



Facebook: An Online Environment for Learning English for ESL Students

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Introduction

As Facebook (FB) is a widely used social networking site in Bhutan these days, investigating whether FB could be tapped positively for learning of English language is imperative. Therefore, this study intends to analyse if ESL students of Phuentsholing Higher Secondary School consider FB as an effective online environment for learning English language. With this study, researchers would be able to propose how social networking sites, viz. FB, assist students in the progression of their English reading and writing skills. Finally, relevant stakeholders will be able to consider and develop suitable methods in order for ESL students to use FB effectively for learning of English language.

Hence, to come to a specific conclusion, a slightly modified research questions devised by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010) are used in this study as mentioned below:

1. What are the students' general practices and uses of FB?
2. Do the students consider FB as an effective online environment that facilitates the learning of English language?

Literature Review

There are numerous studies conducted by different researchers to evaluate whether use of FB helps students in their academic performance. While a group of scholars voices out the negative impact, the other party of researchers advocates for the positive effect of FB usage. The debate about the correlation between FB usage and the academic performance of students continues.

In 2011, Rouis, Limayem and Salehi-Sangari conducted an investigative analysis of the effects of FB usage with 239 undergraduate students at Lulea University of Technology in Sweden. The result shows "an extensive use of Facebook by students with extraverted personalities leading to poor academic performance" (p. 962). In concurrence to the previous examination, a study carried out by Abdulahi, Samadi and Gharlegghi in 2014 reveals that the time students spend on FB is negatively proportional to their academic performance – more time on FB, lower academic score; less time on FB, higher academic score. The study, carried out with 152 students, recommends "the university should really consider blocking the usage of social networks sites such as Facebook" (p. 143).



On the lighter note, Gonzalez, Gasco and Llopis (2016) give a mixed reaction about FB usage and academic performance of students. The researchers point out the majority of respondents “highlight the advantages of Facebook as a space for collaboration, joint work and interaction” (p. 65) but negative aspects such as “multi-tasking which results in distraction” (p. 65) does arise thereby hampering academic performance. On the same front, a study steered by Hashi, Wasuage and Abraham in 2018 with 77 university students of Somalia gives a similar mixed reaction. Although some participants share their ideas of FB usage positively, most of the students reveal to have used FB for “chatting” (p. 7828) thus wasting their time. Therefore the researchers declare “Facebook usage has weak negative relation with students’ academic performance” (p. 7823) and recommends students to be careful when they use FB.

In stark contrast to the previous studies, Ogedebe, Emmanuel and Musa (2012) disclose a negative correlation between the amount of time spent on FB and low academic performance. Without any ambiguity, the researchers conclude “the use of Facebook does not have an adverse effect on the academic performance of students in the Nigerian Universities” (p. 796).

Rather more interesting study titled “Students’ perceptions of Facebook for academic purposes” was conducted by Sanchez, Cortijo and Javed in 2013 with a sample of 214 undergraduate students at the University of Huelva in Spain. The study concludes the respondents are enthusiastic about using FB to interact and “communicate with their classmates and professors” (p. 146) which finally leads to better academic performance.

Similarly, a study titled “Relationship between Facebook Practice and Academic Performance of University Students” was conducted by Negussie and Ketema in 2014. The cross-sectional survey conducted from March 2012 to March 2013 in Jimma University involving 490 postgraduate students specify “there is no relationship between time spent on Facebook and student academic performance” (p. 35). The researchers conclude blocking of FB is not a solution but colleges “should foster students to use Facebook for educational purpose by providing proper arrangements and training” (p. 35). In the same year, Ifeanyi-obi, Olatunji and Akpala conducted a study with selected 80 agricultural students in University of Port Harcourt to assess the perceived effects of FB on academic activities. The overall rating of the study shows “Facebook affect the academic activities of agriculture students positively (67%)” (p. 12). The researchers mention the “positive usage of FB like collaborative research and study should be encouraged” (p. 16). Mahmood and Farooq (2014) do share similar result from their study conducted with 150 students which concludes “there is negative relationship” (p. 54) between FB usage and academic performance. The same negative correlation between FB usage and low academic performance was proven right by Junco (2014) in his survey titled “Student class standing, Facebook use, and Academic performance” and Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, and Dennis (2014) in their study titled “Facebook use and academic performance among college students: A mixed-methods study with a multi-ethnic sample.”

