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Developing first-year students' self-efficacy beliefs about academic writing through online peer collaboration: The case of Facebook

Abstract

Higher education in South Africa faces the challenge to provide every student with an open and accessible learning environment. Educational institutions, therefore, have to make students feel confident and competent in their own learning practice and provide them with opportunities to develop positive self-efficacy beliefs. In the case of language learning, students foremost need to acquire confidence and competence in communicating in an academic context. This paper reports on a peer collaboration project at North-West University where a closed Facebook group was established to support first-year students' development of positive self-efficacy beliefs about a specific aspect of their academic trajectory: their academic writing skills. Students were instructed to collaborate on a writing

assignment through Facebook, enabling them to discuss their writing and learning process. The results show that the students in the project feel comfortable interacting with their peers online and feel confident in their academic writing practice. The participating students considered themselves significantly better prepared to complete their task in comparison to the control group. These results provide strong indications that peer collaboration on a Facebook forum may have a positive effect on students' self-efficacy beliefs and, by extension, facilitate students' engagement with their peers and the academic community.

Keywords: Computer supported collaborative work, academic writing, Facebook, perceived self-efficacy, academic acculturation



1. Introduction

Higher education in South Africa has the responsibility to provide every student with an inclusive and accessible learning environment (Walker & Mkwanzani, 2015), which entails increasing students' social mobility, facilitating access to information and resources, and improving their involvement in training and research (cf. DHET, 2013). Additionally, educational institutions have to look for comprehensive ways to engage their students in the learning process, and to make them feel comfortable and confident in their own learning practice. Foremost in language learning, students' ability to report adequately and write in an academic context are essential components of their academic success (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). Encouraging students to be productive writers and share their writing with others –becoming social and responsible participants in the learning process (Dam et al., 1990)– is, therefore, the main scope of this paper.

The social networking site (SNS) *Facebook* was used as a peer collaboration platform, giving students the opportunity to practice their writing skills and compare their work to that of their peers. Earlier research has shown that the SNS enables students to build communities, motivates them to take up an active role in their learning and lowers the threshold for peer-to-peer communication (cf. Akbari et al., 2015; Lamy & Mangenot, 2013; Peeters 2015a). Given the fact that access to mobile technology has increased considerably over the years¹, *Facebook* as a frequently used SNS (Bosch, 2009) may, therefore, form an adequate environment to encourage students to share their writing experiences and develop their self-efficacy beliefs about their academic writing (Bowers-Campbell, 2008; Aydin, 2012). By giving students the opportunity to develop their self-efficacy beliefs, they may feel better prepared to engage with their peers and the academic community in their further careers (Lewis, Pea & Rosen, 2010).

In order to determine whether the SNS may support the development of South African students' self-efficacy beliefs about their academic writing and potentially facilitate their entrance into the academic world, the present study reports on a research project carried out at North-West University (Potchefstroom, South Africa), in which a closed *Facebook* group was integrated into a first-year academic literacy course in English. In the *Facebook* group, the students had the possibility to peer review other students' writing assignment for the course and discuss their personal writing and learning experiences at university.

¹ According to the Community Survey 2016, 93.8% of households in South Africa have a cellphone, making it the most popular household good. This is an increase of 4.9% in comparison to the Census of 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2016: 81). Furthermore, in a recent study, Mayisela (2013) found that 98.5% of university students who participated in his research project used mobile phones, while less than half of them had regular access to computers.

2. Self-efficacy

This study aims to determine whether *Facebook* may support the development of students' perceived self-efficacy beliefs about their own academic writing practice by serving as an introductory tool for peer collaboration (cf. Peeters 2015a). Self-efficacy is "the belief in one's ability to succeed" (Martinez et al., 2011: 352) and has a major influence on the behaviour, learning process and academic performance of learners in higher education (Pajares, 1995). In the present study, self-efficacy is referred to as the perceived measure of confidence and competence a person has in successfully completing certain tasks (Bandura, 1986; 1989), which is considered to be an "essential motive to learn" (Zimmerman, 2000: 82). Learners who feel confident and competent attribute more value to their learning process than those who have more negative self-efficacy beliefs about their learning (Bandura, 1986). Previous studies on self-efficacy and academic writing have also pointed out that learners who feel less confident about their language proficiency experience higher levels of writing anxiety (Martinez et al., 2011). Learners' level of confidence and competence regarding their academic writing capacities can, thus, have a considerable influence on the eventual writing outcomes (Pajares, 2003).

