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Tapping into the Educational Potential of Facebook: Encouraging Out-of-Class Peer Collaboration in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Due to their social framework and often informal character, social network sites such as *Facebook* are believed to promote out-of-class learning by encouraging learners to participate in online peer collaboration. Yet, the evidence remains inconclusive when it comes to the effectiveness and students' appreciation of collaborating via social network sites, which indicates the need for further research. The first part of the present paper discusses the 'out-of-class' use of a closed *Facebook* group by analysing the online communication behaviour of 119 first-year foreign language English majors at the University of Antwerp (Belgium) participating in a writing course. The assessed data (more than 4,000 *Facebook* posts and a post-questionnaire) suggest that the socio-communicative context of a *Facebook* group motivates students to learn collaboratively beyond the physical classroom walls. The remaining part of this paper investigates which conclusions can be drawn from this for increasing the effectiveness of independent self-access modules and study programmes blending self-access and classroom learning. Here, results hint at the fact that students attach particular importance to social network sites as support networks for sharing positive and critical learning experiences and language learning tips.

Keywords: Facebook, EFL writing, collaborative learning, self-access learning

Opportunities for interpersonal contact are often suboptimal in large, heterogeneous foreign language learning groups, where focus lies on content and language integrated learning with limited contact time. In order to optimise the social learning context, teachers and mentors often look for solutions outside of the classroom. The social, informal character of *Facebook* seems to offer new possibilities as it is intended to encourage interpersonal communication, not only in the personal lives of students but also in various learning environments (Liaw & English, 2013; McBride, 2009; Zourou, 2012). However, studies are inconclusive about the pedagogical potential of social network sites (SNSs) for self-regulated learning and self-access contexts. To shed light on this issue, this paper presents the results of a case study conducted in a first-year academic writing class in English as a foreign language; a course blending classroom learning and self-access modules. In this project (the Antwerp *Facebook* Project or AFP), the social network site was introduced to enhance collaborative learning through peer-to-peer communication outside of the classroom, without the presence

of a tutor online. In order to determine how effective the forum was as an educational tool, the study investigates how the learners experienced the project's face validity and how they established peer collaboration over time.

Facebook in the Foreign Language Learning Classroom

The social framework of *Facebook* appears to be the keystone for thinking about the network site as a support tool for foreign language learning as it may encourage students to take part in peer-to-peer communication and peer collaboration. Over the past ten years, the use of SNSs in foreign language learning classrooms has increasingly caught the attention of researchers and practitioners in the field. Zourou (2012) suggests that *Facebook* encourages peer-to-peer communication due to its community building capacity. Liaw and English (2013) support this argument by pointing out that the social environment of *Facebook* fosters socialisation, and establishes and strengthens social ties between different end-users. As the SNS encourages interpersonal interaction, it motivates learners to form communities in which they can explore language in use (Liu et al., 2013). Engaging in peer-to-peer communication is considered beneficial for students' learning as it encourages them to develop, among others, higher level reasoning strategies, critical thinking and self-reflection (Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995), which are essential features of successful self-access and blended learning environments (Murray, 2014; Zimmerman, 2008).

In the present project, the learners were encouraged to perform self-regulated learning, which refers to "the self-directive processes and self-beliefs that enable learners to transform their mental abilities, such as verbal aptitude, into an academic performance skill, such as writing" (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 166). In other words, self-regulated learning requires learners to gain and develop knowledge and skills by setting their own goals and showing initiative in their own learning process. By enhancing community building, the social framework of *Facebook* therefore seems to be highly applicable to support learners in developing self-regulated learning strategies through peer collaboration.

The social framework of Facebook

Facebook is a highly accessible online tool and part of students' everyday life (McBride, 2009). The language production on social platforms is considered to be genuine or, more specifically, language use that resembles real-life communication (Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008). Using SNSs as communication tools in language learning contexts can facilitate the contact with the foreign language outside of the actual classroom (Lantz-

Andersson, Vigmo, & Bowen, 2013). By implementing *Facebook* into the learning process, additional to in-class instruction or online learning material, the actual learning environment is further extended online. Doing so, the learners are able to experience a language to a fuller extent and are motivated to take part in the productive process of foreign language learning by communicating with their peers (Blattner & Fiori, 2009). However, in an educational context, online peer-to-peer communication also has to be pedagogically relevant (Olvera-Lobo & Gutiérrez-Artacho, 2012). In order to serve learning goals and objectives, the SNS has to be informed by educational incentives, i.e. learning tasks (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010).

