

The Effectiveness of Facebook Group Discussions on Writing Performance: A Study in Matriculation College

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ABSTRACT

Matriculation a pre-tertiary program offered by Ministry of Education for students who have completed their 'Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia's' (SPM) examinations successfully. These excellent students will be required to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) before pursuing their studies in local colleges and universities. MUET comprises all the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, matriculation students are still unable to perform well in MUET examination especially the writing component. Researcher aimed to see whether Facebook group discussions can be used as a medium to improve writing skills of students. The main purpose of this study is to look at the effectiveness of Facebook group discussion in writing performance and college students' perception of using Facebook discussion. This study tested the effect of Facebook discussions by comparing 2 groups of learners (a control group and an experimental group) on writing tasks. The scores of Pre and Post test for both groups will be compared after treatment method of Facebook group discussion on the experimental group. Learners' attitudes towards the usage of Facebook group discussion and aspects of Facebook that help students to express their opinion. Discussions of the findings will include suggestions on whether Facebook discussions can be used to improve writing performance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In globalization era, technology brings lots of effects in education. A social networking service is an online platform or medium used to establish social networks or social relations among individuals who share interests and activities. Most social networking services allow users to share their opinions, interests, activities and events within their individual networks. Therefore, this study will look at the effect of Facebook group discussion on writing performance and benefits of Facebook discussion.

Most of the students are lacking in interaction strategies. In order to play an active role in it students must know when to use appropriate interaction strategies. There are many ways or methods teachers can apply in teaching and learning processes in order to improve students' writing skill. In globalization era, technology brings lots of effects in education. A social networking service is an online platform or medium used to establish social networks or social relations among individuals who share interests and activities. Most social networking services allow users to share their opinions, interests, activities and events within their individual networks. Therefore, this study will look at the effect of Facebook group discussion on writing performance and benefits of Facebook discussion.

This chapter begins with a brief description of issues related to MUET in Malaysia. In addition to that, this chapter will also briefly describe types of interaction strategies in Matriculation syllabus and MUET. This is followed by the statement of problem which is the main concern of this study. The purpose of the study, research questions and hypothesis are then explained. Furthermore details on significance of this study are also explained. Finally, this chapter concludes with limitations of the study.

1.1. Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory indicate that the person and the world need to be connected, so learners are not independent and their learning is not something that goes within themselves only but also in the world he or she inhabit [1]. In other words, students learn not in isolation but interacting with others around them. So teachers should offer more chances to learn collaboratively and interactively. Pi [2] stated that CMC makes it possible to write communicatively and collaboratively so that learner can develop critical thinking and literacy skills through using language in a real context. In addition, Donato and McCormick stated that the development of language learning strategies were within sociocultural theory [3]. They found that learners' participation in the community characterized the ability to develop, reflect upon and refine their own language strategies.

Recently, research has been increasingly inspired by social perspectives on learning. In particular, numerous studies on online learning are inspired by constructivist and social learning theories [4]. Since the 1990s, constructivism has made a strong influence on education, particularly in the field of instructional technology [5]. Uzunboylu, Cavus and Ercag [6] asserted that social constructivist theory assumes that students act and reflect within an environment, and this is then followed by reflecting, abstracting, and increasing experiential knowledge.

On the other hand, Vygotsky focused more on the effects of social interaction, language, and culture on learning. Woo & Reeves [4] also stated that within the principles of the constructivist learning theory, meaningful interactions in a learning environment are designed to enhance meaning, including sharing various perspectives and experiences in communities of practice. Additionally, Birch and Volkov [7] and Wilson & Stacey [8] pointed out that the social constructivist paradigm focuses on learner-centred learning in which learners can share their knowledge, skills, experiences, and perspectives with each other. Students are encouraged to participate in active dialogue with other students and instructors and to collaborate with others in activities in order to construct knowledge and discover principles for themselves Kearsley [9]. Wang [10] also reports that web-based learning has been supported by learning theories that emphasise the creation of an environment where learners can access and share knowledge and resources with one another. In this sense, web-based, technology-enhanced learning seems to be able to stimulate and support the learning process and enhance learning outcomes [11].

Thus, when students were given opportunities to use Facebook group discussion to discuss on topics, learners are exposed to language that is modified to their individual level and multiple steps of scaffolding are constructed throughout the discussion. At this stage, competent learners will assist their group members in the discussion. Finally, after being encouraged, learners would be able to initiate discussion with the help of others.

