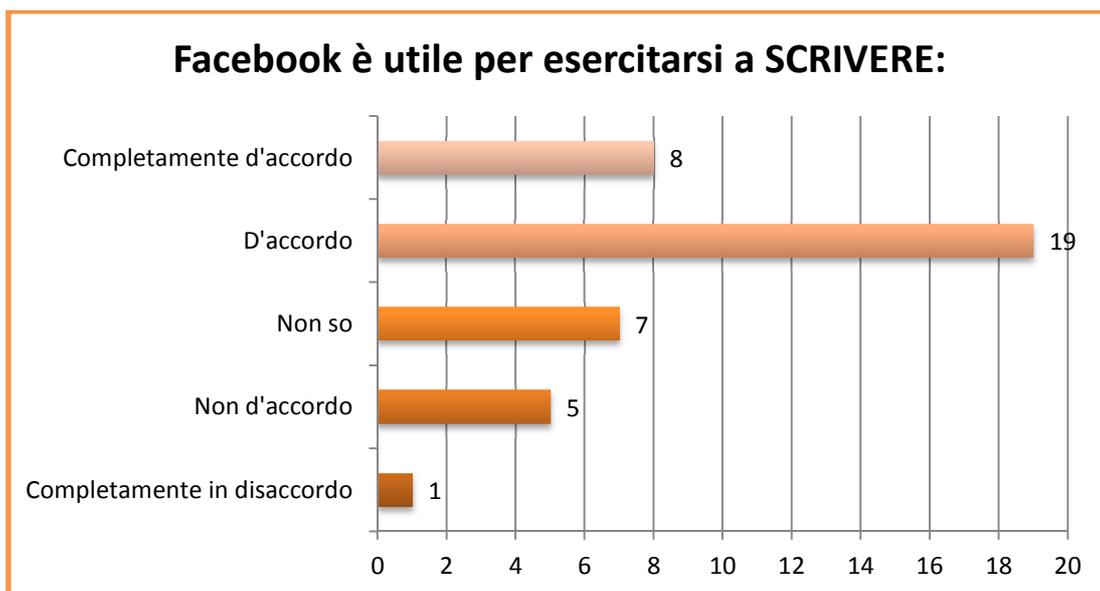


Table 12

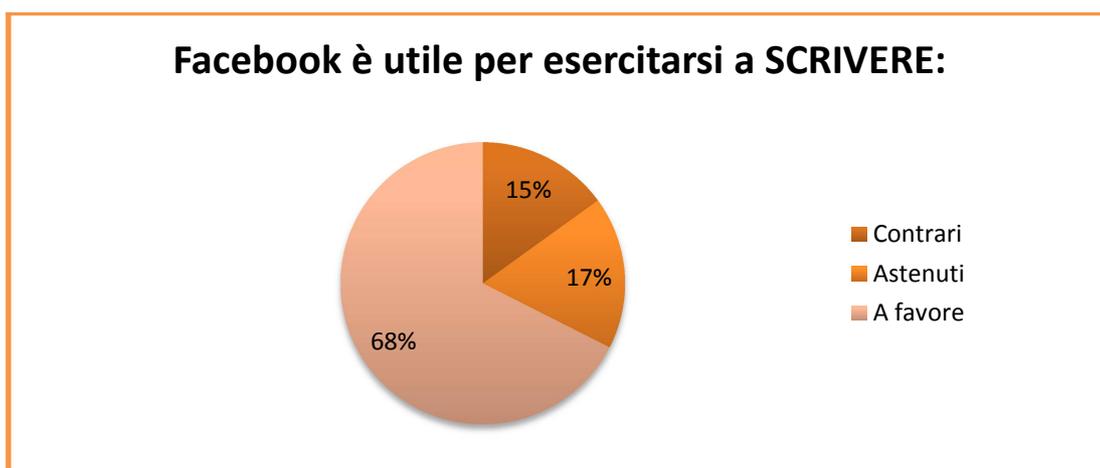


Table 13

Also with regard to the opportunity of practicing *reading skills* in a Social Network such as Facebook (tables 14 and 15), the majority of the sample seem to agree (66%), the 17% abstain, and only the 15% disagree.

