

The Perception of TEFL Students on the Use of Facebook Groups in Teaching EFL Writing

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This paper aims to investigate the perception of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) students on the use of Facebook groups in teaching English Foreign Language (EFL) writing. This research involved 40 TEFL participants at the Faculty of Arts in Philadelphia University in Jordan. They were engaged in a Facebook group for two months where they learnt how to write from each other whilst being facilitated by their teacher. Towards the end of their engagement with the Facebook group, they were asked to complete a set of questionnaires comprising of 10 closed-ended questions to measure their perceptions about using a Facebook group as a tool in improving writing skill. The findings of the research showed that students acquired new vocabulary through reviewing the comments of others in Facebook groups. Also, the findings of the study indicated that the spell-checker is a great toll for decreasing spelling mistakes. This paper recommends that further research be conducted to investigate further into the use Facebook group as a tool in teaching writing in EFL context.

Key words: *Facebook groups, ICT, writing, learning, perception, social network.*

Introduction

The ever-growing advancement in the field of information communication technology (ICT) has led a number of modifications in the learning and teaching process. That is, varied teaching methods have emerged in which conventional approaches have been replaced by new ones such as social networks (Mazman & Usuel, 2010). Social networks are considered

to be web-based services which help users create a public or semi-public profile in a restricted system. Also, the use of social networks assists in identifying a list of different users who share the same connection as well as navigate connections made by other users within the system itself (Boyd & Ellison, 2006).

There are different types of social networks and media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Past research by Lenhart (2009) shows that social networks users spend more than 700 billion minutes a month on Facebook. It is the most widespread network site worldwide. In America, 42% of teenagers aged between 12 and 17 communicate through Facebook, as a replacement for email and landline phones (Lenhart, 2009). This research demonstrates that social network users spend a lot of time on Facebook. In an attempt to leverage off this growing trend, educators questioned how to best utilise social network sites as means of academic teaching and learning. Teachers are resourceful when it comes to using valuable resources in an effective manner. However, the potential of these valuable resources as a learning method has not been completely previously determined by EFL lecturers in classroom setting.

Facebook has become one of the most distinguished social network platforms amongst students because it is capable of supporting teaching and learning. In addition, it provides easy communication between students and teachers (Mazman & Usluel, 2010; Rashid et al. 2016). According to Mohamad and Shariff (2011), Facebook based learning has increased students' motivation and understanding by improving their English paragraph writing skills and knowledge. This has occurred from a combination of in-class instruction point of view and from a co-operative learning position. Furthermore, Facebook integrated instruction can significantly enhance students' interest and motivation. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the perception of TEFL students on the use of Facebook groups in teaching EFL writing.

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To investigate how Facebook group benefits Jordanian TEFL students in developing their writing process.
- ii. To examine the challenges faced by Jordanian teachers in integrating Facebook groups into teaching writing to TEFL students.
- iii. To analyse the effect of Facebook groups on the students' affective domain in the writing process.

In order to achieve the objectives of this research, this present study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How can a Facebook group benefit Jordanian TEFL students to develop their writing skills?
2. What are some of the challenges that Jordanian teachers face in integrating Facebook groups into teaching writing to TEFL students?
3. How do Facebook groups affect the students' affective domain in the writing process?

Review of Literature

Research on linguistic issues has developed rapidly over the past two decades (e.g. Zulkffli, & Rashid, 2016; Rashid, 2018). Investigation of text unity in relation to writing level is one of the specific areas that has gained prominence (Blattner & Fiori, 2009). Such studies are significant as linguistic knowledge can be insightful in providing solutions to language-based problems (McNeil, 2008).

Writing is an integral but challenging skill to develop. The level of difficulty in terms of learning writing is significantly higher when a foreign language (FL) is involved. Differences in language structures, expression, writing styles, and other culturally varying factors greatly affect the writing of foreign language learners (FLL) (Benson & Heidish, 1995). That is, language learners face difficulties in certain types of writing such as the academic style of writing. However, this is at the core of teaching and learning at the tertiary education level. Thus, ensuring assessment, learning and an understanding of particular disciplinary communities is an important factor in developing the written text (Coffin, Curry, Goodman, & Hewings, 2002). This is in line with syllabuses that aim at improving tertiary level students from different cultural contexts, disciplines and educational settings (Lea & Street, 1994).

In many Arab countries including Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the education systems emphasise writing only for taking tests. This suggests that the only reason for language learners to practice writing is to pass the examinations or to get a good grade. Such motivations reduce the value of writing to develop a product and receive a good grade from the teacher (Abdel-Gawad, 2003).

