

Utilising Facebook to Enhance Students' Learning and Learning Experience in the Digital Era: Promises and Possibilities

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Abstract: *Social media as a by-product of Web 2.0 has had significant implications, both theoretically and practically, on teaching and learning in the digital era. This paper critically discusses the potential of integrating Facebook into the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It will begin by identifying classical challenges associated with EFL classrooms across different cultural contexts (with particular emphasis on Asian countries), and subsequently argue how such challenges could potentially be addressed by integrating Facebook into such classrooms. Contemporary learning theories will be critically discussed to demonstrate that the use of Facebook is inherently compatible with these theories. In particular, we will argue that social interaction mediated by technology is critical to both language learning and language acquisition. Some ideas on how to use Facebook in the EFL classroom, in terms of the learning activities, will also be presented and discussed and the interconnectivity between these activities and contemporary learning theories will be explored. Finally, whilst the discussion throughout this paper focuses primarily on the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language, the argument and ideas presented may also be relevant across different subjects.*

Keywords: Facebook; Teaching; Learning; English

1. Introduction

One of the primary objectives of English language teaching is enabling learners to be proficient users capable of communicating in the target language (Oxford, 1990). However, in some Asian countries, this objective is not always easy to achieve due to limitations associated with language learning environments. These limitations include limited exposure and opportunities to use the target language, exposure to inaccurate forms or expressions produced by both fellow students and the teacher, limited opportunities for authentic communication, and limited language ability and cultural knowledge of the teachers (Cziko, 2005). Additionally, teaching and learning often occur in a decontextualised way. Needless to say, solutions to the above challenges should be urgently sought for if we are to improve the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (herein after EFL) in this particular context.

This paper argues that integrating Facebook into the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language can help address most, if not all, of the shortcomings mentioned above and, at the same time, enable EFL learners to use the target language for real life purposes (Wiburg & Butler-Pascoe, 2002). The following section will discuss potential

benefits of integrating Facebook into the EFL classrooms in light of the classical limitations mentioned earlier.

2. Facebook in the EFL Classroom

Facebook is an example of Web 2.0 and is the largest multi-language site on the Net (Grosbeck, 2011). Facebook enables internet users to communicate across different continents, languages, and culture. Since Facebook enables users to communicate using different languages, both orally and written, such social networking has a great potential to offer in the language classroom (Chartrand, 2012; Godwin-Jones, 2008; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010).

To begin with, EFL learners are typically afforded with limited exposure to the target language during ordinary English classes (Cziko, 2005). This is understandable because English is normally taught as a distinct subject among many other subjects in the curriculum. Consequently, the time allocated to the teaching and learning of the subject is also limited. To make matters worse, during this very limited time, EFL learners are not always exposed to English, as some teachers may prefer to use their native language to deliver course materials for various reasons. Ultimately, exposure to English during class is minimal, if at all, despite the fact that it is critical to receiving

comprehensible input, as far as Second Language Acquisition theory is concerned (Krashen, 1985).

With Facebook, limited exposure to the target language can be overcome. For example, the teacher may assign the students to follow news feeds such as CNN student news and add comments or watch relevant videos posted on Facebook and provide a summary to be presented in the classroom. The teacher may also have students join groups associated with English language teaching and learning and participate in the discussion or share relevant links (such as Dave's ESL Cafe). In all cases, the objective of the exercise is to provide the students with as much exposure to English as possible to enable them to receive critical comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) and, at the same time, to enable them to experiment with their comprehensible output (Swain, 1995). Thus, with effective use of Facebook equipped with teacher's facilitation skills, the problem of limited exposure to English in a conventional EFL classroom can be addressed.

Secondly, previous studies also suggest that EFL students typically have limited opportunities to use the target language in the classroom (Cziko, 2005). It has been well established that providing sufficient opportunities for students to practice the language skills they learn is critical for language learning (Swain, 1995). As mentioned earlier, unlike interaction in the conventional EFL classroom, interaction on Facebook is not constrained by time and space, in that students are afforded ample opportunities to use the target language at their own convenience. EFL students can even practice the target language they learn in the classroom with native English speakers from different parts of the globe (Yang & Chen, 2007), the opportunity of which may not be available for students in a 'brick and mortar' classroom. Research evidence suggests that frequent interaction with native speakers is critical to the development of language proficiency (Little & Ushioda, 1998). Thus, effective use of Facebook may not only compensate for the limited opportunities to use the target language in the EFL classroom, but it may also provide the students with the exclusive opportunity to use the language they learn in class directly with native English speakers in a more contextual way for real life purposes.

