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Students' participation in social networking writing tasks

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Abstract

The rapid development of information and communication technologies has brought chances in various pedagogical and technological application and processes. Currently, social networking sites have been utilized for teaching and learning where students learn through social sites such as Facebook. This research investigates students' participation when they have to carry out writing tasks for English Language subject through social networking site; Facebook. Results showed that students were actively participating in the writing tasks that involve greetings, describing character and text completion. However, their participation was influenced by factors such as motivation or accessibility problems. However, students' are found to improve their day-to-day writing because they can get immediate feedback from the teachers as well as their friends.

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1. Introduction

A social networking site is a web-based site and a part of Web 2.0 tools that allows individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and also view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). A study conducted by National School Boards Association (2007) found that 59% of young children and teenagers of nine to seventeen years old reported spending almost as much time using social networking services and Web sites as they spend watching television. 59% of online students said that they talked about any education related topics, including college or college planning, learning outside of school, news, careers or jobs, politics, ideas, religion or morals and schoolwork. Students have spent most of their time discussion through online rather than real-life discussion. Surprisingly about 50% of the online students reported they talked specifically about schoolwork.

The used of online social networking site in the field of education is not something new, but has been introduced in developed countries like the United States and Europe since 2004. Malaysia is also catching up with the development of social networking site for teaching and learning purposes. In the context of education, social networking sites are capable of assisting the management and administration, and as a potential tool to enrich the teaching and learning environment for almost all subjects (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1995). Social networking sites can carry tremendous potential benefits in one's professional development as well as staying in

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touch with friends, family, and colleagues. Facebook is one of the social networking tools available which is considered popular due to its versatility in what can be shared-everything from installing and creating fun applications (e.g. movie quizzes) to posting photos of recent family reunion.

2. Facebook as an online tools for learning English

In the context of Malaysian education where the standard of English has deteriorated, it began particularly after the Malay language replaced English as the medium of instruction in schools in 1980. English was then given official status as a second language in Malaysia. The need to learn and master English is demanded at every level of education, from primary to higher education because of its lingua franca status and its importance for business sector and knowledge dissemination. However, the Malaysian students' performance in public examinations and at the university level has been poor. Hence, the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia is closely monitored and often debated in the Malaysian parliament (Kabilan, 2007). In order to further encourage the learning of English, the use of information and communication technology ICT and Internet platforms to assist teachers in teaching English is widely encouraged in Malaysia at all levels by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. Godwin-Jones (2008, p. 8) suggests that it would be “logical to leverage the current student generation's heavy reliance” on social networking platforms, like Facebook, in support of language learning.

There are a lot of advantages of online learning compared to traditional method. One of the exciting thing about the online environment is that learner can still do many of the usual ‘classroom’ activities and at a place that is convenient for them (Ellison et al. 2007). Table 1 shows a comparison of how learner would normally participate in a classroom setting and how they might accomplish the same activities in an online learning environment (Larkin-Hein, 2001).

Table 1: Comparison of classroom and online learning environment

Classroom Environment	Online Learning Environment
Attend class to keep abreast of course information	Read course module notes Read e-mail messages and posting to discussion area Read course outline and review calendar information
Research and read specific information	Research and read specific information through the Internet
Participate in discussions	Participate in discussions: read, respond and post to discussion area or chat room
Collaborate with other students	Collaborate with other students: read, respond and post messages via e-mail, discussion topic, chat room, and/or whiteboard
Participate in role plays and case studies	Participate: read, respond and post messages via e-mail and / or discussion topic
Ask questions	Ask questions: send e-mail and/or post question in discussion area
Hand in assignments	Submit assignment via e-mail or the discussion topic with or without attachment
Complete quizzes and exam	Complete online self test
Network / socialize with classmates	Network and socialize with classmates: read, respond, and post messages via e-mail and/or discussion topic

In the context of learning English, an average primary school student cannot express himself or herself in simple correct English nor can he/she compose on a given topic in correct English expression. Scholars have attributed this to the deficiency of primary school students in the knowledge of basic grammatical concepts and skills such as using logical connectors to combine simple sentences into larger ones and effective application of grammatical rules and concepts in their writing (Digha 2007; Afon 2006). The learners usually face difficulties in learning the grammatical aspects, such as in subject-verb agreement, the use of preposition, articles and the use of correct tense. Such errors can be seen clearly in the learners’ written performance.

