

Utilizing Facebook Groups in Teaching Writing: Jordanian EFL Students' Perceptions and Attitudes

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Abstract

Online social networks have recently been perceived by educators and language specialists as an alternative method for EFL teaching and learning. Utilizing Facebook (FB) in teaching and learning is considered a controversial issue. Users have the option of exchanging information within a group setting. This study investigates the perceptions and attitudes of Jordanian EFL students' at Irbid University College-Al-Balqa' Applied University towards utilizing Facebook groups in teaching writing. It also seeks to investigate the role that Facebook groups play in enhancing the writing performance level and brainstorm ideas at the pre-writing stage. A survey consisting of ten questions was used to assess these factors. The participants were 42 EFL students at the department of English Language and Literature. Informants were also required to participate in a Facebook group named "Write Out Clear" designed by the researchers. Findings revealed that Facebook groups can be effective in teaching EFL writing. Furthermore, results illustrated that students can develop their vocabulary by being exposed to fellow group members' posts, in addition to checking for misspelled words. Finally, such findings may help EFL educators in incorporating ICTs into their teaching of various language skills to EFL learners.

Keywords: EFL, Facebook groups, ICTs, Jordanian students, writing

1. Introduction

It is inevitable that:

Information and Communication Technologies (henceforth ICTs) contribute greatly to today's education settings. Such technologies enhance teaching methods by providing students with an intellectually sound environment that promotes creativity and that caters to students' need (Prihatiningsih, 2011, p 34).

Ever since the beginning of human-recorded history, no invention existed that brought about enormous changes in human life the way the computer did. The ramifications of computer applications and the multidimensionality of language competence make it hard to establish a rapport between them. Some practitioners believe that technological innovation is the single-most important source of educational change. But just how does a technological advancement cause educational change? What are some of the changes taking place due to the proliferation of technology in educational institutions? What changes influence language performance? These issues have not been extensively and systematically explored and many other similar issues remain without clear awareness.

Moreover, developments in ICTs have led to simultaneous developments in pedagogical methodologies (Mazman & Usuel, 2010, p. 446). Social networks allow users to (1) create a profile, (2) connect with other users with similar interests, and (3) keep up with those connections as well as view others' connections expansively (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). MySpace, Friendster and Facebook are among the most popular social networks. Having begun at Harvard in 2004, Facebook grew to over 500 million subscribers by 2011 (Facebook Press Room, 2011).

Interestingly, the majority of Facebook subscribers live outside of the United States, with the highest number residing in Indonesia (18.9 million) and Malaysia (5.9 million) (Lim, 2011, p. 2). Subscribers are said to expend

more than seven hundred billion minutes per month on the social network site. Forty-two percent of teens use Facebook in the United States alone, causing it to supersede all other traditional forms of communication (Lenhart, 2009, p. 10). For our purposes, we are concerned with how teachers can incorporate social networking sites such as Facebook into EFL teaching methods. Lenhart emphasizes the importance of such networks as resources for teaching (Lenhart, 2009, p. 11). These resources, however, have not been fully exploited by EFL teachers, hence the researchers' interests in assessing student attitudes towards Facebook in relation to teaching EFL writing.

Due to Facebook's ongoing popularity (Cheung, 2011, p. 1339), other social networking sites were omitted from this study. For our purposes, a Facebook group was developed that aimed at giving participants writing opportunities, with the researcher serving as a moderator. It is expected that due to the immediacy of interactivity involved, participants will mutually reinforce one another's brain-storming processes.

1.1 Problem

The researchers have been teaching EFL for many years. They noticed that most students lack competence in English with special regard to the writing skill despite the fact that all efforts by educators, parents and school administrators have been made to help them enhance their learning. Additionally, using technology in teaching languages is a controversial issue; such controversy stems from the fact that the technology used in language teaching including Facebook, since it is the subject of this particular study, does not allow for personal face-to-face contact between students and instructors. The time lag in students' responses is another disadvantage. Finally, since students are historically used to conventional and traditional classroom teaching and immediate interaction with teachers, they tend to resist change. Therefore, this study may be considered as a way of examining such matters concerning the methodologies of language instruction.