1.2. The Influence of Facebook Group Discussions in Students' Writing

Language learning has grown beyond the boundaries of the four walls of the classroom; in fact, most language learning occurs outside and informally. Informal learning, through a medium like ICT therefore, is a significant alternative environment for language practice and use and thus, should not be taken lightly. Informal learning experiences are seen as the link or the bridge between social media and academic content. So it offers more opportunities for students to be highly engaged with educational content in formal learning settings. Educators are too rigid and narrow-minded in the idea that learning cannot take place outside of a classroom. For certain, learning shall always require a formal setting in which the dissemination of knowledge can occur.

However, the learning processes that go on outside of the classroom through the use of technology, negotiation of meaning, construction of knowledge, social and inter-personal interactions and formation of relationships - are equally as important. Selwyn validates that computer and other aspects of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) allow children and young people a wide variety of activities and experiences that can support learning, yet many of these transactions do not take place in traditional educational settings [12]. In fact, many of these may not be considered 'educational' according to our conventional understanding of that term.

Most of the Matriculation students in Malaysia fear of writing because of grammar mistakes. Melor (2012) carried out a research on using Facebook groups in teaching ESL writing [13]. He stated Facebook group discussion helped some of the shy students to communicate without fearing or making mistakes in

front of the class. He also said Facebook group discussion forum offer safe environment to communicate their messages while maintaining a conversational format. Learners can also increase their fluency through writing their comment, because group discussion allows learners the option to discuss one topic step-by-step, so that their language and knowledge of the topic improves accordingly.

Other advantage of Facebook group discussion is where it would increase the motivation of language users. Increased motivation would definitely lead to a successful learning environment which contributes to language proficiency. In sending and receiving comment the students will be in the real context.

Warnock [14] stated that the first reason to teach writing online is that the environment can be purely textual. Students are in a rich, guided learning environment in which they express themselves to a varied audience with their written words. The electronic communication tools allow students to write to the teacher and to each other in ways that will open up teaching and learning opportunities for everyone involved. Besides, writing teachers have a unique opportunity because writing-centred online courses allow instructors and students to interact in ways beyond content delivery. They allow students to build a community through electronic means. For students whose options are limited, these electronic communities can build the social and professional connections that constitute some of education's real value [14].

Moreover, Melor [15] pointed out that social interaction technologies have great benefits for lifelong education environments. The social interaction can help enhancing the skills such as the ability to search, to evaluate, to interact meaningfully with tools, and so on. Education activities can usually take place in the classroom which teacher and students will face to face, but now, it can be carried out through the social network technologies including discussion and assessment.

According to KamarulKabilan, Norlida Ahmad and ZainolAbidin [16], using Facebook affects learner motivation and strengthens students' social networking practices. What is more, according to Munoz and Towner [17], Facebook also increases the level of web-based interaction among both teacher-student and student-student. Facebook assists the teachers to connect with their students outside of the classroom and discuss about the assignments, classroom events and useful links.

Kabilan et al. conducted a research investigating if Facebook can be a useful and meaningful learning environment that could support or enhance language learning in English. Their findings show that, in terms of affective factors, students' confidence, motivation and attitudes improved significantly. Students claim that using Facebook has boosted their confidence as well as made them more daring to use the language especially in terms of writing.

1.3. Aimed of Study

Selami [18] stated that social network discussions provide context where teachers talk less and learners talk more. It also makes learning more student-centered. Facebook group discussion makes it possible for students to engage in learning and brainstorming their schemata before they write in class. A statement from Babyboomercaretaker [19] written that Facebook is the most widely used internet application and sender can edit or rephrase sentences many times before actually sending it. This study is therefore aims to find out whether Facebook group discussions can affect students' writing performance, to identify their perception on the approach of Facebook discussions and college students' attitudes toward the use of Facebook discussions.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The respondents of this study comprise of matriculation students from one of the Matriculation College in Peninsular Malaysia. There are fifteen students in experimental group labelled as A3T14 and fifteen students in control group labelled as A3T12. All of them are also active in social networks, especially Facebook. They spent nearly 2 hours daily to socialize online. The method used to collect data in this study is described below.

2.1. Informal Meeting

An informal meeting is held before the Facebook discussion sessions for the experimental group. It is between the researcher and the subjects of the study. The participants are briefed on the concepts behind Facebook discussion and what is expected of them throughout the period. The students are also informed that topics posted would be similar to MUET extended writing question. Criteria of Facebook discussion are also informed. Besides they are given freedom to express ideas, opinions and feelings in their discussion. They are also told that the experiment period would go on for three weeks. Finally, they will be informed to enjoy the discussion as their writing would not be graded or marked.

