



Learning English Informally Through Educational Facebook Pages

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This study aimed to scrutinise how learners learn English language informally on Facebook. Employing an ethnographic qualitative approach, data for the study were generated from participant observations for a period of six-months involving 275 participants. Three verified Educational Facebook Pages (EFPs) with the highest number of users were chosen to be observed. Data from participant observation were analysed using a thematic approach. The findings of this study revealed that the EFP users focused on grammar and new vocabulary when learning English informally on the site. They exchanged information, and sought for advice and clarification as part of their learning process. This paper argued that Social Networking Sites (SNS), especially Facebook, are a potential online affinity space to learn English language informally. At the same time, the findings of the research are hoped to be useful to educational technology system developers and curriculum makers, especially for the design of web-based learning processes which would be more reachable to the learners of twenty-first century.

Key words: *Social networking site, social media, Facebook Page, informal learning, English.*

Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid advancement of Social Networking Site (SNS) technology in the world has become reachable to many people. They share information, photos and videos with other people with a fingertip. A large number of socially collaborative Web-based platforms deliver powerful technical support for informal learning. Learners can use blogs to manage and share information as well as communicate with one another. Jones and Dexter (2017) mentioned that 80 percent of the knowledge we gain comes from informal learning and only 20 percent from formal learning. Informal learning happens in daily activities when a learner spontaneously chooses what knowledge and skills he or she desires to acquire. The advancement of SNS creates an informal learning situation which is more time efficient and learners can share information with each other, and through their collective efforts, they make that information increasingly useful and relevant to them (Alkathlan & Al-Daraiseh, 2017; Kasuma, 2017; Rashid, 2018). Informal learning can lead to a deeper understanding and a different quality of a learning outcome; it enables the learners to expand their thinking beyond a receptive behaviour within formal schooling and the traditional reproduction of existing knowledge. Thus, the significance of informal learning through SNS cannot be ignored.

Facebook is often associated with negative impacts on learners and the positive side of Facebook, especially for informal learning is over-looked, despite its affordance for the learning. How learners learn English language informally in a natural setting on Facebook is rarely investigated due to the nature of informal learning in that it is considered difficult to observe. However, the emergence of Social Networking Site (SNS) technology provides an opportunity for researchers to observe the informal learning phenomenon as users' activities on the site are archived. This study aims to analyse how learners learn English language informally on Facebook. This research therefore intends to contribute to the research gap by analysing how learners informally learn English language through Educational Facebook Pages (EFP) as a natural setting.

Literature Review

Sociocultural theory states that learning occurs through interaction with other people in a collaborative way (Bandura, 2001). In other words, learning occurs by engaging with other people through collaboration and learners can choose what they wish to learn to resolve problems or to get more information about their particular topics (Ormrod, 1999). A significant view of sociocultural theory is learning occurs through collaboration with others in a society (Bandura, 2001). Psychological state plays an important role in learning. According to Bandura (2001), extrinsic aspects can affect individual's behaviour and learning style. Individual behaviour is basically constructed upon contemplation because he or she can

connect indirectly by approaching stimulation and their individual responses via several mediating links (Vygotsky, 1981). Furthermore, Vygotsky also acknowledges that social factors play a significant role in comprehending the role of language and communication in intellectual development. As pointed out by Liu and Matthews (2005):

Language should not be seen as merely the accidental assembly of purely physical sounds and forms because any language system is at the same time the result of the whole developmental history of the language. To study a language is to study a meaning system as a consequence of historical development. Due to the historical aspect of semantics, the interaction between individuals and society is now placed not within constant parameters of stability but on a continuum of time and historical development. (p. 394)

Collaboration is the most crucial feature of social learning theory. People learn by engaging with capable others in a collaborative context. There are many studies which prove that cooperative learning is more efficient than self-learning in various ways, for instance promoting positive social outcomes, enhancing achievement and motivation (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000; Snowman, McCown & Biehler, 2009).