So, according to Yancey (2009), Facebook has been used as a platform for students to write, but this writing is different from the writing done in school for academic purposes. Students regard the informal writing outside school (including Facebook, blogs and Twitter) as ‘communication’ and the school writing as ‘writing’, which is an exercise in test taking (Yancey, 2009). Yancey (2009) further discusses how Facebook and similar tools such as

blogs and online forums can be used so students can see writing done in these new media as “writing” and they can make use of these media to become better writers. Therefore, as suggested by Godwin-Jones (2008), it would be “logical to leverage the current student generation's heavy reliance” on social networking platforms, like Facebook, in support of language learning. Also, in view of the fact that Facebook is currently considered as the most popular platform for online social networking, it would be worthwhile to investigate if there are activities that directly or indirectly lead to the learning of English.

3. Research procedure and data analysis

This research involved 34 students from Year 6 in one of primary schools in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. Every week, the researcher will upload a writing task in the form of picture and some words in Facebook account that has been created for English subject. The students need to construct a sentence by posting their comments about the picture. As shown in Figure 1, the question will be updated every week within five weeks of observation.



Figure 1. Writing task in Facebook.

There were five tasks given during the online discussion observation. The tasks were divided into five topics; greeting, describing character, text completion, situation 1 and situation 2. Students were required to respond to the task every week. Table 2 shows the description of the topic that students were required to respond.

Table 2: Task description

Task	Topic / Theme	Description
Week 1: Task 1	Greeting	Respond to a greeting.
Week 2: Task 2	Describing Character	Giving character to a people in the picture.
Week 3: Task 3	Text Completion	Complete text with missing words, phrase or sentence.
Week 4: Task 4	Situation 1	Describing situation in the picture.
Week 5: Task 5	Situation 2	Construct sentence based on the picture and the words provided.

For data analysis purposes, information on students participation and comments written from the first week until the fifth week of online discussion group using Facebook will be used to see the students ability in English writing. Data from students’ participation will be collected from their participation, comments and words for each comments written during the group discussion based on what they have posted on their own each question given by the researcher. At the end of each week the researcher will use the checklist guide schedule to collect the data of students’ participation and their marks for each task completed.

4. Findings and discussions

The main data for this research were the students’ participation during the Facebook group discussions which include students’ interaction with the task given. Students’ participation was taken every time they log in and posted their comments in Facebook group discussion. Task assessment is used in opposition to analytic marking scale. The single score will be given, rather than an initial variety of scores, for students’ impression of the language level of

the essay or extract of speech, using criteria supplied by the test constructors. Students’ marks for every week task assessment were recorded using SPSS Statistic Data Editor 17.0.

Among the 34 students, analysis of participate in Task 1 (Greeting), Task 2 (Describing Character) and Task 3 (Text Completion) revealed that 34 students (100%) actively responding to the task given to them each week. The participation decreased to 29 students (85.3%) both on Task 4 (Situation 1) and Task 5 (Situation 2) where as 5 students (14.7%) did not posting comments for these two tasks. Total average participation for all tasks is 68.6. Table 3 presents percentage for students’ participation in each task.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for students’ participation

Tasks	Frequency	
	Students (N)	Percentage
Task 1: Greeting	34	100%
Task 2: Describing Character	34	100%
Task 3: Text Completion	34	100%
Task 4: Situation 1	29	85.3%
Task 5: Situation 2	29	85.3%
Total average participation	68.6	