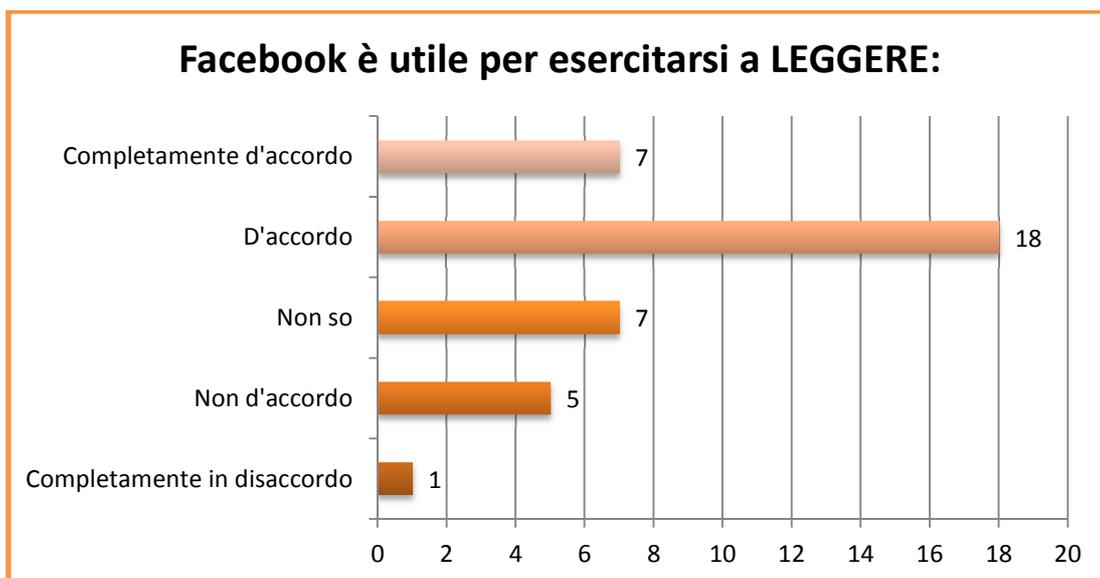


Table 14



Table 15

The opportunity of *learning new words* seem to be the best perceived aspect by the deaf community (tables 16 and 17). In fact, the 78% of the subjects affirm that Facebook is useful to enlarge the vocabulary, and only the 10% of the sample disagree with this statement. Also data arising from the open-ended questions will be described to better explain these results. However, it is important to point out that although these tools are considered useful for the enhancement of the linguistic skills these data do not proof any

effective linguistic improvement. They only show the users' awareness of the potential of such tools.

