

## THE USE OF FACEBOOK TO IMPROVE MOTIVATION AND ACADEMIC WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

Facebook is a social networking website founded in 2004 which has quickly become one of the leading social networking websites in the world. Although not seen as a traditional form of English education, this paper discusses how Facebook can be used to enhance the motivational level of Japanese students who are more familiar with the traditional grammar translation method. This study of Japanese students shows that by creating a discussion group students had the opportunity for multi-level interaction with the teacher and each other. Students were able to receive instant feedback on their writing from private e-mails and the teacher could address common writing issues to the group. Students tend to use a greater level of grammatical complexity and variety when using the discussion group. Using Facebook as a homework activity increased the amount of homework submitted, reduced the level of mistakes and increased the level of effort of the students. Students became more motivated in terms of in-class discussion and offered opinions in ways that were atypical for this level of learner.

### INTRODUCTION

Facebook is a social networking site accessible throughout the world. To many it is seen as a form of procrastination. However, it can also be used as a language-learning tool in and outside of the ESL classroom. By setting up a discussion group teachers are able to create a high level of motivation and allow the opportunity to engage in multi-level interaction. Students can use a greater level of complexity in their written compositions, benefit from instant feedback, reduce mistakes and express opinions they would usually not be able to do orally.

### SOCIAL NETWORKS AND WRITING SKILLS

Social networking is where people place information about themselves on a personalized webpage to keep in contact with friends, family and meet new people. Facebook is one such social networking site started in February 2004 (Wikipedia, 2008).

Recent studies have shown over 40 per cent of children have some of their own material on the Internet and 30 per cent have a page on a social networking site (Murray, 2008). This change from niche to mass adoption brings with it concerns of a lack privacy of information possibly leading to identity theft, bullying, stalking even blackmailing (Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

Research suggests computer-mediated communication (CMC) “creates a unique environment that has removed many barriers for students to participate, because the students can access their online classrooms anytime, anywhere” (Wu & Starr, 2003, p. 687). CMC benefits are only achieved by making participation “student dominated and fun” (Wu & Starr, 2003, p. 688).

Larkin-Hein found that “the use of online discussion groups offers a relatively new avenue through which the learner can take an active role in the learning process” (Larkin-Hein, 2001, pp. F2G-6), while Thomas (Thomas, 2002) suggested online discussions promoted high levels of cognitive engagement and critical thinking. By writing in a journal students can “learn correct grammatical forms and structures by reading teacher responses and imitating them” (Yoshihara, 2008, p. 4). The electronic literacy approach has also been found to allow students to contribute to their learning at their own pace and not get interrupted by learners who have greater competence (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000).

### **PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD**

Nineteen first grade university students in total were asked if they wanted to participate in this research on a voluntary base. Students would not receive extra credit for participating but could improve their writing skills. An invitation was sent to the students to join Facebook and the class discussion group.

Students came from the highest two classes of the first grade and were in their second semester of three studying English. Of the nine students who joined the group three were Japanese, five Chinese and one Sri Lankan.

A question was provided for discussion every week for five weeks and individual feedback was given with the goal of improving their writing skills. When grammatical problems common to all students

occurred general feedback to all group members was posted on the group wall.

After the five weeks were completed an informal interview with students was conducted to find out their opinions on the online discussion group.

### **RESULTS**

Four elements were measured, spelling mistakes, grammar mistakes, words written and motivation. Week one had the highest participation rate in terms of words written, 759. In this week there were 87 grammar mistakes with 20 made by two students.

Week two saw 430 words written by six students. There were 30 Grammar mistakes were 30 and four spelling mistakes.

In week three there were 461 words written by six students including 33 grammar mistakes and seven spelling mistakes.

Week four saw 478 words written by five students. Students made 22 grammar mistakes and 8 spelling mistakes.

Week five had the lowest level of participation. There were 489 words written 11 grammar mistakes and no spelling mistakes.

