

Four Characteristics of Facebook Activities for English Language Learning: A study of Malaysian University Students' Needs and Preferences

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Doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.8n.3p.155

Received: 19/04/2017

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.8n.3p.155>

Accepted: 14/06/2017

Abstract

This paper identifies Malaysian university students' needs and preferences for online English language activities on a Facebook group that supports their formal learning. Two methods of data collection were employed; content analysis of the Facebook interactions, and semi structured interviews. Four main learning preferences or characteristics of online activities are identified; a) teacher-led activities (tasks and learning content provided by teachers), b) teachers' presence (one or two authority figures to facilitate learning and keep group lively), c) topics or content (entertainment-oriented, grammar quizzes, opinion-based discussions), d) structure of the group (optional and ungraded). The passive participants found the activity beneficial in improving their online communication ability, while the more active participants felt a boost of confidence to use English in a more public space like Facebook. The findings indicate that the students are in need of technological changes in learning, but are dependent on teachers' instructions to initiate the process. They exert selective interests in learning topics and content, and demonstrate partial autonomy in negotiating the online group's structure. The theoretical and practical implications, and recommendation for future research are briefly presented.

Keywords: Facebook, language learning preferences, selective interests, online communication skills, topics, teacher-led activities

1. Introduction

The proliferation of social networking sites (SNS) in education is a phenomenon in higher institutions. Of the various SNS, Facebook is the most popular with approximately 1.86 billion active users (Zephoria Digital Marketing, 2017). Facebook is especially attractive to university and college students' demographic due to its initial association with Harvard. As students are spending more time on SNS, it is time that higher academic settings harness the potential of these revolutionary technology to better serve the needs of the students (Davis III, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & González Canché, 2015).

In realising this, it is necessary to address the gap or tension that exists between formal literacy in schools, and students' informal learning interests (Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2015; Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Schools often have the traditional, standardise needs that they have to meet, in the forms of syllabus, curricula, and exams; while the current generation of students thrive on online recreational activities, i.e. video games, SNS, and creative tools (Halverson, Kallio, Hackett, & Halverson, 2016). The way that students learn on Facebook is not always conceptualised similarly to the traditional way of learning. Using Facebook as their personal domain, they communicate peer-to-peer to negotiate academic topics, group discussions and assignments, but they do not often see these as learning (Donlan, 2014). Therefore, they feel that that their teachers disapprove of their use of Facebook for academic purposes (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012); thus, there is a discrepancy in the way that teachers and students view Facebook in educational settings.

Furthermore, while many agree that Facebook is beneficial for language learning (Bugă, Căpeneață, Chirasnel, & Popa, 2014; Ekoc, 2014), not much is known about how students prefer the academic activities on Facebook to be conducted; plus, there are little empirical studies that have examined this issue (Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015; Milošević, Živković, Arsić, & Manasijević, 2015). This study explores a group of university students' needs and preferences when they use Facebook for an English language course, and outlines the characteristics of online activities that appeal to them. It is when these needs are understood that teachers and students would experience a more enriching and effective learning environment. As articulated by Sanchez, Cortijo, and Javed (2014), it is necessary that teachers fully understand the students' view of Facebook for academic purposes to exercise the potential of Facebook in promoting cooperative and collaborative learning. The new media could transform conventional teaching and learning practices to become more personalised and connected (Jenkins et al., 2015).

1.1 Theoretical background

The participatory culture creates a viable path that integrates new media experiences into standardised school curricula (Halverson et al., 2016). It describes the creation of culture and content in communities of Internet users who share similar interests (Fuchs, 2014). It is defined as:

“... a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creation, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to the novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)”

(Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2006: 3)

The participatory culture subsumes four key forms which are affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving, and circulations (Jenkins et al., 2015). Within this paradigm, students act as both the producers and consumers of knowledge, i.e. prosumers (Jahnke, 2013).

In a networked environment, students’ participation on social media is a form of participatory culture. Students’ media usage mainly develops outside of the school context and shapes formal literacy (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Accordingly, Jenkins et al.’s (2015) study of fan cultures blurs the distinction between the forms of cultural productions and social exchanges (Halverson et al., 2016). Fan cultures invite people to communicate, produce, and circulate content and ideas based on their interests. In accommodating these activities, new tools and institutions, such as the SNS, are created (Reilly, 2009). The new media are the medium that invite students’ participation, although other tools could also be used (Halverson et al., 2016). Thus, Facebook as a popular form of social media in Malaysia could invite students’ involvement in an online learning setting.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous studies on Facebook and academic

Social media including Facebook are quickly becoming respectable e-learning platforms (Bosch, 2009). Many research have been carried out to explore their impact on learning in the areas of; students’ uses of Facebook in higher institutions (Wodzicki, Schwämmlein, & Moskaliuk, 2012); formal and informal learning (Chen & Bryer, 2012); students and teachers’ perceptions of SNS (Hew, 2011); collaborative learning on SNS (Toetnel, 2014); interaction opportunities (Adi Kasuma & Wray, 2015); relationships between SNS and academic achievement (Junco, 2012); critical literacy and language skills (Rambe, 2012); and SNS and second language (L2) learning (Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012). Other social sciences research on; social media/Facebook’s implications on identity formation, self-presentation and a sense of community (Yang & Brown, 2016); students’ motivation and gratification (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009); and privacy concerns (Gettman & Cortijo, 2015); have also contributed to the body of literature.

The findings of Facebook in academic are divided. Some criticise its limited educational-orientation (Hew, 2011), while many defend its academic potential. Scholars including Selwyn (2011) and Madge (2009), among others, conclude that Facebook is mainly used by students for social purposes and more practical academic activities, such as to make new friends, banter, talk about faculty members, exchange learning materials and assignment details, engage in social activism, conduct online discussions, speculate content of exams, and talk about instructors. Facebook’s affordances have only been partially implemented due to obstacles that prevent Facebook adoption as a whole including institutional requirements, teaching and learning strategies, and cultural issues (Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Arguably, the current generation of students are not digital natives who expect drastic changes at universities to accommodate their learning interests and needs, and out of school activities. While these students need technological change, they do not always feel comfortable and at ease with Facebook, and they do not appear to be willing to use informal tools such as Facebook as a unique teaching tool for learning (Manca & Ranieri, 2013).

