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Facebook Integration into University Classes: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: Following the principles of the TPACK Framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2009), this study reports findings of integrating Facebook, a social networking site (SNS), in facilitating English language classes at a private university in Manila, Philippines. It aimed to explore students' attitudes towards the use of 'closed' class Facebook groups in the English language classroom and to describe how Facebook groups can be utilized to enhance teaching and engage learners. Research participants include 100 freshman, sophomore, and senior students enrolled at English classes in the first semester of the academic year 2016 – 2017. Research data from surveys, students' wall posts, students' reflections, and individual and focus group interviews suggest that despite some access concerns and technological limitations, students view and respond positively to the use of Facebook as an alternative platform for English language learning and as an innovative and strategic tool in enhancing lesson delivery, engaging students with the material, and creating a discourse space for self-expression. Pedagogical implications for ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) and researchers are offered in the light of these results.

Key Words: TPACK; ICT in education; media in education; Facebook in the classroom; social media in the classroom

1. INTRODUCTION

Facebook is a social networking site (SNS) that boasts more than 1 billion monthly active users, and it is one of the fastest-growing and best-known sites on the Internet today ("Most famous social network sites," 2016). Established by Mark

Zuckerberg in 2004, Facebook is a powerful learning tool that is not only built off synchronous and asynchronous technologies that has transformed learning but also extended the reach of communicative tools (Blattner & Fiori, 2009). Facebook has a variety of interactive features that students can use. Students can create their own profiles, upload photos and videos, post on their wall



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posts, share information, join in groups as online communities, among others. Pempek (2009) reveals that Facebook enables teachers to provide constructive educational outcomes in a variety of fields. Hew (2011) furthered that Facebook allows teachers to practice a differential pedagogy, in the best interests of the students.

Several studies have already explored the pedagogical benefits of integrating Facebook in a language classroom (Selwyn, 2007; Stewart, 2008; Madge et al., 2009; Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009; Yunus & Salehi, 2012; Shih, 2013; Yu, 2014; Ghani, 2015; Miron & Ravid, 2015; Low & Warawudhi, 2016). These studies have established the pedagogical potentials, benefits and implications of integrating a SNS, particularly Facebook, in the classroom.

Following the tenets of Koehler and Mishra's (2009) Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge (TPACK) Framework on technology integration into the classroom, this study explores how Facebook groups can be utilized to repurpose a form of social media in order to improve classroom practices in an ESL (English as a second language) classroom context. This paper demonstrates that Facebook group features compounded by the ubiquity, openness, and mobility of modern technology offer a modern platform for engaging the 21st century learners by providing them relevant and enhanced education that is accessible within and beyond the classroom walls.

The main purpose of this study is to determine the pedagogical viability of integrating 'closed' Facebook groups in the ESL classroom. Specifically, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

- (1) What features of Facebook groups do students use in their English language learning?
- (2) What are the advantages and challenges in using Facebook groups in the English language classroom?

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2016 – 2017 which lasted approximately five months. The participants were 100 freshman and sophomore undergraduate students taking compulsory English subjects (ENGN11A – Study and Thinking Skills and ENGN13A – Speech Communication) at the Lyceum

of the Philippines University, Manila, Philippines. These students were majoring in Bachelor of Science in Accountancy and Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Arts. Their English levels range from Intermediate to Upper Intermediate based on their TOEIC scores in Listening and Reading Tests. The researchers created Facebook groups for each of the four classes, and students were required to be members of those groups. The Facebook group name was given to the class, and they joined the group individually. The researchers acted as the group administrators and approved students' requests to join. As a classroom extension, the students were required to participate actively in the online activities such as responding to polls related to the lessons, posting responses to prompts, commenting on the teachers' and classmates' posts, replying to comments, tagging classmates to reply to posts, uploading and downloading files, among others. Group chat feature was also used to establish connection among members of the group.