Another study which proves the positive effects of FB usage on academic performance of students was conducted by Ainin, Naqshbandi, Moghavvemi, and Jaafar (2015) with 1165 Malaysian university students. The study which aimed at evaluating the impact of FB usage on students’ academic performance shows “positive relationship between students’ academic performance and Facebook usage, i.e. the higher the usage the better they perceived they perform” (p. 64).

Lambic’s study in 2016 investigated correlation between FB use for educational purpose and academic performance of students. The study which involved 139 students of the Faculty of Education in Sombor, Serbia, establishes “positive correlation between the academic performance of students and the frequency of use of Facebook for educational purposes” (p. 313). The researcher concludes his study by recommending teachers to “have their own accounts (groups) on social network sites (SNSs) that the majority of students use” (p. 319). Shafiq and Naz (2017) carried out a statistical survey involving 300 students from eight major universities of Karachi, Pakistan, to analyse the impact and usage of FB and WhatsApp for academic purposes. The quantitative research shows “the frequent use of Facebook and WhatsApp do not have any counter-productive effect on academics” (p. 630).

While the aforementioned studies were conducted in general to investigate if FB usage correlates to students' academic performance, there are some studies conducted to analyse if usage of FB helps in learning of English language in particular. One such study was conducted by Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010) to examine if students in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Malaysia, considered FB as a meaningful English learning environment. A quantitative survey involving three hundred (300) randomly chosen undergraduate students reveals "the students believed FB could be utilized as an online environment to facilitate the learning of English" (p. 179). In parallel to this finding, Mahmud and Ching (2012) provide similar conclusion. They state the use of FB had enhanced the participants' L2 skills particularly reading and writing. The participants' confession includes the utilization of FB "improved their communication skills" (p. 357).

A study which involved a total of 111 students, enrolled in an ESP course called English for Business Communication in a technological university in Taiwan, was conducted by Shih in 2013 to evaluate the effect of using FB. The finding from the study indicates "incorporating Facebook in the English for Specific Purpose (ESP) course can effectively assist college students in learning business communication" (p. 52). The researcher commends the use of peer assessment on FB can be an "effective way to improve their grammar skills such as tense and sentence structure" (p. 58) besides enhancing their desire to learn difficult professional subject.

A recent analogous study was conducted in Indonesia with Indonesian students in a higher secondary school by Sabaruddin in 2019 to explore whether FB utilization can enhance English writing skills. The result of the study shows "Facebook utilization in teaching writing improves learners' motivation to write in English" (p. 37) and that it increases students' mastery in grammar and provides enough learning materials for learners to upscale their writing ability in English. The researcher recommends English educators in Indonesia to inculcate FB in their teaching practice in order to "strengthen English writing skills of students in Indonesia" (p. 41). Yet another study was conducted in 2019 by a group of researchers in Indonesia to study students' perception of the effectiveness of using FB in ESL writing class (Fithriani, Dewi, Daulay, Saimiah & Fransiska). The finding reveals the use of FB in writing class to be "effective in boosting their confidence in using English as communicative means" (p. 634) which encourages them to participate in class discussion. The researchers conclude "social media applications, particularly Facebook be used and integrated in ESL classes in Indonesia" (p. 643) but with teacher's supervision and guidance.

Besides several studies conducted worldwide at different levels – higher secondary schools to universities – to evaluate the correlation between FB usage and academic performance, and of course with differing views, there are ample studies conducted particularly to assess if FB usage helps in learning English. But there is hardly any literature uncovering the impact of FB usage by students in schools of Bhutan and their academic performance in general and English language in particular. Therefore, it was felt necessary to investigate and ascertain whether FB usage by students in Bhutan has a positive impact on their studies, especially in learning the English language.

Method

Participants

This study was carried out with volunteer students (n = 43) of Phuentsholing Higher Secondary School. Convenience sampling method was used as students were randomly approached whenever and wherever they were met on the school premises and asked for their emails to participate in the survey, purely on a voluntary basis. The collection of emails of students began as early as the first week of December and when it was the third week, the researcher collected emails of forty five students. Finally, with a consent letter each, a quantitative survey questionnaire which aimed at exploring the students' general practices

and uses of FB as an online environment for learning English was emailed to every student. Students were once again reminded that their participation in the survey was optional.

The total response rate was 97.7 percent (male = 21; female = 22).

Instrument and Data Analysis

The instrument used in this study was a quantitative questionnaire comprised of two sections. Section A called for demographic information and the language usage of the participants under which the demographic information collected gender and students' language ability. Section B was based on the construct which used a 5-level Likert scale of 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'. The questionnaire was adopted by the researcher based on the previous study conducted by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010).