1.2 Questions

These questions were posed in investigating the ability of Facebook groups in aiding writing skills:

- 1) To what extent can Facebook groups contribute to the development of writings skills?
- 2) What difficulties might instructors face in incorporating Facebook groups in their teaching methods?
- 3) To what extent might Facebook groups have an effect on participants' affective domain?

1.3 Significance

One driving motive behind carrying out this research is the urgent need to figure out if the implementation of Facebook groups can help students who learn EFL with their writing skills. Another motive of this research is to find out the challenges that the teachers may face when integrating Facebook groups in teaching EFL writing.

1.4 Limitations

- 1) Participants are all female students from Irbid University College at Al-Balqa' Applied University – Jordan.
- 2) This research dealt only with Facebook, disregarding other sites such as Twitter, MySpace and Tumblr.
- 3) The results primarily depend on the features available on Facebook during the time in which this study was conducted.

2. Purpose

This study aims at investigating the role that Facebook groups play in enhancing the writing performance level and brainstorm ideas at the pre-writing stage of college EFL learners at Irbid University College - Al-Balqa' Applied University, located in the Northern region of Jordan.

3. Literature Review

The use of computers to aid in language learning is not necessarily new by any means. The employment of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) dates back to the 1960s. It was first introduced on university mainframe computers. The PLATO project, initiated at the University of Illinois in 1960, is an important landmark in the early development of CALL (Marty, 1981). This was greatly helped by the availability of personal computers during the 1970s, followed by a large number of academic and scholarly publications in the area of CALL. The early history of CALL was properly documented by (Sanders, 1997). At the present time, it is safe to claim that knowledge of CALL by English language teachers is extremely important and is almost considered as a pre-requisite for English language teaching at different levels of educational institutions. This focus on CALL resulted in the creation of a large number of programs to be used in schools and universities by

language instructors. These programs are either made available to teachers through the schools or universities in which they teach or may be purchased at different price levels from varying sources including the internet.

ICTs are becoming increasingly popular as a method of language instruction. Bartlett-Bragg describes social networks as a "range of applications that augments group interactions and shared spaces for collaboration, social connections, and aggregates information exchanges in a web-based environment" (2006, p. 3). Such social networking sites mainly consist of a user profile and friends list that enable users to interact with one another (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 2). Features available to subscribers include the ability to add and delete content from their profile, as well as determine their own visibility to other users. In addition, some social networking sites allow for instant messaging and the ability to share images and videos. Facebook allows users to maintain complete control over their profile content, giving users the ability to opt-out of being visible to others by default, as is normally the case.

Moreover, subscribers can send images to one another, add posts to each other's walls, message one another instantly and interact within the online community as a whole. Such features mean that:

Subscribers are constantly sharing information, interacting with each other, and collaborating. All of these features combine to explain why Facebook is believed to be a strong resource for language instruction (Kabilan et al., 2010, p. 180).

Due to the informal structure of the Facebook setting, students do not seem to consider these methods of information exchange as a form of actual writing but rather as a method of social communication (Yancey, 2009, p. 27).

This shows that students are "still unable to see the connection between the writing learned in the classroom and the meaningful communicative use outside the classroom" (Yancey, 2009, p. 28). Moreover, Yancey proposes Facebook as a link between formal classroom writing and the use of the language learned outside of the classroom in informal communication (Yancey, 2009, p. 29). The researchers believe as well that Facebook groups allow students the opportunity to apply the instruction they receive in the classroom in a practical manner outside of the classroom, thereby enhancing their writing skills. 'FB groups' provide ample opportunities for students to practice and improve their writing skills. Given the pressure of responding to friends' posts, users are compelled to further develop their writing skills (Kabilan et al., 2010, p. 181).

Simpson (2012) assessed the effectiveness of using Facebook as an ESL instruction method in South Korea. Data was collected by way of an instructor's journal and indicated that:

Facebook is similar to other modern tools of language instruction in that instructors must familiarize themselves with the program in order to be able to employ it correctly. Moreover, the participant's 'lazy factor' must be given attention, as it can be problematic for the learning process; in addition, an instructor's journal can help instructors remain accountable (p. 36).

