IS FACEBOOK BENEFICIAL FOR WRITING PRACTICE? ECUADORIAN POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS SPEAK UP!

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Abstract

The study was set to understand students' feelings when using Facebook as a platform for practicing writing skills. It could be determined that respondents appreciated and enjoyed working on Facebook. The general sense was that of having a low level of stress and anxiety while working online as their affective filter was reduced. Students were able to work at their own pace, anywhere they wanted, and they could communicate with each other, and the teacher if they had questions. The paired T-test resulted in a negative null hypothesis and, as a whole, the class improved by four percent.

Keywords: social media; Facebook; teaching writing

1. Introduction

Carlino (2012) believes that students do not write to the expectations of their teachers just because they do not know how to do it. The author explains that teachers, at any level, ought to think about activities in which learners can acquire new forms of making compelling arguments or write about the topics that are related to the field explored in the said activities. Ghodbane (2010) states learners usually write the way they speak. Therefore, they face problems when they try to express themselves systematically and logically. Cabrera et al. (2014) maintain that in a study conducted in Ecuadorian high schools, they could identify the use of grammar and vocabulary as a result of L1 interference as the areas that cause students most problems.

This is not the first time that the use of Facebook to improve students' writing skills has been researched, Bani-Hani, Al-Sobh, and Abu-Melhim (2014), Yunus and Salehi (2012), as well as Gamble and Wilkins (2014), have performed similar studies. They all recommend further study including the actions of a moderator who takes care of giving better input and including specific feedback on students' work. Following on their recommendations, this study was devised.

The study centers on the students enrolled at a polytechnic university in the city of Guayaquil. Learners were in the last course of the English levels which are required by their schools' curriculum. Students at this stage have already done other five additional courses, and they are at an intermediate level (according to CEFR). They meet their teacher twice a week and each class lasts for two hours. The primary teaching method used in the English classes is the Communicative Approach, although the heads of the department also encourage teachers to use cooperative and collaborative activities as well as flipping the classroom. There were 38 students registered in the course, most of whom (63%) were female. Their ages range from 18 to 25 years of age, and the most representative age group stands in the 20-21 years of age range.

2. Literature review

The Affective Filter theorizes the way certain factors relate to the success of the process of second language acquisition. Krashen (1988) categorizes the affective variables in one of three groups: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Krashen explains that a student with non-optimal attitudes towards the acquisition of another language will have a high Affective Filter. Therefore, it is the job of the teacher to provide learners with an environment in which these variables are dealt with in such a manner that the filter is reduced efficiently. This reduction will, in turn, according to Krashen, allow learners to be in a better place to acquire the language more efficiently. Krashen's theory was one of the bases for the development of this study and lowering the students' affective filter using a tool they are familiar with was one of the aims of the intervention planned.

Once we can get students to feel more confident with their language use, it is a good idea to have a valid form of assessing their final products. One of the most commonly used analytical rating scales for writing pieces is the Composition Profile as devised by Jacobs (1981). This rating scale has five weighted factors. The first one is content, which has the most substantial weight of them all, while the other items are organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. Jacobs suggests that for reliability purposes two or three different raters should score each piece of writing, but working independently.

However, an assessment of students' work is not finished until we give them feedback. Written responses on students' writing, according to Leki et al. (1990), can have a positive or negative effect on how students see writing. It is a fact; she continues, that the response a writer receives might be crucial to them to keep writing or not. General comments given by teachers encouraging the work and suggesting revisions help to improve the content of the

composition. Responding to grammar and content either separately or at the same time, but in such a way that is not overwhelming to students, helps them improve when they are writing their assignments (Fathman and Whalley, 1990). Therefore, during the intervention, the present researcher took great care to the way the students received their feedback, putting special consideration to the positive feedback before pointing out any places for improvement.

It is in the last few years that people have gained access to computers both at their homes as well as in their educational contexts. This boost of availability of technology has aided Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which is any human communication that is supported by computer technology (Levy, 2006). The author goes further and states that we should be talking about CMC-based CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) as we can use e-mail and chat, as well as audio-graphics, video-conferencing, and mobile learning applications. Selwyn (2009) concludes that Facebook as a technology-mediated communication tool may well be an accompaniment to the traditional face-to-face classes.

