

Effective Ways to Use Facebook in English Writing Classes

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During the last few years, Facebook has been used around the world to improve English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing skills. The purpose of this study was to identify some of the most effective and popular ways for using Facebook in EFL writing classes. A comprehensive review of the literature found that five basic pedagogical approaches are popular: 1) Teachers ask questions or pose weekly topics, and then students respond; 2) Students post essays and classmates respond; 3) Students read something, then answer questions or summarize; 4) Students post photos or videos, describing them; and 5) Students focus on grammar and vocabulary issues.

To verify the effectiveness of one of those approaches—the first one listed above—48 first-year students in Japan and 55 third-year students in Spain engaged in a “cross-culture discussion” for about 10 weeks. Each week the teachers encouraged the students, as homework, to write about certain topics related to the two cultures. This paper focuses on the Japanese students. It was found that some students in Japan were active in using Facebook, but other students rarely or never engaged in it. Thus, the Facebook activity seemed to improve the English skills for some Japanese students only.

BACKGROUND

Facebook is a very popular social media Web site where people can share information and photos. Amazingly, there are about two billion active users worldwide (Statista, 2017). Students can collaborate with friends in project-based activities. The site has good privacy settings, allowing for “closed groups.” As homework for classes, students can go at their own pace in a quiet environment.

But is Facebook an effective pedagogical tool to improve EFL writing skills? Basically, there are three ways to assess this: theoretically, student attitudes, and test scores.

Theoretically, Facebook seems to be effective in promoting English writing skills. For example, social constructivist theory says that learning is a social process (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch & Tulviste, 2005), and the very essence of Facebook is social interaction with many people. Students can learn more if they receive proper assistance from a more advanced person. They can progress through their “zone of proximal development” when they receive “scaffolding” from teachers or more able peers; thus, students develop “higher cognitive functions” (Vygotsky, 1978). Key concepts in social constructivist theory are meaning negotiation, mutual engagement in action, community building, and learning from each other. Also, the best writing is said to be collaborative writing (Storch, 2005; Oxford, 1997); students on Facebook can work together very easily, sharing ideas and jointly improving the quality of writings. The fact it is public means the students probably spend time attempting to produce a high-quality product.

Also, theoretically, Facebook might be effective in promoting writing skills because a lot of research shows that the quantity of writing correlates with improvements in the quality of writing (see Nation, 2009,

for a review). As Taqi et al. (2015) summarize, “The more students write, the more their writing skills develop” (p. 75). However, a key question involves whether or not Facebook motivates students to write a lot.

The second way to measure the efficacy of Facebook is to survey student attitudes. Most research has found that students have fairly positive attitudes, and say that Facebook homework is relatively low stress and comfortable (e.g., Simpson, 2011; Jee, 2011; Shih, 2011; Bani-Hani, Al-Sobh, & Abu-Melhim, 2014; Omar, Embi, & Yunus, 2012; Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi, 2012). For instance, Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi had 83 freshmen in Thailand use Facebook. Thirteen of the students were interviewed, and all had positive views toward Facebook. Students said it was especially good for communication with peers and the teacher.

However, several studies have found mixed or even negative findings with respect to motivation. For instance, Rifai (2010) in Indonesia found that after 13 lessons, students using the school’s e-learning site, which featured online writing tasks, believed they improved their writing skills more than students using Facebook. Instead of a hobby, Facebook became an obligation. Some students said they preferred working individually rather than as a team. Ekoc (2014) in Turkey also had mixed results. She found that Facebook was motivating if students received feedback; five students were quite active on Facebook but the other 17 did very little. Likewise, Bani-Hani, Al-Sobh, & Abu-Melhim (2014) in Jordan found that almost 90% of students said Facebook helped improve writing abilities; but importantly, almost half of the students preferred traditional writing tasks over Facebook. Selwyn (2009) states that some students do not like to use Facebook at school, the writing can be too superficial, and there may be privacy/bullying problems.