This approach is not likely to gain students' interest in writing, as it is decontextualised and artificial, giving them no real perspective of a target audience. To this end, many research studies on the relationship between the development of the writing skill in EFL context and social media such as Facebook were conducted offering different approaches and remedial programs to overcome the decontextualisation of writing and develop the necessary EFL writing skills (El-Hibir & Al-Taha, 1992; Abdou, 1993).

McNeil (2008) demonstrates that there are some interesting issues that can be related to the use of SNSs in higher education. These include discourse expectations that emerge from the

use of an informal ‘outside’ space to hosting a learning community, whether the communication alters power dynamics between the tutors and students, lessens the social distance between participants, or forms the identity in individual performances.

Facebook has a variety of interactive features. It invites users to access and interact actively through the social media platform (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Facebook provides a convenient environment for the development of discourse communities with its varied participatory mechanisms. Consequently, students can create their personal profile page allowing them to list interests and activities and share them with others. Also, this helps them belong to a “Network” that is defined primarily by the educational institutions they are affiliated to. The interactive feature of Facebook is believed to offer students great opportunities to practice their writing. In other words, students post their written pieces, receive comments, write and post their own comments and reply to other Facebook group members.

Therefore, this interactive communication enables students to actively engage in the writing process and improve their writing skills. Also, computer-based grammar and spelling checkers that students use from time to time while interacting on Facebook groups, are considered to be powerful tools for providing immediate feedback on their written output. Furthermore, the use of Facebook is deemed to have a positive impact on boosting students’ motivation and attitude (Kabilan, Jafar, & Ahmad, 2010; Kasuma, 2017).

Facebook has been a platform for students to write in a way that is different from the conventional writing style used at school for academic purposes. Students regard the informal writing outside of school (including Facebook, blogs, and Twitter) as “communication” and the school writing as “writing”, which is an exercise in test-taking (Yancey, 2009). They are unable to see the connection between the two forms of writings (inside and outside of school) as well as consider writing as an enlarging activity to express their thoughts, ideas and perform well in academic situations.

Yunus, Salehi, Sun, Phei Yen, and Su Li (2012) revealed that Facebook can be embedded in writing activities such as through using features in Facebook to learn new vocabulary by reading the comments of other students in the group, discussion in getting ideas for writing, and spell-check by peers. Also, the findings of their study proved that using Facebook can actually help the students complete their essays easier by participating in the Facebook group discussion.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, Facebook groups were created to provide students with the possibility of being in control of the content and the way they learn, in addition to facilitating writing for students. This research hypothesises that students will take full advantage of Facebook groups in the brainstorming phase of the writing process. Nevertheless, it also looks into how Facebook groups can influence different aspects of writing and motivation in order to address the formulated research questions.

This quantitative-qualitative research was conducted at Philadelphia University Jordan in March to May 2017.

The Research Participants

This study included 40 TEFL students in their 3rd year of study at the Faculty of Education at Philadelphia University in Jordan. All of the participants experience the same educational background, language, study degree (Bachelor), nationality and come from different places across Jordan.

The participants were briefed about the objectives of the study and encouraged to join a Facebook group called 'Write Out Freely' which was created for this research. They were invited to be involved and perform the tasks which the researchers had developed, like brainstorming as well as summary writing. Also, they were requested to contribute ideas and express their opinions in an active manner. This was conducted to construct a helpful learning environment for participants and allow them to realise the matter in which FB groups as a tool of learning can develop their writing skills, specifically, in a Jordanian EFL context. Altogether, the students spent two months working on several writing tasks posted in the Facebook group. Finally, every participant was asked to fill in a questionnaire, which was distributed towards the end of their engagement with the Facebook group.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part was concerned with the demographic information of the students. The second part was concerned with i) whether or not participants have accounts on Facebook and how frequently they login; ii) whether or not they are familiar with Facebook groups; and iii) if they joined any other Facebook groups along with the one created for the purpose of the present study. The third part consisted of 10 items using a 4-level Likert Scale of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree. Frequencies and percentages were used for the analysis of the demographic data. To describe other items, mean scores, percentages and frequency were used to outline the perception of students regarding Facebook groups as a tool in order to teach and develop the writing process.

Findings and Discussion

The discussion of the findings is presented in five primary parts. Part one includes the demographic information, while part two deals with the usage of Facebook and Facebook groups among the participants. The following three parts present the results divided into three categories, specifically writing process, challenges and the affective domain.

