The role of social networking websites in assisting blended learning class discussion and peer assessment in an ESP classroom.

By
Syed Adnan Zafar
Division of Applied Linguistics
University of Maria Curie Skłodowska
Lublin

Blended learning enables students to make use of face-to-face teaching with distance education, frequently electronic, either computer-based or web-based. It has been a major growth point in English language teaching industry in general and English for specific purposes (ESP) in particular over the last decade. More and higher educational institutions are opting for blended ESP classrooms because of its increasing importance in tertiary education. One of the pivotal reasons of its phenomenal growth can be attributed to its ability to facilitate the learning which can take place at any time or location as per the convenience of learners as long as they have access to the computers and internet. The benefits of blended learning in an ESP class can bring a lot of advantages for both learners and teachers by merging the crucial components of classroom teaching including collaborative learning, educational advantage and organization with the flexibility and greater variety that is offered by the virtual learning environments (VLE). The use of blended learning opens up numerous opportunities for ESP teachers to utilize immense amount of learning materials available online into their classroom to help learners hone, practice and deepen their understanding of English language effectively and efficiently within the shortest time possible.

This article aims to explain the role of social networking websites in assisting blended learning class discussion and peer assessment in an ESP classroom by showing how Facebook can be used to achieve this potential.

1. Previous studies

The advent of the use of technology in English teaching in general and social networking websites in particular has revolutionised the way language skills are acquired and practiced by learners which in result has positively impacted their learning process. The positive change is synced with the continuous growth of technology which provides more and more flexibility and accessibility for language teaching and learning (Lou, et al, 2010; Shih, 2010). One of the important benefits of using social networking websites in blended learning classroom is to assist learners in distribution of knowledge, enhancing the quality of class assignments and coursework, and progressing their learning ability (Chen, and Li, 2008). Online learning can be followed from anywhere in the world and it motivates students to take charge of their own learning, and facilitate in the cooperation, exchange and sharing of the required knowledge for language acquisition without attending any face-to-face classroom or to work concurrently (Li and Chen 2009). The other significant benefit of combining technology, especially social networking websites into blended learning is the use of peer assessment which does not only help students to learn quicker and better but previous studies have concluded that it exponentially augment the learning outcome and productivities for language acquisition (Yang & Tsai, 2010).

## 2. Why are social networking sites important in an ESP classroom?

The use of the Web 2.0 can provide opportunities for collaboration, authentic communication in a discourse community and offers what Warschauer and Kern (2000) termed as

networked-based language teaching, Dogoriti et al (2014). Bremner (2010) and Evans (2012) concluded that some of the general benefits of using technology in ESP are the use of authentic tasks, tools, and context. Butler-Pascoe (2009) suggested that social networking sites in an ESP classrooms provides interaction and communication among learners, uses collaborative learning, focuses on socio- cultural aspects of the language, is student-centred and enhances students' motivation, self-esteem and autonomy.