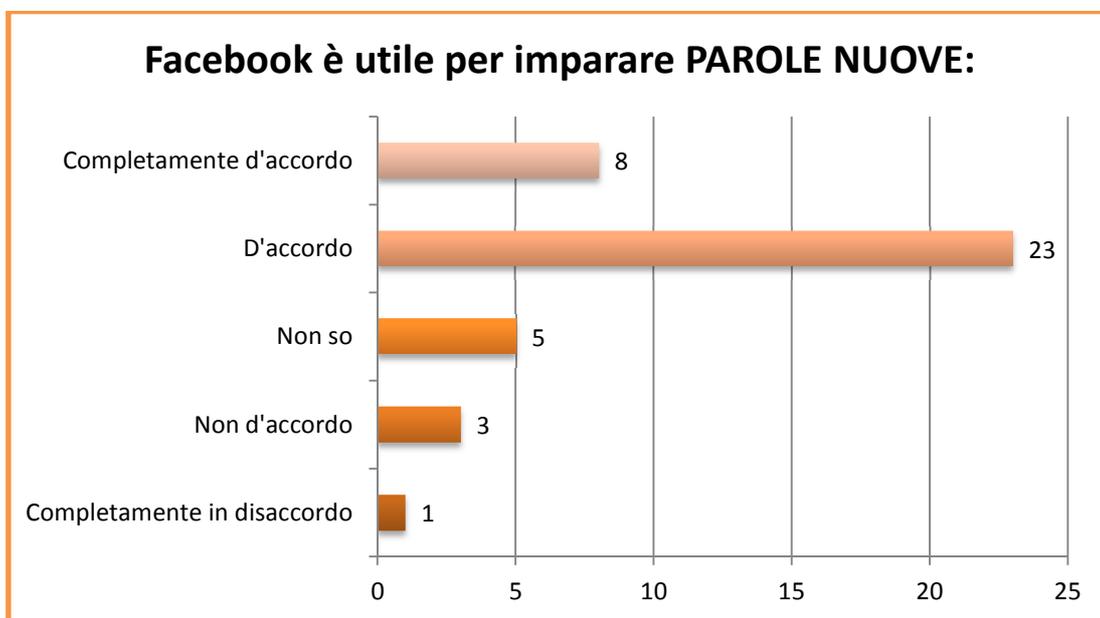


Table 16

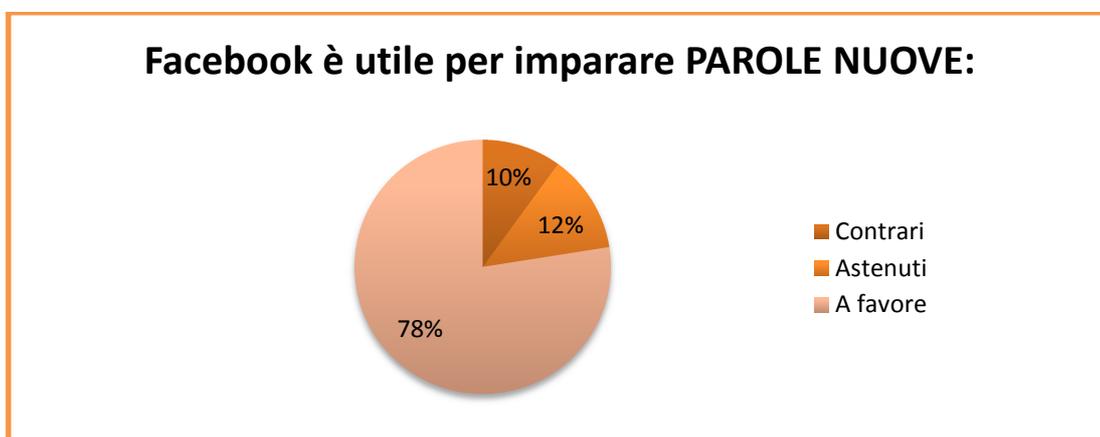


Table 17

Among the many aspects that concur in the success of the process of language learning an important role is that played by **motivation** (see 1.2.). Thus, we decided to investigate also if deaf people consider Facebook as a

motivating linguistic environment especially with regard to reading and writing activities (tables 18 and 19), and to the opportunity of interaction through the written language (tables 20 and 21). The results show that such a tool is definitely considered as motivating. In fact, the 62% of the respondents affirm that Facebook make reading and writing activities more enjoyable, and, the 75% of the sample agree that Facebook encourage them to interact through the written language.

