Utilising a Social Networking Website as an Esl Pedagogical Tool in a Blended Learning Environment: An Exploratory Study

By

Nor Ashikin Ab Manan[1] , Ahmad Ashaari Alias[1] & Ambigapathy Pandian[2]
Universiti Teknologi Mara Perak, Malaysia[1] & Universiti Sains Malaysia[2]

Abstract

This exploratory study was conducted to investigate the possibility of blending a conventional classroom teaching with an online instruction via a social networking website, Facebook. Since Malaysian adolescents have been found to spend a great deal of their time outside school hours online with an evident preference towards entertainment and social networking websites (Tan, Ng & Saw, 2010), it is felt that using an online tool to supplement their classroom teaching would be in line with the current trend. Since English is the language commonly used by these youngsters in their online communication, it is felt that there are potential benefits of utilizing one of the features from this popular social networking website, Facebook which is 'Facebook Group' in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) context. The researchers believe that the features offered by 'Facebook Group', with careful manipulation, can be used as a powerful pedagogical tool. Blending conventional face-to-face instruction with online learning activities does not only solve teachers' problem of inadequate class time but will make learning more appealing to the techno-savvy younger generation learners. This article will describe how face-to-face instruction was blended with online activities via 'Facebook Group' in this exploratory study.

Keywords: *Blended learning, social networking websites, pedagogical tool*

Introduction

The term "blended learning" is used to describe the use of both face-to-face and online modes of instruction in an education programme. Initially, the use of online instruction is more prevalent in distance education as a means of communication between course instructors and learners and a platform for ongoing and interactive social learning. However, with the advancement of technology and increasingly easy internet access, online instruction or e-learning used as supplement to conventional classroom teaching for on-campus education has become more common and this has encouraged educators to explore its use in a variety of ways (Stacey & Gerbic, 2007). This exploratory study was conducted to explore the possibility of blending a conventional classroom teaching with an online instruction via a social networking website, Facebook. Since Malaysian adolescents have been found to spend a great deal of their time outside school hours online with an evident preference towards entertainment and social networking websites (Tan, Ng & Saw, 2010), it is felt that using an online tool to supplement their classroom teaching would be in line with the current trend. A study conducted among 535 adolescents from five urban secondary schools in Penang, Malaysia, shows that 77.06% of the online activities that the participants were involved in use English, 8.16% use Bahasa Malaysia and 14.72% use Chinese. This in itself reflects the potential benefit of utilizing the social networking websites such as Facebook in teaching

English as a Second Language (ESL) context. The researchers believe that with careful manipulation of the features offered by Facebook, it can be used as a powerful pedagogical tool. This article will describe how face-to-face instruction was blended with online activities via one of the features of Facebook which is Facebook Group in this exploratory study.

Overview of Related Literature

A number of new approaches to teaching and learning process have resulted from the blending of pedagogy and technology with many different combinations of media, learning design and teaching strategies. Stacey and Gerbie (2007) investigated blended learning practice for distance and on-campus education and concluded that in order to be effective it requires careful design and preparation and students' online interactions should be explained during face-to-face class time and should be part of assessed tasks. Wu and Hwang (2010) conducted a study on the effectiveness of e-learning for blended courses in college by looking at learning environment and individual factors. They concluded that the essential factors which directly impact the students' use of e-learning and e-learning performance can be divided into technical and social systems. Technical system includes e-learning usability, ease of use and media richness while social system includes extrinsic motivation and learning climate. Van Eijl, Pilot and De Voogd (2005) investigated whether students in a blended learning environment prefer to work individually or in groups while performing an online task and whether their decisions affect their performance in the course. They found that students who chose collaborative learning performed better than those who chose to work individually.

Other aspects of blended learning that have been researched are its benefits. First of all it promotes connectedness among the students (Aspden & Helm, 2004) which means they can easily keep up with the pace of the course and be better prepared for classes. Secondly, limited class time can be extended by letting the students conduct their learning at their own time and pace outside class hours (Pandian, Alias, Abdul Manan et al., 2010). Students can be more self-directed in their learning as learning resources can be used repeatedly and teachers can update learning content easily (Wu & Hwang, 2010). In addition, online discussion has been found to be less threatening for many students. Stacey and Gerbie (2007) found that weak students who were not able to follow the fast-paced class discussion prefer online activities which they perceive as much easier to comprehend. They also found that there was high level of students' engagement during online activities and at times "passionate and heated discussion" (p. 169) as compared to face-to-face class activities where only the more confident students would participate in the class dialogues.