2.1 Instruments and Data Analysis

Research data were gathered through survey questionnaire, students' reflections, interviews, and focus group discussions, which explored students' experiences and attitudes towards the use of Facebook groups in the class. Students also submitted individual reflection papers highlighting the benefits and challenges of using class' Facebook groups. The interview and FGD data were codified and analyzed thematically and were triangulated with students' reflections and survey data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One-hundred students participated in the study for a period of one semester or five weeks. Majority of the students (51%) indicated that they accessed the group every time they were alerted by the notification feature of Facebook; others (44%) reported that they visited the group automatically even without notification alerts in order to check if there were class announcements. A small percentage stated they accessed the group a day before the English class schedule (3%) and every week (2%).



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3.1 Facebook group activities by students

When students were asked about their activities when they accessed the group, they reported a total of 711 responses. Of these answers, 12.9% indicated that they visited the group primarily to see if there were announcements from the teacher such as a lecture file to be downloaded, a weblink to be accessed, a task to be completed, or a project to be submitted. Others stated that they accessed the group to like their teacher's and classmates' posts (12.2%), which is also a means to see for updates and to scan or skim some wall posts. This also includes seeing posts (10.7%), which also another way of checking information. In contrast, the other reported activities can be categorized as active activities because students have to do something to fulfil or accomplish certain tasks. These include the following: commenting on posts (9.3%), submitting tasks (9.3%), replying to posts or comments (7.6%), tagging teacher or classmates (5.8%), replying to teacher or classmates' comments (4.8%), posting ideas or photos (4.5%), sharing links, photos or videos (4.5%), chatting with classmates (4.4%), starting a discussion (2.7%), and chatting with the teacher (0.7%).

3.2 Challenges in using class Facebook groups

As with any other educational undertaking, integrating class Facebook groups in the traditional English language classroom also comes with challenges and limitations. When students were asked what challenges they encountered while using the groups for the entire semester, they reported varied answers. Of the 56 responses, 50% complained about weak internet connection in the campus or at home. Fifteen responses (26.7%) echoed a similar concern on difficulty accessing Facebook while logging in, downloading and uploading files, which could also be attributed to weak internet access. Thirteen responses (23.2%) reported that they did not have any internet connection at home; thus, they could not participate actively in the online discussions or comply promptly with the online tasks or assignments. Some students shared that they had to go out of their house and go to a computer shop just to do the online tasks, which required them to spend extra money and extra time.

Findings suggest that Facebook groups can serve as a class management system that allows the teachers to create an exclusive virtual space, design it like an online meeting room, and use it as an extension of the physical classroom. Facebook groups act as a point of convergence where teachers and students connect with one another at any time and place with the power of the Internet. The results of this study also corroborated with that of Shih's (2013) – integrating Facebook using a blended learning model such as the flex model based on Horn and Staker (2014), which combines face-to-face or in-class instruction with off-line or out-of-class interaction can help increase students' interest and motivation in the lesson and assist them in doing their classroom tasks. Because the teacher can upload learning materials as review tools, post useful websites for enhanced input, and communicate with students for consultation, the learners feel connected and engaged with the happenings of the class; thus, continuity of learning may occur.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the pedagogical viability of integrating Facebook groups into university ESL classes and found that Facebook groups may serve as an alternative virtual classroom platform to provide enhanced language input and continuous engagement with the learners. However, these opportunities may prove to be feasible in classroom contexts where there are available technological resources for the teachers and students. The findings of this study must be set against its own limitations – the area of inquiry focused only on the class Facebook group, which is only one of the communication mechanisms available to the students to explore and utilize while they are online. The data showed the concurrent use of other Facebook features among the participants, with students referring to private messaging and chatting. Students' use of the class Facebook groups is part and parcel of the face-to-face mode interaction in the classroom, and it should be seen as only partial accounts of larger conversations taking place among students and their teachers about their studies. This may raise important questions about how universities will articulate their teaching with students' (Kitto and Higgins, 2003), how educational leaders acknowledge these innovative strategies (Prensky, 2006), and how we can harmoniously blend



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our time-tested pedagogies with the emerging models of teaching and learning.

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