In addition to the above, when it comes to ESP classrooms, it is an established fact that all of its learners are adults, and from the research conducted by Duggan et al (2015),it has been found that out of 81% of American adults who use the internet, 52% of online adults now use two or more social media sites, a significant increase from 42% in 2013 which shows that the role of social networking sites cannot be ignored in the ESP classrooms. The research also concludes that the Facebook remains by far the most popular social media site. While its growth has slowed, the level of user engagement with the platform has increased. Other platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and LinkedIn saw significant increases over the past year in the proportion of online adults who now use their sites.
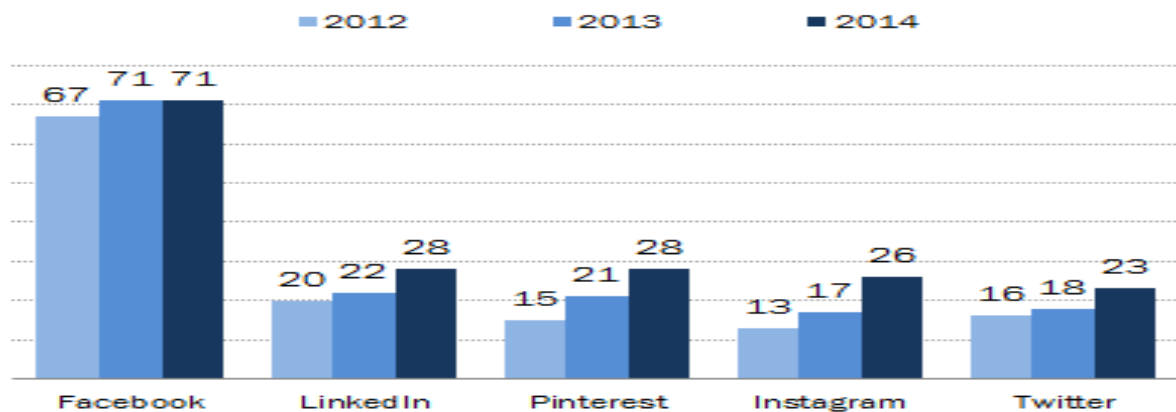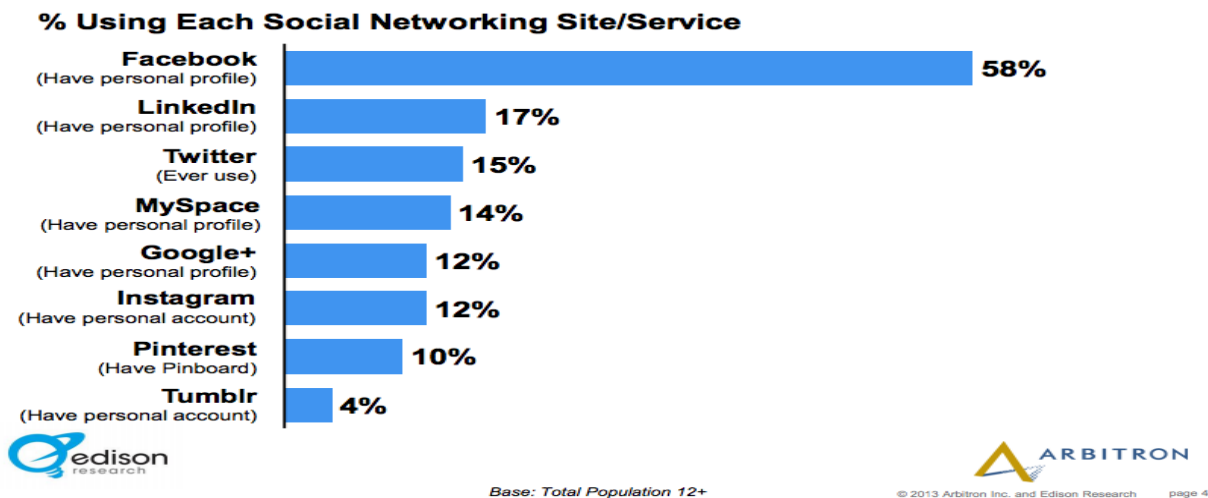

Figure1. Pew Research Centre's internet project surveys, 2012-2014.

2.1 Facebook as the top social networking site

Facebook, being the most popular social networking website came into being in February 4, 2004 by its founders Mark Zuckerberg, his college roommates and fellow Harvard university student Eduardo Saverin. Originally it was called thefacebook.com and renamed Facebook in 2005.The initial idea of starting it as a side-line project was to get to know the people at personal level but soon the word got out and it became a 21st century's technological sensation among the students at Harvard, Stanford and Yale in no time. The popularity of Facebook skyrocketed like a wild fire and by September, 2006, it was made available to all internet users.

Figure2. Pew Research Centre's internet project surveys, 2012-2014.

Facebook is the world's largest social network and people, mainly adults, use it to connect with important people in their life. Four days after Facebook went live it had just 650 users. Around 78% of all traffic to Facebook comes from smartphones. Users upload around 350million photos to the site every day (Snelling, 2014). There are currently more than 1 billion Facebook users across the world with more than 9.8 million Facebook subscribers in Poland. On average, users spend 20 minutes per day on Facebook (Internet world statistics, 2014).