On the other hand, other studies emphasise Facebook’s potential in forming networks of students who create, share, and circulate information and knowledge that may have real impacts on learning (Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Several studies that have conducted Facebook-integrated lessons, find such lessons effective and appealing, despite internet-related issues (Cain & Policastri, 2011; Rod & Guerrero, 2013). The students are able to connect with field experts, share links, interact with peers, and discover new knowledge; and in some cases perform better than their peers who do not use Facebook academically. A small number of a German university students insist that they use StudiUV for academic purposes (Wodzicki et al., 2012); while the Public Health students in an Australian university still recommend Facebook for future educational uses, despite their low participation rate in the academic pages (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012). Facebook collaborative-orientation is dependent on students’ academic performance, perceived and instrumental support from Facebook friends, and higher-order internet skills especially information-searching (Khan, Wohn, & Ellison, 2014). Al-rahmi et al. (2015) found that collaborative learning mediates social media and academic performance in higher institutions; which is related to Connectivism that sees learning as a process of making connections, exploration, creation, discovery and evaluation.

The studies on the effects of Facebook in academia are, therefore, inconclusive as what works for one culture and society may not be effective for others (Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Henceforth, in academic research of education and technology, we have to be mindful of the global, national and local contexts, and avoid a universal supranational attitude (Selwyn, 2012). This includes the linguistic, religious, and geographical variations that significantly impact educational arrangements (Manca & Ranieri, 2013).

2.2 The effects of SNS on L2 learning

The field of L2 learning would especially benefit from the integration of SNS into pedagogical activities. However, there is no consistent efforts to study the use of SNS in the L2 classrooms (Toetnel, 2014). Existing studies on SNS and L2 learning indicate positive relationships. The UK-based college students who used Ning for an informal language practice, improved group cohesion and learner-to-learner interactions, and increased learner collaborations (Toetnel,

2014). In two blended learning environments, two groups of Taiwanese EFL students (n=23), and English for Business Communication students (n=111), found that peer-assessed Facebook writing activities were effective in improving both professional knowledge and language skills, i.e. organisation, grammar, structure, content, vocabulary and spelling (Shih, 2011; Shih, 2013). The use of *likes* and *emoticons* further increased students' writing motivation and enhanced interpersonal relationships. Students were however aware that their peer assessment criteria may differ from one another. A group of Malaysian university students perceived acquisition of new English skills from their engagement with Facebook (i.e. interactions, playing games, reading information) through incidental learning (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010). However, it is when students shift their focus to learning on Facebook that they will gain knowledge more effectively.

Besides benefitting students, the use of social media in learning also brings opportunities for language teachers. SNS are cost-effective, support constant communication and interactions, and allow borderless learning experience (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010). The continuous communication and global network encourage the expansion of community-based knowledge and reflective thinking (Idris & Ghani, 2012). However, the learning process is often taxing and time-consuming for teachers who have to design and implement instructional activities, facilitate learning, and monitor both content and language productions (Shih, 2011). Furthermore, inefficiency in administrative and technical performance often decreases online learning experience, and leads to low uptake of students' participation (Toetenel, 2014).

2.3 The research project

It is based on the mixed literature that there is a need for studies on social media and L2 learning to be conducted. In the 21st century, teachers and students have to work together to create new learning strategies in accordance with the technological progression. Therefore, it is necessary that we understand the characteristics of activities that students enjoy when social media is integrated into learning. This study examines Malaysian university students' needs and preferences when Facebook is used to enhance English language learning experience.

Previous studies in the local contexts are more theoretical than empirical (Milošević et al., 2015), and do not offer much practical suggestions. This study thus presents the students with an online L2 learning platform, in which the experiences and recommendations made from their participation, are taken into considerations to further create new learning strategies on social media. Toetenel (2014) adapted Salmon's (2004) five-stages of online teaching model to suit the L2 classroom environment; which is equally relevant to this study. Stages 1 and 2 give students access into the group and allow socialisation. Stage 3 involves students' exchange of information. Stage 4 sees that learners begin accessing the knowledge provided by the learning materials. Stage 5 centres on students' development where they achieve their personal objectives from their engagement with the content materials. Several recommendations for pedagogy and future research are discussed as implications of the findings.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted at a university in the northern part of Malaysia. Prior to their enrolment, the students were required to take the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). There are six levels of grades in MUET; Band 1 (very limited) to Band 6 (highly proficient). The students who scored Band 1 to Band 3 (moderate), had to enrol in the basic English course (BEP) at the university.

The participants were in their first and second year, and belonged to various faculties, e.g. Biology, Pharmaceutical, Mathematics, Arts, and Education. The researcher visited 22 classrooms to gather the students' emails and Facebook usernames, and invited them to join a closed Facebook group to support their BEP course. Students' participation in the semi-structured group was optional and voluntary.

3.2 Design of the study

In exploring university students' needs and preferences, a qualitative study was conducted with two methods of data collection. The research question is:

1. What are the characteristics of the activities that university students need and prefer when they use Facebook to learn English language?

A closed Facebook group was created to support the university students' learning of an English language course. The students were invited to become members, and as the group grew in popularity, new members requested to participate. The roles of the students and moderator are:

The students' roles: The students were encouraged to share course-related information and English learning materials, conduct academic discussions, create English learning content, and construct knowledge in the group. Social interactions were also welcomed to celebrate Facebook as a social platform, and construct a community of learners.

The moderator's roles: The researcher participated as the group moderator, and it is important that the moderator's contributions are included to show how they generate interactions among students (Toetenel, 2014). The moderator's posts in the group were semi-structured, where for each week of the data collection period, she shared three types of posts; grammar quizzes, entertainment-related posts, and online links to English learning materials. However, the days and time of the posts were not fixed. Occasionally, the moderator posted and shared other materials such as personal photos, and opinion-based questions.