Pajares (1995) distinguishes three effects of self-efficacy beliefs on learners' academic performance. First, perceived self-efficacy influences human behaviour as "people engage in tasks in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not" (4). In an educational context this means that if learners feel more confident and competent about certain tasks and tests, they will be more engaged to complete these in comparison to tasks and tests about which they feel uncertain or insecure. This is directly linked to Pajares' (1995) second observation: learners put more effort into successfully completing tasks about which they feel more confident and competent. Third, a level of high self-efficacy has a positive effect on a person's problem-solving capacities as they tend to take on more challenging tasks, while low self-efficacy results in lower performance. Perceived self-efficacy, therefore, is considered to be an essential part of academic success, as it is "a strong predictor of related academic outcomes" (Pajares, 1995: 5). In order to provide an inclusive and accessible learning environment it is essential for educational institutions to support students' development of positive self-efficacy beliefs.

3. Academic acculturation

Academic writing programmes can benefit from learners' positive self-efficacy beliefs as "students' perceptions of themselves as writers are crucial for our understanding of how to facilitate their entrance into the academic community in a way that enables

the academic discourse they engage in” (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012: 302). Van de Poel and Gasiorek (2012) point out that peer review, among others, is likely to play an important role in the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs. It enables students to negotiate meaning and discuss their ideas—as well as the ideas of their peers—in order to advance in their learning process.

Cheng and Fox (2008) support these findings and identify “access to academic and social resources” as one of the essential factors for students to successfully adapt to a new academic environment. They emphasise that the acculturation process is a social process in which different stakeholders are involved. Access to ‘academic resources’ is referred to as consulting tutors and making use of the different facilities the educational institutions have available, e.g. writing centres and language laboratories. These resources are closely linked to the educational institutions’ curriculum and often involve the use of (additional) course material, learning tasks and personalised guidance. ‘Social resources’ are referred to as fellow students and friends with whom students can exchange ideas and experiences. Enabling them to access academic and –foremost– social resources through *Facebook* is regarded in the present article as a proper way to facilitate students’ acculturation to their field of study as it may encourage them to personally engage with both their learning process as with the new community of peers.

By collaborating online, the students can tie both the social and educational aspects together and form a student culture of first-years entering higher education (cf. Atkinson, 2004), which coincides with current research on the sociocognitive perspective on language learning (Batstone, 2010; Sato & Ballinger, 2016). Creating this culture through social networking may be a constructive approach towards the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs as it enables students to actively participate in the critical construction of (shared) knowledge as a social, collaborative process.

4. *Facebook* as a collaboration tool

4.1 *Facebook*’s contribution to perceived self-efficacy

In order to facilitate the development of self-efficacy beliefs and create opportunities for academic acculturation, a closed *Facebook* group was integrated as a peer-to-peer discussion forum in an academic literacy course in English (see methodology). Integrating *Facebook* into the curriculum extends the actual learning environment by adding an online collaboration space (Peeters, 2015a).² *Facebook* is a global and accessible online platform and is designed to encourage interpersonal communication (cf. Brick, 2011). It allows users to connect to an extensive network of people, exchange information and form communities (Lamy & Zourou, 2013). Using the SNS as a collaboration tool in higher education, furthermore, facilitates the contact between students outside of the actual classroom (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). It encourages informal dialogue and

² For an extensive overview of the learning strategies underpinning peer interaction, online peer collaboration and collaborative writing, see Sato and Ballinger (2016).

allows users to share knowledge (cf. McLoughlin & Lee, 2007), which is believed to expose them to a whole range of new ideas and interpretations.

As *Facebook* is a widely used SNS, and has become part of students' everyday life (Lomicka & Lord, 2009; Mbatha & Manana, 2012), it is considered to be a low-threshold format for peer-to-peer communication (Peeters, 2015a). These aspects are to motivate the individuals in the group to actively partake in the communication and make them feel comfortable to engage with their peers online.

It has to be pointed out that time spent on *Facebook* does not necessarily result in better learning outcomes (Junco, 2012). When integrating *Facebook* in educational contexts, it is necessary for researchers and practitioners to take into account the different wants and needs of the student population. Furthermore, they need to provide learners with appropriate goals and objectives in order to cater for these different wants and needs (Haran & Olamijulo, 2014: 433). Doing so, learners will have an opportunity to experience peer interaction and peer review, giving them the necessary practice to, eventually, appropriate the online environment (Peeters & Fourie, 2016: 312), which might result in more opportunities for peer collaboration, information exchange, and social bonding (Reid, 2011).

4.2 **Facebook** in South Africa: Bridging the digital divide

Research performed in the South African context of higher education has pointed out that social technology can contribute to the democratisation of higher education and, at the same time, facilitate the move from a more teacher-centred to a more learner-centred approach (Waghid, 2014). Brown (2012) points out that the recent developments in mobile technology and social connectivity have made the internet more accessible to a large number of the population and contribute to bridging the digital divide between students. Nevertheless, integrating social technologies in the learning practice faces a very prominent issue:

How [do] we ensure that by using ICTs [Information and Communication Technologies] in teaching and learning we don't further disadvantage already disadvantaged students and yet still provide them with opportunities to participate in global, intellectual communities (Brown, 2012: 42).