### **DISCUSSION**

During the first week of the discussion group 87 grammar mistakes were recorded. This was due to the use of informal English inappropriate in a formal discussion. Feedback was given in this area and grammar mistakes were reduced by almost two thirds in week two. Most students were able to keep this reduced level of mistakes throughout the five-week period. Students 1 and 6 required in-depth feedback as they accounted for almost half of the grammar errors recorded in week one, twenty each. After in-depth feedback students 1 and 6 reduced their grammar mistakes to ten and three.

Spelling mistakes were also used as a measure of writing improvement. Facebook does not include a spell checker, thus students had to use a dictionary when unsure of spelling a physical task that would benefit kinesthetic learners (Turville, 2008). Student 1 was responsible for the majority of the spelling mistakes recorded and even though it was suggested the student use a dictionary it was obvious this is an area that needs more attention than the limits of the Facebook discussion group can provide. In week 5 there were no spelling mistakes however, it must be noted student 1 did not participate this week.

Posting common mistakes on the discussion board was effective in reducing mistakes. For example, the incorrect use of quantifiers such as 'much, many, a lot of and plenty' in the first two weeks was solved by posting general advice on the discussion board. This contributed to a reduction in grammar mistakes in subsequent weeks. Feedback from students indicated they used this advice as a grammar guide when writing further posts.

During the informal interviews students stated they enjoyed the instant nature of the feedback. Students could post a response to the question and receive feedback promptly. Students stated that they enjoyed this aspect of the group, as with written homework they first have to wait until the next class to submit their response and then wait until the next class session to receive feedback, a process that could take two weeks.

Students were encouraged to get involved in their feedback by providing other students with questions about their own work. For example, asking them to find a grammar mistake or spelling mistake in a certain line or asking them to rewrite their response correcting the mistakes previously made. Students became motivated to learn from their mistakes rather than just observing them.

An unexpected spinoff occurred in the making of the discussion group. Students began their own group e-mail to each other. It was a chance for students to use English to communicate with each other opening a new line of communication.

Students seemed motivated in the group and talked about the questions in class with teachers and tried to gain the opinions of other teachers outside of class. Some of the questions posted on the discussion page were then re-suggested by students in a separate oral communication class as debating topics.

### **ISSUES**

Students did not want to put their response on the page first. They felt embarrassed to do so in case they did not fully understand the question and they were worried their response would be a polar opposite to that of their peers. This was solved by posting a model answer to the question up first for students to look at and follow.

Students were concerned about the privacy of their information and posts. The group was made secret so that nobody except group members had access to the page.

The feedback given whilst being positive was taken in a negative way by some of the students. Some students replied to the feedback by saying they were sorry for making mistakes. Students asked the teacher to check their work first before posting it on the discussion page.

Although the Facebook group was set up as a discussion group with the desire of creating multi-level interaction, most students were reluctant to comment on other students work.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The first limitation is the low participation rate. This was expected as initial enthusiasm changed to a

reality that they would need to do more work if they did indeed participate.

A second limitation is the timeframe of five weeks. To get a more accurate results and to be more beneficial to the students learning, the group would need to be active for an indefinite period.

## CONCLUSION

By creating a discussion group in Facebook and providing students with weekly questions to answer a high level of motivation and grammatical complexity above what is normally observed can be achieved. This five-week study showed some very positive improvements in grammar and spelling as well grammatical complexity. Students became involved in their own learning and began to use English for informal communication.

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**APPENDIX I**

WK	Spelling Mistakes					Grammar Mistakes					Words				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
S1	5	2	4	6	0	20	10	10	6	0	87	69	86	73	0
S2	1	0	2	0	0	11	3	12	0	3	55	71	84	146	168
S3	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	73	0	0	0	0
S4	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	67	0	0	0	0
S5	1	0	0	1	0	10	3	4	4	125	125	67	73	83	140
S6	1	0	1	1	0	20	3	0	7	4	228	71	80	76	181
S7	2	0	0	0	0	8	8	3	6	0	124	70	71	100	0
S8	0	2	0	0	0	0	5	4	0	0	0	82	67	0	0
S9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	10	4	7	8	0	87	30	33	22	11	759	430	461	478	489