English as a second language (ESL) classes have also embraced the technology by utilizing variety of online tools to enhance face-to-face classroom instruction. Since its use is not restricted by time and distance these online tools provide flexibilities and convenience to both students and teachers. Among the online tools that have been utilized by ESL classrooms teachers include web logs (Mah & Nah, 2009), social networking website 'Facebook Notes' (Pandian, Alias, Abdul Manan et al., 2010), electronic mail (Bee-Lay& Yee Ping,1991 & Karnedi, 2004) and commercially designed learning management system (LMS) (Grgurovic, 2010). In Mah and Wah's (2009) study, they examined the possibilities of using web logs to teach academic writing (not blogging). They concluded that with well organised instructional design efforts, web logs can be implemented in classrooms to replace traditional "chalk and-talk" activities since writing web logs was found to be useful and easy-to-use. Facebook

Notes is another online tool which has shown promising results. It was found to be a useful platform for providing peer feedback for process writing (Pandian, Alias, Abdul Manan et al., 2010). Bee-Lay and Yee Ping (1991) conducted a study on two groups of students from Singapore and Canada who used the electronic mail as a medium of communication. They discussed two books from the two countries and both groups benefit from the online discussion. The use of electronic mail as a learning tool was found to be effective in improving students' writing skills whether individually or in groups as demonstrated by Karnedi (2004). Karnedi conducted a study on the effectiveness of tutoring using the electronic mail to enhance writing skills. In the study, feedback was given by the tutor through electronic mail. He concluded that the advantages of electronic tutorial using e-mail outweigh the disadvantages and proposed its use to enhance writing skills.

Background of the Study and its Objectives

One of the English for Academic Purpose (EAP) courses offered in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), a public university in Malaysia is *Introduction to Critical Thinking*. The course has a prescribed module which discussed many theories and concepts in critical thinking. Therefore, in-class teaching hour is barely sufficient to cover the module. It is felt that out-of-class activities conducted online would be beneficial to supplement the limited face-to-face class time. This action research was conducted to explore the possibilities of reaping the benefits promised by blended learning environment as discussed in the related literature. The benefits of supplementing in-class lessons with online activities are as follows:
   a) Extending limited class time.
   b) Enhancing in-class lessons.
   c) Promoting self-directed learning
   d) Providing a less threatening environment for student-lecturer as well as student-student interactions.

Facebook Group was used as a platform for out-of-class activities due to its popularity among both students and lecturers thus, making it easier to utilise its features for teaching and learning purposes. Its features allow users to share information by posting texts, videos, pictures and links. In addition, users can also utilize the poll questions, upload documents and have an online group chat.

Methodology

The Participants

The participants for this study were 30 third year undergraduates taking a diploma programme at UiTM, one of the public universities in Malaysia. The students were from an intact group comprising of 20 males and 10 females. A quick survey using the *poll question* revealed that all of them had already had their Facebook accounts for more than one year prior to the study but had never used the Facebook Group features for the purpose of learning. The students' work submitted online via Facebook was considered as part of their on-going assignments and some marks were allocated for these assignments.

Study Period

In this study, the features of Facebook Group were experimented with in reference to the learning outcomes of the course: *An Introduction to Critical Thinking*. Since the essence of this study is blended learning, the time was divided equally for in-class and out-of-class activities. The study duration was three weeks which cover thirty six hours of learning time. This includes six hours of in-class instruction and six hours of student learning time (SLT) allocated for out-of-class online activities per week.

Procedure

Before the study commenced, the lecturer created a group on Facebook. There are three levels of group privacy offered by Facebook. The first level is ***Opened*** which means anyone can join and view the updates of the group. The second level is ***Closed*** which means anyone can request to join but only the moderator can approve their request and only those who are in the group can view the update and finally the third level is ***Secret*** which means only those who are invited by the moderator can join the group and view the updates. In order to create a non-threatening learning environment, the lecturer chose the second privacy level which is ***Closed***. Therefore, only the students in the intact group and the lecturer can view the progress work.

In Class and Online activities

Realising the importance of careful design and preparation of online activities as stressed by Stacey and Gerbie (2007), the online component was carefully incorporated into the existing syllabus thus, three weekly learning outcomes were focused on for both in-class and out-of-class instructions. Table 1 shows the learning outcomes specified in the syllabus and the in-class and online activities used to achieve them.

Table 1: In-class and Online Activities

LEARNING OUTCOMES	IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES	ONLINE TASKS
Learning Outcome 1: By the end of the activity, students should be able to identify linguistics elements that contribute to lexical and syntactic ambiguity.	**Lecture 1** (two-hour in-class lesson): The lecturer used the course prescribed module to teach students the theories and concepts related to linguistics elements that contribute to lexical and syntactic ambiguity.	**Task A** (two-hour SLT*): the lecturer used the function of posting a video via a link from YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qze6 zQwJLts). This video contains pictures of real life signs, pictures, words, phrases and sentences. The video was recorded with Malaysians in mind so that the students were able to grasp the underlying meaning shown in the video without much effort. The video demonstrated how context defines meanings and how features of ambiguity and vagueness in signs, pictures, words, phrases and sentences were very common in our daily lives. Thus, identifying the linguistics elements and being able to explain the differences in the elements would ignite the students' critical thinking skills. The task required the students to watch the video and use the *comment* feature of the Facebook

