

Facebook as a virtual classroom for English language Skill acquisition

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ABSTRACT

The exponential growth of information and communication technologies have drastically changed every walk of human life worldwide. Social media have profoundly changed our lives, especially how we interact and communicate with others. Today, online social networks rule the lives of millions of users including students of all ages. These networks provide online platform that encourage the users to build virtual lives, make social relationships with others who share similar activities, interests, backgrounds. From elementary school to university level, social media is empowering students to share information in new ways and develop a new sense of social media community for educational purposes. This study explores the use of social networking sites (Facebook) as virtual classroom to facilitate the teaching of English as a foreign language to students from non-English backgrounds (especially Japanese students). This study was conducted at University of Toyama and 24 students participated in virtual classroom course. The results were gathered through the students' online activities and participation in the virtual classroom course. The obtained result demonstrated that using Facebook as virtual classroom course can assist students to learn and practice English language more effectively.

Keywords: Facebook, Education, Language learning platform, Social Networks, and virtual class room

I INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, Information and Communication Technology and social media have become ubiquitous and is completely reshaping almost every aspect of life in an unprecedented way, and education is no exception. Social networking technologies have a profound impact on societies and are drastically changing the way we

interact with each other, our means of communication with family and friends, the way we work, learn and even engage in social activities [1-3]. Online social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Myspace, YouTube, Google+) are used not only to make friends, send and receive instant messages to specific network profiles, but also provide a participatory virtual platform for users in virtual communities and teams to build and expand social and professional networks for communicating, interacting, collaborating and strengthening cooperation with different stakeholders across geographical boundaries using multiple modalities such as pictures, video, simple writing, voice or video chat and link sharing etc. In addition, these social networking platforms have become a part and parcel of most students' lives [4-6].

Over the past few years it has been observed that usage of internet and electronic gadgets (computers and smartphones) has increased very rapidly on school, college and university campuses, and social media growth trends indicate that more and more students are catching on and using social media websites. In universities and other higher education institutions' cafeteria, dormitory or local hangout place most of the students can be noticed with their head down, thumbs swiping up and down quickly or fingers tapping their smartphone touchscreen [7-9].

In parallel, needs and expectations of twenty-first century learners are changing rapidly and enormously. It is therefore very important to integrate or adopt student-centered innovative teaching and learning technologies that facilitate active learning environments in order to enhance student engagement, attention, focus and understanding through collaborative or blended learning platforms. Many educators or educational researchers and practitioners believe that social media offers numerous flexible and dynamic learner-centric opportunities that are often more alluring than traditional learning environments [10-11]. Additionally, many universities and colleges around the world have created various group profiles which are visible to all users in social networking sites to keep up with students' requirements, interests and demands. In short, the integration of student-centric technologies in education is among the top priorities of most of the educational institutions throughout the globe. Over the past few years, many empirical research articles have been published on the possible application of online social networking platforms for teaching and learning purposes [12-15]. Among social networking sites, Facebook has become one of the largest and most popular social networking platforms in existence frequently used by students of all ages for learning and collaboration activities in an informal mode [16-18]. Therefore, usage of Facebook-based virtual classroom may promote students' active and effective learning by engaging them both for offline and online.

In this study, we used Facebook to create a virtual class room for teaching English language to Japanese students at University of Toyama. The main reason to choose Facebook social networking site is the great popularity of this social network among the participants and amount of time they spend on it. The objective of this study was to address the following questions

1. Can Facebook-based virtual classroom be used as tool in foreign language teaching and learning purposes?

2. Can Facebook based virtual classroom provide a friendly environment and enhance student's motivation and confidence level to communicate with their peers in using English language?
2. Can Facebook based virtual classroom provide a platform where student feel more comfortable to discuss and give their opinion using English?

2. Using Facebook as an Educational Space

Facebook is the largest and most popular online social networking site. At the beginning, this social networking site was exclusively designed for Harvard university students but the popularity of Facebook enhanced rapidly, and in 2006, it was subsequently opened up to everyone. Now a days, it has become one of the most popular social network sites worldwide. In brief, Facebook users can use this site to create virtual networks for building relationship, form groups for interacting or keeping in touch with people they already know offline, and expanding interpersonal relationships and social connections online, uploading Photos & Profile Pictures, expressing personal opinions and views in writing or through live streaming [19-21]. Because of these features of Facebook, there has been an increasing interest within student community as well as educators in using Facebook social networking sites as an effective tool for achieving the pedagogical aims of learning within teaching development initiatives[22-23].