Bridging the digital divide is key when South African higher education wants to cater for an accessible and inclusive learning environment for every student. Educational institutions are expected to encourage students to access the internet and connect to different communication platforms, e.g. by providing computer labs and Wi-Fi on campus. They are also required to support inexperienced students in their first steps online. Students have to gain experience in their use of digital and mobile means in order to successfully and effectively use the technology at hand. Even though the level of computer literacy among students is mostly taken for granted, inexperienced students in South African higher education have to be motivated to make progress in their online practice, and

become more confident and competent, as “self-efficacy is an important consideration for individuals who are new to online experiences” (Gunawardena et al., 2009: 11).

In recent projects on the integration of SNSs in South African higher education, Haran and Olamijulo (2014: 433) contend that *Facebook* can be regarded as “a useful tool for creating communication spaces in a language classroom by facilitating classroom dialogue and interaction as well as providing access to task material and developing academic literacies”. They also point out that practitioners and researchers need to investigate and ensure proper accessibility for learners, and need to be aware of learners’ different computer literacy levels. In earlier research, Reid (2011) reached the same conclusions when investigating the potential of *Facebook* as a closed-group tutorial page. The author, furthermore, contends that *Facebook* can serve as a dynamic online space where learners are able to discover and use different types of discourse, as well as different types of resources. Waghid (2014) points out that, next to the fact that *Facebook* can function as a dynamic space for peer collaboration, it can also be used as a tool to let learners develop critical and problem-solving skills; traits which will be important throughout their academic careers. In order to make informed decisions on the feasibility of integrating *Facebook* as a peer collaboration tool, the present study assessed how accessible internet, mobile technology and SNSs are for the students in the project

5. Research questions

In order to analyse the effectiveness of social media in South African higher education and determine if it may support the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs about students’ academic writing, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do students gain confidence in their academic writing practice by collaborating with their peers on *Facebook*?
2. Do students who collaborate with their peers on *Facebook* feel more competent in their academic writing practice than students who do not?

In the analysis, the study first determines how accessible *Facebook* is for the members of the student population. Second, the data on students’ perceived level of confidence and competence allow to investigate the effect of the peer collaboration on the *Facebook* forum on students’ belief in their ability to succeed. Third, the results and discussion show how gain in positive self-efficacy beliefs can benefit the higher education system, giving special attention to how it may benefit students’ performance in language learning.

6. Methodology and instruments

In this descriptive case study, a closed Facebook group was integrated as a peer-to-peer discussion forum into a first-year academic literacy course in English (AGLE111, 2014-2015) at North-West University (Potchefstroom, South Africa). The purpose of the module is to help students function effectively within an academic language environment. The course particularly introduces the learners to the basic principles of academic literacy (i.e. using language and register within an academic environment, being able to read and write accurately, conduct research and present content which is academically suitable) and assesses their progress by means of writing assignments, in-class tests and group presentations (NWU, 2016).

At the start of the semester, the scores on the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL, cf. Van der Slik & Weideman, 2008; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004; Weideman, 2003) identified a group of learners ($n = 795$) who were at an *extremely high risk* (level 1) or *high risk* (level 2) as a result of a substandard level of academic literacy, and taking up the introductory course was mandatory. In order to support this academically vulnerable group of students, they were given the opportunity to voluntarily join a *Facebook* group where they would be able to exchange their writing experiences about the upcoming writing assignment for the course. This intervention focuses on a particular element of students' academic literacy skills, i.e. their ability to report accurately and write in an academic context.

In order to reduce the risk of selection bias and ensure that the sample of students in the case study is representative of the aforementioned student group, a random sample of 120 students was selected. Out of this random sample ($n = 120$), 74 students agreed to join the project. They were asked to confer with their peers online about the main writing assignment for the course and exchange tips and tricks in order to advance in their writing practice and their learning process. The writing assignment was a 3,000-word essay which concerned a socio-political topic and which had to be handed in individually. Students were instructed to form an opinion on the topic and provide supportive argumentation, making use of and integrating academically relevant sources. The group of students who were not part of the random sample ($n = 675$) functioned as a control group. They were asked to fill in the same questionnaires as the sample group voluntarily. Apart from having the possibility to interact with their peers through *Facebook*, the sample group and control group received the same instructions in class, as well as the same learning materials and were assessed according to the same criteria. Participants in the project and students of the control group were informed that all the data would be processed anonymously and would only be used for research purposes, with the aim to improve existing teaching and learning materials. They were also informed that their data would not be shared with third parties and that they had the freedom to withdraw from the project, or let their personal data be removed from the data set, at any given time during or after the study. They have access to their personal data at all times.