Forkosh-Baruch and Hershkovitz (2012) see Facebook as having a huge potential for forming online communities of practice favoring informal learning for individuals who consume content as well as collaborate with others. Therefore, Facebook can be regarded as a place where learners can appreciate the benefits of collaborative learning, and it can link students with one another using networks whose nature is social and academic at the same time (Yunus et al., 2011). Shih (2011) investigated how the use of Facebook as a blended learning tool affected the learners' writing abilities when it was integrated with writing class instruction. During the experiment, the author explains, the intervention was successful as all the students in the analysis had significantly higher scores in the post-test they did. White (2009) determined that the creation of a Facebook group and the provision of weekly input gave learners a motivation boost and achievement in grammatical complexity was attained.

3. Methodology and data collection instruments

One of the very first things, before starting a study, researchers need to do is to establish the research paradigm. Additionally, one must define one's ontological and epistemological positioning. With these two principles in mind, the methodology to be used can be set. The constructivist paradigm, according to Guba and Lincoln (2005), complies with a relativist ontology assuming the existence of multiple realities. Creswell (2008) sheds some light on the ontological question and reports that reality is subjective and multiple, as it is the way the participants of the study see it. This is the knowledge that, with the results of the intervention,

was obtained. The epistemological positioning of this study, considering the paradigmatic and ontological stances described previously, is a constructivist one. The tradition chosen for this paper is action research, which, according to O'Brien (2001), is used in real situations as its focus is to solve practical problems. Action research, states Creswell (2012), collects data using quantitative, qualitative or both methods.

The first instrument used was a survey, which was adapted from the ones applied by Nolan (2011) and Karim (2015) in their studies of the academic use of Facebook in the English writing class. With this instrument, the participants' demographic data, their use of Social Networking Sites (SNS), as well as their perception of their level of English, were obtained.

The second tool was a semi-structured interview, composed of only six questions, which were adapted from the questionnaire used by Kamnoetsin (2014), given the demand from the graduate committee of the program of using a sample of 30 participants. This issue resulted in the researcher not being able to obtain as much data as it might have been desired. The questions asked participants to describe their experience of writing on Facebook, whether they wrote a lot or not and why. It also inquired about their opinions on the usefulness of the tutorials and asked them what they learned most during the intervention, whether they felt an improvement in their writing skills and finally what was their perception of the delivered feedback.

Another instrument used to gather data was a writing test, used as pre-and post-test, which is widely used for measuring change resulting from an educational intervention (Dimitrov and Rumrill 2003, Creswell 2008). The topic used came from past papers from the Preliminary English Test furnished by the Cambridge ESOL department website.

The last instrument was the Facebook page where the researcher posted the information the participants needed to read and practice further (https://www.facebook.com/English.class.with.David.Estrella/). Initially, the intention was to make use of a closed Facebook group to protect the participants' privacy, but Kamnoetsin (2014) reported several problems when setting up such a group. Therefore, an opened fan page was used. During the intervention time, the researcher input writing information accompanied by examples and an exercise, on every day the class met for regular instruction, several topics resulting from a needs analysis carried on the pre-tests. It is necessary to make clear that no other input was done during the face-to-face classes.

4. Research procedures, validity and trustworthiness

The researcher contacted the Academic Coordinator of the English Department at the University to be authorized to carry out the research. Once obtained, the participants received a class in which every single detail of the project was explained to them. Out of the forty-two students enrolled in the course, only thirty-five of them decided to take part in the project and signed the informed consent forms which were translated into Spanish just for the sake of complete understanding of the document.

The intervention consisted of four tasks participants had to do over four weeks. It started on July the fourth and ended on August the twenty-fourth. The first task was to answer the online survey posted on Google forms. In the second task students had to participate in the writing tutorials posted on the Facebook page twice a week. On most of the tutorials, the subject was dealt with via images, as this was one of the preferred media chosen by the participants on the survey. The writing tutorial was accompanied by one or two exercises they needed to do. The third task was the pre-writing test used at the beginning of the intervention to determine their writing abilities. Moreover, they had to do a second writing test after the writing tutorials had finished. The last task was to take part in the personal interviews.