To analyse the demographic data, frequency and percentages were used while for the description of items in the construct, percentage method – top-box (%) or top two box (%) scoring – was used to describe students' views on whether FB usage was an effective online environment for learning English.

Results and Discussion

The findings are presented in three sections. First is the data on demographic information followed by respondents' general practices and uses of FB. The last section discusses on the effectiveness of FB as an online environment for learning of English for ESL students based on the four themes presented by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010): (1) Improvement of language skills, (2) Confidence, (3) Motivation, and (4) Attitude.

Demographic Information

With regard to demographic information, participants (n = 44; males = 22, females = 22) were sent a questionnaire each via their email addresses but the return rate was 95% male and 100% female. The total number of male and female respondents is 49% to 51%. All the participants were from class 12.

Students' General Practices and Uses of FB

With regard to students' general practices and uses of FB, 100% of the respondents have FB accounts and they had had them for three years. In relation to the frequency of logging into their FB account, as depicted in Table 1, 44% of respondents log in to their accounts 1 – 3 times daily while 67% of respondents log in to their FB accounts 1 – 3 times a month. None of the participants log in to their FB accounts more than 10 times a day or a week, but a mere 5% of respondents do so in a month. In general, the respondents can be categorized as moderate FB users.

TABLE 1
Frequency of Logging in to FB Account

Frequency	1 – 3	4 – 6	7 – 9	More than 10 times
Daily	15	0	0	0
Weekly	20	2	1	0
Monthly	29	7	2	2

Figure 1 presents a summary about the language use during FB interaction. 41% of students use only English always during FB interactions while no one uses the mother tongue always to interact on FB. Although an astounding 70% of students use a mix of their mother tongue and English, 58% of students

use only English frequently to interact on FB. With this, it can be generalized that English is the medium of interaction on FB.

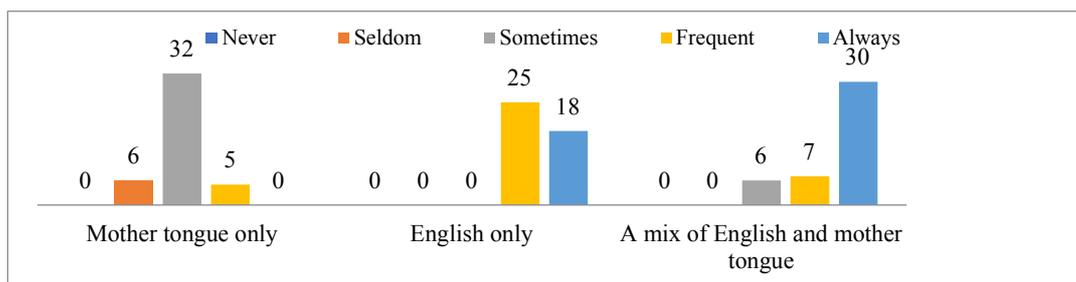


Figure 1. Use of language during FB interaction.

FB as an Online Environment that Facilitates English Language Learning

Assessment of students’ perception about whether FB is an effective online English language learning environment is based on the construct which uses a 5-level Likert scale of ‘Strongly disagree’ being 1 to ‘Strongly agree’ being 5. The analysis is based on the four themes of improvement of language skills, confidence, motivation, and attitude (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010). In general, 58% of students consider FB as an effective online environment for learning English language.

Improvement of Language Skills

Figure 2 is the representation of language skills (in %). In the case of the enhancement of language skills (3 items), students consider FB as an effective online environment for learning English. 65% (n = 28) and 51% (n = 23) of respondents agree they practice writing in English and reading in English respectively. An aggregate of 58% (n = 25) of students agree their English communication skills were enhanced due to their interaction on FB. These could be the result of their free use of language. During FB interaction, unlike in the usual language classroom setting, students need not have to worry about language errors as 40% (n = 17) of students consider language mistakes are tolerable in FB interaction. This aligns with Mahmud and Ching’s (2012) study which states interaction in FB would encourage students to read related articles to support their points and they would also think critically on the topic (p. 365) thereby enhancing students’ language skills.

