

FACEBOOK AS A FORMAL INSTRUCTIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN FACILITATING L2 WRITING: IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

In this century most of the ESL learners can be considered as digital natives due to the excessive urge and availability of technology. There are hardly any learners who aren't exposed to any means of social network in their personal life. In use, Facebook is seen to outbalance the rest of the social networks due to its convenience and easy going approach. However, little is known about how Facebook assists learners and teachers to approach for teaching and learning ESL writing though it is found that this form of social media helps learners to socialize in their personal and academic life. Hence, this paper describes the impact and challenges of including Facebook as a formal environment in facilitating this productive skill. Results of this study indicate that using Facebook for the said purpose has had a positive impact on students' writing practices though some challenges and suggestions for future implementation were reported.

Keywords: Facebook, Formal Instruction, Facilitating, ESL Writing, Productive Skill

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, Facebook as a social media has achieved highest level of momentum due to its easy user-friendliness. Many studies show that the substantial number of Facebook users is the students. To be more specific, college students outnumber students of other institutions in terms of using social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and search engines (Rhoades et al. 2008). In the same connection, Hoover (2008) points out those new intakes at a higher education institute often use Facebook. To quantify the number of Facebook accounts, Kolek and Saunders (2008) have opined that the students from public university are in peak of having accounts.

According to "Facebook Statistics" (n.d.), 85% of four-year university students use

Facebook, many of whom do so daily (comScore, 2007). Facebook and social network sites in general have become an integral part of teenage and adult social life. Even, one teenager said you are no more existing if you aren't in the social network (boyd, 1 2007, p.1). It is found that college students socially "exist" on Facebook but far fewer ESL learners are present (Mitchell, 2012).

It may be important for ESL learners and instructors to include Facebook in their learning and teaching process as it can undertake their jobs effectively. Since the learners of this world can't ignore or shouldn't dodge the influence of social networking sites from their life, it's better to embrace it for the sake of using it as a learning tool. Through calculative

diversification, the ESL writing instructors can make Facebook a formal instructional environment for their learners. The number of impacts it carries for both learners and teachers outweigh the challenges it offers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on ESL students' use of Social networking sites for learning their ESL writing is new though it is found that they use Facebook, one of the most common sites, for their personal reasons. The striking reason why learners enlist their other mates on Facebook is their pre-existing friendships (Choi, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007) and it benefits them to socialize in their personal lives (Boyd, 2007; Choi, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007). Common tendency among the learners is to accept Facebook as social technology rather using it as a formal teaching tool. They feel comfortable with using it to communicate with others, posting their images to seek like and comments but show reluctance using it for educational purposes (Selwyn and Grant, 2009). Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009) categorize this social media as a via in helping learners to settle into university life. Newly enrolled learners in the university struggle to make friends and find a suitable residence to live. In this connection, Facebook helps them to know each other easily and they also can request others to help them.

Also, Facebook is heavily used when the informal communication is sought. Students specially use it to communicate their family members and friends (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Pempek et al. (2009) notes that Facebook was used most often for social interaction which provokes daily communication within the community. Madge et al. (2009) claim pre-registration at a Facebook university network site has very influential connection to students' post-registration social networks; it helps specifically new students to make friends and keep in touch with their family members.

Moreover, it even is considered as a ground of sharing knowledge (Huang et al. 2010) and important communication skills (Decarie, 2010), as it provokes and influences learners to reach out and develop relationships (Neibling, 2010)

Social networks distinctively generate very effective possibilities as cultural interventions for the learners (Christie and Bloustien, 2010). For the young people virtual worlds appear as sites of significant cultural and textual relevance (Carrington and Hodgetts, 2010), as social networks also helps them to know and respect each other's' cultures (Birky and Collins, 2011). Furthermore, Cho (2010) found that the collectivistic society maintain very close social networks and excessive interactions with others reduced the anxiety related to adjusting in a new place or to deal with the stress given by a new university course. As learners come in a course from numerous cultures they inherit some sort of distinctive cultural inflections, the interactions in social networks help eclipse those inhibitions. Interaction with others makes them more confident in terms of improving their inter-personal skills and conclusively helps perform better for any new course (Ryan et al. 2011). Bowers-Campbell (2008) believes this widely accepted social networking site could help learners with low self-efficacy by increasing communications with the instructor and classmates, and provide clear instructions to the learners in how to responsibly use it.