In addition, Vygotsky gives emphasis to the central role of the social environment in learning and considers “learning as a largely situation-specific and context-bound activity” (Liu and Matthews, 2005, p. 388). In this way, social constructivists argue that shared meaning occurs through social negotiation and that essential aspects of mental functioning in the individual are developed in social life (Dale, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Consequently, various available digital technologies have been used as a means for sharing the perspectives and social communication among groups, thus the need to focus on social constructivism has grown substantially in education. Vygotsky’s work (1896-1934) has led to the development of social constructivism through his theory of social cognitive development. From this paradigm, learning not only occurs through the individual’s cognitive processes but also through social, historical and cultural contexts (through which the knowledge was constructed). In other words, cognition (mental, language, and social development) is mediated through social interaction among individual’s collaboration and out of learners’ unique experiences. This is because human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process where children are conditioned into the intellectual life of those around them (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88).

Methodology

This study employed an ethnographic approach to analyse participants’ activities in a natural setting. This was their involvement in an informal learning on EFPs as part of their everyday routines. The qualitative method of participant observation offered the opportunity to

understand how an emerging phenomenon, like informal learning through EFPs, takes place within the everyday activities of the learners. The participants for this research were learners who follow the EFPs. We focused on three verified EFPs. By ‘verified’, we mean that some Pages and Profiles have been verified by Facebook to let people know that they are authentic EFPs. The verification checkmark shows authenticity and credibility of the Pages or Profiles and usually verified Pages or Profiles have huge followers. The three EFPs are: i) Learn English; ii) BBC Learning English; and iii) Wall Street English. Participants of this research were purposively chosen. There were 275 learners who took part in this study by allowing the researcher to observe their comments on the EFPs. There were 190 male and 85 female participants with the age range from 20 to 30 years old. They were from different countries and had different backgrounds and interests. They were either in their first or second year at university and from various disciplines and faculties such as Faculty of Business, Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Law and Faculty of Art and Music.

This is in contrast to prior research (e.g. Abdullah, 2011; Rashid & Rahman, 2014; Mohamad, 2017) which examined interactions in Facebook groups created specifically for the purpose of their research, rather than studying the interactions that take place (natural setting) on the Facebook Pages as part of participants’ daily routines. When conducting this research, we tried our best to avoid any circumstances that were harmful and detrimental to the participants. We provided a consent form as a formal agreement with the participants to express an understanding of the research.

Analysis and Discussion

Observational data shows that English grammar and vocabulary are focused on by the curators and learners of EFPs. The sites provide opportunities for learners to acquire English grammar such as subject-verb agreement. Based on inductive thematic analysis, it is discernible that the learners’ focus mainly on Subject-Verb Agreement and Syntax. Perhaps, this is because Subject-Verb Agreement and Syntax are the most significant elements of English grammar and the basic things that English language learners need to know in order to improve their English language proficiency or to construct sentences properly.

Focus on Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-Verb Agreement denotes that there must be an agreement between subjects and verbs in number (singular or plural). Therefore, if a “subject is singular, its verb must be singular; if a subject is plural, its verb must be plural. A third person singular subject should have a singular verb (with -s), and a plural subject must have a plural verb (with no -s)” (Hinton & Hale, 2001, p. 252). Perhaps, this is very crucial to English language learners because knowledge of Subject-Verb Agreement helps learners to construct sentences correctly and to

gain better communication skills; they can communicate without worrying about their grammatical mistakes. Out of 9,700 posts, there were 1,400 posts on ‘Subject-Verb Agreement’ by the curators. In Figure 1 below, curators and learners interacted in relation to ‘Subject-Verb Agreement’.