Two questionnaires were developed to assess the accessibility of SNSs, participants' sense of comfort online, as well as their perceived levels of confidence and competence in academic writing. The questionnaires consisted of closed-format questions and closed-end questions using a four-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates a low (self-reported) score on a given statement, and 4 indicates a high (self-reported) score. Respondents had to provide additional comments to every question in a comment section. The answers of the participants were compared to those of the control group. The two sets of data allow to analyse the differences in perceived self-efficacy between the two groups and determine whether the collaboration on *Facebook* has had any effect on the students' perceived level of confidence and competence about academic writing. The questionnaires were distributed and filled in online through Survey Monkey Gold. The data set was later exported to MS Excel for statistical analysis, as well as for tagging and analysing the additional comments made by students.

7. Results

7.1 Social media use: The digital collective

Before analysing the self-reported data on self-efficacy beliefs, the present study first investigated students' use of mobile media and the accessibility of SNSs. Porter et al. (2012) reported earlier on a staggering increase in the use of mobile phones in Sub-Saharan Africa. Even though the use and accessibility of mobile technology differs from region to region, it is believed that especially South African youngsters in recent years have adopted mobile connectivity as part of their daily life (Lawrence, 2016; Mbatha & Manana, 2012). Bosch (2009) reported in earlier research that the use of mobile phones to access social media is widespread among South African university students and that they use it to increase their social connectivity, more so than for educational purposes. In order to ratify earlier findings and determine whether social media and mobile technology are widespread and accessible for a majority of the student population, the students were asked about their personal *Facebook* use and their *Facebook* intensity (cf. Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe et al., 2011).

The students' answers to the first questionnaire ($n = 330$)³ have pointed out that 97% of them have accounts on SNSs and that 91% of them have a *Facebook* account. More than three quarters of the respondents (79%) have had their accounts for more than two years and a tenth (10%) has had their accounts for more than a year. A majority of the students (82%) primarily access their accounts via mobile devices, while the rest does so via personal or university computers. Almost three quarters of the respondents (72%) check their *Facebook* account on a daily basis, while about a quarter does so once every two days (14%) or less (14%). These numbers provide strong indications that the students in the present project have adequate access to the SNS and that they can be

³ This number includes the students from the sample group, as well as the students from the control group who filled in the questionnaires voluntarily.

considered frequent users of social media. It becomes more and more apparent that the digital divide among South African youngsters entering university has evolved into a digital collective, where students are mobile and have made social connectivity part of their daily routine.

With regard to the question whether *Facebook* can be used for educational purposes, a majority of the students agree (63%) or strongly agree (19%) that the SNS could be used as a tool in their learning trajectory, while a minority disagrees (12%) or strongly disagrees (6%). Similarly, three quarters of the students agree (60%) or strongly agree (14%) that it is acceptable for educational institutions to promote *Facebook* as a peer collaboration tool, while a quarter disagrees (17%) or strongly disagrees (9%). These numbers provide strong indications that a considerable majority of the student group is willing to use the SNS in an educational context.

It has to be pointed out that, when looking at these numbers, it is not possible to make any generalisations about students' digital literacy levels. Van de Poel and Fourie (2013) also point this out in their research on the use of ICTs in blended learning environments in South African higher education, arguing that there is a need to provide training for students with low digital literacy levels and raise awareness among students about, amongst others, privacy issues. Only then can (mobile) technology be used frequently and adequately.

7.2 Well-being

In order to determine how *Facebook* can contribute to the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs, the study first looked at students' psychological well-being when participating in the project. If students are disengaged, they are more prone to be socially discordant and less academically successful (Bandura et al., 1996), which has to be avoided. Well-being is subdivided into two aspects: satisfaction, or to what extent students like being part of the *Facebook* forum (cf. Lampe et al., 2011), and comfort.

7.2.1 Satisfaction

Almost two thirds of the students (64%) like being part of the *Facebook* group. They indicate that the forum is informative and keeps them up-to-date on deadlines and announcements from the tutors, as illustrated in the following abstracts from the questionnaires:

- P1: It made me interact with other learners and how they operate in their lectures.
- P2: It was a good way to get everyone involved and reminded about the projects we had.

- P3: It keeps me up to date with the information that I may need or just posting problems I may have and getting help.

Students particularly appreciate the possibility to exchange ideas and pose questions to their peers. The fact that the forum was available 24/7 is also considered to be a plus. The students who do not like to be part of the group report that they want more guidance on the platform. Some of them feel that examples of good practice would have given them more insights into successful peer collaboration, or express that including a tutor in the group would have helped them be more active in the discussions.