In an important study in Japan, Dizon (2015) found that university students have “moderately favorable views” toward Facebook. Results showed that 71% of the students in his writing classes used Facebook only about once per week; in other words, most students did not get excited about doing it. But 19% of all the students said they viewed the page at least one time per day. Students answered a Likert-scale survey about their opinions (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree). The most positive statement was “I enjoy learning English through Facebook,” which received a 3.80 average score (SD= 1.19). The lowest score among eight statements was for “I can express myself more easily in English because of Facebook;” but even this averaged 3.46 (SD= 1.23).

The final way to measure the effectiveness of Facebook in EFL classes is through test score improvements in longitudinal studies, and a relatively large number of studies have found that using Facebook in EFL university classes improves writing and grammar skills (Shih 2011, 2013; Al-Haj 2015; Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi 2012; Faggosa 2015; Hussain et al. 2015; Shukor and Noordin 2014; El Fatah & Ahmed 2016; Sim & Pop 2014; and Rifai 2010). Grammar tests are often a part of writing assessment because a strong correlation exists between writing and grammar (Pike, 1976); if a student is good at grammar, he/she probably also writes well. Those test improvements involving Facebook are described in more detail below.

A review of the literature found that basically five pedagogical techniques have been used with Facebook to improve EFL writing skills:

1. Teachers ask a question, then students need to answer.

Ekoc (2014) in Turkey had teachers and students posting questions, and she found mixed results. She

concluded that the teacher needs to be active on the Facebook page for success to occur.

Wang (2012) in Taiwan used Facebook for cross-cultural discussions with students in the United States. She found basically good results, but limits were individual motivations and that the interface does not support structured discussions.

Deng et al. (2017) carried out a cross-culture discussion between students in Hong Kong and Taiwan, using Skype, Moodle and Facebook. Students talked about the education systems in the two places, and technology. The researchers found that Moodle was good for formal discussions, while Facebook was moderately successful for informally building social relationships. Unfortunately, students were not so active with the Facebook activities, because they said they did not know the other students, so were reluctant to find common topics for chatting.

At Ritsumeikan University in Japan, White (2009) had students answer a question each week. He found that using Facebook increased the amount of students' writings and reduced the level of mistakes. Nine students volunteered for the five-week Facebook project. The researcher counted the number of words written each week and grammar mistakes. In interviews, students said that they liked how they got quick feedback on grammar errors. A problem was that students were reluctant to be the first to post a comment, because they were shy and afraid their opinion would be different from that of peers. Some students were afraid of making grammar mistakes in public. Also, students didn't want to give negative comments on other students' writings.

2. Students write an essay, and others respond.

Shukor and Noordin (2014) in Malaysia tested to determine if Facebook collaborative writing groups are more effective than face-to-face collaborative writing groups. Students wrote opinion essays, shared them, and made comments. Thirty-three undergraduates (various majors) were divided into two groups based on pre-course test scores. The researchers found that the Facebook students scored slightly higher, but not significantly higher, on a rubric measuring content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

Elfatah & Ahmed (2016) in Saudi Arabia had 30 female undergraduates using Facebook and 30 using traditional methods. Students took pre- and post-course grammar and writing tests. Students posted writings and discussed grammar during a semester. The tests had students create five-paragraph essays, evaluated by two independent raters, using a rubric which rated content, organization, and voice-style. They found the experimental Facebook group improved grammar and writing skills significantly more than the control group.

Bani-Hani, Al-Sobh, & Abu-Melhim (2014) in Jordan had 42 female freshmen on Facebook brainstorming, writing, and giving feedback to peers. The majority of students reported positive attitudes toward the project. The researchers stressed that the teacher needs to be active on the Facebook page in order for the project to be successful.

Wichadee (2013) in Thailand also used Facebook for giving peer feedback during the writing process. Thirty freshmen over one semester posted 100-word writings, and peers were required to give at least one comment on each essay. The researcher found that the nature of the students' feedback focused more on content than on grammatical errors. Peers were good at recommending that content be added or deleted. Concerning grammar, peers were good at spotting verb tense mistakes. Also, students claimed that this

feedback resulted in notable improvements between first drafts and final drafts.