This study deals with the issue of descriptive validity by relying on an accurate and solid account of the events that surrounded the study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2008). During the investigation, the different tools, namely a survey and interview questions were piloted, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). It was found during the piloting that both the interviews and the surveys had to be done in Spanish as the language used was, at times, too complicated for learners to respond to them without problems. Cronbach and Meehl (1995) say that it is necessary to provide for the validity of the test to have a statistical procedure run over the results. Therefore, the researcher used a Paired T-test to prove the null hypothesis. This kind of process, as explained by Creswell (2012), allows the researcher to claim for good construct validity. Throughout the completion of the different stages of the research, a peer de-briefer analyzed the various documents created and revised the transcripts of the interviews. While considering all the above mentioned, the reviewer challenged a diversity of issues which would not have been addressed without this intervention.

This research was based on several issues to account for trustworthiness. The first point falls in the category of credibility, as coined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which relies on the confidence the researcher has in the truth of the data and conclusions reached with the research design. The extent of this credibility comes from the analysis performed over the

experiences related by the participants. Also, as above mentioned, several colleagues aided this researcher by looking at the different instruments. During these reunions, issues arose from questions and doubts the de-briefers had about the various sections. This researcher was able to resolve some of the concerns at that same moment, and others were kept for further review and inclusion in the final paper. This researcher believes that with this measure the quality of the investigation was improved. Additionally, reflexivity was tapped into, which Krefting (1999) theorizes as the proximity necessary to establish rapport with the informants so that they answer the researcher's questions more candidly. This relationship was being set every time respondents posted their responses on the Facebook page and the researcher commented, giving feedback on the accuracy of the postings as well as intervening sharing personal information with them. Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Krefting (1999) speak about transferability, saying that the researcher's responsibility is to make sure there exists plenty of information about the research, so the reader and researchers can make an informed decision on whether that data can be transferred to their realities. This researcher kept a great deal of information on everything that was done during all the stages of the investigation to account for this transferability of knowledge.

5. Discussion

The first question asked learners about their feelings when using Facebook to practice their writing skills. More specifically, it inquired whether it was beneficial or not for them. The average grade in the pre-test was eighty-one, while the post-test results averaged on eighty-five points. It is necessary to say that not all results were positive as twenty-six percent of the participants had an adverse change. These pre and post-test results were analyzed using the Paired T-test, as suggested by Creswell (2012). A point of caution when reading these results is that there was not an in-depth inquiry into the reasons for the variations in the grades obtained. This means that it is not one hundred percent certain that the positive results came as the sole consequence of the exposition of the participants to the sessions on Facebook. Therefore, it seems necessary to perform a more in-depth quantitative analysis of the correlation of the input done on Facebook and the errors or speech reported in the participants' writing tasks.

During the interviews, a question appeared whether the tutorials on Facebook were beneficial to them. A clear majority of the informants stated that Facebook allowed them not to worry about space or time as they do when they have to attend classes. "I don't have to worry about when or where I have access to the platform. I can be in my bedroom, or I can be

at the café doing homework. It is great because I can take advantage of my free time," said student 1. Another participant explained she had enjoyed using the Facebook platform for class a lot because she already had it and used Facebook every day and she liked it when they had to go back and read their partners' work and post positive comments. Some of her peers even dared to give her writing advice, she recalls. This assertion agrees with the results presented by Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010).

The second inquiry proposed whether the continued use of Facebook to practice writing skills permits learners to increase their writing performance. There was evidence of the answer to this question by the results of the Paired T-test which, according to McDonald (2014), measures before and after observations of the same subjects, reviewing the null hypothesis. If the results of the test are lower than 0.05, the researcher can confidently say the null hypothesis can be rejected. The two-tailed critical P- value came to 0.0005, meaning we have sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis at a 5% level of significance.

The third question inquired about the types of input participants deemed as most attractive or appealing. In the survey, at the beginning of the term, participants identified images as their first choice of input, followed closely by video sources and in the third place – texts. The round sessions of interviews corroborate this information. The participants confirmed that they enjoyed using the platform and felt they learned and retained the information better every time they saw the tutorials with pictures to illustrate the different concepts or points.

The final research question addressed the emotional issue by asking if learners regard the use of the Facebook platform as motivational for their writing tasks. During the interviews, students responded about their general experience on Facebook, some of them described it as a positive experience. Student 23 commented that "using Facebook is not new or difficult and it makes me feel more comfortable than using the university's platform. Although I was not a very active writer because I didn't have a lot of free time, I liked coming to the platform and see what everybody else was writing, and I used that as help for my writing." "When I saw your comments, very good or great work," says student 3, "it made me feel good about myself because I was doing things correctly."