Facebook influences all levels of academic activities (Bugeja, 2006) and academic settings (Villano, 2007); by offering exiting common ground for learning something new for both educators and students (Couros, 2008), it can be effective if is used properly for academic purpose (Boon and Sinclair, 2009). Facebook also can become a valuable resource to support students' educational communications and collaborations with faculty (Roblyer et al. 2010), as it can provide

a different model of how online tools can be utilized in educational contexts (Downes, 2007). Moreover, Blankenship (2011) describes how social media impacts higher education vis-a-vis five interconnected "literacies," which includes attention, participation, collaboration, network awareness and critical consumption. Interestingly, Violino (2009) states that school administrators believe social networking promotes achievement on campus as it creates broader sense of community.

A countless number of studies have demonstrated that learners use social networking site like Facebook for their personal reasons. Learners use it to communicate their family members and friends, settle down in the university life, build up rapport with their teachers, share knowledge and ideas, know cultures of other friends, put comments and likes on others account though very little is known how effective Facebook can be for learning ESL writing. Considering the above studies, it is seen Facebook also has values for language learners but any literature is missing when it comes specifically ESL writing. All in all, researchers agree on a point that this adds value to the learners' social life in the university but all express caution about its potential in using for learning and teaching ESL writing.

METHODOLOGY

Context

In this study we used participants from Asian University of Bangladesh during four months undergraduate course entitled 'Intensive English Language: Writing' in the spring of 2016. This course is listed in the catalog as IEL: 1004 which is offered to the students of first semester. This is a mandatory first semester course and the students are taught basic writing skills such as movie review, book review, paragraph writing, formal and informal writing and so on.

Participant Selection

All the students of three sections participated in this study as Md. Zahangir Alam, first author of this paper, was the instructor of this writing course. There were 96 students total in three different sections and the aim of the study was to find out what they thought about the including of Facebook in their learning process. I created three Facebook groups for three different sections, and involved the students for some guided activities. Students were given writing activities, guidelines and sometimes sample answers and they were asked to produce similar type of writing. Many times, I posted a show movie cliff and they were putting their own opinions to write a complete review of that and same was true for book review. Students were allowed to give feedback to their peers and they even could add comments.

Research Instruments

The data were collected using a questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire consisted of five main parts comprising 15 close ended questions where the participants put tick mark on the correct option.

Data analysis tool

MS Excel was used for analyzing the data gathered from this questionnaire. The frequencies and percentages were calculated with the 'countif' function of Excel. The interviews aren't put with the result but included in the discussion section which largely enlarge on the earlier responses to the questionnaire items.

RESULTS

In this section, all the questions are categorized under five dimensions which are as follows:

Usage of Facebook Before and After The Course

It is evident from the survey that most of the students ($n = 87$; 90.625%) were signed up on Facebook before the course. Nearly ($n=9$; 10%) learners didn't have Facebook account or didn't log on it before they enrolled in this course which is quite surprising in the age science and technology. In that four months, only over one-third of the students used Facebook almost every day ($n = 33$; 34.4%). However, after the students got enrolled in the course, they began using it more frequently than before (one or more times a day: $n = 39$; 40.63%).