2.2 Benefits and reservations about using Facebook in ESP classrooms

Being the world's largest social networking website mainly used by the adults, Facebook can surely be classified as one of the most effective teaching tool in an ESP classroom which could provide a platform that can be used to expedite the learning process for the ESP students. The key benefits of using Facebook in ESP classroom including ease in sharing information, mobile accessibility, asking questions, posting replies and feedback, monitoring students' work and observations, and being able to keep in touch with learners on constant basis help ESP educators in making students learning process informative, interactive, and highly effective.

In addition to the benefits, obviously there are certain reservations of ESP students about using Facebook for learning purpose. One of the most important reasons for the ESP students to avoid sharing, posting, and participating in any online discussion or learning on Facebook due to the fear that their contributions, views, reviews, comments and personal details may stay on the internet against their consent and use by certain people who may misuse them. Some opponents of using Facebook in ESP classroom claim that even after deleting students' works on the Facebook page, their details may still be retrieved by some unscrupulous users of the internet. Not only that, they also argue that 37% of the employers are checking out prospective employees on social media before making a final decision (Messieh, 2012), so getting involved in online learning may impact their chances for securing

jobs. The online security of the users' details is a hot topic nowadays and although It is a generalized problem and even the biggest and most powerful organizations like NASA and CIA are not fully protected from the online security breaches, it is hard for the ESP teachers to completely resolve this issue though alongside complying with the suggested Facebook's security measures, they can also make sure that all the comments, reviews, feedback and related works of the ESP learners about their online learning are deleted along with their personal, professional and academic details after the completion of the course. It goes without saying that online security is the responsibility of both teachers and students and to make sure that the personal details are secured from any online misuse, the standard online security measures should be taken at all times.

2.3 Ways of using Facebook in the ESP classroom

There are over 100 methods to use Facebook in classrooms (Online College, 2009) but following are the most commonly used ones;

- Create a group page to post assignments, homework, questions, pointers, ideas and writing prompts to encourage creativity, brainstorming and peer assessment with keeping in mind the ultimate goal of improving the language skills in English grammar, reading, writing and comprehension in particular.

- Using Facebook to keeping in touch with students' progress on constant basis is a key benefit in any ESP blended learning course. Timely reviews and feedback on students' works help them to learn quicker and improve the productivity and impact of the tasks assigned.

- Use Facebook to connect with the students beyond the national boundaries. Our world has become a global village and thanks to the social networking sites the use of Facebook can certainly help ESP educators to broaden the scope of language learning for their learners by promoting interactions among ESP students from different countries and backgrounds.

- Using Facebook applications like "Survey Monkeys" to identify student's interests, gathering their feedbacks on the topics or addressing the areas of disagreements can also be extremely helpful for the ESP teachers in planning their lessons and students to express their views, suggestions and ideas for effective learning. Other useful Facebook applications for ESP learners are:
  - **weRead:** It is about the management of the books on the reading lists or connecting with others in discussion.
  - **Flascards:** To strengthen the learning of the students in specific.
  - **Study Groups:** to work closely and cooperation with the other learners for group based tasks or learning.
- Using dedicated classroom's Facebook page to post videos, slides and other useful learning material to facilitate learning is also an effective way of incorporating Facebook in the language learning.

2.4 Steps for Facebook supported teaching process

It is essential for the teacher to lay down the rules regarding time limits, use of appropriate language, mobile technology, details about the specific topic, additional marks for the peer

assessment and extra-contributions before starting the online learning process. Once the understanding of the rules is established then whole process can be initiated. The following example discusses the Facebook supported teaching process regarding an ESP writing course. It depicts the step by steps instructions which can be followed in order to use Facebook in an ESP based blended learning classroom.