Figure 1. Learning ‘Subject-Verb Agreement’ on the EFPs

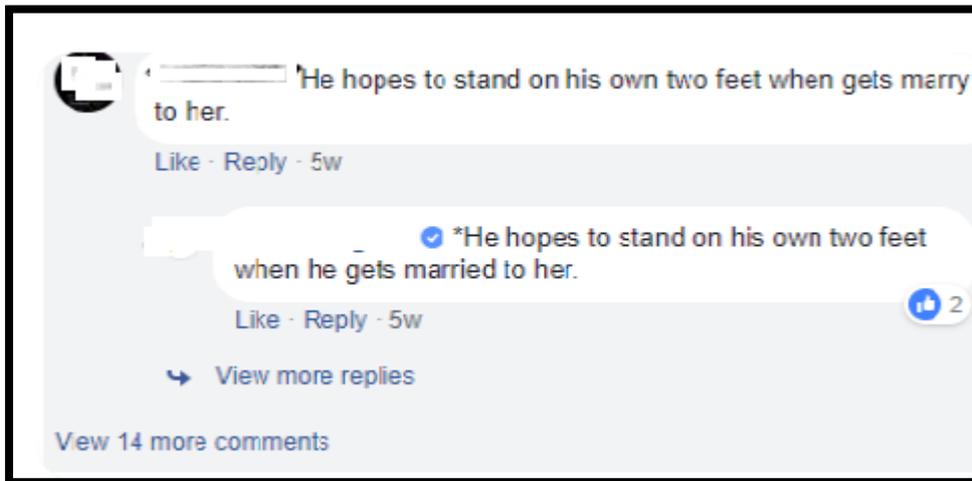


Figure 1 shows that one of the learners left a comment ‘*He hopes to stand on his own two feet when gets marry to her*’ but the sentence is not grammatically correct. Then, the sentence had been corrected by the curator. The curator’s reply (comment) receives two Likes and 14 comments from the other learners. The high number of comments received by the curator’s reply reflects the learners’ perseverance, enthusiasm and willingness for learning Subject-Verb Agreement on the EFPs which could also be seen as an attempt to engage in the informal learning of English language. Consequently, having supportive curators and fellow learners are crucial for individual learners to check what they are doing and how they are thinking. When fellow learners and curators provide support and guide each other’s engagement in the informal learning of English, such scaffolding is there to provide opportunity for the learners to informally acquire content knowledge (e.g. tense, subject-verb agreement) (Salomon & Perkins, 1998). Perhaps, this also encourages learners to learn English language and enhance their willingness to use the language without being afraid of making mistakes and criticisms (Branch, 2012). As the learners did not argue with the curators, and the curator’s comments receives two likes from the other learners, it is reasonable to suggest that the learners agree with the curator’s correction and see the curators as more knowledgeable about grammar. The interaction that occurs between the learners and curators on EFPs may have significant contribution to the enhancement of learners’ knowledge on English grammar. Even though the learners sometimes do not respond, it does not mean that the learner does not learn. This is because previous studies showed that on Facebook, not only learners who leave comments learn, but also those who do not leave



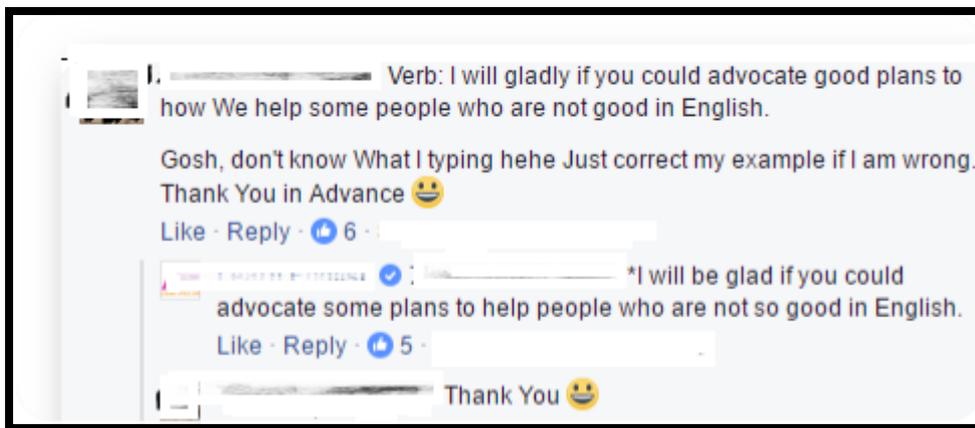
comments known as the *lurkers* (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; McBride, 2009; Karpati, 2009; Adalberon & Saljo, 2017).