As the students are part of an academically vulnerable group, it is not surprising that part of them feel unsure about the purpose of the forum and want personal guidance from the teaching staff. All students were informed that the tutor would not be available online. This study is interested in student-student interaction and their collaboration on the SNS. By excluding the tutor, it was assumed that students would feel less inhibited to communicate with their peers, which is to lead to a more extensive and genuine language output (cf. Lloyd, 2012). Even though almost three quarters of the students agreed (36%) or strongly agreed (36%) with the statement that it would be appropriate for a tutor to join a *Facebook* forum, other students who disagreed (22%) or strongly disagreed (6%) have negative opinions towards the inclusion of a tutor:

- P4: It makes it easier when your peer gives you feedback because you are close with him/her and she/he will give you a honest [sic] opinion and you will not take it as offense [sic] because she/he is helping you to improve you wriiting [sic]. It makes easier [sic] to see whether he/she understands what you have written because he/she does not know what you have written n [sic] will be first expose to you [sic] piece of work so the reaction that she/he has your preview precisely that she can understande [sic] full as the way you where [sic] thinking it will make it easier for the lecturer to understand your work.
- P5: the lecturer will assist students in class, the facebook page should be only accesseble [sic] to students.
- P6: Facebook should only be used as a means of communication between students, tutors or lecturers and provide additional work or examples of the work being done as extra help in difficullt [sic] courses.

7.2.2 Comfort

More than half of the participants in the Facebook group (56%) feel comfortable talking to their peers online and about one fifth feels very comfortable (19%), while a quarter (22%) does not feel comfortable or not comfortable at all (3%). Students who feel comfortable say that their peers are more open to discuss the assignments than the lecturers and that there is a lot of respect among the participants:

P7: Because I understood them [fellow students] more than the lecturers [sic] and they were more open.

P8: Because we treat each other with respect and we don't judge each other.

The students who do not feel comfortable again indicate that the group lacked guidance and that they do not always trust the judgement of their fellow students:

P9: Peers are not lecturers and they cannot explain to other students properly what everything is about. We come across times where the wrong information is conveyed.

Positive beliefs on well-being are crucial when developing positive self-efficacy beliefs, as well as in the process of academic acculturation. The fact that a majority of the academically vulnerable group feels comfortable discussing their writing assignments indicates that the process of online peer collaboration is “arguably lowering affective thresholds to participating in this discourse community and thus increasing their readiness and willingness to communicate with peers and staff” (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012: 300).

7.3 Confidence

More than three quarters of the students who participated in the present project feel confident (61%) or very confident (17%) in writing their assignment for the course, as illustrated in Figure 1. In comparison, less than two thirds of the students who did not participate in the *Facebook* group feel confident (48%) or very confident (13%) in writing their assignments for the course.

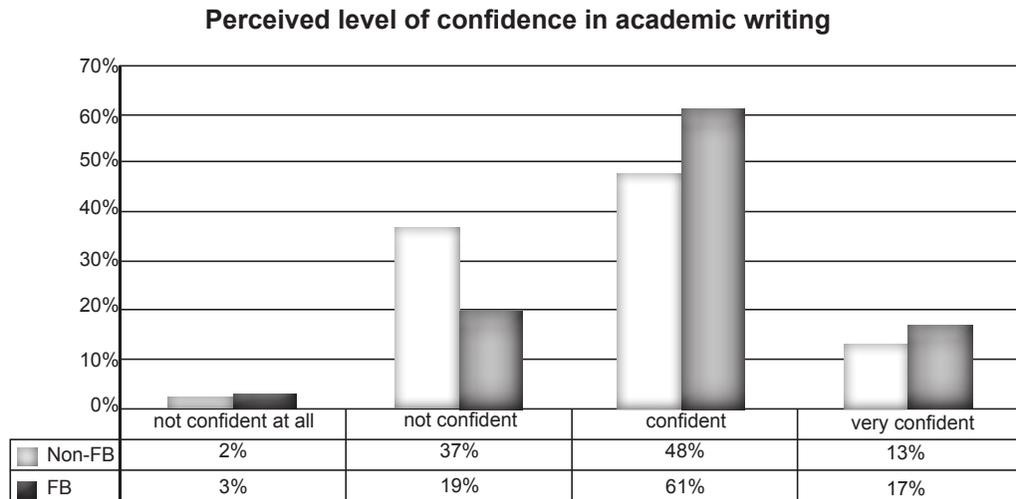


Figure 1. First-year students' perceived level of confidence in academic writing

A two tailed t-test does not show any significant variance between the test group and the control group, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. First-year students' self-assessment of confidence in academic writing