- After setting up the class Facebook page, instructor sends out the invitations to the students to join. Upon accepting their joining requests, teachers may initiate the process of learning by posting a topic, idea, question or set of questions (in this example, three writing prompts are posted for discussion and making sentences).
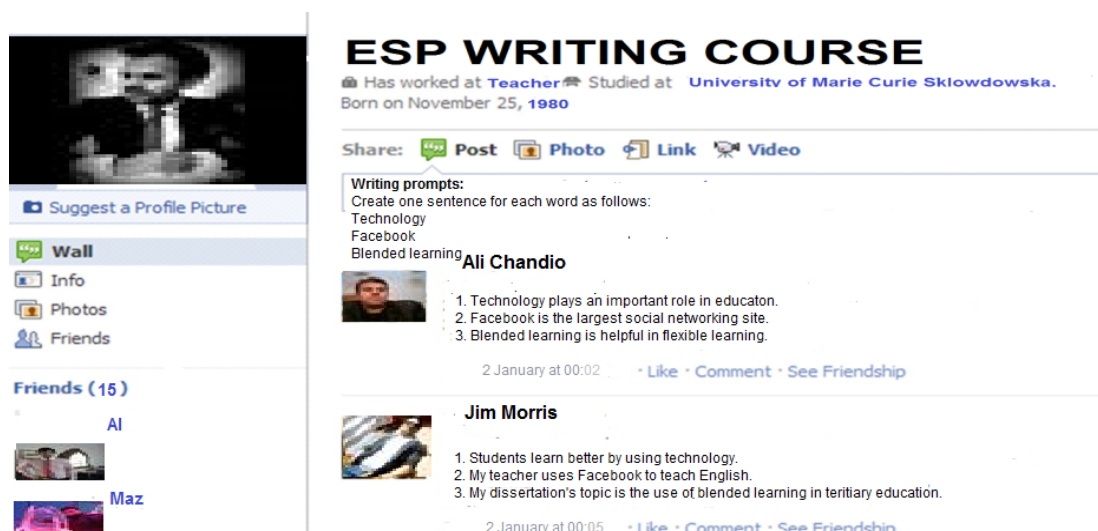

Figure3. Facebook page for ESP writing course

- Once the writing prompts have been posted, students can start posting their responses by using the writing prompts posted by the teacher. The flexibility of using Facebook's mobile technology can enable them to participate in online discussion and posting their feedbacks at any time of their convenience. Not only that, it helps them to think about and engage in the lessons more frequently. All students' responses appear on the class Facebook page and to keep track of their progress, teachers can comment, like or merely monitor students' works at any time.

Figure4. Students' responses and peer assessment

- Alongside posting their responses, either teacher may prompt students or students themselves can take the initiative and start examining each other's work and weighing it against pre-set benchmarks. Their feedback on each other mistakes can be observed constantly by the teacher and in the case of any errors, teachers can promptly step in to keep them right. With the help of the Facebook's enabled continuous interactions with the learners outside the class hours and increased communication can surely bring immense advantages to the ESP teachers like better monitoring and providing effective assistance to weak students.

- While students commenting on the Facebook page and teacher's acting as a moderator and observer, learners can be encouraged to use relevant Facebook applications to enhance their learning process. For example, to deal with an area of disagreement instructor could create a Facebook posting that asks a question and has the results polled. Discussion could grow from the poll results concerning the area of conflict (OLC, 2013).

3. Further Research

The sample size of the data to explore the wider impact of incorporating Facebook in blended learning environment has always been a challenging task for the researchers so for the future studies, it would be beneficial to include larger sample data sets to conduct research in order to obtain better results.

Also, the issue of online security of students' details while engaging with the ESP learning on Facebook is also a topic which has not been empirically researched to large extents so future studies could explore this topic further. Although in this research, we solely endeavour to explore the impact of using Facebook in the blended learning classroom environment, it would be valuable to see the impact of Facebook only instructions independent from the formal classroom teaching within the context of students' learning in English language.

Moreover, the scepticism regarding the use of technology in language acquisition in general and Facebook in specific among elderly people is an issue that needs to be explored and examined in future studies. In addition, numerous studies have based their researches to explore the positive impact of using Facebook in blended learning but fewer have primarily focused on Facebook's role in negatively influencing the learners' education, class involvement and a sense of community.