Moreover, we argue that learners may benefit through this kind of response and willingness by the curators on EFPs because it offers an opportunity for learners to improve their English grammar by engaging in vicarious learning. As pointed out by Cox, McKendree, Tobin, Lee and Mayes (1999), the concept of vicarious learning highlights “the potential benefit to learners of being able to observe or ‘listen in’ on experts or their peers as they discuss new knowledge” (p.432). It is in this sense that learners informally learn English language through the guidance of capable others (curators), and EFPs may be a good platform to engage in the informal learning of English language. Learners using online platforms such as Facebook to engage in learning beyond the classroom. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is ideal to represent the domain where learners share their knowledge and skills with peers and more capable others (Geyer, 2008; Dale, 2010). Vygotsky (1978) explains the concept of ZPD as the “distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Therefore, such encouragement, willingness and guidance of curators reinforces the educational use of Facebook, supporting learners to acquire knowledge and extend their ZPD, which are basic to the development of new knowledge for informal learning.

Focus on Syntax

Syntax deals with phrases and sentence formation out of words. Syntax refers to the set of principles and rules for structuring the sentences in a given language, specifically word order. Therefore, syntax lies at the very heart and centre of meaning in any language (Radford, 2004; Venuti, 2017; Zulkffli, & Rashid, 2016). Out of 9,700 posts, there were 2,300 posts regarding ‘Syntax’ by the curators. The posts received 16,100 comments from the learners. Figure 2 below shows an example of syntax learning.

Figure 2. Learning English Syntax on EFPs



The learner left a comment where they were not sure about the sentence structure and sought help from whom they perceive as the more knowledgeable other about grammar. After being corrected by the curator, the learner replied 'Thank You' with a smiley emoticon which implies that the learners are pleased and excited for learning new knowledge. This also reflects the learners' joy, perhaps for getting a response from curators. The curator's comments receives five Likes from the other learners which suggests that they agree with curator's correction and believe the curators as more knowledgeable other about grammar. Therefore, this scaffolding is very important for individual learners to obtain English language skills. This is also very crucial for learners because curators provide support and guide each other's engagement; such scaffolding is likely to motivate the learners to engage in informal learning. Facebook provides an interactive online learning environment by inspiring learners to receive support for their learning (Cho, Cheng & Lai, 2009; Emerson & MacKay, 2011; Rashid et al., 2016). Furthermore, it is a valuable learning platform for shy learners who are nervous in class interactions but who are eager to communicate in real-time with others across the world. For example, on Facebook, the learners can prepare comments before sending, making them feel at ease in sharing thoughts without the fear of making mistakes, disapproval or criticism, and thus they may become more confident.

Focus on English Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are useful in all areas of English language such as spoken and written English (Quirk, 2010). Out of 9,700 posts, there were 3,200 posts regarding phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions by the curators. The posts were followed by 28,900 comments which include comments from the learners and curators' replies. Some examples of curators' posts on phrasal verbs are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Learners learning new vocabulary on EFPs



This post attracted 860 comments and the high number of comments received by the curator's post on vocabulary learning suggests that the learners are not only enthusiastic to engage in informal learning but also like the explanation. This post also received 3,000 likes by the learners, which implies that the learners love the content or find this explanation useful. The curator also provides examples in the explanation which may help the learners to fully comprehend how to use phrasal verbs in a sentence. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that Facebook enables self-paced learners to informally learn new English vocabulary independently and with the aids of capable others. Recent studies by Dale (2010), Starkey (2010) and Al Mubarak (2017) show that learners seemed to be motivated as they were using social media such as Facebook, where they can learn language at their own pace. Another example of learning new vocabulary on the EFPs is illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure. 4. Learners learning new vocabulary on EFPs