2.2. Facebook Discussions

The participants' email addresses are required to be added in the Facebook group discussion. Researcher will create a private group in Facebook which titled "*Thinking Out Loud*". Participants are asked to reply the topic that will be posted weekly by the researcher. Students can write their opinion in the discussions. These discussions are not graded. Total of three topics are posted for three weeks.

2.3. Pre test and Post Test

Researcher will select randomly on one extended writing passed year question (Year 2011- 2013) as pre test and post test to both experimental and control group. The writing scores of the pre-test and post-tests will be compared using a *t*-test (paired sample *t*-test and independent sample *t*-test) to determine if there are any significant difference in the number participants in the control and experimental group.

2.4. Survey

Participants in experimental group completed a survey after three weeks of Facebook group discussions, which include eight open-ended items with a 4-level Likert Scale of 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' that related to students perception and opinion about Facebook group discussion. The questionnaire is divided into two sections, (section A) *Aspect which found in Writing Process and* (Section B) *Attitudes towards the use of Facebook Group.*

2.5. Procedure for Data Analysis

The data analyses from the pre and post test scores are conducted using SPSS version 16 and descriptive analyses are used for the survey. The mean scores from the pre and post test by the experimental and control are compared to see any differences between both groups. The outperforming group is identified. The writing scores of the pre-test and post-tests will be compared using a *t*-test (independent sample *t*-test and paired sample *t*-test) to determine if there are any significant difference on writing performance in the number participants in the control and experimental group. Finally, the college students' attitudes are described based on the findings of questionnaire survey from the experimental group.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, it is explained the results of research and at the same time is given the comprehensive discussion. Results can be presented in figures, graphs, tables and others that make the reader understand easily. The discussion can be made in several sub-chapters.

3.1. Do Facebook group discussions affect college students' writing performances?

The results of paired samples *t*-test for both groups are presented in Table 1 with 15 participants in control group (A3T12) and experimental group (A3T14). The *p* value is 0.00 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, null hypothesis two (H_02) is rejected. There is significant effect of Facebook group discussions on college students' writing performances. From Table 1, the result indicates that there are significant differences between the mean score of pre-test and post-test in experimental and conventional method. The mean score from pre and post test in control group is 29.40 (SD = 3.00) and 32.67 (SD = 4.12) with a mean difference 3.27. The difference in pre and post test for control group is significance with ($p = 0.001$).

Table 1. Paired Sample T-test In Control Group and Treatment Group

Method	Mean (SD)		t(df)	p-value
	Before intervention	After intervention		
Control Group (n= 15)	29.40 (3.00)	32.67 (4.12)	-4.42 (14)	0.001
Experimental Group (n= 15)	32.67 (4.12)	39.67 (3.06)	-10.84 (14)	<0.001

On the other hand, the mean score from pre and post test in experimental group is 32.67 (SD = 4.12) and 39.67 (SD = 3.06) with a mean difference 7.00. The difference in pre and post test for experimental group is significance with ($p < 0.001$). Both groups performance improved significantly but the results in the Table 4.1 shows that the experimental group increased higher and performed better than the control group.

Referring to Table 2, independent sample *t*-test (two tailed) was introduced to examine whether there were any significant difference for both groups. Based on the results shown from the table above, it is reported that the pre test mean score is 29.40 for control group and 32.67 for experimental group. The mean score difference is 3.27 and significant difference is $p = 0.019$. Besides that, post test mean score for control

group is 32.67 and experimental group is 39.67 respectively. The mean score difference is 7.0 and significant difference is $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Independent Sample T-test Between Control and Treatment Groups

Test	Mean (SD)		t(df)	p-value
	Control	Experimental		
Pre	29.40 (3.00)	32.67 (4.12)	-2.49 (28)	0.019
Post	32.67 (4.12)	39.67 (3.06)	-5.28 (28)	<0.001

However, from the results, it is shown that the pre test would affect post test performance. The first issue highlighted here is that the pre test score between control and treatment has significant difference and secondly, pre test score correlates moderately with post test score ($r=0.45$, $p=0.013$), as Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation between Pre Test and Post Test

Correlation	r	p-value
	0.45	$p = 0.13$

These issues can be solved by controlling the pre test performance by using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). ANCOVA has been used to test for differences in means among the groups when some of the variation in the responsible variable can be explained by a covariate. Covariance is a measure of how much two variables change together and the strength of the relationship between them.

In the analysis of covariance, the differences of mean score for control and experimental group are significant ($p < 0.001$). In the same analysis, it is reported that the value of adjusted R square was 0.491. This value proves that the Facebook group discussion treatment method had contributed merely 49.1% differences in writing performance in the post test between the control group and experimental group. Meanwhile, another 50.9% of the differences could be contributed by any other factors out from the researcher's research area.