In Japan, Dizon (2015) had students write on a variety of topics and respond to other students' Facebook entries. According to the students, the best aspects of Facebook were that it was easy to use and low stress. This study did not test students for improvement.

3. Students read something, then answer questions or summarize.

Omar et al. (2012) in Malaysia had 31 students summarize posted articles and make comments. Students were divided into seven groups based on themes chosen by the students and teachers. Each student averaged 18 entries, which was three times the number required.

Melor & Hadi (2012) had 43 third-year students in Malaysia doing summary writing using Facebook in writing class. Students especially reported that Facebook was helpful during the brainstorming stage of writing. Students also stated that they learned new vocabulary from classmates. But many students said that in-class discussions were more helpful than Facebook discussions.

4. Students post photos and videos, describing them.

Simpson (2011) in South Korea had about 40 freshmen answer questions, make comments, and tell impressions about posted photos and videos. According to the researcher, motivation toward the task was only moderate. This study did not attempt to quantitatively measure improvements.

5. Students focus on improving grammar and vocabulary.

Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi (2012) had 83 mostly non-English major freshmen in Thailand use Facebook, discussing grammar. The researchers categorized the grammatical topics which students wrote about on the homepage. The most common topic was "sentence structures", followed by "word meanings", "parts of speech", and then "relative clauses". There were pre- and post-tests, and students significantly improved in both grammatical (a cloze test) and writing (ability to write an essay) competence.

Sim & Pop (2014) asked 127 first- and second-year business-oriented college students in Romania to use Facebook, and measured vocabulary improvements. Groups were divided into two classes based on English entrance exam scores. One group used Facebook to study vocabulary, the other group used traditional in-class methods. Both groups significantly improved during the semester, but the difference between the two groups was not significant.

Rifai (2010) in Indonesia had 25 students using Facebook, and 33 students doing online tasks. Their writings were compared for vocabulary ability, grammatical accuracy, and fluency. He found that, after 13 lessons, students using the school's e-learning site improved their writing scores on pre- and post-course tests slightly better than students using Facebook.

Sulisworo et al. (2016) and Yusof et al. (2012), both also in Indonesia, found that students using Facebook could give helpful feedback to peers on how to make preparatory outlines for their writings. Utilizing the social media site especially helped students come up with writing ideas and to organize those ideas.

METHOD

The current study set out to determine if one of those approaches listed above—the first one: the teacher posing questions to students on Facebook—was effective in motivating Japanese university freshmen to write a lot. The main assumption was that if students wrote a lot, their writing abilities would improve. Thus, Facebook’s effectiveness was measured not by an opinion questionnaire—the reliability of which can always be questioned—but by the actual number of Facebook entries and words which students wrote during a semester. This paper focuses on the quantity of the Japanese students’ writing activities.

Three first-year non-English major college classes in Japan, totaling 48 students (28 males), were required to have “culture discussions” using Facebook with three classes in Spain for about 2.5 months in the autumn of 2016. Importantly, the project was only a small part of each writing course in Japan, resulting in about 15% of students’ course grades. The writing course had many other dimensions, such as writing individual blogs, a professional resume, a research paper, a fiction story, and multiple grammar exercises and quizzes. During the Facebook project, which began in mid-October, students were evaluated two times: once in early November, and once in late December.

Fourteen Japanese students majored in biology, 14 in economics, 11 in engineering, five in an integrated major, and four in literature. They had an average TOEIC score of 508 ($SD = 128$). Each class was in a different closed Facebook group, with the 14 biology students in one group, the 11 engineering students in another group, and the remaining 23 students in the third group.

In Spain at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, 55 third-year students (11 males) volunteered to join the project; their contributions were never formally evaluated by their teachers. They were all English majors with high English skills.