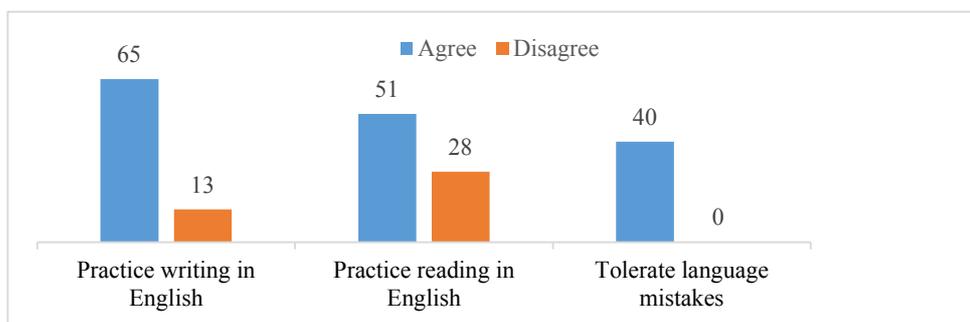


Figure 2. Improvement of language skills (in %).

Confidence

From Figure 3, it can be vividly deduced that students’ gain confidence (3 items) from their interaction in FB. First, with regard to students’ enhancement of confidence to write in English, 56% (n = 24) agree

out of which 16% (n = 7) strongly agree. Second, an astonishing 88% (n = 38) of students express their confidence to read in English was enhanced. Finally, in relation to students' confidence to communicate using English, 65% (n = 28) agrees while 21% (n = 9) of respondents strongly agree. A total average of 70% of respondents declare their confidence level was enhanced due to their interaction in FB. The findings run in parallel with a study by Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010) which states students can express their feelings in English to their friends and the use of English in the FB is not governed by grammatical rules (p. 183) which in turn boost students' confidence to read English materials and write in English.

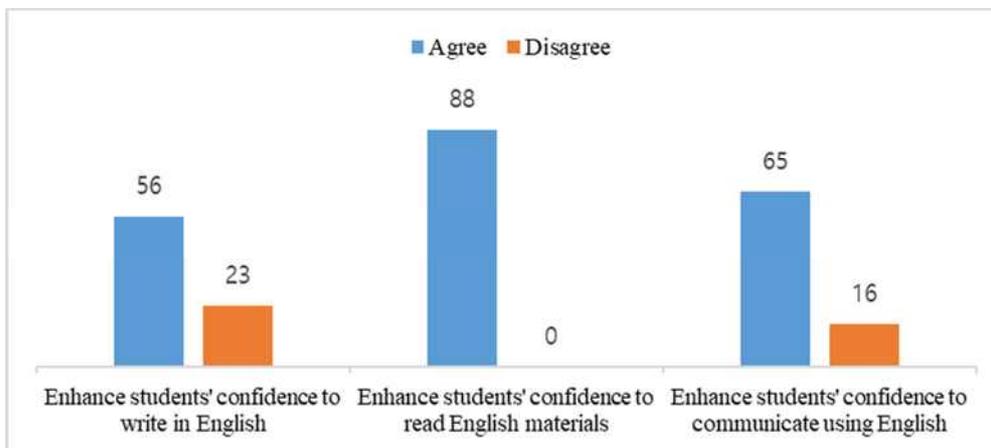


Figure 3. Confidence (in %).

Motivation

With 67% of students agreeing, the general conclusion from Figure 4 is students consider FB as an effective online environment for students to upscale their motivation (3 items) to learn the English language. 88% (n = 38) of students agree that the use of FB motivates them to communicate using English. Similarly, around 63% (n = 27) of students confess their motivation to read English materials was enhanced after their interaction on FB. Students' motivation to write in English was enhanced as 49% (n = 21) agree so under which 14% (n = 6) strongly agree. As stated by Mahmud and Ching (2012) students would be able to provide suggestions and express their opinions in FB freely (p. 367) thus motivating them to read and write in English.

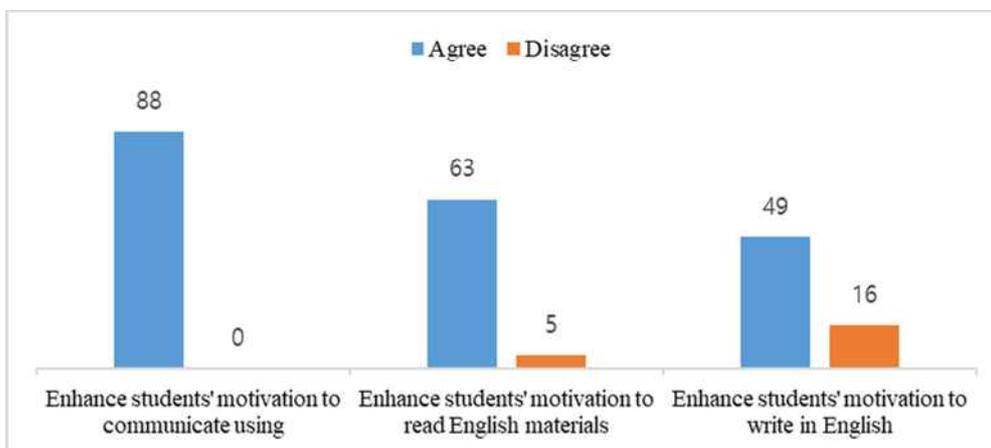


Figure 4. Motivation (in %).