Therefore, we decided to create Social Networking technology based virtual classroom to teach English as a second language to students from non-English speaking countries (especially Japanese students). In our preliminary work, we carried out an empirical research at University of Toyama to understand whether Japanese student accept SNS (Facebook) as learning tool or not. To further extend our research, we decided to create a virtual classroom to get more information and to validate empirical data.

We decide to use Facebook based virtual classroom because this sites have several interesting features which allow the educator/lecturer to create a page or group and to control the admission or rejection or blocking of students. Facebook also allow the students to like the given topic, comment on the particular course material, message their queries to teacher and can communicate with their teacher via audio/video calls.

Although, Facebook provides various interesting features such as liking, sharing, messaging, posting, commenting, following, blocking, and audio/video calls but without creating a virtual class room it's difficult for a teacher to handle the students or to teach them properly. In a virtual class room a teacher can design a proper course and teach without the interference of the general Facebook users.

3. Create the virtual classroom

In order to incorporate strategically Facebook to educational purpose, we created a closed virtual classroom group and provided URL link to students who were interested in learning and improving their English communication. We realized that this is the best way to attract the students because we can expose the virtual classroom to the students instead to bring students to virtual classroom. Students showed their interest and we received their request to join the group subsequently their request was accepted and they successfully added to

the virtual classroom group (Fig.1).

Methods

Participants and other research instruments

The research instruments were the participants, social networking site or Facebook virtual classroom, demographic data, the pre-test and post-test of student's English skills, and the students view towards virtual classroom as an online English language learning/practicing platform. A survey was carried out for the evaluation of student's experience of using Social networking site (Facebook) as a virtual classroom.

1, Participants

This research was carried out at University Toyama, Japan. The participants in this study were 24 undergraduate and post graduate students enrolled in different courses. 28% of them were females while 72% were males. Their ages ranged between 18 and 28. The highest numbers of the participants were 19-26 years old. We made an open announcement that interested candidates can join or can recommend their friends having non-English speaking backgrounds to join our virtual classroom course. As a result, 24 students showed their interest, 20 students already had Facebook accounts but 4 of them didn't. The participants were advised to sign-in for a Facebook account and send us online request. Finally, these students were added to a Facebook group called *SNS Classroom-English for daily life*. The main aim was to evaluate whether students consider social networking site Facebook as effective online language-learning platform and whether this social learning approach provide students with the opportunity to voluntarily learn English as a second language and gain experiences that help them to better communicate with foreigners using English. **Table 1** shows the socio demographic characters of the participants.

2. Facebook as virtual classroom

We selected Facebook for this study because it provides a variety of tools, including the options of uploading and sharing of snapshots, images, videos, documents like word, excel, power point, PDF, etc. which can be useful for teaching/learning purposes. As an administrator, we can easily create own pages and virtual groups. In order to control the privacy of the group, we can keep the open(allow anyone to join,), or closed (require an invitation from the group administrator), manage the group members and allow or limit messaging between members within the group. The group member can use the page to post, react and comment in respective virtual group. Facebook virtual class room group can be good for educational community as a place to teach, learn, and network. In this study, students were allowed to use English or English and Japanese mix for communication.

3. Pre-test/post-test design

in order to measure students' improvement in English language communication standard over the virtual classroom course period, the researcher adopted pre-test and post-test method. We wanted to test the effectiveness of a virtual classroom on students' attitudes towards English language skill acquisition. Therefore, we conducted analysis using vocabulary and sentence structures and patterns, common expressions, phrases and idioms that are much used in everyday life to see if the participants' attitudes significantly change from before joining the virtual classroom (the pre-test) to after attending the virtual classroom course (the post-test)..