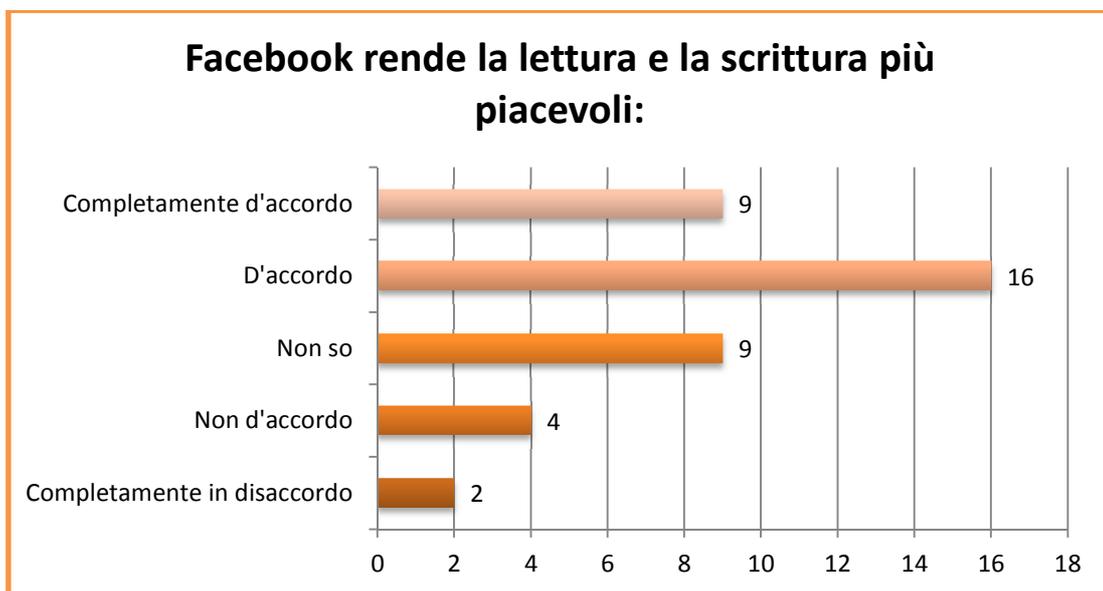


Table 18

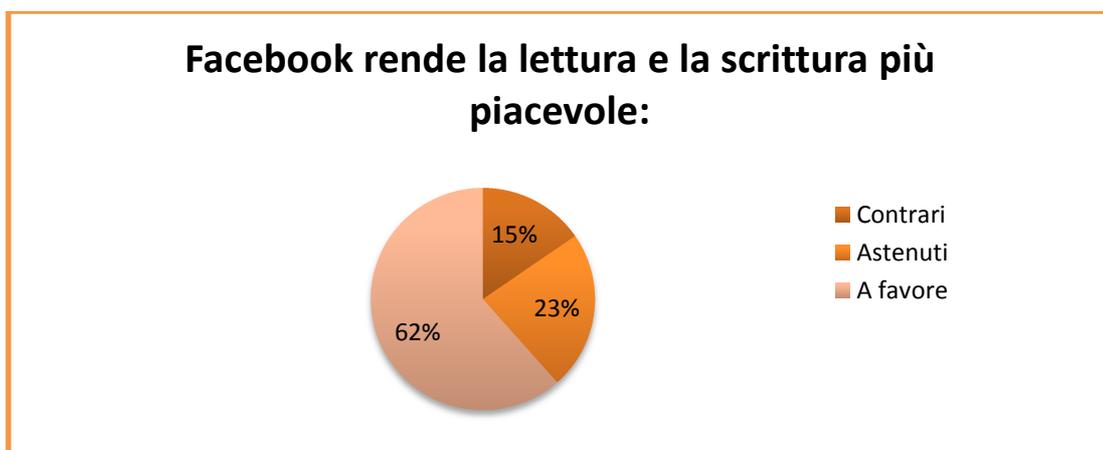


Table 19

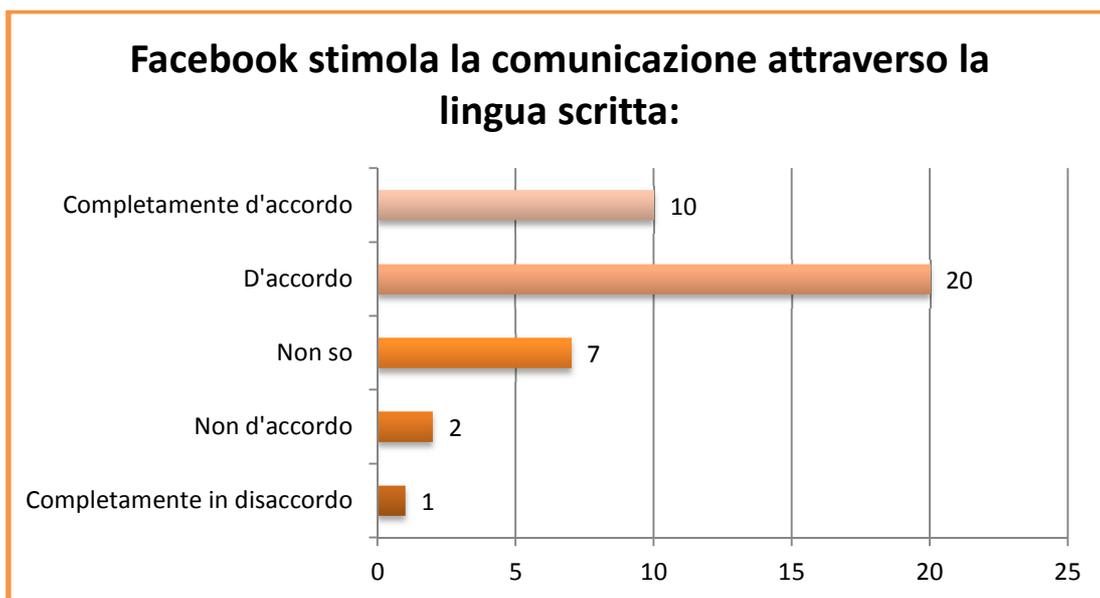


Table 20



Table 21

So far all the results seem to be in line with those presented by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) with regard to Malaysian university students. However, the results appear to be slightly different when we refer to **confidence**. Our assumption was that, exactly as for Malaysian students, the use of Facebook could increase deaf people's confidence in communicating through the target language, thus avoiding anxiety and stress and the activation of the

affective filter. Actually, although they seem to be more confident when they communicate through Facebook with respect to when they do it verbally (tables 22 and 23), the majority of them (52%) keep being worried about making linguistic mistakes (tables 24 and 25).

