

The Use of Social Network Facebook in Flexible Collaborative Learning for EFL Students

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Abstract

There have been many initiatives towards second language learning with a view to assisting language learners in achieving the desired language proficiency. Nowadays, either in e-learning or blended learning, technology plays a significant part, not to mention, it becomes a fashionable and efficient tool in a “socially mobile learning environment”. On-line learning and teaching goes far beyond the one-way knowledge impartment to students. In fact, “digital literacy” enables flexible and mobile technologies to be fully explored in order to enhance students’ creativity, autonomy, collaboration as well as critical thinking and evaluation of information. From that angle, this paper is to highlight the educational possibilities of such powerful social network as Facebook. Not physically simple as a social network, Facebook is actually beneficial for the language learning. Facebook is an advanced content development and management technology which enables an interactive and intercreative engagement amongst students as well as between students and teachers. This sort of technology facilitates desirable practices such as collaborative content creation, peer review, assessment, formative assessment of student work, individual as well as group reflection on learning experiences, and up-to-date information regarding changes in collaborative spaces, and can be used in the development of authentic learning tasks.

Key words: *mobile learning environment, digital literacy, collaboration, social network, technology*

1. Introduction

Finding a most advantageous learning environment as well as seeking appropriate teaching methodologies which help inspire EFL students to learn, stimulate their hunger for knowledge, facilitate the process of second language acquisition and learning are for ever the teachers’ concern. Emphasizing student-centered principles, flexible learning environments can give valuable advantages in an increasingly competitive learning environment as greater flexibility can help meet the needs of a diverse range of students [11].

Besides, with the speeding development of digital technologies and their wide application in both teaching and learning, EFL teachers and learners are open to a great access to new learning environments and models in which the use of social networks such as blog, facebook, wikis, and available exercises design assisted websites are of great significance in building a “socially mobile learning”. Thanks to these models, learners are appealed to learning situations in which useful skills and technological know-hows are required in order to efficiently handle learning tasks. What is more, these social media also help enhance learners’ interaction and intercreative engagement, assist mutual learning, enable collaborative content creation, peer assessment, individual as well as group reflection,

strengthen cooperation amongst students and between students and teachers. This paper introduces a model of utilizing Facebook in flexible collaborative learning for EFL students.

2. Flexible learning environment

As stated by Wanda Gerard, Josina Nagtegaal and Debbie Terceros [11], flexible learning focuses on offering students choices about when, where and how they learn, emphasizing the effectiveness of student-centered learning. It can give valuable advantages in an increasingly competitive learning environment as greater flexibility can help meet the needs of a diverse range of students. Besides, flexible learning enables the shift in ownership of learning in which students are taking on more responsibilities. In fact, it provides students' choices and promotes their independence, creativity, innovation and critical thinking.

Flexible learning environments adapt to student requirements. Structurally, the flexible learning environment expands beyond the classroom walls, allowing learning to take place in a variety of environments, including online. By offering choice through such environments, students determine what they learn, where they learn and when they learn. According to Krashen (1981) [7], second language learning in informal environments is also as important as one in formal environments. From his angle, the more learners are exposed to environments to practice their target language, the more successful they are in their second language learning.

The role of the teacher in a flexible learning environment is to be a learning facilitator, helping to decide what the flexibility options are for students outside of their classrooms.

3. A model of “socially mobile learning”

TESOL and methodological experts especially stress the significance of creating a communicative environment wherein students are offered opportunities to interact and practice their target language. “The informal learning that occurs in the context of participatory media offers significant opportunities for increased student engagement in formal learning settings” [1]. The experience with communication technologies that students today possess facilitate the model of students study everywhere, anywhere they like and also form a community of working together. The idea of “working together,” as suggested by Bull et al., has also been reflected within the education system, where a push to foster classroom communities or a community of learners has gained strong support. This “sense of community” has been defined as a mutual interdependence among members, connectedness, trust, interactivity, and shared expectations and goals, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986) [9]. According to Bowers-Campbell, with the aid of Facebook in community learning, more communication will be able to be created amongst teachers and students (2008) [2]. The creation of a community of learners, or learning networks levels the playing field for shy, introverted students. When a community of learners is established, such students may become more comfortable, allowing them to make greater contributions to the community.