3.3 Methods

The design of this study is qualitative and exploratory, with two methods of data collection; Facebook group observation, and semi-structured interview.

The Facebook group data were gathered for a six-week period, starting from when the university resumed its semester for the year. The first month of the semester was the most suitable as students want to make new friends for both academic and social reasons. The first week saw the participation of 360 members, and the end of the sixth week saw approximately 600 members. The big number of members accumulated in a short period of time indicates the students' interest in engaging with social media technology to improve their English language skills, and get help with the course. The interaction threads were collected on a weekly basis, and at the end of the sixth week, the interaction threads were re-reviewed to see if there were any changes to them. The topics of interactions and types of posts in the group were listed as open codes, and reduced into more specific themes.

The interview participants were selected based on their participation in the Facebook group, in which their participation was quantified to show frequency. Each action was given points; multimedia posts (5 points), text-based posts (4 points), comments with multimedia (3 points), text-based comments (2 points), and like (1 point). These points totalled, the students were divided into four categories; active, average, passive, and very passive. Passive participants showed involvement in the group but accumulated the least points, while the very passive participants joined the group as members, but never made their involvement visible; hence accumulated no points at all.

Four to nine participants from each category were invited as interviewees to discuss their experiences in the Facebook group. A total of 25 interviewees that comprise of seven active, nine average, five passive, and four very passive members were selected. The interviewees decided the time and place of the interviews to follow good ethics and ensure their comfort and safety. A voice recorder was used to record the sessions with the interviewees' consent. The interviews were semi-structured where the interviewees were asked some questions that guide further elaboration of the matters. Thematic-content analysis was used to code the interview data and establish themes on the NVivo software. The themes derived include the participants' reasons for their (non)-participation in the group, views on posting requirements, and the effect of interactions on their language skills. The students also recommend some strategies to further improve such activities. Despite participating at a different rate, the interviewees' responses do not differ too greatly from one another.

4. Findings and Discussions

The data from the Facebook group and interviews were reduced into four main themes that describe the characteristics of English language activities on Facebook that the students need and prefer. These are; a) teacher-led activities; b) teachers' presence and guidance; c) the group's structures; and d) topics of interactions. First, the general statistics of the group activities are described.

4.1 The statistics of the group activities

The students showed high interest and enthusiasm to participate in the group during the first week that it was launched. This establishes the students' need for a technological change in learning (Manca & Ranieri, 2013), with a tool that is easily accessible and close to them. They shared a variety of multimedia and text-based posts, as well as interacted with each other.

Table 1. The distribution of posts shared by the moderator and students in the Facebook group

| Members who initiated posts | Frequency (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Students | 75 (68%) |
| Moderator | 36 (32%) |
| Total | 111 |

In total, there were 111 posts in the group. The overall ratio of students to moderator's posts is 70:30 (Table 1). Other statistics are as follow:

- 46 students (8% to 13%) wrote 75 posts.
- 67 students (11% to 19%) published 343 comments in the 111 posts.
- 89 students made their participation visible through posts and comments (15% to 25%).
- 170 students made their participation visible through posts, comments, and likes (28% to 47%).
- 20 students (3% to 5%) constantly generated new posts and content.

The percentage of students who participated visibly in the group did not reach 50 percent; which establishes the abundance of silent readers or pedagogical lurkers, rather than producers of knowledge and content on Facebook (Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006). The culture of student-students' interactions on Facebook is relatively small as users consume more online content than they post or interact (Cain & PolICASTRI, 2011). A lot of time, there are one-to-many broadcastings but little user-to-user interactions. There are five reasons for English as a second language (ESL) students in Malaysia to lurk in Facebook groups that use English as the medium of communication, which are; poor online communication skills, lack confidence, no sense of belonging, learning by lurking, and following the norm of

Facebook groups (Shafie, Yaacob, & Singh, 2016). Many interviewees in this study similarly expressed that they were not confident with their L2 ability, and that the group members were not supportive of their efforts to promote learning.

MM: I wanted to participate but I was scared that others would laugh at me and the content I share.

HH: I feel bored as there were not a lot of responses from others.

FAR: The group is far too quiet that it's dull.

Keeping quiet or being silent does not indicate that the lurkers are not learning, or learning far less than active participants (Dennen, 2008). Jenkins et al. (2015) expressions function of the participatory culture present that once students feel more comfortable in an online community, they will start to create, contribute, and circulate knowledge. Silent readers acquire more knowledge and language skills than active participants as they take time to go through other's contribution. On the other hand, active participants often join an activity to complete it, rather than engage with the content; hence learn far less and feel dissatisfied with the experience (Cain & Policastri, 2011; Dennen, 2008).

Table 2. The types of posts shared in the Facebook group

| Types of posts | Frequency (%) | |
|-----------------------|---------------|----------|
| | Moderator | Students |
| Socio-academic | 2 (6%) | 42 (57%) |
| Non-academic | 9 (25%) | 22 (29%) |
| Academic | 25 (69%) | 11 (14%) |
| Total | 36 | 75 |

Table 2 shows three types of posts shared in the Facebook group. While the moderator shared more academic content, the students gravitated towards socio-academic content. The academic content includes educational and practical academic information, e.g. assignments, lecture notes, class schedules and venues (Figure 1). The non-academic posts include everything else such as students' self-expressions, where Facebook becomes a personal microblog (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010) (Figure 2). The socio-academic posts are social in nature, but relate to the university setting. This includes advertisements or promotions of events and contests conducted at the university (Figure 3). Students also used the group to share their creative productions, and asked the members for *likes* when they participated in a contest or competition at the university.