Attitude

Students' attitude (2 items) towards FB as an online English language learning environment is positive with a 40% aggregate. This is illustrated in Figure 5. A whopping 88% (n=38) of students concur they learn new words in English as they interact in FB. When students interact in FB, they might come across new words which they will have to look up for meaning and eventually learn new words (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010) due to which 32% (n = 14) of students agree their attitude towards learning English as a second language was positively inculcated. 7% (n = 3) of respondents strongly believe a more positive attitude towards learning English as a second language was inculcated due to interaction in FB. This links to a study by Mahmud and Ching (2012) which holds that interaction in FB improves students "creativity and expressing of ideas" (p. 367).

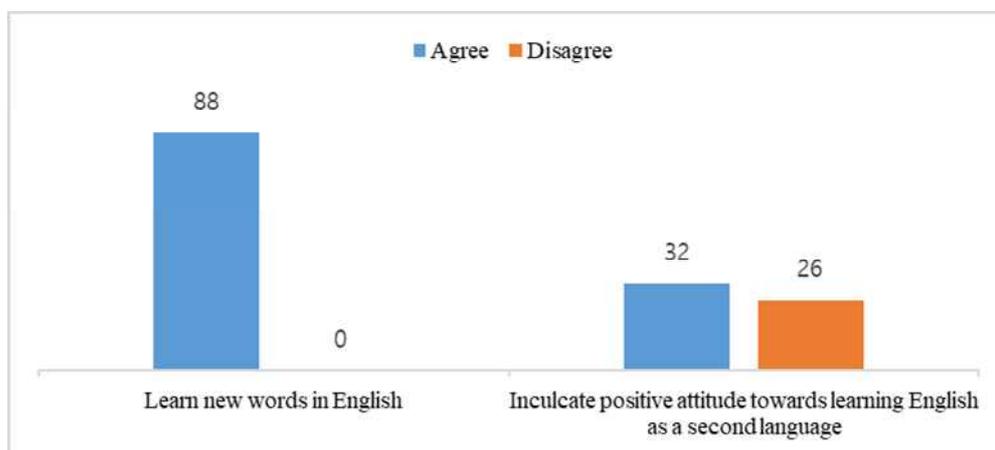


Figure 5. Attitude (in %).

Negative Findings

Figure 6 demonstrates negative findings from the study. A negligible 5% (n = 2) of respondents express they are not motivated to read English materials even after their interaction in FB and 32% (n = 14) of students say interaction in FB does not make learning English easier. With regard to improvement of language skills, 13% (n = 10) and 28 % (n = 12) disagree that FB facilitates practising writing in English and practising reading in English respectively. In conclusion, 12% of students consider FB as an ineffective online environment for learning English as a second language.

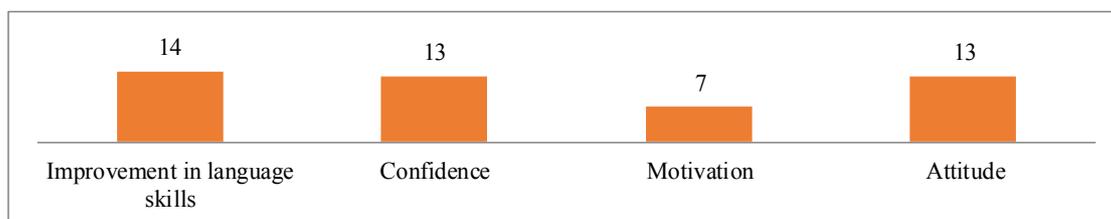


Figure 6. Negative findings.

Conclusions

To conclude, the result of the study shows students believe Facebook can be utilized as an online environment for learning English language. Consequently, language teachers are recommended to

integrate FB as an educational project with pre-determined learning objectives and outcomes for the learning experience of English language to be meaningful.

Limitations

The sample size, participants being a handful of students from a school, is the main limitation of this study. Therefore the researcher intends to take a qualitative study approach involving more participants to authenticate and make the results of this study more applicable.

The Author

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