3.2. What aspects of Facebook group discussions help college students to express their opinions?

According to Table 4, items 1 to 3 in this section investigate certain aspects of the writing process, including the organisation of ideas, vocabulary building and spelling. The mean score for Item 1 was 3.53 (SD = 0.52) and majority of the participants strongly agree with a percentage of 53.3% found that brainstorming on Facebook group has helped them to organise their opinions well before the actual writing in class while another 46.7% who agreed to it.

Table 4. Aspects of Facebook Group Discussion

No item	Statement	Likert Scale, Frequency (%)				Total	Mean (SD)	Mode
		1	2	3	4			
1	Brainstorming on FB group helps organize my thoughts before the actual writing.	0	0	7(46.7)	8(53.3)	15(100)	3.53(0.52)	4
2	I learn new vocabulary from reading the comments of others on the FB group.	0	3(20)	9(60)	3(20)	15(100)	3.00(0.66)	3
3	The spell-check feature helps me reduce spelling errors.	0	0	10(66.7)	5(33.3)	15(100)	3.33(0.49)	3
4	Ideas or opinions posted by my peers on FB group help me in getting a better idea before writing.	0	0	6(40)	9(60)	15(100)	3.60(0.50)	4
5	I find it easier to complete my essays after participating in FB group discussion.	0	1(6.7)	7(46.7)	7(46.7)	15(100)	3.40(0.62)	3

Next, the mean score for Item 2 was 3.00 (SD = 0.66) and majority of the respondents only agree that they learnt new vocabulary from reading their peers' comments with a percentage of 60% out of 15 participants. There were 3 respondents with a percentage of 20% who disagreed that they learnt new vocabulary and another 20% of the respondents chosen only to agree with the statement respectively.

The mean score for question item 3 was 3.33 (SD = 0.49) with a percentage of 66.7%, where 15 respondents agreed that the spell check feature did help in reducing spelling error, while on the other hand, there were only 5 respondents with a percentage of 33.3% who strongly agreed that it helped a lot.

The next two items (Q4 – Q5) explored if Facebook group provides students with the content knowledge for writing tasks. Question item 4 reported that the mean score was 3.60 (SD = 0.50). There were 9 respondents (60%) who strongly agree that ideas which were posted by peers were helpful to produce better idea before writing while another 40% of 6 participants responded only agree. None of the participants had chosen disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Question item 5 reported mean score was 3.40 (SD = 0.62) and only 1 respondent (6.7%) disagreed with the statement thinking that it was not easy to complete the essay even after participating in the Facebook group discussion. While the other 46.7% of respondents responded agree and strongly agree each respectively. Based on the results, there was only one participant who disagreed and this may be due to shyness or inactiveness in the Facebook group discussion.

Based on the results obtained, the aspect from learning of new vocabulary among others was not popular among participants as the researcher assumed that accounting students were in the lower proficiency level in their vocabulary and also spelling. The researcher had once given accounting students dictation, and a majority of account students made a huge amount of mistakes in spelling as they were barely able to comprehend the meaning of certain words.

But, one thing for sure, their writing performance shows improvement in term of their interest and when they read their peers' comments. Ideas posted by peers have helped other weaker learners to obtain ideas and they found it easier to write an essay on the same topic in class. Overall, mostly all the participants in the experimental group have gained some benefits through this Facebook group discussion and it is proven that different individual own different ability, Thus, they definitely found different aspects which suited them in learning English especially in the writing performance.

In conclusion, Facebook group discussions provide ample opportunities for students to practice and improve their writing skills. Studies show that students feel obliged to respond to their peers' comments or opinions posted, thus are actively "Posting" and "Commenting" on the application. They take every opportunity to practice their writing skills. Students also discover new sentence or writing structures by reading the comments and posts from their peers. These show that writing skills are very much emphasised in Facebook group participation and thus has a high potential of enhancing and improving students' writing skills.

3.3. What are the college students' attitudes toward the use of Facebook discussions?

There are three items in the questionnaire that answered the third research question. All these three question items 6 to 8 reflected college students' attitude towards the use of Facebook group discussion. Based on Table 5, the most chosen 4 scale level were mode 4 and mode 3 which were strongly agree and agree. The results collected from the survey shows positive attitudes among participants who were involved in the Facebook group discussions. These results had rejected null hypothesis one (H_01).