Item	Test Group <i>M</i> (SD)	Control Group <i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i>	df
Level of confidence	2.92 (0.69)	2.72 (0.71)	1.49*	189

Note: * $p > 0.05$

The difference between the groups, nevertheless, is noteworthy and provides indications that students in the *Facebook* group feel very confident about their writing practice. Earlier research on the use of *Facebook* in academic writing courses has pointed out that students report on gaining confidence in their academic writing practice through face-to-face instruction in class or through working with the course material (Peeters 2015a). They report that the instruction and materials provide them with the necessary building blocks to advance in their writing practice, which may contribute to perceived confidence gain. Even though the *Facebook* group provided them with an extra opportunity to practice their academic writing, it did not significantly enhance their perceived level of confidence regarding their academic writing skills.

7.4 Competence

While a vast majority of the test group feels skilled (75%) or very skilled (11%) in academic writing, only about two thirds of the control group feels skilled (61%) or very skilled (6%) in their academic writing practice, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Perceived level of competence in academic writing

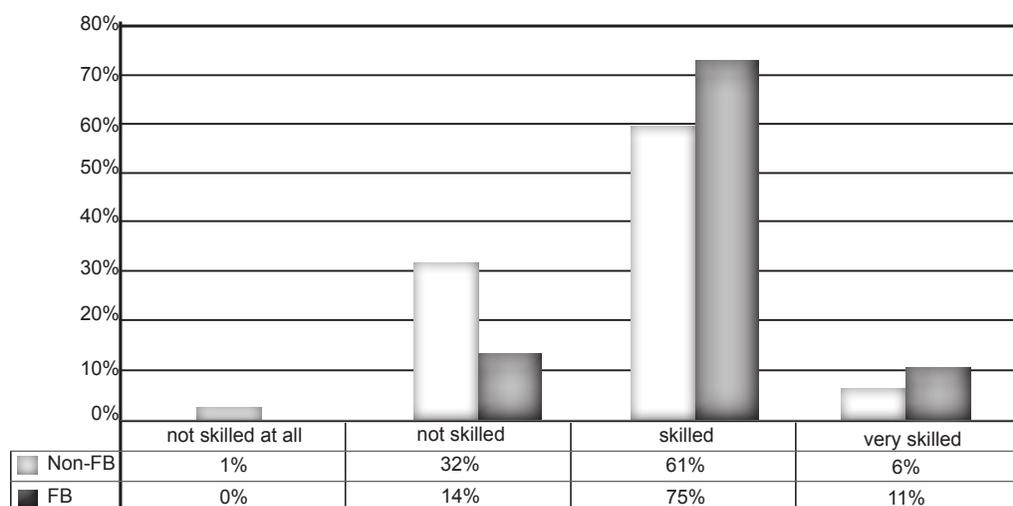


Figure 2. First-year students' perceived level of competence in academic writing

A two-tailed t-test shows a significant variance between the two groups, as illustrated in Table 2. Students who participated in the *Facebook* group perceive themselves as significantly more skilled in academic writing than their peers who were not part of the group.

Table 2. First-year students' self-assessment of competence in academic writing

Item	Test Group <i>M</i> (SD)	Control Group <i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i>	df
Level of competence	2.97 (0.51)	2.71 (0.59)	2.46*	189

Note: * $p < 0.02$

The fact that students' perceived level of competence differs significantly across the two groups while their level of confidence does not, can be explained by the nature of their collaboration online. Students may perceive themselves as more competent in academic writing as they have been given an additional opportunity to practice their writing skills, and are able to experience peer collaboration and peer review. Through their participation on the *Facebook* forum, they are able to gain hands-on experience, and, additionally, review their own work, as well as the work of their peers.

8. Discussion

From the results, it is believed that the *Facebook* intervention enabled students to develop positive self-efficacy beliefs by engaging them in a social, low-threshold communication environment. The discussion focuses on this development, highlighting the importance of hands-on experience in academic writing and the construction of a social network of peers.

8.1 Developing self-efficacy beliefs

8.1.1 *Practice and experience*

Supported by earlier case studies –listed in the literature review and below– and due to the fact that the project selected a random sample of participants, the *Facebook* intervention is considered the main variable between the test group and the control group. The test students' profound confidence levels, as well as the significant increase in their perceived level of competence about academic writing can, therefore, be attributed chiefly, but not exclusively, to their engagement in the peer-to-peer communication online.