Using the Facebook platform to practice writing skills proved to be a pleasant experience for students. Moreover, it functioned as a mediation tool between the student and the artifacts in the environment that will permit them to understand the cognitive activities. The fact that they were using a tool they use every day for their personal affairs made it easier for them to accept the work. Seeing their peers' and teacher's comments made them feel

confident about the things they were posting on the platform. Participants felt comfortable when they were writing their ideas on Facebook. As a result, the Affective Filter, as described by Krashen (1988) could be lowered, and their feeling of self-confidence was raised, and their written work performance also experienced a beneficial development.

6. Limitations of the current study and suggestions for further research

There were a few inhibitions when implementing this research project that should be mentioned. The first barrier in the study is the researcher's lack of experience in the research field, as this was the very first time such kinds of studies had been undertaken. Secondly, there was a time constraint considering all the teaching-related activities and the researcher's participation in the academic writing center of the department as well as the translation work done for the university. The interviews with the participants were yet another limitation. The researcher, who was also the teacher, conducted the discussions with the participants. This fact could affect the honesty of the responses and in turn the results of the study. It was thought at one point that the solution for this constraint might be to appoint a colleague from the center to do the interviews but again, time was against the project. A considerable limitation, regarding the interviews, was that the sample had to be a minimum of 30 participants, which meant the number of questions had to be reduced. This imposition resulted in a semi-opened conversation with the participants dealing with only six issues that at times were increased to 8 or 9 inquiries.

A new inquiry can take place but this time with teachers as it would be interesting to look at how they respond to the inclusion of Facebook in their teaching of writing. Knowing whether they would have a positive or negative attitude towards using SNS in their English language classrooms could aim at a potential broader use of the platform in the English class.

Since the present study was done focusing only on the students of one university in the city of Guayaquil, it lacks on population validity. Therefore, it is a good idea to encompass a larger sample, probably utilizing students from three or more higher education institutions in the city of Guayaquil. That way this new research could be proven for a generalization of the results.

Also, another investigation could be carried out with a quantitative tradition in mind, focusing on the input provided and the types of errors that are committed during the intervention stage, by the participants. In this paper, the analyst can look at the correlations that might exist between these two variables and how the treatment of such errors influences

the results of the participants' post-tests.

7. Conclusions

Considering the increasing importance of the role that social media play in the daily lives of college students in the digital era (Selwin, 2009), it becomes necessary to pay attention to the different ways teachers can use Facebook to enhance their traditional classrooms and include a bit of technology in them.

The results of the present research work have answered the central research question positively as participants broadly agreed they felt an improvement in their writing skills, which confirms the results obtained by Ibrahaim (2013) and Kamnoetsin (2014). Participants in the study concurred that one of the benefits they gained from the Facebook platform is that they received much information promptly, and they enriched their knowledge by seeing each other's pieces of writing permitting them to better their writing tasks as well. Hence, the platform served as a useful channel for expediting writing practice and the result of the learning process.

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Appendix 1. Instruments used – Questionnaire for interviews

1. Can you describe your writing experience on the Facebook tutorial platform? (e.g. did you like it, is it difficult to write on Facebook platform?)
2. How did you do on the Facebook tutorial session? Did you write a lot? Why or why not?
3. What do you think about the tutorial sessions provided on Facebook? Did you like them? Why or why not?
4. What do you think you learned most from participating in the tutorial lab in terms of writing skills?
5. In your opinion, do you think writing on Facebook helps you improve your English writing skill, or do you think it impedes (make it worse) your writing skill? Why or why not?
6. What do you think of the feedback?

PS: This questionnaire was translated into Spanish so that students would feel more comfortable and their responses would be more candid.

Appendix 2. Instruments used – Writing test

Preliminary English Test: Writing Part 3 Practice Test

Question 7-8

Write an answer to one of the questions (7 or 8) in this part.

Name: _____ Date:_____

This is part of a letter you receive from an English friend.

For my homework project, I have to write about a special day that people celebrate in your country. Which special day should I write about? What information should I include?

Now write a letter, giving your friend some advice. Write about 100 words.