Figure 1. A practical academic information post to inform about a test

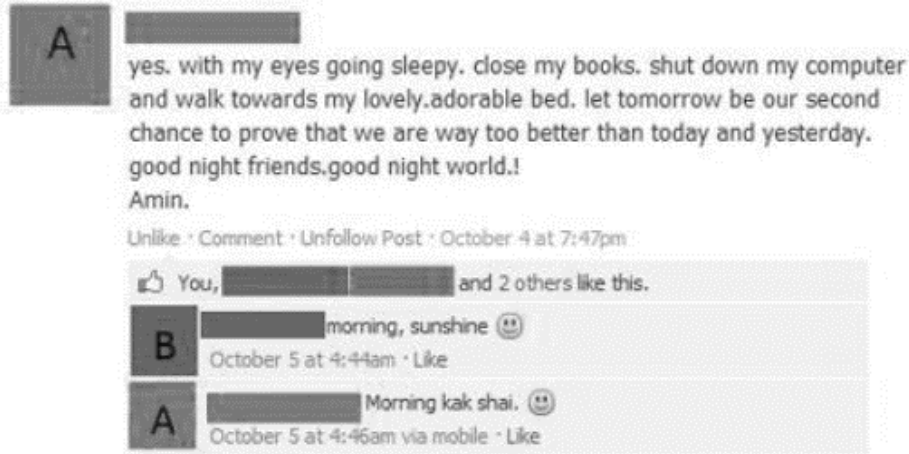


Figure 2. A student's self-expressions



Figure 3. A socio-academic post that promotes a contest at the university

The findings show the different ways that the moderator and the members used the Facebook group. It was also observed that the students' motivation for using the group, shifted, from wanting to learn English language and socialising, to circulating information of the happenings at the university. Following previous literature, the students did not perform much academic activities in the group (Madge et al., 2009; Selwyn, 2009), but their active participation was skewed towards promoting university events. Perhaps, when their needs to learn English language were not met, they lost interest and found other ways to utilise the group.

4.2 The characteristics of English language activities on Facebook that the students need and prefer

It is necessary for L2 learners to continuously use the target language outside of the classrooms. Social media provide learners with opportunities to communicate, receive input, and provide output while engaging in the process of meaning negotiation (Ekoc, 2014). The four characteristics of an English language activity on Facebook that the students need and prefer are; teacher-led activities, teachers' presence, topics of interactions, and the group's structure.

4.2.1 Teacher-led activities (tasks, content, and learning materials provided by the teachers)

The moderator's posts generally gathered more responses than the members, which was perhaps due to her authoritative nature. The interviewees felt that teacher-led activities were more credible and suitable in the Facebook group. They viewed the moderator as responsible for the construction of knowledge and content, as the group was created by her for their benefits. The posts by other members, although useful, were viewed as less important.

JE: The moderator should post more content, because it's a learning group, and the students are there to learn from an authority, not from one another. However, if there are study groups for students, I don't mind joining in.

DZ: If the activities are instructed by you [the moderator], the students would be obliged to do it, than when it's by other students.

At times, they felt like participating more visibly in ongoing interactions, but refrained due to several reasons; did not know how to join in other people's conversations, were not sure if the content was suitable in terms of knowledge and language quality, and feared criticisms.

FB: I am interested to join in interactions, but, I am shy and don't know how to do it. I have written my comments, but I deleted them without posting.

DZ: I feel like sharing a lot of things, like the videos I saw on YouTube on how to improve English. However, I was scared if other students don't see the values. They are university students, so their language standard might be high, and the content I wanted to share might not be up to their levels. Maybe it's too basic for them.

HH: I watch a lot of TV shows like Ellen DeGeneres that I shared in the group. I love them, but, I don't want to post all the time because the members might think that I'm showing off.

They felt that the activities initiated by the moderator carry more values, and are treated more seriously by the students. Furthermore, the moderator's previous experience as a teacher of the course, may have influenced the students' involvement and their participation to respond to her posts. The students were thus interested to be part of the Facebook group learning community, but they did not have the confidence to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. The learning process may be easier if the students are already acquainted with one another and comfortable with the environment. The constructivist and social-interactionist theories of learning treat students as members of learning communities (Asoodar, Atai, Vaezi, & Marandi, 2014). As teachers may now meet students' in their space outside of the controlled classroom environment (Sugimoto, Hank, Bowman, & Pomerantz, 2015), it could heighten their motivation to contribute to an online community with support and help from their peers, as well as maintain and strengthen relationships with others (Ekoc, 2014).

By combining a teacher's expertise with a platform that is closed to the students' lives, Facebook has a great potential for teachers and students to experiment and discover new learning methods (Buga et al., 2014). However, it is also a key contributor to students' task switching and multitasking behaviours that leads to reduced focus (Judd, 2014). Nevertheless, this does not affect their academic performance, but increases their learning satisfaction, heighten engagement, and improve grades (Paul et al., 2012; Wang, Lin, Yu, & Wu, 2013). Thus teacher-led activities would be facilitating students' online learning and build their self-confidence at the initial stages of the activities.

4.2.2 Teachers' presence (one or two authority figures to facilitate learning)

The interviewees saw the moderator as responsible in ensuring sufficient English language content and materials in the group. Previous findings similarly observed that students often feel demotivated to take charge of discussions, and refuse to let go of facilitators' control in the online environment (Clark, 2000). There were a variety of content shared by the moderator in the forms of reading articles, links to English language activities, grammar quizzes, discussion threads, audio recording, and comprehension exercises. For example, the moderator encouraged vocabulary learning from the interactions in the group (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A post to enhance vocabulary acquisition

However, the interviewees felt that the moderator was not playing an intensive role in helping them interact with the content. They wanted the moderators to equip the group with more useful and practical English language activities, provide more vocabulary-enhancing exercises, create more grammar quizzes, and correct the mistakes in their writings. They do not see the values of these activities if the grammatical mistakes in the group were not addressed. This finding demonstrates Malaysian university students' emphasis on form-focused learning where grammar mastery and writing skills are often viewed as the achievement of English language (Che Musa, Koo, & Azman, 2012). This leads to the English language instructions being learned in isolation than in socially-mediated contexts.