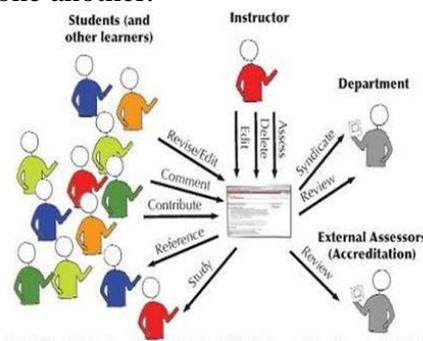
4. The Use of Social Network Facebook in Flexible Collaborative Learning for EFL Students

4.1. Facebook as an effective educational tool for EFL students

Facebook is a social networking website that enables users to connect and share with their families and friends online. As the world's powerful network, Facebook also function as a discussion forum since it allows users to upload information, is also employed as an important educational tool. Facebook can be considered a useful tool to create such a sense of community learning in flexible learning environments.

Some benefits of Facebook in EFL teaching and learning:

- a. *Learning materials can be posted on Facebook.* Facebook allows users to post relevant course-relating materials, for instance, the curriculum, lesson Power Point slides, reference books or learning materials, as well as links to many other online materials, documents or websites.
- b. *Teachers can keep track of students' progress and monitor students' task completion.* Teachers can divide groups, assign tasks as well as decide the task timeline for a group or a community of students. Discussion of students along with their progress of task completion can be closely kept track of. Task assignment within groups or direct and interactive correction among members in a group is also accessible to the teachers. Facebook provides expansive opportunities that would support online discussions and online "extra help." This vision is shared by many teachers.
- c. *Teachers can create a forum to call for students' opinions and ideas.* In facebook flatform, teachers are able to post a topic and initiate discussion among students. Students contribute their ideas and brainstorm to have the task done. This can be seen as a helpful reference source for teachers and other students, and also an efficient way for students to learn form one another.



Picture 1: Facebook – participation of ideas from both teachers and students

- d. *Facebook is also valuable teachers' teaching and tutoring data base.* Facebook allows teachers to share teaching materials, teaching experiences and methodologies as well as their subjective thinking about a lesson to help teaching reach the most efficiency.
- e. *Facebook assist students in preparing presentation.* Posts of student's presentations can draw attention among members in a group, or the whole class, or just only teachers, which facilitate necessary feedbacks, correction for perfection.

4.2. Useful online tools and Internet programs for EFL students

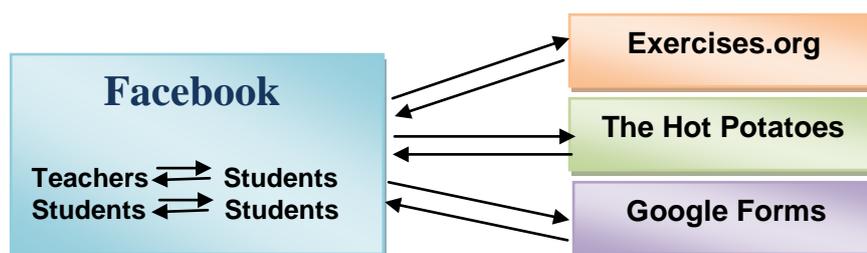
- a. *Google Forms* provide a fast way to create collective exercises for EFL students, with responses or answers collected in an online spreadsheet. Students can give answers to the questions from almost any web browser - including mobile smartphone and tablet browsers. Teachers can view each response in a single row of a spreadsheet, with each question shown in a column.
- b. *Exercises.org* is a website which provides hundreds of exercises to learn English online: vocabulary, grammar, listening, songs, etc. These exercises have been made by English Language teachers from all over the world. While teacher can join and either use the existing exercises or create new ones, learner can use them to practice English. Exercises.org is also a community where teachers can get share not only exercises, but also worksheets, power points, lesson plans, ideas, suggestions, etc.

- c. *The Hot potatoes* software suite includes five applications (JCloze, JCross, JMatch, JMix and Jquiz) that can create online exercises. There is also a sixth application called The Masher that will compile all the Hot Potatoes exercises into one unit.

4.3. An integrating model of Facebook and online tools and programs in designing lessons for EFL students.

With the constraint of classroom time, it is impossible for EFL teachers to teach a large amount of knowledge for students along with giving them many chances for practice. Meanwhile, second language learning requires regular and frequent practice. Therefore, lesson preparation and home practice definitely hold great significance in helping students make much progress. Hereby, I introduce *necessary steps* in create a model utilizing Facebook in learning and integrating useful online tools and Internet programs in designing a flexible learning program for EFL students.