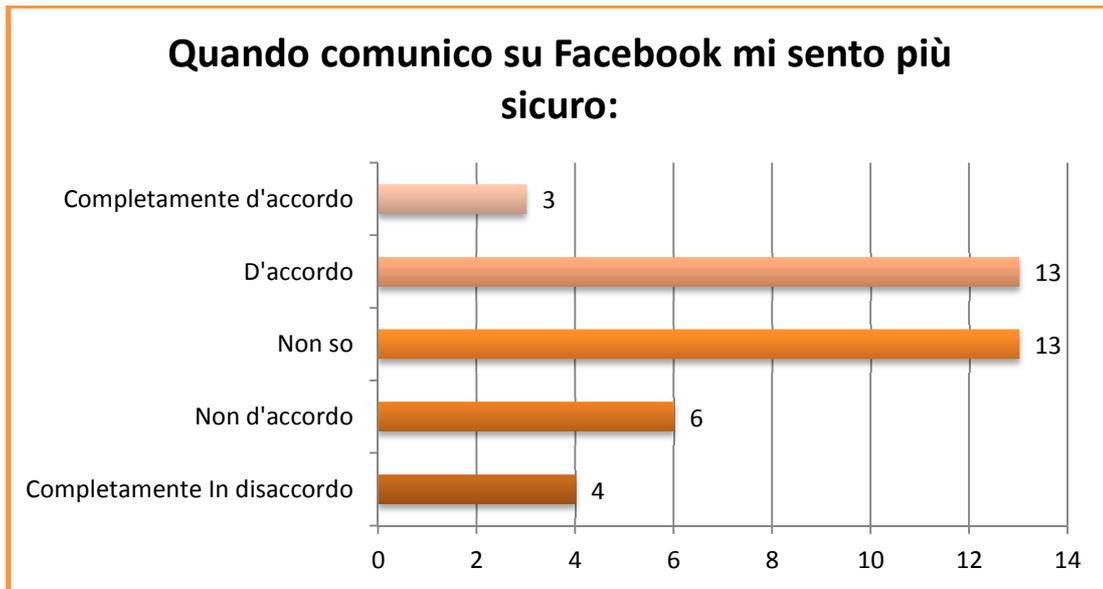


Table 22



Table 23



Table 24



Table 25

The subjects were also directly asked if they considered Facebook as a useful tool to **learn the Italian language**. Firstly they were asked to express their agreement/disagreement with respect to a statement, and then we tried to explore more in detail such a topic through an open-ended question. The results show that the 63% of the sample agree that Facebook is a useful tool to improve

their competence in the Italian written language, while the 15% disagree, and the 22% abstain (tables 26 and 27).

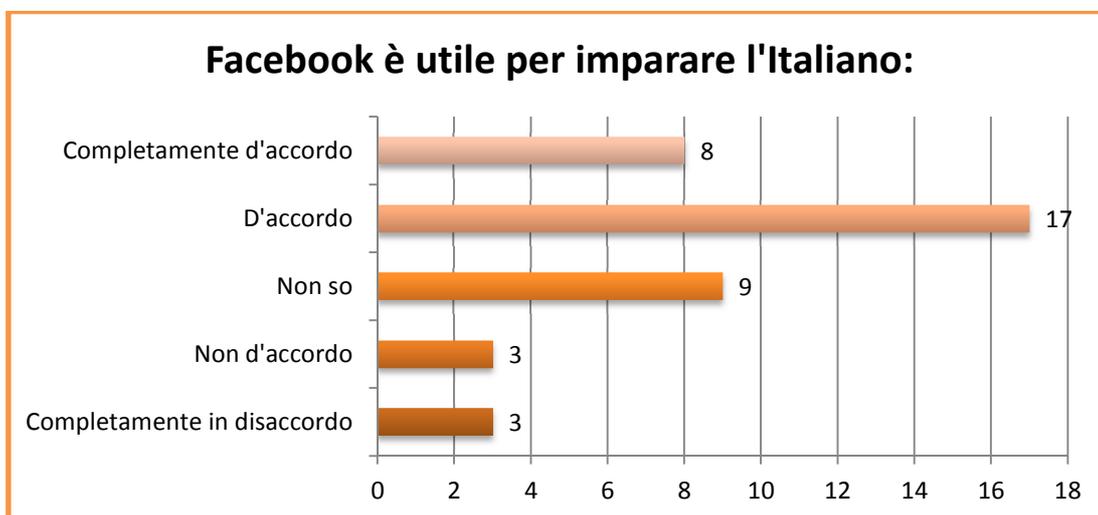


Table 26

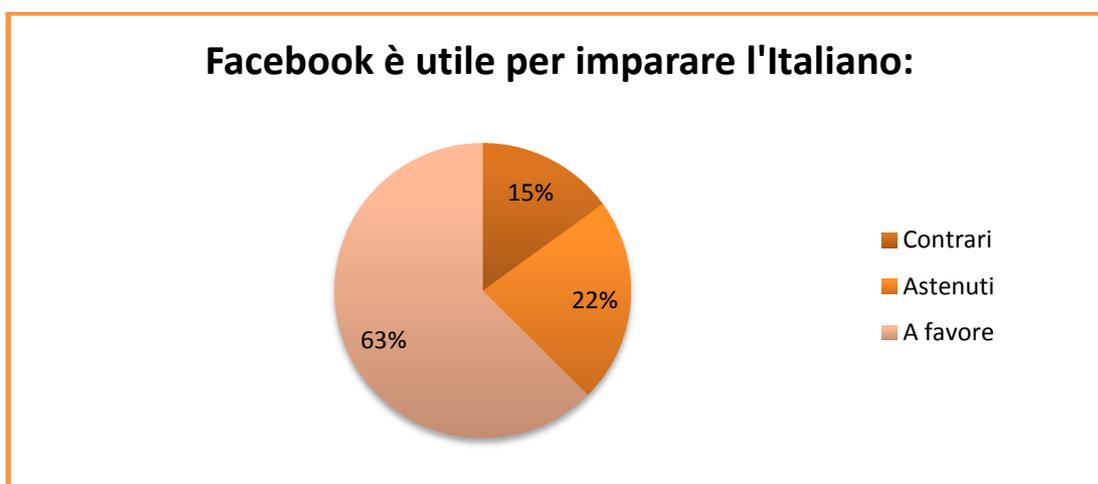


Table 27

The aim of the **first open ended question**, thus, was to understand if the sample considered Facebook as a useful tool to improve their linguistic competence, and why does it support such process. We deliberately avoided any

specific reference to the Italian language. Also in this case we have tried to analyze the answers at first through a tag cloud (picture 3), and then in detail.