Yunus, et al, assessed the pros and cons of utilizing social networks as a method of language instruction. TOEFL students' online discussion board at a Malaysian university served as the basis for the study's data (2012). Results indicated a positive effect of social network utilization as a method of language instruction on students' writing ability and motivation levels. Some challenges the students reported having faced included low concentration levels, a lack of equipment and a lack of internet access.

In addition, this study highlighted the essentiality of providing the tools necessary for the development of technical skills that will enhance teachers' ability to utilize social networks as a method of language instruction as well as the ability of students to benefit in terms of writing skills.

Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi (2012) examined the use of Facebook as a means by which users can participate in discussion boards about grammar and writing. Data was collected from student discussion boards concerning explanations about grammar, in addition to participant scores in three phases. Most postings were shown to involve sentence structures, word meanings, parts of speech and relative clauses. Important for our purposes is the fact that participants expressed attitudes supportive of utilizing Facebook as a method of language instruction.

Yu (2013) maintained that "as social networking sites become popular, they provide great opportunities for language learners to practice their target language" (p. 2). Very few studies focused on the integration of Facebook into an EFL tertiary-level writing context. This study aims at contributing to fill the gap by collecting qualitative and quantitative data to examine how a teacher of writing with a group of college students in an evening program interacted on Facebook and organized a writing forum. The preliminary data indicated that participants were comfortable with utilizing Facebook as a method of language instruction.

4. Methodology

This research was carried out at Irbid University College - Al-Balqa' Applied University - Jordan in January, 2014. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. The survey was specifically designed to explore student attitudes towards utilizing Facebook groups as a method of enhancing writing skills. 42 female freshman students who took writing I as a course offered by the Department of English Language and Literature at Irbid University College, were selected as subjects for this study.

These students were added to a Facebook group called 'Write Out Clear'. Next, informants were instructed to brainstorm and conduct summary writing. After that, they were asked to give one another feedback. The aim was to develop an environment that would illustrate how, by using such groups, students can better develop their writing skills in the Jordanian EFL setting.

The instructions included the following:

- 1) Go to www.facebook.com, using the assigned user name and password, access the designated group.
- 2) Write on the assigned topic.
- 3) Discuss, correct, omit and send drafts to your peers and instructor.

Finally, informants were asked to complete a ten-question survey designed by the researchers, divided into three sections as follows:

- 1) Questions related to student's demographics.
- 2) Questions related to whether the participant was a Facebook account-holder.
- 3) Questions related to account use frequency, Facebook group familiarity and whether the participant was a member of another group.

Then, part three of the survey was comprised of ten questions with a four-tier assessment value: 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree'. Percentages and frequencies were used to assess student demographics, whereas frequencies, means, and percentages helped in evaluating student attitudes.

In addition, the instructors were directed to do the following:

- 1) Assign the specific topics for your students for writing purposes.
- 2) Make the topics available on the Facebook website for students to access.
- 3) Ask students to write on their selected topics and share their drafts with peers. Then, ask students to send their drafts back to you for checking.
- 4) Comment on the students' final drafts and send them back with your corrections and feedback.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Informants

Informants were all female since the college is only for girls, as mentioned earlier. Participants who were involved in the Facebook group answered the ten-question survey. They were all in the 19-25 age group. The respondents who participated in the FB group responded to the questionnaire. All the respondents were in the age group of 19-25. With regard to command of the English language, participants' Jordanian University English Test (JUET) band are 4+ (Bands 4, 5 and 6 constituted of 'Competent User', 'Good User' and 'Very Good User', respectively). JUET is an English test designed by the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education to test Jordanian university students' competence in the English language.

5.2 Facebook Access

The survey's first question was meant to confirm that each participant indeed had a Facebook account. 80.9% of participants claimed to access their account from anywhere between two to three hours a day and more than three hours a day, with 26.1% claiming access only one to two times a week and less than one hour per day. All participants were well-versed in the Facebook group feature and were involved in an additional Facebook group other than the one that serves as the basis of this study. In addition, data illustrated that participants were familiar with the other features involved with Facebook, such as sharing images and videos, commenting on other users' walls, etc.