Table 5. Students' Attitudes toward Facebook discussions

No item	Statement	Likert Scale, Frequency (%)				Total	Mean (SD)	Mode
		1	2	3	4			
6	I feel comfortable posting my ideas or opinions on FB group.	0	2(13.3)	5(33.3)	8(53.3)	15(100)	3.40(0.74)	4
7	I feel encouraged by my friends "liking" my ideas or comments.	0	0	4(26.7)	11(73.3)	15(100)	3.73(0.46)	4
8	I prefer discussing issues or topics on FB group instead of in a classroom session.	0	0	9(60)	6(40)	15(100)	3.40(0.50)	3

The question item 6 from Table 4.5 reported that the mean score was 3.40 (SD = 0.74). There were 8 respondents which was 53.3% who chose strongly agree while another 33.3% of 5 respondents chose agree of the statement that they felt comfortable posting ideas or opinions on Facebook group. There were only 2 participants who felt uncomfortable to post their ideas or opinions.

Question item 7 reported mean score of 3.73 (SD = 0.46). There were 11 respondents out of 15 who strongly agree feeling encouraged by friends who have clicked "like" to their comments and another 26.7% of respondents who agreed with the statement. Respondents felt more confident when their ideas or opinions were appreciated by others.

Lastly, question item 8 reported with a mean score of 3.40 (SD = 0.50) and the percentage who chose agree was higher with the percentage of 60% compared to 40% of who chose strongly disagree. None

of the participants showed negative attitude towards the Facebook group discussion as 0% result for scale level disagree and strongly disagree.

According to the research, the results have successfully rejected null hypothesis and this shows that positive attitudes were gained from all the respondents towards the treatment method of using Facebook group discussion to improve writing performance outside the classroom. The researcher had one experience in the early process of this research, on the second week of brainstorming Facebook discussion outside the classroom. Students came back in class sharing their feelings and feedbacks on what they had commented in the Facebook group discussion. There was a change in their attitude in writing and even speaking in English. Higher level of encouragement and motivation was gained as the researcher acted as the instructor who also guided and commented in their discussion and by praising them for giving good points, mature thinking or clicked “like” to their comments. This has brought a positive outcome and functioned as an immense support to them in learning English. That was why the result in question item 7 had a high percentage of score in strongly agree and agree.

Overall, majority of all the participants preferred to discuss any current issues or topics in the social network such as Facebook group rather than in the classroom. When their confidence level is low, they will not able to share their opinion in class and they are unable to give mature ideas. They were also lacking in knowledge on the topic given due to lack of reading English materials and had very least approach to the language context. Facebook group discussion had proven as one of the method to encourage brainstorming and improve college students’ writing performance.

In conclusion, Facebook group discussion provides a space where ideas are posted in view of all, to be open to criticism as well as praise. Higher order thinking skills are put into play in organising, synthesising and analysing these ideas both by oneself and peers in constructing knowledge. This makes up for meaningful learning when the members of the group are able to generate ideas that are shared by, and built upon through the response and feedback given by peers. A student may also gain confidence in writing through the fact that his or her ideas are supported and agreed upon by peers, made known through the feedback received in the group. While sharing views, exchanging messages and comments on FB, students certainly develop a confidence in writing in English as a by-product of their online socialisation. Facebook group discussion had proven as one of the method to encourage, brainstorming and improve college students’ writing performance.

4. CONCLUSION

This study focused on the college students’ perception of Facebook group discussion and effect of Facebook discussion on their writing performances. The objective of this study is to find out college students’ attitude toward the use of Facebook group discussions and also to identify the aspects of Facebook group discussions that helped college students to express their opinions. In addition to that area, the research also attempts to investigate whether Facebook group discussions affect college student’s writing performance.

The findings from the study showed that there are positive attitudes of college students on Facebook group discussions. On the aspects of Facebook group discussions, all the eight areas stated in the questionnaire got positive feedback from the respondents. In contrary, there is significant effect of Facebook group discussion on students’ writing performances.

The findings of this study indicated that the experimental group did outperform the control group in the Facebook group discussions, the students’ attitude towards the usage of Facebook group discussion were positive. Social networking site is fast replacing traditional modes of communication such as letters, faxes, emails and even telephone calls. Today social network is used to advertise, vote, sales promotion, platform for latest news, as well as to interact socially.

Furthermore, Kabilan et al (2010) have also written similar ideas on the challenges of the online environment for the learning of English[16]. Some of the negative impacts mentioned are overspending or wasting of time, promoting negative attitudes among students, and last but not least, affecting students’ development destructively. In incidental learning, the focus of students should be on the learning process instead of the social process on the Facebook site. Therefore, it is very important to draw students’ awareness and attention on the aspects of learning on Facebook so that learners will be clear of their learning goal and will be working towards it.

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