Also in this case, through a rapid view to the tag cloud of the answers it is possible to identify the most recurring words: the frequent use of *migliorare*, *meglio*, *competenze*, *conoscenze* and *linguistica* probably show the general opinion that Facebook can support the improvement of the linguistic competence. But also the word *no* seem to appear quite often, thus demonstrating that not all the subjects agree. Words such as *parole*, *nuove*, *commenti*, *leggendo*, *libri*, *scrivere*, *frasi* identify what probably are considered the best activities in order to improve the linguistic competence, while *LIS*, *segni* and *straniere*, can be related to the peculiarity of deaf people's linguistic background, thus demonstrating their need to enhance also the competence in the sign language and foreign languages.



Picture 3: Tag Cloud on Facebook as a tool that support the linguistic improvement

Analyzing the answers in detail, it is possible to realize that they are in line with the data deriving from the closed items: thus showing a positive

opinion by the majority of the sample, a negative position by a minority, and doubts from another small part of the sample. Also in this case we divided them according to main themes.

Subjects who consider Facebook as a tool that support the improvement of their linguistic competence mainly affirm that this is due to the opportunity that it offer with regard to reading and writing activities and the interaction with other people through the written language (6); some others refer to the opportunity of learning new words (7), or the opportunity of modify and correct the productions and discuss the mistakes with native speakers (8).

(6) "Penso di sì, vedendo notizie e curiosità e anche commenti"

"leggendo i commenti degli altri miei amici sia udenti sia sordi (se hanno una buona competenza in italiano) (...) chetando con amici e scrivendo sui commenti e post."

"Sì, potrebbe avere anche questa funzione attraverso la conversazione con altre persone per aggiornarsi di un fatto o per spiegare una data questione (...)"

"Sì molto perché leggo e guardo le frasi (...)"

"Perché per le persone sorde scrivere è importante (...)"

(7) "Tipo nella pagina di fb che ci sono parole nuove e molto significative infatti ho imparato tante parole grazie a fb :)"

"per avere più vocaboli nuovi (...)"

"trovando parole che non uso quotidianamente così da poter ricordarmi e aggiornarmi"

"(...) capire il punto di vista dell'altro imparando nuovi vocaboli più complessi."

(8) "rileggendo il mio commento con la possibilità di correggere. Accetto suggerimenti e correzioni da qualche persona competente in linguaggio lessicale."

"(...) con il mio ragazzo udente che mi aiuta e mi spiega quello che non capisco."

Among those subjects who recognize the role of support of Facebook from the linguistic point of view, someone have also mentioned the opportunity

of enhancing also the competence in other languages, such as English and the sign language (9):

- (9) “(...) ci sono sordi che sono a livello avanzato nel comprendere e leggere e possono usare social network per approfondire la conoscenza nelle lingue straniere.”
“(...) interagendo anche con persone straniere”
“(...) seguo anche 2/3 pagine in inglese che queste mi permettono di migliorare qualcosa in inglese che sono ancora in livello base.”
“(...) mi permette di avere dei segni in video per imparare altri segni in LIS (...)”

Subjects who do not consider Facebook as a support for the enhance of the linguistic competence, mainly affirm that such a process is possible through the reading of books (10):

- (10) “No. Per migliorare le mie competenze linguistiche approfondirei letture di libri semplici e facili da comprendere”
“No, amo molto la lettura quella sui libri! Non ho avuto bisogno di Facebook per migliorare le mie competenze. Sono migliorata grazie alla lettura dei diversi romanzi. Viva i libri.”

To conclude this part of the questionnaire the sample was required to answer to a **second open-ended question**: Do you think that Facebook could be used in the field of deaf people’s education? Why?

Here the sample seem to be divided: on the one hand there are subjects that support the possibility of using such tool to educate deaf people, mainly thanks to all the already analyzed opportunities that it offer: reading and writing activities, interactions, the possibility of learning new words and its richness of informations and contents (11). On the other hand there are a those subjects who are not in favor of such use of Social Networks. In this case the reasons can be related to what are considered to be the negative aspects of Social Networks (table 8), such as problems of privacy, wrong or bad contents, fear of wasting too much time and fear of being isolated from real life (12).

Some other subjects, however, point out how Social Networks could be useful tools for the education of deaf people even if they show some disadvantages, affirming that they should be integrated with other educational activities (13).