_____

_____

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http://www.flo-joe.co.uk/preliminaryenglish/writing/pet_writing_practice_test_part_3.htm

Appendix 3. Instruments used - Survey

Survey

Section One: Demographics

1. **What is your gender?**
   - **a.** Male
   - **b.** Female
2. **What is your age range?**
   - a. 18-19
   - b. 20-21
   - c. 22-23
   - d. 24-25
   - e. 26-27
   - f. 28-30
3. **Are you originally from Guayaquil?**
   - a. Yes
   - b. No
4. **If you are not from Guayaquil, which province do you come from?**
   - a. El Oro
   - b. Esmeraldas
   - c. Manabí
   - d. Los Ríos
   - e. Chimborazo
   - f. Pichincha
   - g. Azuay
   - h. Other
5. **Which type of school did you go to?**
   - a. Public
   - b. Private
6. **Where did you first started studying English?**
   - a. In primary school
   - b. In secondary school
   - c. In the university
7. **How did you reach Advanced B?**
   - a. I did all the other subjects
   - b. I did the placement exam
   - c. I did some subjects and the placement exam
8. **Which semester are you in ESPOL at the moment?**
   - a. First
   - b. Second
   - c. Third
   - d. Fourth
   - e. Fifth
   - f. Sixth
   - g. Seventh
   - h. Eighth
   - i. Ninth
   - j. Tenth
9. **How long have you been studying English?**
   - a. 1 semester
   - b. 1 year
   - c. 2 to 4 years
   - d. More than 5 years
10. **Do you like English?**
    - a. Yes
    - b. No

Section Two: Use of Internet

1. **How often do you use Internet?**
   a. Everyday b. Once or twice a week c. Once or twice a month
2. **On average, how many hours per day do you spend on Internet?**
   a. 1-2 hours b. 2-3 hours c. 3-4 hours d. More than 4 hours
3. **What do you most like doing online?**
   a. Chat rooms b. Blogs c. Music d. News
   e. Gaming f. File sharing g. Shopping h. Social networking (Facebook)
4. **How often do you use…?**

	Everyday	More than once a day	Once a week	Once a month	Less than once a month
Chat rooms					
Blogs					
Music					
News					
Gaming					
File sharing					
Shopping					

5. **Where do you use Internet?**
   a. Home b. School c. Cafeteria
   d. Cyber café e. Friend's house f. Others
6. **Do you use social networking sites?**
   a. Yes
   b. No
7. **If your answer to question 6 is yes, how many hours per day do you spend on these sites?**
   a. Less than one hour
   b. One hour
   c. Two hours
   d. More than two hours
8. **If your answer to question 6 is yes, which social networking sites do you use? Check as many as apply.**
   a. Facebook
   b. YouTube
   c. Twitter
   d. LinkedIn
   e. Pinterest
   f. Google+
   g. Tumblr
   h. Instagram
   i. Reddit
   j. Flickr

Section Three: Use of Facebook

Check the box that best indicates your level of agreement with the statement.

1. Do you currently have a Facebook account?
   a. Yes
   b. No
2. How long have you had your Facebook account?
   a. Less than one year
   b. For a year
   c. For two years
   d. For three years
   e. For more than three years
3. What posts do you think are more interesting? Check all that apply.
   a. Images
   b. Texts
   c. Videos

   d. Other people's content
   e. Blog posts
   f. Podcasts

4. Which of the following levels of agreement best describe what you think about the statements below? Strongly disagree= 1; Disagree=2; Medium=3; Agree= 4; Strongly agree= 5
   a. Facebook helps me make more foreign friends
   b. Facebook give me the opportunity to communicate with other people using English.
   c. Facebook gives me the opportunity to exchange information in English regularly.
   d. I receive useful information through Facebook for my everyday life.
   e. With Facebook I get opportunities to write in English.
   f. I can get familiar with the way to write in English when I use Facebook.
   g. When I write in Facebook I try to use grammar correctly.
   h. I realize I need to improve my writing when I use Facebook.
   i. Facebook helps me improve my writing to communicate more effectively.
   j. Facebook makes me understand the benefit of learning English to use it in real life situations.
   k. I feel motivated to learn English when I use Facebook.
   l. Facebook encourages English learning outside the classroom.
   m. Facebook helps me visualize the objective I have to learn English more clearly.