		Group to write a reflective review based on their understanding of the lesson. **Task B** (two-hour SLT*): the students were assigned to capture images around the campus such as a sign or an action, a picture, a word, a phrase or a sentence which has ambiguity in meaning using their camera phones. They would use the Facebook Group to upload their pictures and write descriptive paragraphs explaining the linguistics elements and the ambiguity of the picture.
Learning Outcome 2: By the end of the activity, students should be able to identify features used in persuasive texts.	**Lecture 2** (two-hour in-class lesson): The lecturer introduced the concepts and theories related to features used in persuasive texts. The students did in-class enrichment exercises as presented in the module.	**Task A** (two-hour SLT*): The second learning outcome was achieved through the use of *link sharing* and *comment* on the Facebook Group. The students were assigned to explore online advertisements from other websites and analyse the persuasive devices (euphemism, loaded questions, innuendo, stereotyping, etc.) used in the advertisements. Once they have selected their advertisement, they were to share the link to the advertisements on Facebook Group. **Task B** (two-hour SLT*): The students were assigned to work in pair and to review the persuasive devices used by using the *comment* feature. They had to identify at least five persuasive devices. The lecturer would provide feedback on each post.
Learning Outcome 3: By the end of the activity, students should be able to construct effective persuasive texts.	**Lecture 3** (two-hour in-class lesson): The students were taught effective construction of persuasive text based on the module.	**Task A** (four-hour SLT*): The students were required to work in pair and act as online salesmen. They were assigned to develop an advertisement to promote a product using catchy wordings (preferably rhetorical ploys and fallacies) to attract buyers. The advertisement could be originally designed or adapted from the internet but the emphasis was on originality of the texts. Students used the *upload picture* and *comment* functions to present their work.

*SLT: Student Learning Time

The Lecturer's Roles

Throughout the study, the lecturer assumed different roles which include an instructor, facilitator, manager as well as a guide. He managed the students' activities within the tool and provided reinforcement as well as feedback to each and every assignment posted by the students. Table 2 summarizes the lecturer's role in the study.

Table 2: Summary of the lecturer's role

Steps	Facebook Group's Features	Lecturer's Roles
First	*'create document'*	Published the activity instructions.
Second	*'comment'*	Reviewed students' work using impression method by labeling them either *Average*, *Good* or *Impressive*.
Third	*'comment'*	Providing feedback by highlighting samples of language or content errors for the students to take note.
Fourth	*'comment'*, *'copy-and-paste'*	Highlighting errors and demonstrating the corrections.
Fifth	*'group chat'*	Entertaining queries and solving problem related to assigned tasks

Discussions

Throughout the duration of the study, it was observed that there are many strengths and weaknesses of the approach and their response is discussed in the following section.

Strengths

After exploring the use of Facebook Group as a tool for online learning, there are several strengths and weaknesses that could be highlighted. First and foremost, the popularity of Facebook has made it the main strength of using this social networking website as a learning tool. The online survey via *poll question* revealed that all the students have already had their own accounts for more than a year. This shows the students' high acceptance of this social website. Moreover, the survey also revealed that although the students had never used Facebook Group as a tool for learning before the study, they are already familiar with its features and this contributes to the strength of using Facebook Group as a pedagogical tool.

Secondly, the group privacy setting is a feature offered by this tool which can be considered as its strength. It is important to create a non-threatening learning environment for the students. In online learning, if the students have to display their work publicly where anyone can have access like unrestricted web logs, they might not be interested to participate. This is because they are more likely to feel apprehensive having their work judged by total strangers. Therefore, having a **Closed Group** where their work can only be viewed by their lecturer and peers is a good starting point to encourage their participation.

Thirdly, the Facebook notification service keeps the participants updated with the group activities. Any comment posted by anyone will appear at the notification icon on the top left side of the webpage. Even though the participants are offline, the notifications will remain there until they are viewed. This feature allows the students to keep track of their groups' progress easily.

Next, the simplified *sharing bar* with tabs labeled as *post, link, photos, videos* and *question,* is user friendly. Both the students and the lecturer could easily share information through texts, third-party websites, pictures and videos using the options on the sharing bar. They can also ask questions. The functions are straightforward and easy to use. Figure 1 shows how the *sharing bar* looks like on the webpage.

Figure1: The Sharing Bar

In addition, the *create document* feature allows a very basic text sharing which can be edited by the participants. It functions like *wiki* where people can collaborate to write some information. It is a very easy function and can be used by both the lecturer and the students. However, in this study, the function was only used by the lecturer to publish the activity instructions.   Finally, the *group chat is a* feature which allows the students to interact with the lecturer simultaneously. This feature can be used by them whenever they have any queries related to their tasks. The feature helps overcome communication barrier between the lecturer and the students.