5.3 Impact on Writing

Questions one through five in part three of the survey aimed at assessing participant attitudes towards utilizing Facebook groups as a method of language instruction. This data were categorized into two parts: 'Cumulative

'Disagree' to indicate results of 'Strongly Disagree' and "Disagree" and 'Cumulative Agree' to indicate results of 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree'. See Table 1 below:

Table 1. Student attitudes towards FB groups in improving writing

#	The Item	Cumulative Disagree %	Cumulative Agree %
1	Brainstorming helps organize thought before writing	11.9	88.1
2	Learning new vocabulary from comments	16.7	83.3
3	Reduce spelling errors through the spell-check feature	9.5	90.5
4	Getting a better idea before writing	4.8	95.2
5	Easier to complete essays after participation	11.9	88.1

Table 1 indicates that over 88% of participants found the utilization of Facebook groups to aid their writing process. These results also have implications for the first research question concerned with how such methods can assist student writing. Additionally, data illustrated that Facebook groups helped students brainstorm during the pre-writing phase, further develop their vocabulary, lessen the occurrence of spelling mistakes, and complete their writing assignments. Indeed, 95.2% of respondents claimed to benefit during the pre-writing phase.

This finding may be substantiated by the fact that students have enough time to brainstorm while participating in Facebook group discussions, unlike the case in a traditional classroom where time is limited, not to mention the time taken by the teacher's interference and participation in class discussions. Moreover, students have instant access to the comments and writings of their peers with whom they can exchange ideas freely and at their own pace.

The importance of the moderator's role must be emphasized, especially in terms of assessing student's writing topics during the pre-writing phase to ensure topic relevance. Teachers also benefit from utilizing Facebook groups as a method of language instruction because 90.5% of respondents agreed that the Facebook group helped them to lessen spelling errors.

To give the audience a taste of what students were writing about using Facebook groups in pre-writing activities, the following example may be provided as an excerpt written by one of the participants in the study which appears below exactly how it was originally written by the student before any corrections were made:

Student A: "somoking may be consider dangerous habit. it cost the person a lot money because smoking is very expensive. It is also dangerous since it cause number of health problem".

Student B: "I think the idea is good. However, you should pay attention to capitalization especially in the beginning of the sentence. You should also pay attention to the use of articles and prepositions as well as pluralizing".

After receiving the writing sample from student A, the instructor corrected it and sent it back to the student in the following form assuring student A that student B's comments were very accurate and beneficial:

"Smoking may be considered as a dangerous habit. It costs the person a lot of money because it is very expensive. It is also dangerous since it causes a number of health problems".

The above exchange shows the student's original writing sample with the mistakes she made. It also shows how one of her peers provided her with accurate and beneficial feedback that in turn helped her improve her writing during the pre-writing activity. This is clearly emphasized by the instructor who corrected the student's sample and sent it back to her with the appropriate feedback. This exchange is also interesting since it reveals how peer-editing and collaboration helps improve students' writing during the pre-writing process and includes students in the collaborative learning activity.

5.4 Challenges

The researchers anticipated certain challenges participants may encounter while interacting in a Facebook group writing discussion. One concern is if users will actually familiarize themselves with material before posting. Another concern is how much respondents will be subject to distraction by other Facebook features. See Table 2 below:

Table 2. Student attitudes towards the challenges of using Facebook groups for writing

#	The Item	Cumulative Disagree %	Cumulative Agree %
6	Will read materials before sharing them	9.5	90.5
7	Distracted by other features of Facebook	14.3	85.7

Contrary to the researchers' expectations, 90.5% of participants claimed to allow themselves adequate time to become familiar with their own raw writing material before posting. Such responses emphasize the importance of utilizing Facebook groups as a method of language instruction. In addition, it debunks the researchers' previous expectations that students would fail to familiarize themselves with material before posting. Showing such student initiative will, in addition, alleviate the group moderator of additional burdens because students will take more control of their own learning materials.