Students' Feelings About The Learning Content

A significant number of the learners said that they would have preferred a face-to-face course in terms of L2 writing to a Facebook-based instruction ($n = 42$, 43.6%) and a high number of learners dropped hints that they thought that Facebook should only be one of the elements in the teaching and learning ($n = 72$; 75%). They had very strong reservation against the absence of teachers in their learning process. They expected more involvement of the teacher for any sort of learning progress. The observed responses hinted that most of the students were intrinsically reluctant to approach for the information and communication technology based ESL writing class.

However, their responses showed that Facebook could be used to aid learning for L2 writing in formal contexts ($n = 81$; 84.4%) and that mentioned social network based work with proper instructions and feedback was found very effective approach ($n = 60$; 62.5%). A larger figure of learners expressed that they could share any information related to their class and university on Facebook ($n = 87$; 90.7%) which they believed helped to motivate them in their learning L2 writing ($n = 63$; 65.7%) as they it assisted them to

communicate their friends easily. However, almost the equal number of students, who found it effective, failed to decide whether or not this form of social media could add any value for teaching this productive skill ($n = 69$; %72). Surprisingly, many learners casted their opinion in favor of using Facebook for other courses ($n = 57$; 59.4%).

Motivation and Facebook as a Formal Instructional Environment

The figure for this dimension is very interesting. More than half ($n=54$; 56.25%) of the students expressed that they felt low while they were commented and criticized based on their L2 writing posts on Facebook. They sometimes failed to appreciate their friends' comments which were pretty negatives. Teachers' negative feedback didn't inspire them either to advance their learning. At the same time, less than half of the learners ($n=42$, 43.75) was never demotivated for any type of comment either from teacher or friends that shows their intensity as learners. Students were extremely satisfied when they received positive comments and feedbacks from their peers or teachers on their writing ($n=85$;88.51%).

Learners and Teachers' Rapport

More than half of the students expressed that it was quite appropriate for an instructor to use Facebook ($n = 66$; 100%) and the figure is overly high when it comes for socialization ($n = 87$; 90.6%). Only ($n=9$; 9.4%) students had reservations against the usage of Facebook to create social interactions. Consequently, some learners ($n = 21$; 21.9%) have highlighted the dark side of Facebook that teachers sometimes post personal pictures and information on Facebook which distract learners from their responsibility though many ($n=51$; 53.1%) didn't appreciate the opinions which go against Facebook. At the end of the course students found that this form of social media brought success to have good

communication with their teachers ($n = 87$; 90.6%) and that they were intrinsically motivated when the teacher commented in the form of feedback or comment on their mandatory postings ($n = 20$; 62.5%). By the end of the course, nearly all the students ($n=80$; 83.33%) showed interest to be the Facebook friend of their teachers. A fraction of students ($n=16.67\%$) were reluctant to add their teacher in the Facebook friend list.

Assistance of Facebook on Making Friends

Almost all the students believed ($n=90$; 93.75%) found Facebook useful to keep each other in touch during the course and only ($n=6$, 6.75%) showed their negative opinions against Facebook. In one interesting point, it is found that over half of them ($n=57$; 59.38%) in boxed other friends in the list to know about them better.

DISCUSSION

Considering the above results and the opinions from the participants, the most influential impacts and challenges using Facebook as formal instructional Environment for learning and teaching ESL writing are discussed.