JE: I think it's your responsibility to keep the group lively, because we are there to learn. You could provide mind-maps so that we learn better.

YHT: I want to be able to speak with big vocabulary, where I don't have to say a lot to carry a big meaning. My friends do that. They say something simple but it sounds fancy. I want that.

MFTI: I enjoy the grammar quizzes because I wanted to refresh my memories of what I've learned at schools previously, but I was disappointed because the group lacked content.

FAR: Yes, I think you need to correct the grammar mistakes, if not we won't learn anything. The students may also do it, but I don't think that they will get it right. Also, other students might not like it because it seems like he or she is showing off. It'd be better if you or a teacher does it.

Although the students feel a need for authorities to direct the activities in the group, they concurred that one or two teachers are sufficient, as they did not want to be burdened with extra tasks by authorities who may have different approaches to learning. This finding is related to Aydin's (2014) who observes that a group of Turkish EFL students prefer passive interaction behaviours with their teachers. Furthermore, younger teachers were preferable as students feel that they could connect with them more on social media, than older teachers who might not understand their needs as the new generation.

AT: We need teachers in the group, but not too many. One or two like yourself is enough. You're young so you understand us and Facebook. Older teachers might not like what we post or share.

JE: You are enough in the group, but as a moderator you have to provide more information. I don't mind sharing learning content when I feel like it.

In summary, teachers' presence in an online learning environment is needed, especially at the initial stages of its introduction. Students see the values that teachers bring in improving their skills and learning experience, which substantiates Hamid et al.'s (2015) finding that many positive outcomes from using SNS for students-students, students-lecturers, and students-content interactions. It also implies that the Malaysian university students were not ready to take charge of their own learning, and relied on teachers for content and activities. A group of Saudi undergraduates similarly showed low level autonomy in English language (Falah Alzubi, Kaur Mehar Singh, & Pandian, 2017); which might indicate that autonomy and independence in learning a L2 is a global issue, rather than a cultural one. Autonomy in digital literacy naturally develops when students try to resolve the difficulties they meet while exploring the web and collecting data for learning (Ting, 2015).

4.2.3 Topic of activities (entertainment-oriented, grammar quizzes, opinion-based discussions)

There are three topics of interactions that saw high students' participation rates in the group; entertainment-oriented (Figure 5), grammar quizzes (Figure 6), and university-related discussions (Figure 7). These topics indicate specific and selective learning interests, where their associations were to establish identities, improve language skills, and express opinions and raise awareness about issues at the university.

A

Any suggestions for good songs?
I'm leaving for London on Thursday, so I would like to update my MP3 playlist to keep me off boredom!

Do share some of your favourite songs that you might have on your phones or laptops; songs that you keep listening to while studying. Any languages will do; English, BM, Korean.

I need to have a little bit of variety and zest in my live!

Many thanks and have a splendid day 😊

Like · Comment · Unfollow Post · November 25 at 5:18am

👍 and 11 others like this.

- B** "now" by troublemaker??hihi
November 25 at 5:19am · Like · 👍 1
- C** begin again taylor swift .
November 25 at 5:19am · Like · 👍 1
- D** dark horse-katy perry
November 25 at 5:21am · Like
- D** unconditionally-katyperry
November 25 at 5:21am · Like · 👍 1
- E** Bruno Mars-talking to the moon
November 25 at 5:28am · Like · 👍 1
- F** home-westlife...
i love the song so much..
November 25 at 5:30am · Like · 👍 1
- G** Yuna- colors
November 25 at 5:33am via mobile · Like
- H** The fox
November 25 at 5:36am · Like · 👍 1
- I** Bintang hati ku,jaga selalu hati mu,sendiwara cinta,huhu.. sy silu dgr lgu bm je.. 😊 lgu ct yg terbru best jgk.. some lgu bm sy tau la.huhu.. k. ckp je nk lgu pe t sy sent je..hihi
November 25 at 5:41am via mobile · Like
- J** What about love-austin mahone,just give me a reason-pink,diamond-rihanna,galau-five minutes.hehehe
November 25 at 5:50am via mobile · Like
- K** It girl - jason derulo
November 25 at 6:56am via mobile · Like
- L** top of thw world by the carpenter.
November 25 at 6:59am via mobile · Like
- L** *the
November 25 at 6:59am via mobile · Like
- H** Blitzkrieg bop- ramones
Ruby soho- rancid
Red hot moon- rancid
Do I wanna know- arctic monkeys
Why'd you only call me when you're high? - arctic monkey
Home sweet home- motley crue
Wrecking ball- miley cyrus
Roar- katty perry
November 25 at 7:00am · Like

M

sweeter than fiction-taylor swift
you can't make old friend-kenny rogers
double rainbow-katy perry
don't let me be lonely-the band perry
November 25 at 8:37am · Like

N

J.s bach he3
November 25 at 8:51am via mobile · Like

O

english song or malay or what??
this time i love to hear rindukanlah by encik mimpi..hehehe
pengaruh cerita kt tv 3
November 25 at 9:29am · Like · 👍 1

P

haha me too! 😊
November 25 at 9:35am · Like · 👍 1

P

well kak its sad to her that u gonna leave soon 😊 do come and visit us if u r back in Malaysia! hehe. my fav song is Little Thing by 1D. ya its not a new song but i just so in love with the lyrics! haha
November 25 at 9:37am · Like · 👍 2

M

maybe u can try story of my life by 1D
too...
November 25 at 9:38am · Like · 👍 1

Q

Carla Bruni - Quelqu'un m'adit 😊 take care kak
November 25 at 12:09pm · Like

N

Don't you remember by Adele, impossible by shontelle.. We can't stop by miley Cyrus. Eheh.. Happy trip Kak
.. Jgn lupa kmi 😊
November 25 at 12:12pm via mobile · Like