4. Conclusion

This article aims to explore the effect of incorporating Facebook with blended learning for students of ESP courses. Its positive impact on the ESP students' learning has been verified and supported by numerous studies in the past which have concluded that by combining Facebook with the classroom instructions certainly helps to enlarge students' knowledge base and improve their skills in the target language. This paper further strengthens the constructive and effective role of Facebook in language learning for the ESP students and educators. It concludes that by combining Facebook with peer assessment, ESP teachers can enhance students' learning motivation, interest, and interactions in order to exchange information and dispense knowledge effectively and efficiently. The use of mobile technology can significantly assist learners to contribute their views, check their progress and receive feedback from teachers which in result expedites the learning process. Interacting with the Facebook for the language learning also puts students at ease when it comes to engaging, communicating and expressing freely without having to worry about their class fellows or teachers' physical presences. The online security of the students' details is a massive problem and this paper has reinforced the view that it is the mutual responsibility of learners and educators to take necessary precautions to avoid any unwanted exploitation of their details. One of the solutions that this study proposes is that after the completion of the course, any comments, opinions or feedbacks about students' personal work should be deleted by teachers to avoid any misuse. Finally, it should be noted that blended learning with Facebook, by no means, provides an alternative to face-to-face classroom education rather by incorporating the use of Facebook into classroom teaching fetches better results, increases efficiency and capacity to learn fast, and facilitates learners to use the rich resources available online through the Facebook's technologically enhanced virtual learning environment.

5. References

Bremner, S. (2010). Collaborative writing: Bridging the gap between the textbook and the workplace. English for Specific Purposes 29, 121-132.

Butler-Pascoe, M. E. (2009, June). English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Innovation, and Technology. English Education and ESP, 1-15.

Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2008). Social network sites: Definition, history, & scholarship. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13, 210−230.

Chu Shih, R. (2013). Effects of using Facebook to assist English for business communication course instruction. The Turkish Journal of Educational Technology – January 2013, volume 12 Issue 1, 53-57.

Chang, C. K., Chen, G. D., & Li, L. Y. (2008). Constructing a community of practice to improve coursework activity. Computers & Education. 50(1), 235-247.

Chang, T. Y. & Chen, Y. T. (2009). Cooperative learning in E-learning: A peer assessment of student-centred using consistent fuzzy reference. Expert Systems with Applications, 36, 8342-8349, 8342–8349.

Duggan et al (2014). Social media update. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/

Dogoriti,E. & Pange, J. (2014). Instructional design for a "social" classroom: Edmodo and Twiiter in the foreign lanaguge classroom. ICICTE 2014, 154-155.

Internet world stats (2014). Internet in Europe stats. www.internetworldstats.com

Kwong, V. (2007). Reach out to your students using MySpace and Facebook. Indiana Libraries, 26(3), 53−57.

Lim, D. H., & Morris, M. L. (2009). Learner and Instructional Factors Influencing Learning Outcomes within a Blended Learning Environment. Educational Technology & Society, 12 (4), 282–293, 282-284.

Lou, S. J., Wu, S. C., Shih, R. C. & Tseng, K. H. (2010). Adoption of blogging by a Chinese language composition class in a vocational high school in Taiwan. Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 26(6), 898-916. http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet26/lou.html

Li, L. Y. & Chen, G. D. (2009). A coursework support system for offering challenges and assistance by analysing students' web portfolios. Educational Technology & Society, 12 (2), 205–221.

Messieh, N. (2012). Survey: 37% of your prospective employers are looking you up on Facebook.http://thenextweb.com/socialmedia/2012/04/18/survey-37-of-your-prospective-employers-are-looking-you-up-on-facebook/

Online learning consortium (OLC), 2013: Using Facebook to facilitate class discussion in the blended learning environment. http://olc.onlinelearningconsortium.org/conference/2013/blended/using-facebook-facilitate-class-discussion-blended-learning-environment

Online college session: http://www.onlinecollege.org/2009/10/20/100-ways-you-should-be-using-facebook-in-your-classroom/

Snelling, D. (2014). 10 things you never knew about the social media site. http://www.dailystar.co.uk/tech/363872/FACEBOOK-TURNS-10-Here-s-ten-fun-facts-you-never-knew-on-Facebook-s-10th-birthday

Warschauer, M., & Kern, R. (Eds.). (2000). Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Yang, Y. F. & Tsai, C. C. (2010). Conceptions of & approaches to learning through online peer assessment. Learning & Instruction, 20(1), 72-83. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.01.003