The curator elaborated on the use of the adjectives *afraid* and *frightened* in a sentence. The curator provided many examples to assist learners gain a deeper understanding about how to use an adjective in a sentence. Moreover, providing an explanation with examples by the curators reflects the curators' high level of interest in sharing knowledge with each other on Facebook. To this end, this scaffolding enables self-paced learners to acquire English language vocabulary with the support of more knowledgeable others.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the advent of social media has become a landmark in the technological evolution and provides an opportunity for learners to gain knowledge beyond the formal learning setting. The Facebook site allowed learners to get rich and quickly replies to their inquiries from other supportive Facebook friends. Through collaboration on the site, the learners attempted to enhance their knowledge where learners of all ages, races and even religions meet for different purposes; to share experiences and information and to keep themselves up to date in a competitive and demanding global world. This study concludes that Facebook provides an opportunity for learners to engage in informal learning of English language. Learners focused on grammar and new vocabulary when learning English informally on the site. They exchanged information, and sought for advice and clarification as part of their learning process.

This study has several contributions. First, the findings of this study have the potential to enhance knowledge regarding informal learning of English language beyond formal contexts. Second, English language educators and learners will benefit from this study by gaining a better understanding of the characteristics inherent in SNS based learning contexts that



support independent learning of English language. This knowledge is hoped to help education policy makers and practitioners to promote learners' learning progress by integrating these features into their instructions and formal activities. At the same time, the findings of the research are hoped to be useful to educational technology system developers and curriculum makers, especially for the design of web-based learning processes which would be more reachable to the learners of twenty-first century.

Third, this research is hoped to be helpful to English learners especially those who are less motivated in both informal and formal settings. For such learners, it is important to comprehend the factors that inspire others and enhance their critical thinking abilities as well as their own learning impetus. The rapid development of new technology, especially social media, provides opportunities for people to seek knowledge informally. The findings of this study will therefore enable further development of theories on how learning is tied to the social and cultural contexts in which popular digital media is employed.

Fourth, employing ethnographic methods, this study focused on SNS - especially Facebook - where learning occurs in a natural context (Markham, 1998; Hine, 2000; Slater, 2002). This ethnographic method is useful as it helps the researcher to get sound and rich data, in this case, through a six-month observation of informal English language learning on Facebook. Therefore, the findings of this study provide holistic insights into informal learning of English language on Facebook. This study could provide comprehensive understanding about the nature of new social technology-based informal learning.

Fifth, this study contributes to the development of sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory was first introduced by Vygotsky (1978) who developed this theory to scrutinise various subjects including language and thought, psychology of art, as well as learning and improvement in offline contexts. After gaining popularity, these sociocultural and social learning theories have been used to scrutinise offline interaction, but this study shows that these theories can be useful to analyse informal language learning in a natural setting in an online context (e.g. Facebook). In this vein, this study has developed and re-contextualized these theories from their application to offline interaction to an online setting. This re-contextualization is effective because it gives new information to the current literature. Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature on informal learning by bringing to the fore the role of Facebook in educational fields, which could help decision makers to adopt Facebook in their pedagogical fields.

Recommendation for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for future research are presented. First, there are many SNSs where informal learning takes place, but this study

mainly focused on Educational Facebook Pages. Therefore, it is recommended that for future research, one should take into consideration how learners informally learn English language through other SNSs. This is because each SNS has its own unique features and affordances, and this might influence the way the users learn on the site. Last but not least, the period of the present study was limited to six months. Therefore, future research may consider a longer period to study how learners learn English language through EFPs, because collecting data for a longer period would be useful in providing more insights into this phenomenon. It may also assist the researcher develop a model to incorporate EFPs in English language learning.

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