The students’ participation decreased during Task 4 and Task 5 were because the students unable to construct sentence due to low motivation: (1) that their respond could be wrong and scared that their friends might make fun of them, (2) that they did not know how to construct the sentence, (3) they forgot to post their respond for the tasks, and (4) they don’t have the facility to respond to the discussion. There were 5 (14.7%) students not responding to the Task 4 and Task 5. These students were then being interview for pertaining to their participation. Two students mentioned that they have been forgotten to log in to Facebook and participated in English Writing group. While another 3 students stated that they don’t have the facility to participate in Task 4 and Task 5.

In Task 1 which is Greeting, the moderator posted “Good morning! How are you feeling today?” as an introduction in the discussion group. The objectives of this task are students will be able to give relevant information politely in response to enquiries made to greet and also will able to communicate with people on the Internet. The finding shows that all students posted their comment once because the question is easy and straightforward.

For Describing Character which is Task 2, the moderator posted a picture of a girl. First, students were required to give a name for the girl in the picture. They can vote by clicking ‘Like’ to the proposed name. Students were able to participate actively by discussing suitable name for the character. The task seems frivolous but this help student to be actively engaged to the discussion. The next activity for Task 2 was to describe the character in the picture. This activity experienced students’ capability in writing a simple description. The finding shows that students posted at least one comment (70.6%) with more than two words (44.1%). This shows that students were able to write more words for Task 2 compared to Task 1.

Next, for Task 3 which is Text Completion, students were required to study the picture and complete the text with correct words. The moderator posted a picture and a text with missing words. The guided answer was given for them to figure out which words that suit the text. For example; You can start your sentence with “This is _____.” From the findings, shows that only two students (5.9%) post the words correctly and this implicated them to post a second comment in order to correct the first comment. There is a learning environment in this activity where students make a correction to their comment after they realized that they have posted the wrong answer.

For Task 4, students required to make a simple sentence about “Aminah”. A picture and words were given to help them to understand the requirement of the task. A sentence is a complete thought. Students started to construct a sentence based on the picture given. The moderator used the previous picture in Task 2. The main objective of this task was to let the students familiar with the situation and character in the picture. This help them in writing as they were able to understand and confident when they were familiar with the situation. From the findings, it is show that students’ percentage increase as they wrote more than two words for this task.

Last but not least, in Task 5, a picture posted on the Facebook group wall requiring the students to study the picture carefully. Students need to predict the place, who is in the picture and what he or she doing. Students also need to understand the list of words given for them as a guide. In this task students required to understand the keyword before writing the sentence. The moderator intention was to test the students whether they can construct 1

sentence from 7 words given to them, or they can separate it into 2 or 3 sentences. This task helps students to think before they decide what to write and how they arrange it into a meaningful text. From the results obtained, it is shown that this task enhance students' interest and confident in writing. It shows that students posted their comment more than four times (50%) and they posted more than two words at 76.5% (n=26). This includes their comments correcting their writing mistake and sharing new sentences or text.

Hence, as a conclusion, students improve their writing each day and see their friends comment or like what they posted on Facebook wall. Sharing knowledge with their friend and getting quick respond from their teacher is a turn on for them to be active in learning process.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of online learning, this study has proven that learning of English in Facebook is possible. This is because the technologies that support Facebook and features that characterize Facebook are able to engage students in meaningful language-based activities, even though their initial intention of joining Facebook is to socialize. Some researcher demonstrated that online environments focused on collaboration and action, rather than reading and test-taking, can be more social, creative, substantial and personally meaningful than traditional classes. Based on the findings presented above, this study makes a number of significant contributions to existing knowledge. It contributes to existing knowledge in the field of small group reseach and communication, by looking at task and the idea that this learning environment can be developed and use for future generation. Based on the data and views expressed by the students in this study, Facebook could be utilized as an online environment to facilitate the learning of English.

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