R

try alexendar rybak song the title is "singing oah" but some people say there are mistake in the lyrics maybe the grammar.. kak try to hear it.. and have a safe journey..
November 25 at 12:21pm · Like · 👍 1

S

WESTLIFE'S songs...😊
November 25 at 2:07pm · Like · 👍 2

T

korean songs??
November 25 at 4:13pm · Like

U

ringa linga by taeyang
growl by exo
crooked by gd
no by bts 😊
November 25 at 6:37pm · Like · 👍 1

T

fiction by beast
who you by gd
November 25 at 7:22pm · Like

G

3000 miles- emblem3 . Haha confirm homesick bila dengar
November 25 at 7:24pm via mobile · Like

V

sudah cukup sudah sis....ma fav song..!!
November 26 at 2:53am · Like · 👍 1

A

OMG! You guys are the best!
I'm gonna try and download all of them. If you have the MP3 versions, you can always share them here. I'm so outdated, that many of the songs sound so foreign to me. But I love Talking to the Moon.

Keep the songs coming and do supply me with the MP3s too! Love love love!
Thank you guys! 😊
November 26 at 3:54pm · Like · 👍 3

The screenshot displays a social media thread with 15 comments and two video posts. The comments are as follows:

- D** [Redacted] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiiRWoNlnYg>
Billboard Hot 100 - Top 50 Singles (11/23/2013)
www.youtube.com
 Billboard Hot 100 Top 50 singles for 11/23/2013 The top 50 songs from the Bilbo...
 See More
 November 26 at 3:55pm · Like · Remove Preview
- A** [Redacted] And I will never forget all of you. I'll be posting news and pictures until you get sick and tired of me! Muhahaha *evil laugh*
 November 26 at 3:55pm · Like · 4
- S** 😊 [Redacted] Thank you Kak [Redacted].. have an nice trip..
 November 26 at 3:56pm · Like
- A** [Redacted] That's very helpful. Thank you [Redacted] 😊
 November 26 at 3:56pm · Like · 1
- A** [Redacted] Aww... touched.. sobs.. thanks [Redacted]
 November 26 at 3:57pm · Like
- D** [Redacted] ignore Miley Cyrus' song
 November 26 at 3:57pm · Like
- A** [Redacted] too late.. I already have Wrecking Ball on my playlist 😊
 November 26 at 3:57pm · Like · 1
- D** [Redacted] better not watch the music video.. too annoying
 November 26 at 4:03pm · Like · 1
- D** [Redacted] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8piAL5rD6wI> Shai Akma
The Wanted - We Own The Night
www.youtube.com
 Word Of Mouth is out now: <http://po.st/WOMDeluxeYT> Follow The Wanted: <http://www...>
 See More
 November 26 at 4:10pm · Like · 2 · Remove Preview
- A** [Redacted] Hahaha. Luckily I haven't, but thanks for the heads up [Redacted] 😊
 November 26 at 4:19pm · Like · 1
- D** [Redacted] you're welcome.. bring back some souvenirs for group 82 LMT100 students.. hahah
 November 26 at 4:21pm · Like
- A** [Redacted] ouhh.. the pressure 😊
 November 26 at 4:25pm · Like · 1
- W** [Redacted] taylor henderson - borrow my heart
 jai weatford - your eyes...
 both are finalist for xfactor aus....
 not to heavy...
 November 26 at 5:13pm · Like · 1
- K** [Redacted] Unconditional katy perry
 November 27 at 2:31am via mobile · Like · 1
- X** [Redacted] Taman rashidah utama,misteri mimpi syakila:wings
 Puteri seroja,laila namamu teratas:search
 November 27 at 6:57am via mobile · Like

Two video posts are also visible:

- Y** [Redacted] <http://youtu.be/XjwZAa2EjKA>
Katy Perry - Unconditionally (Official)
www.youtube.com
 Download "Unconditionally" from Katy Perry's "PRISM": <http://smarturl.it/PRISM>
 O...
 See More
 November 28 at 8:26am · Like · 2 · Remove Preview
- Y** [Redacted] <http://youtu.be/SnNbIoK98XQ>
Siti Nurhaliza - Lebih Indah (Lirik)
www.youtube.com
 Have fun listening & Thanks for watching ^^ Check out my channel at : <http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-pyMo-ITmyiXF7dxtGQJ-g/videos>
 November 28 at 8:26am · Like · Remove Preview

At the bottom, there is a comment input field: "Write a comment..." with a camera icon.

Figure 5. An entertainment post that received the highest participation rate from members

The entertainment post (Figure 5) received the highest response rate from the students who made song suggestions. This substantiates Malaysian students' preference for entertainment subjects, which is the reason for their continued SNS use, and dislike for complicated matters on social media (Wong, Lean, & Fernandez, 2011). Their confidence to associate and disassociate themselves with celebrities or music genres, establishes identities and demonstrates awareness of global pop culture. The interactions that are based on students' favoured topics may be meaningful and beneficial for their language development and learning motivation. Entertainment topics should not be dismissed and misunderstood, as the discussions of pop culture including local bands, races, religions, dramas, sports, act of charity, and political debates which are popular on social media, benefit students (Heryanto, 2008). Educators could thus base students' entertainment interest and knowledge as the focal point of L2 learning to encourage more critical discussions and collaborative processes.

Students' confidence with their choices of music, project them as up-to-dates and fashionables. It also indicates positive collective self-esteem, or the way the students see themselves from their interactions with the group they belong to (Barker, 2009). Female teenagers communicated more with peers, spent more time on SNS, and were more involved in entertainment; but both male and female students were equally enthusiastic in establishing musical preferences (Barker, 2009). Perceived enjoyment was more significantly predictive of students' attitudes towards SNS than perceived usefulness (Goh, Lada, Muhammad, Ag Ibrahim, & Amboala, 2010). However, this differs according to gender and culture as illustrated by the Korean students who preferred social activism on Facebook, while the American students were more entertainment-oriented (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011). Other factors that determined the continued usage of SNS, besides entertainment, were number of peers, internet self-efficacy, collective self-esteem, the need to belong, cognition, and overall attitudes towards SNS (Gangadharbatla, 2008).