Each week either the teacher in Japan or the teacher in Spain made a Facebook entry, introducing a main topic and encouraging students to make comments. (But students were also told they could write about anything they desired.) The main topics over the 10 weeks were: A) Introduce yourself, B) Tourist places in each country, C) Sports, D) Food and family, E) Movies and music, F) Your best trip or holiday, G) Good books, H) Student life and work, I) Male-female relations, J) The best ways to learn English. Besides the weekly entry, the teachers made only a few comments on Facebook during the semester.

RESULTS

In Japan, 36 students (21 males) with an average TOEIC score of 520 ($SD = 135$) made at least one comment. Importantly, a total of 12 students (7 males)—25% of all students—never made any Facebook entries during the 10 weeks; those 12 students had an average TOEIC score of 459 ($SD = 93$).

The 36 students made a total of 187 entries, and posted 36 photos and four video clips. That is an average of 5.19 ($SD = 3.72$) entries per student during the 10 weeks, or about one entry per two weeks. Three students had 12 to 16 entries. Most of the other students had 2 to 9 entries. Each entry averaged 55.27 words ($SD = 33.66$)

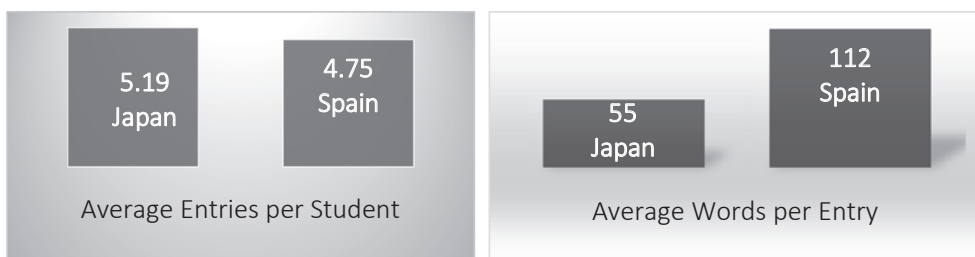


FIGURE 1. Facebook Comments during 10 Weeks

In Spain, the 55 students made a total of 266 entries, plus posted a remarkable 151 photos and 10 video clips. That is an average of 4.75 written entries per student ($SD = 5.78$), about the same as in Japan. One Spanish student had an amazing 40 entries during the 10 weeks. One student had 17 entries, and one had 14 entries, but most had two to nine entries. Importantly, the length of each entry was about twice as long in Spain, averaging 112.25 words ($SD = 76.94$) per entry.

Grammar errors were relatively rare in Japan, and very rare in Spain. This study did not analyze the errors in detail.

Sara (Spanish student): Hi! In my opinion, football (or soccer) is the most important sport in our country. It is...
(continue 73 more words)

Kuramoto (Japanese student): It's famous even in japan that the soccer of Spain is strong!

Sara: Yes, I'm pretty sure soccer is (continue 42 more words)

Kuramoto: Oh! You pretty love the soccer. But, I don't like soccer very much because (continue 43 words)

Sara: Yes! I do love it, and I actually get bored watching any other kind of sport, (Continue 104 more words)

Kuramoto: I see! I will difinitly go to some stadium to see a soccer someday. I think (continue 90 words)

Sara: That sounds cool. I'm sure... (continue 106 more words)

FIGURE 2. An Example of a Heartwarming Facebook Exchange

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Some Japanese students were active in using Facebook. If the assumption is true that writing a lot leads to improved writing skills, then it can be stated that their writing skills probably improved. Those students put their emotions into writing relatively high-quality sentences (as measured by length of sentences, communicativeness, and the scarcity of errors). Each of their entries averaged 55 words, which is about five relatively long sentences. Since some comments are naturally short, this means that there were a fairly large number of longer entries too. For an example of an emotion-filled entry, see Figure 2 above.

However, 25% of Japanese students chose never to use Facebook, and others rarely did, so their English abilities probably did not benefit from the activity. One of the main reasons why the 36 active Japanese students only made an average of one entry per two weeks, and the other 12 students made no entries, is that they were all non-English majors, so their dedication to English might not have been so great.

Another key reason for the relatively low number of entries might have been that the Facebook task was only a small part of the course, comprising about 15% of their course grades. Some students seem to have preferred to put their efforts into other parts of the course, such as blogs, the research paper, and a fiction story.