4. Results and Discussion

The exponential growth of Internet access and Intensive application of information communication technologies in educational purposes can be regarded as one of the greatest revolutions that occurred in the global higher education during the past few years [6,24-25]. The introduction of Smartphones to the average consumer and the beginning social media websites (Facebook) with user-friendly features has brought tremendous transformations in the information and communication flow patterns as well as interaction individuals, groups or institutions. Now more than ever, people are channeling most of the latest updates through social media across the globe. Over the past few years, the popularity of social media has significantly increased among students of all ages. Social networking sites networks provide online platform that encourage students to build virtual lives, helping them to connect with new people and make social relationships with others who share similar activities, and interests or stay in touch with school friends after starting new college/university [26-27]. Facebook dominates social media and is currently the most popular social networking website among students across the world. The increasing use of Facebook by student has resulted in the increasing demand for incorporating and implementing social media technology into teaching and learning activities that can be adapted and used for modernizing the management of the entire education system as per students' learning styles (characteristic ways of taking in and processing information) [28-32]. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to identify underlying types of social media usage in academic activities (e.g., English language learning). Although online social networking sites have experienced a rapid increase in membership in recent years, there is relatively little theory-driven empirical research available to address these new complex communication and interaction phenomena.

In this paper, a Facebook based virtual classroom study is carried out to examine. Almost 86% of the participants voluntarily joined our virtual classroom learn English as a second language had an active participation in conversation. The learning satisfaction survey questionnaire was used to gather students' feedback towards using Facebook virtual class room course 'SNS Classroom-English for daily life'. The survey consisted of 9 questions and participants had to choose as specific **choices** based on agreeing or disagreeing phenomenon. The questionnaire was about the use of the Facebook Group as virtual class room in general and their attitudes towards effects of using Facebook Group in the course English for Everyday Communication. Results indicated (**Table 2 and 3**) that participants improved their English skills which

suggested that virtual classroom can be largely used as an effective tool for bidirectional communication and distribution of educational materials among students through the use of tools such as messages, chats, forums, newsfeed. This study could be helpful for us to carry out further research to study Facebook connections in structural models, simulations and investigating Facebook educational usage.

5. Conclusion

The main objective of creating a virtual teaching and learning environment was to overcome shortcomings in traditional classroom approaches. Using virtual teaching and learning system, the role of the educator/lecturer can be simply changed from knowledge provider to a friend, guide, and facilitator of learning. As mentioned above, in virtual class room the participants were also able to talk with each other, and to discuss and share educational resources within the network. Therefore, the main focus of this study the was to evaluate whether students from non-English speaking countries consider Social networking site Facebook based virtual classroom as an effective online language-learning platform and whether this social learning approach could be helpful when efficiently used to support traditional classroom environment for educators and learners in educational institutions. This study may be useful for English language educators, or instructors to use Facebook for creating more meaningful languagelearning environment outside the classroom and to develop efficient strategies for the incorporation Facebook into and across higher education pedagogy to changing the educational landscape, and facilitate the learning innovations.

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Figure captions:

Fig.1 Snapshot of SNS virtual classroom group for language learning.



Table 1 shows the socio demographic characters of the participants

Demographic value	Categories	Percentage
Gender	Male	72
	female	28
Time length using FB	0-1 years	36
	1-2 years	16
	3-4 years	26
	More than 5 years	20
Language used in FB	Native language only	48
	english only	28
	Mix of english and native	14
Frequency of logging into FB	1-3 times daily	7
	4-6 times daily	12
	7-9 times daily	6
	Whenever get time daily	16
	not daily	54

Table 2 shows the pre-test/post-test results.

Test	Participants	Mean	Stdev	Std error
Pre test	24	55.41	9.57	1.99
Post test	24	66.33	8.6	1.75

Table 3 shows the students' perception and attitude towards virtual classroom for learning English.

Students Perception of FB as an online English language learning environment	Percentage(%)
practice reading and writing in English	22
Enhance students English communication skills	23
Enhance students confidence to read and write English material	17
Enhance students confidence to communicate using English	29
Make learning English more interesting	19
Learn new words in English	16
Inculcate a more positive attitude towards learning English as second language	12
Make learning English easier	14
Tolerate language mistakes	26