Nevertheless, a small number of students initiated threads on serious, complicated topics of education and politics (the emphasis on English language mastery by the ex-Prime Minister of Malaysia), humanitarian (Syrian war), and academic discussions (the definition of excellence). Four interviewees, AA, AE, NIN and JE, also expressed their interest in political debates, and viewed Facebook as a suitable tool for it.

AE: Yes, I enjoy debating politics on Facebook, but I ignore the keyboard warriors.

Accordingly, it was reported that Malaysians are progressively using Facebook to express their political dissatisfactions (Muniandy & Muniandy, 2013). However, these topics were often disregarded in the group, perhaps due to their complexity, participants' limited knowledge, and time constraint. Similarly, Bode (2016) finds that while social media have the potential to spread political information, this is not always realised within the general populations. The initiation of such threads by more ambitious and willing students indicates a progression in critical thinking among Malaysian youths. Thus, the current generation of students should be gradually introduced to more challenging and critical topics that stimulate thoughts and improve awareness, so that they could participate more effectively in an online environment.

Murder of English

1. Pick up the paper and fall in the dustbin.
2. Both of you stand together separately.
3. Why are you looking at the monkeys outside when I am inside.
4. Will you hang the calendar or else I will hang myself.
5. I have 2 daughters both are girls.
6. Give me a blue pen of any color.
7. The principal is revolving in the corridor.
8. all of u stand in a straight circle
9. Open the Window - Let the AIRFORCE come in.

Like · Comment · Unfollow Post · November 13 at 5:57am via mobile

Find the problems with these sentences.
November 13 at 5:58am via mobile · Like

1. throw into dustbin
2. together separately?
3. when I am inside?? inside the monkey?
4. hang by myself
5. daughters are girls
6. blue, so no more any colour
7. at the corridor
8. straight circle?? straight line or round circle
9. airforce, lol.. the battle plane
November 13 at 6:05am · Edited · Like · 1

4.I will hang myself(this one funny for me)
November 13 at 6:06am · Like · 1

9. airforce come in also funny..
November 13 at 6:07am · Like · 1

I have a question here.
the sentences of no 5,6,7 look okay, but i can't detect where is the grammar error,, especially "the blue pen of any color".
November 13 at 6:07am · Like

oh..nampak.. give me the blue pen of any color" ...
November 13 at 6:09am · Like

or give me the pen of any color...
November 13 at 6:17am · Edited · Like · 1

fall in the dustbin.
November 13 at 6:55am · Like

give me a blue pen of any color, all of you stand in a straight circle,fall in the dustbin,both of you stand together separately, i will hang myself,
November 13 at 8:56am · Like

best questions...
November 13 at 8:57am · Like

Good job people. I agree with almost all of answers. But additionally, can we just check what revolving means?
November 13 at 9:13am via mobile · Like · 1

Figure 6. A grammar activity in the group

Figure 6 is a picture of sentences with grammatical mistakes, and the students were instructed to provide the correct forms. Six students participated in the activity; hence demonstrated their awareness of the mistakes, and eagerness to improve skills. Other members may have acted as silent readers and learned from others' input and interactions. Other grammar quizzes were presented in the multiple-choice format and saw higher students' participation rates, which justifies the main reason they joined the group; to learn the English language.

YHG: The main reason is to increase my fluency in English. My dad asks me to speak in English. We speak Tamil at home, and most of my friends are Malays and Indians, so I use our common language. We rarely use English. I read a lot of English newspaper before coming to university, but now I'm too busy.

The students' interest in grammar quizzes may reflect their familiarity with the exam-oriented culture that centres on practice-and-drills and classroom learning. The quizzes are a solid learning activity, one that they could easily measure. Therefore, they expected the group to provide more grammar exercises, vocabulary drills, and reading comprehension so that they could see their progress.

AA: It's a bit weird having your teachers elsewhere. I need someone to directly teach me, so the traditional way of learning is still the best.

DZ: Malaysians are very particular about grammar. If we write with the wrong grammar online, we will be ridiculed and criticised.

Other reasons for their involvement were to make new friends, and receive course-related information and English language knowledge, rather than share them. Added to this, the students were hoping that previous exam questions were shared in the group, and that their participations were rewarded in the forms of university merit points.

YHT: You [the moderator] could also share previous exam papers so that we can learn and be prepared.

HAR: We need teachers so that everybody will participate in the tasks, so maybe we could reward MyCSD points to those who participated. We all want to collect MyCSD points.



Figure 7. A university-related discussion in the group

The students were asked to give opinions about the university (Figure 7). Eleven of them responded with their views and ideas. Essentially, two respondents (D and E) negotiated meaning to comprehend each other's points. This is a small example that shows the way that Facebook encourages interactions and meaning-making that leads to collaborative learning. However, the process needs to be solidified by an authority, to ensure a more effective learning experience, e.g. clarifying the meaning of the phrase "I couldn't agree more" when there were clearly confusions among the students.

4.2.3.1 Selective interests in learning

Students' interests are central to learning as its outcomes are more worthy and valuable, while pure instructional-based learning that neglects materials and students' interests is without value and not worth pursuing (Schiefele, 1991). Therefore, it may be the case that despite the abundance of readily available online English learning materials, students only engage with content that match their needs and interests. When this happens, they may become more involved in the interaction process, and experience a heightened sense of engagement with the content. The recurrence of this process may increase familiarity and comfort, which could transform them into autonomous learners. The members may have exerted selected interests for various reasons; to show interest and awareness in English learning, project social media

identity, express disinterest in complex issues, and illustrate preference and motivation in the content. Therefore, it may be necessary that educators and students engage in dialogue sessions (Selwyn, 2007) to negotiate topic preferences, activities, as well as the levels and types of languages that should be allowed on the online platform, in ensuring a more enriching interaction experience, increasing participation rate, and maximising learning potential.