The reason why the intervention may have supported this development is that, first, the *Facebook* environment enables students to exchange questions and experiences, and gives them the opportunity to share and, as it were, pilot their ideas. By sharing personal knowledge, they use their group as a training ground (Peeters 2015b). Their peers can provide them with an additional review of their work and, by discussing their suggestions and opinions, they practice their negotiation skills. Furthermore, as they have to be able to present their ideas, comments and criticisms adequately, they have to use academic discourse (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). This is regarded as a unique opportunity for students to “share innovations in their own works with the immediate support of electronic groups” (Liaw, 2008: 865). This process of negotiation eventually may have had a positive effect on the perception of their writing skills, as they gained experience in peer review, were presented with a range of writing examples from their peers and, therefore, may have felt well prepared to write their assignment (cf. Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012).

Second, collaboration on SNSs contributes to students' intrinsic motivation to take part in the learning process (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Kabilan et al., 2010). Doing so, peer collaboration can, on the one hand, enhance the level of effort students make to successfully complete tasks, and, on the other, add to their determination to reach the learning goal (Zimmerman, 2000).

Third, by engaging in peer review, students are encouraged to –chiefly autonomously– apply problem-solving skills (cf. Akbari et al., 2015; Peeters, 2016). By collaborating through the *Facebook* forum, they have the possibility to draw upon their own knowledge and experiences to present a range of solutions for a posed problem. Furthermore, by introducing them to peer collaboration through *Facebook*, they may feel that they are properly engaged in their own writing process, as well as in the writing process of their peers.

8.2.1 Social network of peers

Collaboration through *Facebook* enables students to build a network of peers. As their fellow students are faced with the same learning goals –i.e. making progress in academic writing and handing in the writing assignment successfully– it is possible to connect with them both on a social and on an academic level. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) already pointed out that social connections between students contribute to academic success. In the present study, the social network of peers seems to have enabled the students to develop their self-efficacy beliefs about academic writing through the social and academic engagement with others (Fox et al., 2014), an evolution which may eventually have a positive impact on their academic outcomes (cf. Pajares 1995).

Self-efficacy beliefs are heavily dependent on the social network of students as the community supporting them is partially responsible for the amount of information they receive, but also for the processing and organisation of this information (Bandura 1993). The information exchange on the *Facebook* forum depends on mutual effort and thus, in order for students' effective intellectual functioning, relies on social, affective and motivated participants. Furthermore, students engage in self-comparison to other users and gradually frame the feedback from the peer group in accordance with their self-efficacy beliefs. As the collaboration on the *Facebook* group was centred around common learning goals, there was no emphasis on competitive social comparison, but on students' problem-solving capacities and their ability to make progress in the learning process; an approach which is "well suited for building a sense of efficacy that promotes academic achievement" (Bandura, 1993: 125).

8.2 Opportunities for academic acculturation

The results provide strong indications that the collaboration on *Facebook* contributes to gain in students' self-efficacy beliefs about their competence in academic writing. The online forum, therefore, provides several new opportunities for acculturation which are mostly absent in large classrooms with limited contact time.

As they collaborate online, it is observed that students engage in peer review, and at the same time socialise with their fellow students about the course's goals, objectives, practices and language (cf. Van de Poel & Gasiorek 2012). This socialisation process provides both access to social resources, as students are able to exchange personal experiences and working styles, and to academic resources, as students discuss and review each other's work, as well as present new insights on the course material and the course content. Fox et al. (2014) point out that this kind of social interaction and engagement are key features of academic acculturation. They build upon the findings of Scanlon et al. (2007: 223) who emphasise that "identity results from situated interactions in which students pick up cues regarding the horizons of possibility for identity formation in university transition".

As in language learning, students' academic writing is one of the primary ways in which they present their knowledge and skills in the academic field (Van de Poel & Gasiorek,

2012), giving them the opportunity to take part in peer review and letting their writing be assessed before handing it in is considered a stimulus to putting their academic writing skills to the test (Hyland, 2006). By obtaining practical experience, they are able to use the target language to edit, negotiate interpretations and construct meaning through peer collaboration. This skills-focused approach to academic writing may benefit language learning in particular as students become more experienced in using the language for academic purposes (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012).

In sum, the collaboration on *Facebook* provides students with adequate access to social and academic resources, as they, on the one hand, socialise with their peers on an informal level, and on the other hand, discuss common learning goals, writing practices and course material. As the *Facebook* group allows them to engage in peer-to-peer communication on a social and educational level, it can facilitate both their adaptation to the new community of learners and to their individual fields of study. The forum, furthermore, can be regarded as an introductory tool for using the target language for academic discourse. When students discuss their writing with their peers, they engage in the discourse related to their field of study and are able to negotiate meaning. It is suggested that “this kind of exposure to and practice using this kind of language and metalanguage may be an effective means of socialising students” (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012: 300), as it may strengthen social ties and introduces them to the academic rhetoric. By extension, this shows that a closed *Facebook* group can provide new opportunities for the acculturation process to higher education by making it a social process of co-dependence, where students can be motivated to actively participate, learn from their peers and practice their skills.