Demographic Information

The study sample consisted of 16 male (40%) and 24 female (60%) participants. They responded to the questionnaire and are members of the Facebook group created. The age of all the participants ranges from between 21 to 27 years old. The gender numbers nearly represent the proportion of the study's population of the students at Philadelphia University in the TEFL programme. They were all non-native speakers of English (Jordanians).

The Use of Facebook and Facebook Groups

Each participant has a Facebook account. From the sample, 33 participants (83%) logged in to Facebook very often and selected the options from 3 to 4 hours per day as well as over 4 hours per day, whilst the selection of the options "once or twice a week" and "less than an hour daily" was done by 7 of the participants (17%).

This data is important to inform the researcher that all participants have knowledge about Facebook groups revealing that they know the features available in Facebook groups, are familiar with the various methods of sharing information on Facebook groups such as links to posting documents in websites, posting a photo and sometimes reading posts or reviewing comments. Taking into consideration the experiences of the participants, the data which were collected according to their perceptions can be considered valid since their responses are on the basis of the prior experience of usage of Facebook groups.

Facebook Group and Writing

Items 1 to 5 in part three of the questionnaire are raised to reveal the perceptions of participants on the use of Facebook group in developing writing skills. The results are classified into two groups: Accumulative Agree and Accumulative Disagree, respectively. The former shows the cumulative data proportion of respondents' choice of Agree and Strongly Agree. The later indicates the cumulative data proportion of Strongly Disagree and Disagree, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Perceptions of students on the use of Facebook group in developing writing skills

Number	Statement	Accumulative Disagreement	Accumulative Agreement
1.	Collecting ideas help organise thoughts before writing.	15.0	85.0
2.	The comments help learning new vocabulary.	20.4	79.6
3.	Reduce spelling errors to avoid spell check online.	12.3	87.7
4.	Selecting the good idea before writing.	5.8	94.2
5.	It is a good idea to complete essays.	16.0	84.0

Table 1 above indicates that in general over 80% of respondents agree to the statements. This means that the Facebook group contributes to improving their writing skills. Also, the findings reveal that the Facebook group can benefit students in improving their writing skills by assisting in collecting data, organising their ideas before they start writing, acquiring new words through reviewing others' comments in the group, decreasing spelling mistakes by the spell-checker, choosing good thoughts before writing process from the ideas or views that students posted, and learners finding it easier to accomplish their essays after discussing matters in the Facebook group, which is the answer of research question 1.

The statement "Ideas or opinions posted by my peers on the Facebook group helps me in getting a better idea before writing" has the highest cumulative agreement with a percentage of 94.1%. This presents the significance of the flow of thoughts and views by those who joined the Facebook group.

Challenges in Using Facebook Group for Improving Writing Process

Statements (6) and (7) have been developed by researchers to predict the challenges which the respondents might face when joining the Facebook group's discussion regarding the writing process. The first statement shows whether or not the participants will actually review the articles or materials before sharing them on Facebook groups. The second statement shows whether or not they tend to be distracted by other properties of FB while on the Facebook group. Table 2 shows in the cumulative proportion for participants who agree and disagree to the statement.

Table 2: Perceptions of students on challenges in using of Facebook group for improving writing process

Number	Statement	Accumulative Disagreement	Accumulative Agreement
6.	Reading materials before sharing them.	9.5	90.5
7.	Separated by various qualities of Facebook.	18.6	81.4

In contrast to the thought of the researchers, 90.5% of the respondents pointed out that they will review the articles and materials before they share them on Facebook group. This is considered a very positive response and could enhance the reason behind why educators should incorporate Facebook group in language classrooms for teaching writing skills.

The researchers no longer predict the challenge that most learners might not review the topics before they share them with their friends on a Facebook group. When learners review topics before sharing them, this review can help the educator in controlling the process too since learners will be responsible for their learning and take charge of the resources or topics they share on the Facebook group. Furthermore, they will post topics related to the context of the subject matter when they have time to review what they want to share on the Facebook group.

Affective Range and Facebook Group

The objective of the last three closed-ended statements in the questionnaire is to respond to the third study question in order to show how Facebook groups have an effect on the affective range of the students in the writing process. Statement (8) examines whether or not participants are comfortable in sharing their thoughts or views in the Facebook group. Statement (9) investigates whether the “like” property on Facebook would make the participants feel encouraged, when peers “like” their comments. The last statement is to show their favourability, whether they have preference to discuss on Facebook groups or the classroom. Table 3 below illustrates the data.