Weaknesses

As expected of any teaching approaches and methodology there are several drawbacks of using Facebook Group for the purpose of teaching and learning. Firstly, the group page flows like a news feed. Therefore, the latest posting will move up leaving the important postings below. Due to this, some students may overlook important information and updates. In order to overcome the problem, during the study period, the lecturer highlighted the important postings by labeling them "ANNOUNCEMENT (DATE)" and informing the students about this occurrence so that they could pay attention to the updates closely.

Secondly, the preferred language used by most students to interact on Facebook is Malay and 'Manglish' (the combination of Malay and English). Very few among them, actually use *Standard English* to interact with each other. Hence, another drawback of using this tool is poor quality of English used in the online interactions. In order to control this situation, they were reminded to revise their work before posting it on Facebook Group. They were required to check their choice of words, spelling and sentence structures. Over time, the quality of the language slightly improved.

The Lecturer's Perception

As a participant observer in this study, the lecturer found that Facebook Group can be a powerful pedagogical tool and its application has contributed positively to his teaching practices. Firstly, the lecturer was able to give feedback to the students' work more consistently. The use of the *comment* feature by the lecturer to review his students' work has encouraged him to give a much better feedback compared to his conventional paper and pen feedback or oral feedback. This is due to the fact that he could do this at his own pace, thus, allowing him to be more productive.

Students' Acceptance

Based on the survey conducted using the *poll question* feature in the Facebook Group, the majority of the students found the use of Facebook Group as interesting. This is because they

are already familiar with the functions and uses of the social networking website and found the tasks assigned to them manageable. The students are connected to the internet almost every day thus, performing the online exercises is something that they enjoy doing. They found the different approaches to learning enjoyable and fun and feel that relating the theories and concepts to real life contexts is a good way to enhance their understanding.

However, they admitted to having problems in coping with the write up of the activities. This may be due to their inability to express themselves well in English. Some of the students expected more assistance from the lecturer in completing the online assignments. They believed that they could have performed better with proper guidance.

Conclusion

This exploratory study demonstrates how technology can be blended with conventional face-to-face instruction. With careful planning, ESL teachers can utilize everyday technology and turn it into a powerful teaching tool. The advancement of the internet has created a borderless world, thus, teaching and learning are no longer confined to the four walls of a classroom. Students can conduct their learning activities anywhere as long as they have the internet facilities. Personal computers, mobile phones and iPad are just some of the devices that could be utilized for teaching and learning purposes. It can be concluded that ESL teachers have to be creative and up-to-date with the current technology in order to keep up with the fast-paced society. Blending conventional face-to-face instruction with online learning activities does not only solve teachers' problem of inadequate class time but will make learning more appealing to the techno-savvy younger generation learners.

References

Aspden, L & Helm, P. (2004). Making the connection in a blended learning environment. *Educational Technology Research and Development.* 4(3),245-252.

Bee-Lay, S. & Yee-Ping, S. (1991). English by e-mail: creating a global classroom via the

medium of computer technology. *ELT Journal.* 45, 287-292.

Grgurovic, M. (2010). *Technology-enhanced blended language learning in an ESL class: A description of a model and an application of the Diffusion of Innovations theory.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Iowa State University.

Karnedi. (2004). The Effectiveness of the Electronic Tutorial in Enhancing Writing Skills. *Malaysian Online Journal of instructional Technology (MOJIT).* 1 (1), 41-49.

Mah, B.Y. & Nah, E. N.(2009). Writing Web Logs in the ESL Classroom: A Study of Student Perceptions and the Technology Acceptance Model. *Asian Journal of University Education: ACRULeT.* 5(1), 47-70.

Pandian, A., Alias, A.A., Manan, N. A. A., & Yusof, J. (2010). *The Effect of Providing Peer Feedback via Facebook Notes on the Quality of College Students' Academic Essays: A*

Case Study. Poster presented at the Free Linguistics Conference, University of Sydney, Australia.

Stacey, E. & Gerbie, P. (2007). Teaching for blended learning—Research perspectives from on-campus and distance students. *Education Information Technology.* 12, 165–174.

Tan, K. E., Ng, M. L. Y., & Saw, K. G. (2010). Online activities and writing practices of urban Malaysian adolescents. *Science Direct: System, 38*, 548-559.

Van Eijl, P.J., Pilot, A. & De Voogd, P. (2005). Effects of Collaborative and Individual Learning in a Blended Learning Environment. Education and Information Technologies. 10(1/2), 49–63.

Wu , W. & Hwang L. (2010). The effectiveness of e-learning for blended courses in colleges: A Multi-Level Empirical Study. *International Journal of Electronic Business Management. 8(4), 312-322.*