Language learning objectives or learning tasks have to encourage students to engage in ‘meaningful interaction’ (Liaw & English, 2013), supporting their learning as a collaborative process. Collaborative learning is exemplified by students working together towards the same (learning) goal (Akdemir & Koszalka, 2008). In the present study, the learning objectives are set by the tutor and are supplemented by a collaborative learning environment on *Facebook* in which students have the freedom to select and manage their own self-regulated learning activities (Murray, 2014). The learning tasks are to stimulate the participants to engage in peer-to-peer communication in the ‘deeply social’ environment of *Facebook* (Gasiorek, Giles, Holtgraves, & Robbins, 2012), guiding their interaction by means of assignments and instructions.

The Antwerp *Facebook* Project (AFP)

Methodology and instruments

A group of 119 first-year English majors –all native speakers of Dutch– participated in this study as an out-of-class part of an academic writing programme. The course adopted a blended learning approach with 12 contact hours, self-access modules and elements of continuous assessment. In an effort to improve the overall academic writing quality and give opportunities to practise writing, students had to individually hand in three 300-word essays. As part of these genuine assignments students were instructed to discuss online particular language and writing issues. They were requested to include their posts in the final version of their writing assignment, as well as provide the tutor with the most helpful response of their fellow students. In class, students were introduced to a writing scale to monitor their progress and they were encouraged to engage in peer correction. The texts were individually corrected by a tutor and graded as part of the final assessment. In-class feedback was given and students were required to rewrite the assignment and upload it again on the university’s learning platform.

The students were introduced to the AFP forum and were requested to use it for collaborative writing for the duration of the course. Students who did not have access to *Facebook* ($n = 2$) teamed up with peers who had. They consulted the peer group through the *Facebook* profiles of their team mates and regularly logged on to participate in the discussions. All students were informed that the tutor would not be available online. This study is interested in student-student interaction and their self-regulated collaboration on SNSs. By excluding the tutor, students would feel less inhibited to communicate with their peers, which is to lead to a more extensive and genuine foreign language output (cf. Lloyd, 2012). Introducing the assignments and instructions –guiding students in their online collaboration while minimising the anxiety to collaborate– provided the initial learning goals. Students had full control over their own collaboration strategies and were able to autonomously appropriate the online learning space while working together on the set learning tasks.

Data and approach

This study is interested in the applicability of SNSs in self-access and blended learning environments, and analyses the students' online language production as well as their self-reported data on learning gain when collaborating with their peers (cf. Kabilan et al., 2010). The following research questions were formulated:

1. How do students appraise the use of *Facebook* for peer-to-peer collaboration?
2. Do students feel they gained knowledge and skills regarding their learning process by collaborating with their peers on *Facebook*?

The study investigates which conclusions can be drawn from this for integrating SNSs in the learning process and increasing the effectiveness of independent self-access modules and study programmes blending self-access and classroom learning.

Two types of data were collected: 4,278 online posts, produced by the participants on the forum over a time span of four months, and responses to two pen-and-paper questionnaires. The project had four phases, co-occurring with the three monthly writing assignments: three assignment phases (ASS1, ASS2, ASS3) and one post-assignment phase (POST-ASS). The POST-ASS phase was the time when the forum was still online and used by the students, but in which no set learning task was present. The language data of the individual posts underwent topic analysis through topic identification and topic segmentation.

Topic identification looks for words or clusters of words which indicate a given subject in a string of sentences and consequently identifies the communicative purpose of that sequence. Topic segmentation groups sequences together which share the same subject. The topic analysis also attended to the fact that different sequences could be generated by different individuals (cf. Li & Yamanishi, 2003). The analysis of the language data is to enable this study to make informed decisions on the communication strategies and the effectiveness of student collaboration on SNSs in the context of self-access and blended learning.