- At least a fraction of learners aren't ready to use social networking media like Facebook in their formal learning environment. Socio-economic condition, lack of knowledge about technology or even their long held believe could be reason of acting so. For instance, one of the students expressed that he didn't have Facebook account because he was simply ignorant about the process of opening an account.
- The learners are ambivalent regarding the effectiveness of Facebook in their learning process. Traditionally, learners from Bangladesh don't readily accept any practice of learning outcome without the manifestation of teachers though they believe Facebook helped them to act as a better L2 writer. This pressing situation often made them hesitant about receiving Facebook as a formal instructional environment for learning the mentioned skill. They could post their writings anytime they preferred and received comments from their professors and peers which abetted them immediately assess their learning growth. However, learners largely tend to feel this social network to use as means of communication and a platform of sharing their ideas but the learning point is questionable. Intrinsically, the learners feel there must be teachers for any sort of learning outcome.
- In terms of received feedback from instructor and peers, the study shows mixed results. The common tendency among the students observed is that they are reluctant to receive negative feedback and they expressed it demotivated them to keep the tempo of Learning L2 writing. Also, there were learners who could carry on even if they received negative feedback. This happened due to their dynamism and learning intensity as an ESL writing learners. However, almost all the learners are happy if they are given positive comments which is pretty natural as human beings love to be appreciated rather being criticized.
- Facebook helps learners and teachers build up good rapport and excitingly not many hold reservations against this view. Students can communicate to their instructors whenever they feel and teachers can do the same. However, it also distracts learners from their original purpose as they get to be busy with focusing the personal pictures of their teacher. Students show tendency to put likes and comments on their teacher's any picture or Facebook post to draw attention.
- None of the learners express any caution about the value of Facebook as a means of

social communication. They use it as a common platform to socialize each other and it conclusively supports them to learn better. Few learners commented:

Once they got to know each other, the peer feedback became more effective than that of they didn't know each other. As a wide-ranging rule, people stay confident and focused when they are put in an environment with known faces. Such places take hold of the fringe pressures and offer very congenial atmosphere to the performers. Exactly same happens with the learners, they make considerably better improvement in ESL writing when they know each other that of the time they feel each other stranger. The striking reason for this is they proactively can receive criticism and comments from their peers and tutors.

- The cultural inflection of this part of the world rarely stimulate learners for carrying informal rapport with their instructors therefore, they continue to believe both the parties shouldn't have such casual communication on the social network. In Bangladesh, learners and students maintain a type of distant affinity which is quite formal. So, learners are normally conditioned about their beliefs and attitudes which they usually don't want to change.
- Overall, learners' inured beliefs from their educational background, conservative attitudes towards teachers-students relationships and notably poor economic status have inculcated their challenges for not accepting Facebook as a formal instructional environment for L2 writing though unarguably this social networking site offers both teachers and students many incomparable aids.

CONCLUSIONS

This study implicates that not all the learners are ready to embrace Facebook as a

formal instructional environment to learn L2 writing skill. They feel this important social networking site has high value for informal communications such as making social interaction among friends and teachers. To add more to the results, learners feel teachers should behave formally rather than such informal communication on Facebook. They largely expect their instructors to be present during their learning L2 writing skill. This study was undertaken with particular cultural setting as most of the learners were from almost similar socio-economic background. As a result the findings can't be generalized but this can pose alert to the instructors who are involved in using Facebook as a formal instructional environment in teaching Language skills. However, the large number of participants ensures reliability of the results.

The results of this study are apprehensively relevant to the academic world as its stalk holders can't avoid the presence of Facebook from their life. Both teachers and students are avidly active users of Facebook, so using it as formal instructional environment for teaching and learning L2 writing skill creates greater sense. Even, the irregular learners can make the most out of a L2 writing course as they can communicate from their residence. This can be highly motivating for those learners and they can end up joining class if they are encouraged enough based on their online activity.

Further investigations into the possibilities and limitations of Facebook and the approaches required to ensure its appropriate use. Few recommendations can be put to show how Facebook can be used in effective way.

1. Detailed guidelines for the students should be circulated among before assigning learners any writing activity.
2. Learners should be restricted to access instructor's personal account as it

sidetracks their focus or the teacher can open an account only for this purpose.

3. Instructors need to establish a sense of "Taking Criticism Positively" and "Positive Criticism" in the group.
4. At the beginning of the semester, teacher can check learners' familiarity about social network. A mini training session can be arranged to educate and inform learners about the usage of such social network.
5. Instructors must budget considerable amount of time for monitoring and encouraging learners to post their assigned writing. Those who avoid posting should be informed by the teachers and assisted not to miss more posts on Facebook.

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