- (1) First, teacher needs to create a Facebook with necessary configuration for his own class community.
- (2) Teacher adds friends/ students and form small groups.
- (3) Teacher creates English exercises for target skills, designs interactive tasks, discussion questions, or question lists using Google Forms, Exercises.org or The Hot Potatoes...
- (4) Teacher uploads and shares the newly invented exercises which are so that these exercises and tasks are accessible to their students or groups of students.
- (5) Once students get involved, they will work in group as allocated, form discussion to work on an assignment. Teacher can interfere into discussion if necessary; sometimes, an “extra help” from teacher always counts.
- (6) Students submit their homework, exercise, or tasks according to the deadline or share for others for a larger scale forum. Students get feedbacks form friends and teachers.



Picture 2: Interactive model between Facebook and other online programs and websites to facilitate interaction between EFL teachers and students

Some activities for EFL students in Facebook spaces with the aiding online programs and websites:

- a. **Pre-class preparation:** For EFL students of any levels, preparation before the class is always important. Grasping the idea, teachers assign tasks for each group of students. For grammar periods, it is advisable for teachers to post situation sentences or examples enclosed with open questions for students to figure out each grammatical rule to be presented in front of the class. This urges students to brainstorm and help save time for classroom periods as teachers just need to summarize students' homework and provide extension of related knowledge, giving pace for more practice and exercises. For listening periods, necessary input of vocabulary should be given, together with or without pronunciation for students to look up at home. Once these

tasks are completed, these students already get some preparation for the listening tasks and definitely have better performance.

Example sentences:

The teacher, along with his students, **wants** to play soccer.
 The teachers, along with his students, **want** to play soccer.
 Ten dollars **is** too much for a lunch.
 Two-thirds of the land **has** been sold.
 Two-thirds of the students **have** good results at school.
 Either he or his students **are** going to help us.
 Either his students or he **is** going to help us.

Verbs Agree with A or B?

- A along with B
A as well as B → + V (agree with ___)
- Either A or B
Neither A nor B
Not only A but also → + V (agree with ___)
- fractions + of phrase → + V (agree with ___)
- Expressions of time,
distance, price, weight → + V (agree with ___)

Students figure out grammatical rules by analysing examples

Picture 3: Example of giving exercises to prepare before Grammar periods

Index =>

Match each expression with each function

Matching exercise

0:43

Match the items on the right to the items on the left.

Check

I'm afraid	I'm going to tell you something surprising or interesting
It depends	I'm going to give extra information about my response
I guess	Wait a second. I'm thinking
Well	I think so or I suppose so
In fact	I can't give you a simple answer
Actually	I'm going to apologise or disagree politely

Picture 4: Examples of vocabulary exercises

b. Lesson consolidation

After attending lessons in class, students are asked to complete personal exercises in Google Form to consolidate what they have learnt in the class. The results of the exercises will be automatically sent to the teacher in a form of a collective file, including classification of right and wrong answers, which helps teachers to be able to keep track of student' understanding of the lesson.

Unit 7: Agreement

Choose the correct answers

* Required

- Mary, along with her cousins, _____ going fishing. *
 - am
 - is
 - are
- The girls, as well as the handsome boy, _____ along the river bank. *
 - walk
 - walks
- My brother, along with his friends, _____ having a picnic. *
 - am
 - is
 - are
- My little sisters, as well as her dog, _____ playing game in the yard. *
 - am
 - is
 - are

Picture 4: Exercises for consolidate learnt knowledge

5. Conclusion and recommendation

In the flexible learning environments and spaces, the increased use of virtual worlds for entertainment, socializing, and education will continue to grow (NMC, 2007) [8]. With more users acclimating to a combined virtual and physical life, teachers and educators will also need to find ways to bring these technologies into pedagogies to keep instruction relevant and applicable to the world our students are used to and will inhabit after graduation. In fact, the involvement of technology has attracted far more students to their learning, created positive motivation for these students and helped them learn more effectively. Dornyei (2001) notes that such positive motivation directly proportional to the students' success in their second language acquisition [3].

On the platform of the powerful social network like Facebook, the integration of useful website and programs for designing tasks and exercises for EFL students will bring them a great deal of benefits. Students can improve their language proficiency, their critical thinking, independence, communication, interactive and collaborative skills, fostering a necessary sense of community learning. Once they take the ownership of their learning, progress in second language learning and acquisition is definitely sooner or later. Perhaps, giving students a little more freedom and trust in a less controlled environment may be the key to their success.

What to keep in mind to ensure students to strictly follow academic requirements and restrict the negative impacts of online environments is teachers' being well-equipped with technology - related knowledge, so that they can better target and implement strategies that use social media to support their teaching.

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