The questionnaires consisted of closed-format questions and closed-end questions using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates a low (self-reported) score on a given statement, and 5 indicates a high (self-reported) score. Respondents could provide additional comments to every question in a comment section. The study used two questionnaires: a pre-questionnaire provided insights into students' computer literacy and their opinion about the use of *Facebook* in language learning, and a post-questionnaire examined the students' opinions about peer collaboration on *Facebook*, and was completed after the last writing assignment had been handed in. Answers to the post-questionnaire also provided more insights into students' perceived gain in writing skills, knowledge and evaluation of their individual participation.

Analysis

Identifying educational vs. social topics

Topic analysis was conducted on the 4,278 contributions the students had generated during the four phases of the project. All contributions were analysed and identified as either *social* or *educational*, depending on the topic of the conversations. Educationally relevant communication addressed course content or contributions on the content, formulation, or structure of the writing assignments. The social contributions consisted of course-related postings, e.g. posts on course objectives and assignment deadlines; but also non-course-related posts about general pastime and upcoming events.

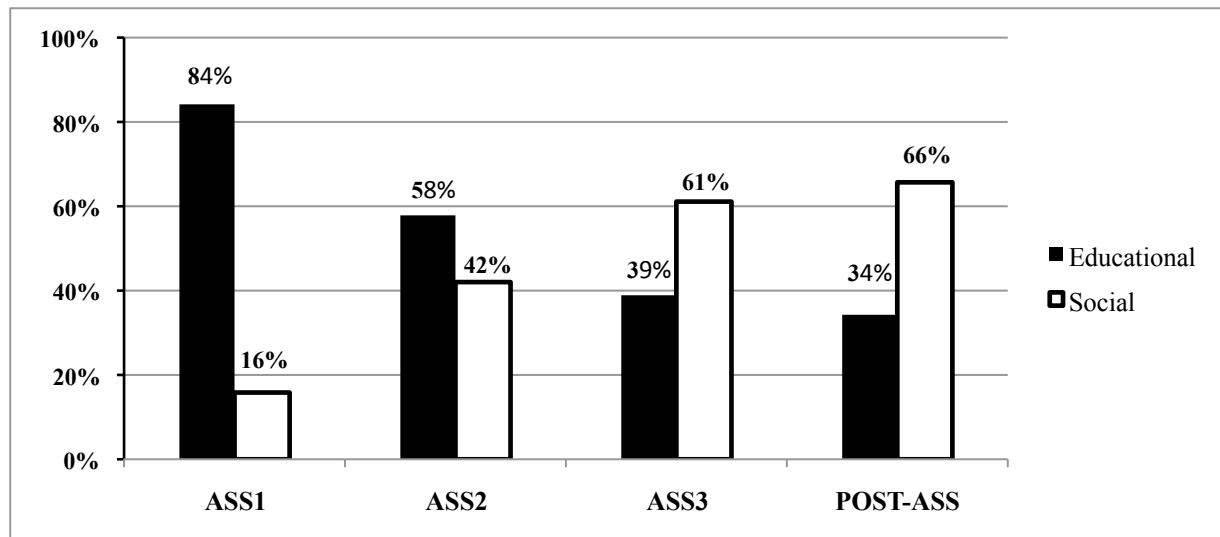


Figure 1. Percentage of Contributions with an Educational or Social Communication Purpose

When comparing the four phases of the project, two distinctive tendencies can be observed, as illustrated in Figure 1. During the first two months of the project (ASS1-ASS2) the educational contributions outnumbered the social. In ASS1, 84% of the posts are considered to be educational, while 16% are considered to be social. During the second phase (ASS2), this was 58% vs. 42% respectively. From the third month onwards (ASS3-POST-ASS), the social contributions outnumbered the educational. In ASS3, the social contributions (61%) surpassed the educational ones (39%), and in the POST-ASS phase the number of social contributions even rose to two thirds of the total number of individual posts (66%), while the educational dropped to one third (34%). This crossover exemplifies the presence of both an educational and social communication purpose on the forum and shows a shift in the students' use of the AFP forum over time: from a mainly educational to a mainly social communication environment.