This exercise offers great opportunities for the students to develop their writing skills (Alias, Siraj, Azman, Daud, & Hussin, 2013). Of course, such activities should be informed by sound instructional design. For example, before the students use Facebook, teachers should make the objective of the exercise very clear right from the outset, including how the students should go about completing the task. Asking the students to use Facebook without any explicit and clear instruction may not necessarily result in learning (later in this paper, I will provide a few examples on how to use Facebook in the EFL classroom). Through the dynamic interaction between student, teacher, and native speakers of English, there will be ample opportunities for the students to use English which may, in turn, help address the problems of limited opportunities to use the target language in the conventional classroom.

Additionally, the fact that Facebook enables users to update statuses anytime encourages users to practice their writing. An interesting anecdotal observation of EFL learners of Halu Oleo University indicates that these users are inclined to use English when updating statuses on Facebook. It becomes even more interesting as some of these learners do not normally participate voluntarily in the classroom discussion using English; yet, they seem to feel comfortable enough to use English on Facebook. This observation appears to suggest that Facebook offers an amicable learning environment for the learners to practice their English language skills.

Furthermore, research evidence also suggests that being exposed to inaccurate forms or expressions produced by both fellow students and the teacher is also another classical challenge associated with EFL classroom (Cziko, 2005). Needless to say, being a foreign language, English may prove to be challenging not only for the students, but also for the teacher. As a result, students may be exposed to inappropriate forms or expressions and this experience can be detrimental to their learning as no one in the classroom is capable of providing feedback when needed. In this case, any errors produced will go unnoticed.

Using Facebook, however, students can have access to unlimited resources available online such as news, videos and websites with more natural language and expressions commonly used by native English speakers. Being exposed to the language used in these sites may help students learn natural expressions used by native speakers. Additionally, students even have access to native English speakers. In this case, not only are students exposed to natural expression, but they are also exposed to the culture (for example how native speakers initiate a conversation, how they avoid personal questions, etc.). This opportunity may not be available in a conventional classroom. Also, using Facebook, students can seek help from others. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that some native speakers are willing to proofread student thesis for free. Of course, this is not the reason why Facebook should be used in the EFL classroom; it is just another instance of the potential benefit that can be gained. All in all, not only does interaction using social networking enable students to be exposed to natural expressions used by native speakers, but it can also bring about other potential benefits.

In addition, research also indicates that limited opportunities are not always available in the EFL classroom for authentic communication (Cziko, 2005). This is understandable because communication that occurs in the classroom is, in most cases, not for real life purposes. Whereas students learn such topics as interviewing people, introducing oneself, etc., the communication that takes place is, in most cases, artificial in nature. In comparison, communication that takes place on Facebook is more authentic and contextual for real life purposes in the process of negotiation of meaning. Thus, as far as EFL classroom is concerned, use of Facebook can provide more opportunities for authentic communication, both for teacher and the student.

Finally, limited language ability and cultural knowledge of the teacher are often cited as classical challenges associated

with conventional EFL classrooms (Cziko, 2005). Obviously, EFL teachers vary in their language proficiency and in their cultural knowledge of the target language, in that some teachers are more knowledgeable than others. In some cases, teacher's knowledge of the target language and the culture is so limited that students are frequently exposed to inappropriate culture or expressions as discussed earlier. Using Facebook, such limitations could be minimised provided that students are interacting with native or near-native interlocutors. Of course, one of the teacher's responsibilities is to introduce instructional design that enables students to interact with more proficient interlocutors in an attempt to accomplish a task (such as interviewing people, discussing a topic, finding out what people do in their spare time, etc.). This could be easily done through e-tandem language learning using Facebook.

3. Using Facebook for Tandem Language Learning

Tandem language learning involves students from different linguistic backgrounds, where students work together and help each other in learning the target language (Alberth, 2013). During e-tandem language learning, EFL learners are paired with native English speakers learning Indonesian, Thai, and Chinese, for example, so they can take turn assuming the role of native speaker of their mother tongue. In this case, both teachers should work closely to design learning activities for their students. In this case, a Facebook group can be a great Learning Management System for both groups. For example, during the first week, EFL learners learning English are required to interview native English speakers (either using chat or forum) and the results of this interview will be shared in the classroom for discussion. In the second week, native English speakers will reciprocate by undertaking a similar activity using tools provided on Facebook. In this way, learners will learn from one another in a more authentic and contextualised way and the acquisition of the language, as well as the culture of the target language can take place more naturally in the process of negotiation of meaning. As far as Second Language Acquisition Theory is concerned, interaction with native speakers can facilitate for both comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) and comprehensible output (Swain, 1995) critical to language learning. However, successful e-tandem

language learning observes two principles; principles of reciprocity – both groups should support each other equally – and the principles of autonomy – both groups should take control of their own learning (Little & Ushioda, 1998).