Table 3: Students’ perceptions of effects of Facebook group on their affective range

Number	Statement	Accumulative Disagreement	Accumulative Agreement
8.	Feel comfortable posting ideas.	9.0	90.0
9.	Feel encouraged when friends like my comments.	4.4	95.6
10.	Prefer discussing on FB group.	47.3	52.7

The cumulative percentages of the participants agree items 8 and 9 are significantly higher than item 10. In item 8, 90.0% of the participants agreed that they feel comfortable posting ideas and opinions on Facebook groups and 95.6% actually feel encouraged when friends “like” their comments. The positive opinions and answers of the students concerning Facebook groups influencing the affective domain of the respondents can be clarified by the point that learners have a period of time in order to determine what a particular material they would prefer to share, perform in their free time comfortably, and the specific “like” property that may promote participants to write further comments and have the sense of being appreciated by the groups through their comments.

Nevertheless, only 52.7% agree that discussing issues or topics on Facebook groups is more preferable than in a class. This presents insights regardless of all the other properties of the matter in which Facebook groups have the potential to assist in developing the writing skills, and the affective impacts such as those in statements (8) and (9), slightly more than half of the participants do like discussing on the Facebook groups. In classroom discussion, 47.3% of participants prefer this type of interaction. This might be the result of non-synchronised feedback or comments reducing the discussion. This is in comparison to the synchronised process that takes place in the classroom where the educators are able to provide students with immediate feedback directly and anyone else can just add their thoughts and opinions.

Discussion

In this study, the research questions were developed in order to identify the use of Facebook groups in teaching EFL writing and improve the students’ writing skills. The study results revealed that Facebook usage is perceived to affect the students’ competency in writing skills. In other words, Facebook plays an effective role in developing students’ writing skills, and inspiring their creative and critical thinking skills to write about different academic topics.

The students’ competency in writing skills was developed when they were offered opportunities to join discussions using Facebook. Many students improved their writing skills through creating more meaningful contents and writing well-organised paragraph after taking the writing test. The most significant matter was that the students showed a positive attitude toward using this social media site.

Form their point of view, Facebook was used as a substitutional and modern learning tool, which can be easily accessed. It also enabled students to study the English Language at their convenience, in addition to further selections. Therefore, they improved writing competency, eliminated shy feelings and had the courage to ask their Facebook friends questions. They could also leave messages for the educators or other Facebook users. In addition, before they took the writing test, they could practice their English writing.

In this regard, these results were consistent with previous studies which highlighted that Facebook is used as an effective means for language teaching and learning (Mills, 2011; Schwartz, 2009; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). Shih (2011) suggested that after the students received Facebook integrated blended learning; they developed writing skills, including paragraph organisation, content, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. They claimed that Facebook not only made peer evaluation easy but also encouraged them to participate more in their language learning. Moon (2011), Rashid and Rahman (2014) and Al Mubarak (2017) pointed out that Facebook created a positive language learning atmosphere and enhanced the capabilities to collect facts and ideas from different sources of information.

In the current and previous studies, the results revealed that Facebook is considered as an effective language learning tool. The above mentioned positive impacts in this study were as a result of offering opportunities to join writing discussions on Facebook. This is probably a reason behind assisting the students in developing their writing paragraph competency, as sentence structure is an important part of effective writing and an additional essential criterion to improve their skills in academic writing (Saunders & Scialfa, 2003). Furthermore, accuracy in sentence structure is related to the capabilities to develop different types of sentences.

Accordingly, Facebook is considered one of Web 2.0 applications, which should be enhanced and used as an online community for students in English language majors/fields in order to join discussions on their English writing challenges. Facebook allows students to discuss ideas with educators or other FB friends using different options. It also provides them with convenient academic and social atmosphere for chatting, leaving messages or posting their pieces of writing on Facebook for the educators and other FB users in order to check them beforehand.

Conclusion

According to the 40 students' perceptions in the present study, Facebook groups assisted in improving their writing skills, specifically in the processes of brainstorming and forming thoughts before the writing process itself. In addition, their answers have indicated that the majority of the participants agree that they acquire new words by reviewing the other members' comments in the FB group, and that spelling mistakes are reduced.

The opinions or ideas expressed by peers assist them in forming ideas before beginning the process of writing. They also think it is an effective method to write their articles after joining the discussion on FB groups. The different distractions of Facebook applications are



considered the major challenges to which educators should pay attention, for instance games and FB chats, etcetera.

This research recommends that further future research be conducted to investigate the challenges of using a Facebook group for the purpose of educating and developing writing skills in greater detail, including a study of teachers' perceptions as well. Further studies could also be carried out to explore the matter in which the affective impacts of FB groups help to enhance the writing skills of the educators.

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