The crossover towards the end of the third phase of the project was due to the finalisation of the three writing assignments. As the writing assignments were completed, the set learning objective disappeared. Students who had finished their essays switched to more informal communication, socialising with their fellow students and exchanging information and tips about the upcoming examination period. Both communication purposes nevertheless appear to be an indissoluble part of the online forum, as the forum was used for educational peer-to-peer discussions, but also as a *social safety net*. This social safety net was conceptualised over time by the fact that students started to discuss more and more questions about life at university, and exchanged information about their own experiences. They

assisted each other with administrative issues and exchanged their opinions on the goals and objectives of the university's curriculum.

Identifying peer collaboration

Since peer-to-peer communication had both an educational and social purpose, the study further investigated the nature of the conversations in order to examine how the crossover from an educational to a social communication environment is represented in the peer collaboration. In prototypical educational peer-to-peer communication on the forum, students posted questions about the content and argumentation used in their writing assignments, as in the example below:

P1: Papers nowadays are made to attract people's attention because there are more competitors on the market, like internet and television. This might change their reliability. Reactions? Agree or disagree?

Students also asked for advice regarding the formulation, grammar and spelling of their assignments, using their peers as a sounding board. In other words, they made use of their peers' knowledge and expertise, posing goal-directed questions:

P2: Can someone who is really good at English check the grammar and choice of words in this sentence? [...].

The responses to the questions were, overall, coherent and well-structured. The quality of the initial questions also appeared to influence the quality of the replies (cf. McBride, 2009), as replies prototypically contained the same jargon and provided argumentation to support the given opinion or answer.

While educational postings mainly received extensive replies (represented in *mean utterance length*: 16 words/post), the social posts, as well as the replies to them, were shorter (represented in *mean utterance length*: 12 words/post). Social posts also received a higher number of replies ($M = 11$ for the social vs. $M = 4$ for the educational). The educational conversations typified goal-directed discussions as part of self-regulated learning while the social contributions appeared to have an additional function in the learning process, e.g. to encourage fellow learners:

P3: To those who have submitted their essay: YOU GO GLEN COCO! To those still working on their essay: YOU CAN DO IT!

In the POST-ASS phase, the social aspect gained momentum and students made their posts more entertaining. They also shared how they were dealing with the upcoming examination period and how they experienced the *Facebook* forum:

P4: One positive thing about this exam: I feel like we are bonding!

In sum, the educational posts mainly focused on collaboratively and successfully completing the writing assignments, which exemplifies common goal-directed behaviour. Students also exchanged additional course information and tips, and posted questions about the curriculum, which shows how students added learning goals to the peer collaboration. The social posts mainly focused on encouraging fellow students and sharing funny remarks, and exemplify the community-building capacity of the social network site.

Students appear to enjoy this kind of interaction with their fellow learners, which attributes to their sense of satisfaction in online learning programmes (cf. Swan, 2002; Gunawardena, 1995) and is an essential part of effective online learning (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). The interaction on *Facebook* exemplifies students' social presence as they demonstrate their own personal engagement, as well as acknowledge the presence and effort of others (Kehrwald, 2010; Rourke et al., 2001).

Student evaluation of Facebook's educational potential

The observed conversations have both an educational and social function. In order to know how students perceived the forum, its learning tasks and the peer collaboration, the study further examined the reported data from the questionnaires. These data show, in contrast with the rising number of social conversations over time, that a vast majority of the learners (85%) considered the communication purpose of the forum to be *educational*. Moreover, 82% of the students regarded the *social* purpose of the forum subordinate to the *educational* purpose. The students therefore appear to attribute a high degree of educational value to the AFP forum and regard it as a valid tool in their learning process.