Moderators will still, however, have to be concerned with students being distracted by other features of Facebook such as instant messaging, etc. Indeed, 857% of participants claimed to be easily distracted by such features. Such distractions could lessen the amount of student attention given to actual writing. Therefore, it is especially necessary to emphasize to students the importance of self-reliance and initiative in terms of choosing material to introduce to other members of the Facebook group as well as preventing themselves from becoming distracted by other features of Facebook. In other words, students should fully recognize the importance of using Facebook groups in improving their competence level in the pre-writing stage. Moreover, they should take the assignment seriously and concentrate on writing without being distracted by any other services or applications offered by Facebook such as chatting with friends who are not a part of their group that participates in the writing activity.

5.5 Affective Domain

The survey's last three questions relate to the third research question- namely, to assess how such groups impact the affective domain of participants involved in writing. Item 8 illustrates respondents' level of comfort with regard to opinion-sharing. Item 9 aims at illustrating whether users posts being "liked" encourage them or not. Finally, Item 10 seeks to assess student preference in terms of classroom versus Facebook group. See Table 3 below:

Table 3. Students' perceptions of an FB group effects on their affective domain

#	The Item	Cumulative Disagree %	Cumulative Agree %
8	Feel comfortable posting ideas or opinions	7.1	92.9
9	Feel encouraged when friends 'like' my comments	2.4	97.6
10	Prefer discussing on FB group instead of classroom	45.2	54.8

Responses to Items 8 and 9 are much greater than those of Item 10. For example, Item 8 shows that 92.9% of users are comfortable with sharing ideas with others in the Facebook group and 97.6% become encouraged when others "like" their posts. Perhaps this is explained by the fact that in such settings, users can take the time to consider what they want to post or comment on beforehand. Interestingly, however, 54.8% of users preferred the classroom setting over Facebook group participation. Perhaps this can be explained by the lack of spontaneity that sometimes occurs in the Facebook group setting due to time lags and slow responses, in comparison with the classroom setting where discussions take place on the spot.

It may be concluded that Facebook is definitely beneficial to EFL students attempting to improve their English writing skills. This is substantiated by the fact that students can write at their own pace, exchange writing samples among each other freely and spend as much time as they need brainstorming. All of this helps the students in their pre-writing activities well before they become ready to compose the final version of their paper to be submitted to the instructor for final evaluation.

Having mentioned some of the benefits of using Facebook in helping EFL students in brainstorming and other pre-writing activities, it may be speculated that its use no doubt has some weaknesses as well. Such weaknesses include the following:

- 1) There could be a time lag in students' responding to each other's comments or writing samples when using Facebook.

- 2) Using Facebook does not make use of the instructor's immediate comments of feedback on students' writing.
- 3) Some students may be falsely corrected by their peers which negatively impacts their writing and results in wasting time.

These weaknesses in the use of Facebook for pre-writing may explain why more than half of the students participating in the study prefer learning pre-writing activities in the traditional classroom in the presence of the English instructor. This is true because people generally prefer face-to-face communication. Facebook does not allow students to see the non-verbal cues and this results in delayed feedback for students' discussions conducted in the group. The response on students' discussions or comments is not made until sometime later unlike face-to-face communication which allows the instructor to provide students' with immediate comments and instant feedback.

6. Conclusion

The majority of the 42 students who took part in the study felt that utilizing a Facebook group in language instruction does indeed assist in language acquisition and helps to better develop writing skills, particularly in the pre-writing phase, as well as helps students to better develop their vocabulary and lessen spelling mistakes. Instructors need to be concerned, however, with the potential for student distraction as a result of the many features offered by Facebook. Interestingly, despite the positive attributes of Facebook group language learning, almost one half of participants prefer the traditional classroom setting as opposed to the Facebook group setting. Though participants prefer to learn independently, it is important to have a moderator in such settings given the lack of control over the intellectual environment in virtual discussions (Sapio, et al, 2011). Research of this topic in the future should aim at overcoming these challenges so that ICTs can be better used as a method of language instruction. Such research might also focus on teacher attitudes towards utilizing Facebook groups to help students improve their writing skills.

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