Although research studies indicate that tandem exchanges are motivating and promote autonomous learning (Ushioda, 2000), relatively little research has explored the full potential of Facebook in supporting tandem foreign language learning, despite its ubiquity (Alias et al., 2013). Investigating the potential of Facebook in supporting e-tandem foreign language teaching and learning is particularly important, as research studies indicate students enjoy using Facebook (Grossek, 2011; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Thus, sound instructional design using Facebook could turn foreign language teaching and learning to an enjoyable experience for both students and the teacher.

4. Some Examples of How to Use Facebook in the EFL Classroom

It goes without saying, there are various ways of using Facebook in foreign language learning and the choice of which strategy to use depends crucially on the learning objectives to be achieved. To begin with, the teacher could create a group for the class he/she teaches and add all students in the class to the group. With the group, (a) teacher can see who actively participates in the group (b) student can submit their assignment online (c) student can add relevant link. Below I will discuss a number of ideas of how to use Facebook in foreign language classroom. In all cases, teacher should make it clear that student participation will be part of the evaluation of the course to ensure higher level of participation.

Posting Cartoons or Photos and Have Students Comment

As far as a foreign language classroom is concerned, a good learning activity is one that encourages students to participate in. One idea is to post cartoons or photos on Facebook and have students comment on the blank callouts. The teacher can omit parts or all of the conversation (phrases or sentences) and have students complete the missing parts of the conversation as shown below.



Alternatively, the teacher can simply post a cartoon or photo and have students comment on the cartoon/photo using the adjective that they have learned in class. In this way, learning English could be more enjoyable, both for the teacher and the students.

Debates/Discussion

Using Facebook, the teacher can also post a controversial topic, divide the students into two groups with one group in favour of the topic and the other one against the topic. Each member of the group should brainstorm the idea and post their argument as to why they are in favour of or against the topic and the teacher can serve as a moderator. However, it is extremely important that the teacher should participate in the discussion to ensure that students do not feel that they are left alone on the cyber and to promote teacher's presence in this learning environment. Research evidence indicates that the teacher's presence increases student participation in online discussion (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

Sharing Personal Experience or Story

The teacher may also ask the students to share a personal experience and have other students comment on the post. In the end, the class can vote as to whose experience is the most interesting and why, whose experience is the scariest and why, whose experience is the saddest and why, etc. In this way, EFL learners learn how to justify their opinions and to convince people, thus promoting critical thinking and classroom learning community (Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

Posting Relevant Links to the Group

The teacher may also ask the students to post relevant links to the group. These links should be related to the topic that they are currently learning in class. In this way, students should read the relevant link before posting it to the group. The more links posted, the more the students read information from different sources. Sharing links with other class members enable students to have access to more resources.

Posting Assignment/Project

Using the Facebook group, students can post their assignment/project either through inbox or through the group wall. The teacher can then provide feedback online. Alternatively, students can also provide feedback to one another and send the final version of the assignment to the teacher for feedback.

Nonetheless, to be able to use Facebook for teaching purposes, it is the institution's responsibility to ensure its teachers are provided with training on how to integrate social media in their teaching and to make sure that technological support is always provided when needed.

5. Concluding Remarks

Social media as a by-product of Web 2.0 has had significant implications not only on how people communicate in the digital era, but it has also had significant implications on how people learn. Although the examples discussed in this paper primarily focuses on the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language using Facebook, these

examples may well be relevant for the teaching and learning of other subjects. We have argued throughout the paper that classical challenges associated with EFL classrooms such as limited exposure to the target language, limited opportunities to use the target language, exposure to inaccurate forms or expressions produced by both fellow students and the teacher, limited opportunities for authentic communication, and limited language ability and cultural knowledge of EFL teachers can potentially be addressed by integrating Facebook into such classrooms. We have also argued that not only is the use of Facebook compatible with current learning theories, but it could also offer a wide range of benefits which may not be available in a conventional classroom. However, it is important that teachers be provided with sufficient training prior to integrating Facebook in their teaching.

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