As part of the post-questionnaire, students evaluated various statements about their perceived gain in academic writing through their participation on the *Facebook* forum, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' Self-Assessment on Peer Collaboration (Post-Questionnaire)

| Statement | M (SD) |
|--|---------------|
| Discussions on the forum have given me more insights into academic writing | 3.21 (0.96) |
| Discussions helped me to improve my writing assignments (content) | 3.49 (0.98) |
| Discussions helped me to improve my writing assignments (formulation) | 3.18 (1.10) |

On a five-point Likert scale students indicated that they had gained insights ($M = 3.21$), knowledge ($M = 3.49$), and skills ($M = 3.18$) by actively participating on the *Facebook* forum. The standard deviation (SD) of about 1.00 is rather large, which indicates that the respondents hover around the mean and do not appear to have outspoken opinions towards the far negative or positive side of the five-point scale. The findings drawn from these responses therefore do not represent the definite conceptions and opinions of the community of learners, rather than generalised beliefs and attitudes towards the given statements.

Table 2. Students' Self-Assessment on Confidence Gain (Post-Questionnaire)

| Statement | M (SD) |
|---|---------------|
| Confidence gain in discussing language topics | 3.08 (1.04) |
| Confidence gain in academic writing | 2.89 (1.03) |

Students reported that they had gained confidence in discussing language topics due to their active participation on the forum ($M = 3.08$), as illustrated in Table 2. These findings attest earlier research by Promnitz-Hayashi (2011) on a small scale sample of Japanese students which proposed that the use of *Facebook* may have a positive impact on students' sense of comfort, confidence and motivation while collaborating with their peers on *Facebook*. However, the students in the present project also expressed that the discussions on the *Facebook* forum did not result in confidence gain regarding academic writing ($M = 2.89$). In the comment section students indicated that the instruction in class had given them confidence in academic writing as it introduced them to the essential building blocks of a proper academic text. They regarded the *Facebook* forum as a support tool in the language learning process, but not as a learning environment per se.

The role of the learner and the tutor in peer collaboration through Facebook

As the *Facebook* forum is perceived as an educational online environment, it is important to consider the students' assessment of their own participation on the forum, as well as the role of the tutor and the educational institution.

Table 3. Students' Self-Assessment on Peer-to-Peer Communication (Post-Questionnaire)

| Statement | M (SD) |
|--|---------------|
| Comfort about discussing assignments with peers | 3.38 (1.13) |
| Comfort about writing assignments after discussing it with peers | 3.39 (0.90) |
| Positive attitude towards providing extra support for peers | 3.05 (1.13) |
| I liked being part of the <i>Facebook</i> forum | 3.46 (1.10) |

The students reported that they felt comfortable discussing the writing assignments with their peers (M = 3.38), as illustrated in Table 3. They also felt comfortable writing their assignments after discussing them on the forum (M = 3.39). Students expressed the willingness to provide additional support for their peers (M = 3.05). Additional support is exemplified by sharing summaries, replying to additional questions and reviewing supplementary assignments. By doing so, students added various learning objectives to the *Facebook* forum and actively engaged in the discussions. In the context of self-access learning, this means that *Facebook* may provide a suitable environment for participants to exchange information, pose supplementary questions about their personal learning process and, additionally, be motivated to take part in peer collaboration. Moreover, students liked being part of the *Facebook* forum (M = 3.46) as they regarded it as a fun and safe environment to take part in peer-to-peer communication.

Table 4. Students' Self-Assessment on the Role of Tutor/Institution (Post-Questionnaire)

| Statement | M (SD) |
|---|---------------|
| Positive attitude towards the presence of tutor/lecturer in the <i>Facebook</i> group | 2.66 (1.01) |
| Positive attitude towards the educational institution supporting collaboration on <i>Facebook</i> | 3.13 (1.10) |

Students preferred not to have a tutor join the *Facebook* forum (M = 2.66), as illustrated in Table 4. Half of them (50%) additionally commented that the presence of a tutor would have influenced their participation in a negative way. As they were able to self-regulate

the collaboration on the forum, the inclusion of a tutor could have affected their active engagement and intrinsic motivation. The students' attitudes confirm that the *Facebook* forum is to be regarded as an online environment of self-regulated learning, which is a "process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment" (Pintrich, 2000, p. 453). Despite the students having a negative attitude towards the inclusion of a tutor on the *Facebook* forum, they had a positive attitude towards educational institutions supporting recourses on *Facebook* to stimulate peer-to-peer communication ($M = 3.13$). The students seem to prefer institutions to make tools for collaborative learning available to them, but also want to have the opportunity to self-regulate the peer-to-peer communication.