- (11) “Sì, perchè c'è la divulgazione di informazioni corrette”
“Si perché soprattutto imparare a leggere e scrivere l'italiano”
“Per arricchire i vocaboli e imparare a fare dei dialoghi e meditare e riflettere anche sulla lingua parlata e scritta”
“Potrebbe essere uno valido strumento per l'educazione perchè è una piattaforma dove sono presenti molte realtà, dai giornali alle persone, e permette di essere in contatto con quello che succede nel mondo (...)”
- (12) “Secondo me no, anzi a volte è diseducativo e poco costruttivo. Diventa una specie di droga (...)”
“Qualsiasi social network non lo ritengo idoneo per migliorare l'educazione, sia per alcuni contenuti sia perché la privacy non c'è”
“Assolutamente no. Per educare i sordi si vanno a corsi convegni seminari si sta a contatto con altri x poter scambiare opinioni e insegnarsi a vicenda le curiosità.”
- (13) “Secondo me non è indicato come metodo di educazione iniziale.il miglior modo per me resta la logopedia è meglio insegnare ad un bambino ad esprimersi in italiano, mentre su Facebook viene usato molto spesso lo slang...io dopo anni ho cominciato a capire "quei vocaboli"!!!!!!”
“Per l'educazione no, molti scrivono come viene, con acronimi o forme contratte... non c'è sempre lo stimolo a migliorare la comunicazione. Però serve per continuare ad allenarsi... ma l'educazione di base alla lingua italiana o straniera scritta dev'essere insegnata sistematicamente e probabilmente in modo assistito.”
“Secondo me dovrà esserlo. Facebook è un campo vasto dove includono moltissime persone anche normoudenti. I quali hanno la possibilità di conoscere la disabilità linguistica dei sordi ed eventualmente aiutarli a correggere il linguaggio. I sordi, dall'altra parte, avranno modo e beneficio di relazionare con la società normoudente. È relativamente importante però che una volta instaurato un buon rapporto con diversi utenti ci sia la possibilità di farsi incontrare per avere un approccio diretto con il mondo diverso da quello che è abituato finora. Con questa possibilità avrà modo anche di sentirsi utile anche nel mondo del lavoro e sociale.”
“Si può imparare tramite Facebook e le sue notizie (però non è facile distinguere le notizie vere da quelle false). Si può aggiornarsi attraverso diversi link o video e mettersi in contatto con altri sordi o

5.2. Conclusion and suggestions

On the basis of the results emerged from the questionnaires, it is possible to affirm that the use of technological tools of communication and in particular of Social Networks is affecting also deaf people's lives, supporting their socialization, integration, autonomy and self-esteem. The features typical of deaf people's communication affect also the preferences and perception they have of such tools: visual aspects such as the opportunity to communicate through the sign language and to share videos and images become very important. Besides some negative aspects of Social Networks mainly related to the contents, their use is quite spread among deaf people of different age, not only because they enable them to communicate both with hearing and deaf people, using the written or the signed language and integrating messages with videos and images, but also because they play an important role in terms of access to information and update.

The results also show the awareness of deaf users of Facebook on the opportunity that such systems offer in relation to the process of language learning, thus including Italian written language, Sign Language, but also foreign languages. It is considered as a useful and motivating tool to practice reading and writing skills, to interact with native speakers and expand the vocabulary, as well as to be updated. Even if they affirm to be worried about making mistakes, they seem to be more confident when communicating through a Social Network rather than face to face. Generally speaking it is considered as a tool that can support their linguistic improvement thanks to its potential. However, negative aspects typical of Social Networks such as the fear of wasting time and of isolation from the real world, inappropriate contents and the problems of privacy seem to discourage deaf people from considering the possibility of using them as educational tools.

As the linguistic problems of deaf people are much more complex with respect to learners of a L2, it would also be interesting to see if they are actually

able to improve their linguistic competence through the use of Social Networks, and to identify what types of activities, possibly, lead to the acquisition of verbal language.

Our data, however, are in line with those presented by Besana (2012) and Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010). We tried to show that also deaf adults are aware of the potential that Social Networks offer to support their learning process, especially from a linguistic point of view. Nonetheless, there are many doubts on the possibility of using them as sole educational tools, mainly connected to prejudices and wrong uses, which could prevent their integration in traditional educational settings. So, if on the one hand the possibility of using them as informal learning tools emerges from our data, on the other hand it arises the need to set procedures, methods and projects to educate young students (still inside traditional scholastic environments) on a thoughtful and responsible use of such tools, in order to allow them to exploit such opportunities in the adulthood or outside educational settings.

Conclusion

Starting from the assumption that language learning is a process that involve an active participation of the learner and that people learn languages better when they interact with other learners or people in an authentic communicative environments, we assumed that Social Networks, thanks to their features, are positive settings for the process of language learning. We also proposed that Social Networks could be particularly relevant for deaf people as they seem to suit their specific communicative problems. The goal of the research was therefore to investigate, through a questionnaire, Italian deaf people's preferences and usage habits of Social Networks, together with their perception of such tools as possible language learning environments.

The results confirm the importance that technological tools, especially Social Networks, have in the life of deaf people as they support their socialization, integration and autonomy. In line with the study by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) our data also show the awareness of deaf users of Facebook on the opportunity that such systems offer in relation to the process of language learning.