4.2.4 Structure of the online group (optional and ungraded)

Students' preferences for teachers-led activities, and teachers' presence in the group may indicate interest in formal learning. Although they wanted instructions from teachers, they requested for the group to be made optional and ungraded in the future. In other words, they enjoyed the informal, organic, and dynamic format of the group, but with more English language content and learning materials.

NHFZ: If there are tasks, we feel like we have aims and guidance, but make it optional and ungraded.

JE: We cannot force students to participate in online activities, so I prefer this format.

Based on the participatory culture, several interviewees took their time before participating more visibly in the group. For example, MRL, who at first participated minimally in short comments such as "ok", gained more momentum and started to share more academic-related posts, including a YouTube video link of the poem they learned in the classrooms (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LESrczAQD_k). The students were thus capable in connecting classroom learning and online learning, that may bridge the gap between school practices and online activities.

Kabilan et al.'s (2010) identify that vocabulary and sentence structures were learned incidentally from Facebook. In relation to this, two passive interviewees reported to have improved their online communicative skills from reading their peers' interactions in the group. Similarly, a foreign language class of French and English manages to increase the students' participation through digital home assignments on Facebook (Buga et al., 2014). Students who previously had never written their homework, became more responsive to a variety of communicative assignments posted on Facebook. Communication that occurs from informal activities is meaningful and authentic, and is a means of knowledge exchange and transformation (García-Peñalvo, Colomo-Palacios, & Lytras, 2012; Richards, 2015). It is therefore central to the development of students' critical thinking skills. Students' usage of the web-based applications has enhanced all of their language skills including reading, listening, speaking, and writing; thus social media is seen as the optimal virtual environment for language acquisition (Faizi, El Afia, & Chiheb, 2014). On the other hand, four active participants, did not improve in their language skills, but felt a boost of self-confidence to use English in more public spaces. Furthermore, almost all of the interviewees concurred that they were not afraid to make grammatical mistakes in their writing on Facebook, as it is a learning process.

MM: I now know how to respond to certain posts or comments, like when somebody says these, I know how to respond to them. From this, I improve on vocabulary and learn new sentences too.

SC: I don't think my language skills have improved, but I am more confident to use English now to talk to people.

TM: My teachers told me that as students we are given the license to make mistakes, so I think it's just a process of learning.

AT: There's no restriction in learning, it is a fluid process, so it's not necessary to feel scare of making mistakes.

Several interviewees suggested that the Facebook learning community is made smaller, to reduce their anxiety in practising English language skills. Their previous experiences of successfully creating and using small Facebook groups to discuss tasks and assignments over a range of content-based subjects at the university, might be adapted for proficiency courses like the English language.

ZM: I'm quite a shy person, so I would never normally post anything on Facebook. The good thing is that everybody uses Facebook nowadays, so it's easy for us to create small groups to discuss our assignments. If there are smaller groups [for the English course], I would join in and give ideas.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Based on the participatory culture framework, this study identifies four characteristics of English language activities on Facebook that the students need and prefer, which are teacher-led activities, teachers' presence, structure of the group, and topics or content of discussions.

The group saw a big number of 600 students' membership in a short span of time, which indicates their awareness of the importance of English language, and eagerness to learn and improve skills. Essentially, they called for technological progressions in learning. Although the participation rate was not great, the abundance of silent readers is a norm in online environments. This does not indicate that the students were not learning; as they consumed the input presented by others. Nevertheless, English is a proficiency subject rather than content-based; hence constant practice is needed for it to develop successfully. Students need to be fluent in written and oral communication to be regarded as proficient English users, thus, it has to be learned in socially-mediated contexts, rather than in isolation such as found in many Asian language classrooms (Hu, 2002).

Social media mediate social settings and learners' community; but Malaysian university students require close teachers' supervision and facilitation at the initial stages of Facebook integration in English language learning. They have yet to become familiar with the new environment of online learning that requires independence in discovery and exploratory learning. Not many were ready to embrace the learning opportunities afforded by social media, and to be challenged with more critical discussions (Allen & Lee, 2011).

However, while the students require teacher-led tasks and guidance, they negotiated that the structure of the group to be made optional and ungraded. This shows that they are aware of their likes and dislikes in online learning; thus, their voices need to be heard. Based on the students' interests in the topics of entertainment and grammar, there are some activities that could be conducted and transferred in both online and offline environments at the initial stages, e.g. rewriting English songs to make them grammatically correct, retelling the ending of a movie, critical discussions of a documentary, analysing the meaning of songs, and vocabulary enhancement activities from TV shows. More challenging, critical, collaborative discussions and projects may be presented, once the students are more comfortable with the online learning environment.

Facebook, as one of the many online tools, is highly recommended for foreign language learning in distant, blended, or face-to-face learning (Faizi et al., 2014). Instructors often choose to replicate formal classroom activities and content into the online environment, which results in controlled students' output, that may not reflect the dynamic and organic environment of social media (Adi Kasuma & Wray, 2015). New media tools flourish when users become both consumers and producers of knowledge, and explore new questions through the availability of synchronous and asynchronous platforms (Halverson et al., 2016). Fundamentally, the integration of SNS in academia is to find new learning strategies rather than replicate classroom practices in online environment. As such, Facebook as a social platform should be celebrated than restricted to specific activities. Students should step out of their comfort zone and engage with more interactive content, but the new activities need to be measurable so that students could see their progress in learning.

6. Recommendations for future research

Future research might want to focus on creating small Facebook groups of about 30 students each for L2 learners, in which the activities are prompted and facilitated by teachers on entertainment topics and grammar learning. Students' interest and participation rate would illustrate the suitability of social media in L2 learning. Specific English skills of reading, vocabulary, writing, listening, critical thinking, and speaking could be centralised, so that students are more focused during the learning activities. Research could also look at the differences in learning rates and achievement between silent readers and active learners in L2 learning.

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