Implications for Self-Access Learning

This study highlights *Facebook's* potential as a collaborative support tool in (1) independent self-access modules and (2) study programmes which blend self-access and classroom learning. Self-access learning through self-access centres benefits from immersing learners in a 'social environment', as it may encourage and motivate them to take part in the learning process (Gillies, 2010). A collaborative space on *Facebook* might therefore form an incentive for learners to engage in the different modules of self-access learning; even more when taking into account that one of the main reasons for learners to avoid self-access centres is the unwillingness to study by oneself (Chan, Spratt & Humphreys, 2002; Gillies, 2010). As learners in the present project experienced little anxiety talking to their peers and perceived the forum as being primarily educational, the apparent contradiction of combining low-threshold socialisation and learning tasks seems to have been overcome. Even though measuring the effectiveness of self-access modules is regarded to be complicated and understudied (Gardner & Miller, 2010), the learners in the present project reported that they gained insights in academic writing and writing skills through their self-regulated collaboration. Furthermore, the data provide indications that the collaborative nature of a *Facebook* forum in self-access learning may attribute a high degree of educational credibility to this online environment, since it is experienced by the learners as a fun and worthwhile component of their learning programme. Self-access centres therefore may consider integrating group forums on social network sites in their modules, where students are to

manage the conversation and collaboration strategies in order to fully engage in the learning process.

As the integrated learning tasks and instructions attributed a high degree of educational value to the collaborative forum, *Facebook* is highly applicable as a support tool in study programmes which blend self-access modules and classroom learning, i.e. a “social network enhanced blended learning environment” (Mynard, 2011, p. 302). The learners in the AFP study indicated that the contact sessions introduced them to the essential building blocks of academic writing, which made them more confident in their writing practice. The collaborative forum on *Facebook* was regarded as an additional support tool, but not as a learning environment as such. It gave them the opportunity to gain more insights in their own productive process of language learning and into successfully completing learning tasks through peer collaboration. Therefore, it can be argued that a peer-to-peer discussion forum on *Facebook* might be most effectively integrated into a study programme which blends self-access and classroom learning, where online collaboration may enhance the knowledge, skills and confidence acquired in class.

The design of the SNS environment (i.e. making the online environment a closed environment and excluding the tutor from the discussion group), as well as the learning tasks, whether integrated in self-access modules or blended learning contexts, have to fit the specific learning goals of the set curriculum as well as the needs of the learner group. Only then can the multi-faceted role of self-access centres and educational institutions alike tie both the educational as the social, leisure-related factors together to provide an optimal language learning environment (Gillies, 2010).

Conclusion

This study has shown how *Facebook* can function as a support tool in foreign language learning, encouraging learners to successfully complete learning tasks while interacting on a collaborative learning platform. As an integrated part of the learning programme, the *Facebook* forum, complemented with learning objectives and tailored instructions, provided students with an out-of-class discussion environment for self-regulated learning activities. The learners indicated that they gained insights, knowledge and skills regarding academic writing, and that the peer discussions online made them feel comfortable in completing their learning tasks. This feeling of comfort can be attributed to the social framework of the *Facebook* environment, lowering the threshold for peer-to-peer

communication and socialisation. The learners experienced the forum as a playful and constructive component of the learning process and attached particular importance to it as a support network for sharing positive and critical learning experiences and language learning tips.

In this study, self-regulated collaboration exceeded the initial instructions and pushed the boundaries of the learning tasks. Learners engaged with the content and argumentation of the assignments and discussed their learning experiences. Such a collaborative space therefore holds considerable potential as a support tool in self-access learning and blended learning environments, providing an accessible discussion environment with a high degree of educational value for the learner community. Therefore, integrating *Facebook* as a support network may provide the learners with the social environment needed for effective self-access learning and may be the stepping stone towards a more communicative and participatory language learning process.

Notes on the Contributor

Ward Peeters is a PhD researcher at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, studying social network impact in educational contexts.

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