Appendix

The Questionnaire

Sono una studentessa dell'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia. Sto facendo una ricerca sull'uso che i sordi fanno dei Social Networks, e sulla percezione che avete di questi strumenti dal punto di vista linguistico. Il questionario è molto semplice, richiede solo pochi minuti. Tutti i dati sono raccolti in forma anonima e saranno utilizzati al solo scopo della ricerca. Se hai dubbi o domande contattami!

Mail: casagrande.valeria@gmail.com

Skype: casagrande.valeria

1. Dove hai studiato? (nome della scuola)

2. Sesso:

- Maschio
 Femmina

3. Quanti anni hai?

4. Che tipo di educazione hai avuto?

- Oralista
 Lingua dei Segni
 Entrambe (bimodale, italiano segnato...)

5. Preferisci comunicare:

- In Italiano
- In Lingua dei segni
- Entrambi

6. Quale tra i seguenti strumenti di comunicazione usi maggiormente?

- Social Networks (Facebook, Twitter...)
- Skype
- Whatsapp e Messenger
- Sms
- E-mail
- Altro:

7. Qual è il tuo Social Network preferito e perché ti piace?

8. Come accedi generalmente ai Social Networks?

- Dal Computer
- Da un dispositivo mobile (tablet o smartphone)
- Da entrambi

9. Perché usi i Social Networks? (puoi dare più risposte)

- Per tenerti in contatto con amici e compagni
- Far sapere agli altri quello che fai
- Perché lo fanno tutti
- Per sapere cosa fanno gli altri
- Per essere aggiornato e informato su cosa succede nel mondo
- Per rilassarti, divertirti e passare il tempo
- Per scambiare informazioni, foto, video e materiali
- Per conoscere persone nuove

Altro:

10. Cosa non ti piace dei Social Networks? (puoi dare più risposte)

- Sei preoccupato per la tua privacy
- Creano dipendenza e si perde il controllo del tempo
- Ti isoli e hai meno contatti con le persone
- Spesso vengono diffuse notizie false o imprecise
- Mi piace tutto
- Altro:

11. Con che frequenza accedi a Facebook?

- Tutti i giorni
- Quasi tutti i giorni
- Poche volte alla settimana
- Poche volte al mese
- Quasi mai

12. Su Facebook ti capita di comunicare più spesso...

- Con amici sordi
- Con amici udenti
- Con entrambi

13. Cosa preferisci fare su Facebook? (puoi dare più risposte)

- Chattare e inviare messaggi
- Commentare i post condivisi dagli amici
- Guardare i post e le foto degli amici, anche senza commentare
- Condividere video e foto
- Leggere e condividere notizie curiose e novità
- Aggiornare il tuo stato o il tuo profilo
- Trovare vecchi amici
- Conoscere nuove persone
- Giocare

Altro:

COSA PENSI DELLE SEGUENTI AFFERMAZIONI?

completa la griglia esprimendo una preferenza

1. FACEBOOK E' UTILE PER IMPARARE L'ITALIANO

	Completamente d'accordo	D'accordo	Non so	Non d'accordo	Completamente in disaccordo
1.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

2. FACEBOOK E' UTILE PER ESERCITARSI A SCRIVERE

	Completamente d'accordo	D'accordo	Non so	Non d'accordo	Completamente in disaccordo
2.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

3. FACEBOOK E' UTILE PER ESERCITARSI A LEGGERE

	Completamente d'accordo	D'accordo	Non so	Non d'accordo	Completamente in disaccordo
3.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

4. FACEBOOK E' UTILE PER IMPARARE PAROLE NUOVE

	Completamente d'accordo	D'accordo	Non so	Non d'accordo	Completamente in disaccordo
4.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

5. FACEBOOK RENDE LA LETTURA E LA SCRITTURA PIU' PIACEVOLE

	Completamente d'accordo	D'accordo	Non so	Non d'accordo	Completamente in disaccordo
5.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

6. FACEBOOK STIMOLA LA COMUNICAZIONE ATTRAVERSO LA LINGUA SCRITTA

	Completamente d'accordo	D'accordo	Non so	Non d'accordo	Completamente in disaccordo
6.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

7. QUANDO COMUNICO SU FACEBOOK MI PREOCCUPO MENO DEGLI ERRORI LINGUISTICI

	Completamente d'accordo	D'accordo	Non so	Non d'accordo	Completamente in disaccordo
7.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

8. QUANDO COMUNICO SU FACEBOOK MI SENTO PIU' SICURO

	Completamente d'accordo	D'accordo	Non so	Non d'accordo	Completamente in disaccordo
8.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Pensi che Facebook ti sia di supporto nel migliorare le tue competenze linguistiche? se sì, in che modo?

Secondo te Facebook (o un altro Social Network) può essere utilizzato per l'educazione dei sordi? perchè?

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