9. Limitations of the research and recommendations for future practice

Even though the study selected a random sample from the student population, it relied on students' readiness to participate and did not make students who were not willing to cooperate join the *Facebook* group. This might have had an effect, however slight, on their perceived levels of confidence and competence in academic writing as they are considered active learners already.

The present study focuses on students' self-efficacy beliefs about academic writing and how the *Facebook* intervention influences the development of the perception of themselves as academic writers. In order to provide an inclusive and accessible learning environment for this academically vulnerable group –which scored below average on the TALL at the beginning of the semester– it is essential to support the development of their positive self-efficacy beliefs. As learners' level of confidence and competence regarding their academic writing capacities can have a considerable influence on the eventual writing outcomes (Pajares, 2003), the present study recommends to further analyse the actual writing outcomes of the students, compared to the control group in order to ratify if their positive self-efficacy beliefs have a legitimate foundation. As the present study aimed to overcome the first hurdle of using social media as a peer collaboration platform in this

specific academic context, testing the eventual writing outcomes was not within the scope of the analysis.

The particular needs of a student population affect the integration of a *Facebook* discussion group. As the students in the present project were part of an academically vulnerable group, it is advised to introduce them to peer collaboration and peer review, guide them through the pitfalls of social media use –e.g. securing privacy, creating a critical eye for the different types of information available and avoiding communication breakdown– and provide them with recommendations to start up discussions in the group. Educators can ask reflection questions about students' online engagement in class, making them evaluate their own participation, as well as that of their peers. Doing so, students may be triggered to critically think about their own role in the online peer collaboration and, possibly, be encouraged to become active participants.

Including a facilitator online who can guide the online discussion when necessary, ask reflection questions online and send out deadline reminders, may provide students with more guidance and support. In order to keep the *Facebook* forum a low-threshold communication platform, the present study does not recommend the facilitator to be a tutor, but rather a researcher or observer who is not involved in the students' immediate learning activities in order to keep the threshold for peer collaboration as low as possible.

10. Conclusion

The present project provides strong indications that the integration of a *Facebook* discussion group in the learning process of first-year students may have had a positive impact on the development of their self-efficacy beliefs regarding their perceived levels of confidence and competence in academic writing. In general, students feel comfortable taking part in peer-to-peer communication on *Facebook* because they regard the SNS as an accessible and open collaboration environment. They refer to their fellow students as being helpful and respectful, which supports the argument that *Facebook* stimulates the formation of groups and communities by facilitating users' interpersonal connectivity. As a result, students appear to consider the *Facebook* forum to be an attribute to their learning process. The power of the networking site is that students already are acquainted with the platform, as well as with the way of communication. By harnessing the networking power and integrating educational goals by means of a writing assignment, the *Facebook* environment is considered to be an adequate online space to introduce students to peer collaboration and to invite them to critically assess their own writing practice, as well as that of others.

Considering that the test group is an academically vulnerable group, it is important to activate them to become responsible, critical and collaborative learners. Through the *Facebook* intervention, the present research seems to have reached that goal. Even though there is no significant variance with the control group, the results show that students in the test group feel confident in their writing abilities. This is likely a result of collaborating with

the peer group on *Facebook*, through which students may feel well prepared and engaged in their own writing process, as well as in the writing process of their peers.

The students in the test group feel significantly more skilled in academic writing. The results suggest that the collaboration on the *Facebook* forum has a positive impact on their perceived levels of competence in academic writing as they are able to discuss their writing products and have an additional opportunity to peer review. The *Facebook* group allows students to easily access academic, as well as social resources (cf. Cheng & Fox, 2008; Fox et al., 2014), which may have encouraged them to negotiate and, potentially, to become more skilled in academic discourse. This opportunity to collaborate, exchange information and negotiate meaning using the target language outside of the classroom may be particularly interesting for language learning contexts as this skills-focused approach to academic writing (Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012) gives students the opportunity to apply and practice their newly acquired skills and competences.

By using *Facebook* as a tool to connect peers outside of the classroom, the forum provides new opportunities for academic acculturation, e.g. practicing negotiation, academic discourse and information management. The present study believes that the *Facebook* forum may lower the threshold for students to actively engage in peer collaboration, and encourages them to access and make use of academic and social resources. Doing so, the forum may facilitate their adaptation to the new educational environment, as well as to the new community of learners. Therefore, *Facebook* may be regarded as an attribute towards a more inclusive and accessible learning environment for students entering higher education as it may be used as an introductory tool for group collaboration, through which students may initiate the co-construction of knowledge and the use of academic discourse, next to engaging in peer review. This study has proven that the networking site provides an accessible platform for students to engage in their own learning and writing practice and may support academic acculturation as a social, collaborative process.

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