The Spanish students, who were English majors, had long entries, averaging 112 words per entry, and they posted many photos and video clips. Interestingly, their average number of entries during the semester was about the same as that of the Japanese students—about five entries per student during the 10 weeks. This might be a reflection of natural communication give-and-take; if one student makes a comment, then another student (from a different country) responds. Each Spanish student might have had only an average of one comment per two weeks because the Facebook activity was not required in Spain, and the Spanish teacher gave no grades; it was purely voluntary.

In summary, the current study had mixed results, but a lot of other research has found clear benefits to using Facebook in English writing classes. Thus, it can probably be recommended that teachers use the tool as a part of courses. Future research on using Facebook in English writing classes should focus more on exactly which aspects of English writing skills can be improved. For instance, can certain grammatical obstacles (e.g., *a/the* usage among Japanese students) be overcome by using Facebook? As part of future research, the pragmatic aspects of the entries should also be studied; for example, are students asking questions, or are they writing only about themselves in their own worlds? Social media sites offer tremendous potential for improving EFL writing abilities.

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to identify some of the most effective and popular ways for using Facebook in EFL writing classes. A comprehensive review of the literature found that five basic pedagogical approaches are popular: 1) Teachers ask questions or pose weekly topics, and then students respond; 2) Students post essays and classmates respond; 3) Students read something, then answer questions; 4) Students post photos or videos, describing them; and 5) Students focus on grammar and vocabulary issues.

To assess the effectiveness of one of those approaches—the first one listed above—48 freshmen in Japan and 55 juniors in Spain engaged in a “cross-culture discussion” for about 10 weeks. Each week the teachers encouraged the students, as homework, to write about certain topics related to the two cultures. This paper focused on the activities of the non-English major Japanese students. It was found that some students in Japan were active in using Facebook, but other students rarely or never engaged in it. Thus, the Facebook activity seemed to improve the English skills for some Japanese students only. The reasons for lack of engagement are hypothesized.

要 約

英語のライティング授業における Facebook の効果的利用法

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本稿の目的は、英語のライティング授業における Facebook のもっとも効果的かつ学習者に人気のある使い方のいくつかを明らかにすることである。本稿では、その一つの方法を実際に授業で応用した結果についても報告する。

英語のライティング授業における Facebook の使用が、ライティング能力の向上に貢献することは既に数多くの先行研究が示している。(Shih 2011, 2013; Al-Haj 2015; Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi 2012; Faggosa 2015; Hussain et al. 2015; Shukor and Noordin 2014; El Fatah & Ahmed 2016; Sim & Pop 2014; and Rifai 2010)。これらの文献調査の結果から、以下に挙げる 5 つの基本的な教育的アプローチに人気が集中していることがわかる。(1) 教員が Facebook 上で質問したり毎週 1 つの課題を出したりして、学生がそれに返信する、(2) 学生が自分の書いた作文を Facebook に投稿し、同級生がそれに返信する、(3) 学生が何かを読んで、質問を答える、(4) 学生が写真やビデオを投稿し、言葉で説明する、(5) 学生たちがそれぞれ文法や語彙に関する問題に焦点を絞ってコメントする。

上述の利用法 (1) の有効性を検証するために、48 人の非英語専攻の日本人大学生 (学部 1 年生) と 55 人の英語専攻のスペイン人大学生 (学部 3 年生) が Facebook を利用した異文化ディスカッションを約 10 週間行った。教員は、両文化に関係する興味深いテーマを毎週一つ取り上げ、学生たちに意見を書くよう促した。なお、この Facebook 上の活動は、常に宿題として課され、授業中に行うよう強制はしなかった。Facebook の使用に積極的で多くの書き込みを行い、そのライティング能力を上達させたと思われる学生もいたが、その一方で多くの学生はまったくあるいはほんの少ししか書き込まず、この種の活動をあまり好まないように見えた。本稿では、日本の学生の活動に注目して、評価の分かれる両側面について報告する。