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Reform in ELT Strategies in Postmethod Era: Newest Breakthrough to Promote English Literacy



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Breakthroughs to Promote English Literacy”**

**English Department  
Faculty of Teacher Training & Educational Sciences  
Galuh University**

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*“Reform in ELT Strategies in Postmethod Era: Newest Breakthroughs to Promote English Literacy”*

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## **Online English Discussion (OLD) via Facebook to Provide Learners with more Opportunities to Use English Language in an Academic Setting**

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### ***Abstract***

*One of the problems that the English learners face in trying to improve the competency in English is the minimal opportunities to use it for real communication. Internet technology can offer help to solve the problems as by the use of social networking sites (SNSs) as Facebook, Twitter, Weblogs, Youtube, etc. Research found that those kinds of social network tools support educational activities by making interaction, collaboration, active participation, information and resource sharing (Selwyn N. , 2007). This study was aimed at seeing how on-line English discussion via Facebook could provide language learners with more opportunities to use the target language in an academic setting. The study was conducted in the English Education Department of Sultan Agung Islamic University. The subjects were the students taking the course of The Introduction to Second Language Acquisition. A Facebook group was created and the students were added as members. The teacher posted issues related to the course and asked students to discuss. Amazingly, many students took part in the discussion and presented elaborated arguments or comments; the ones that never happened in classroom discussions. The activities were observed and analyzed. It was concluded that facebook group could be a good place where learners have opportunities to use the target language, and in the same time, share knowledge on the subject matter.*

**Keywords:** *online discussion, facebook, target language use, students' participation*

### **Introduction**

One of the problems that the English learners face in trying to improve the competency in English is the minimal opportunities to use it for real communication outside the classroom. It is because in Indonesia English is a foreign language which means that English is not used in daily lives and, therefore, the English learners are likely to have minimal exposure to English, and have little opportunity to use the language for interactions with members of the native English community (Saville-Troike, 2012). English as a foreign language also means that students are lack of opportunities to practice their speaking skills in a meaningful way (Krashen, 1981).

It is therefore, classroom very often serves as the only place available for learners to practice using the target language naturally and meaningfully either with their teachers or their friends. Unfortunately, classroom sessions are constrained with times and walls. One session weighting 2 credits usually lasts around 90 to 100 minutes which will be used for teacher's presentation, students' responses, and other activities to stimulate learning. In the case of teaching content subjects at English Education Department of Sultan Agung Islamic University (UNISSULA) as *Introduction to Second Language Acquisition (SLA)*, 90 minutes is only enough for topic presentation –either by the teacher or groups of students, three to four questions or comments as responses from the students, and feedbacks from the teacher, which can only involves the teacher and students attending the session.

While the act of producing language the students are learning through speaking and writing is very crucial in the process of language learning as suggested by the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985), or the input hypothesis by Krashen (1981) that input is not only necessary but sufficient in itself to account for acquisition; and that fluency in speaking or writing will come naturally after learners have built competence through comprehensible input, this kind of classroom practice cannot offer much help for both the teacher and students in developing their language proficiency.

This condition is very often worsened by the passivity of the students. Many students are not very responsive and tend to be 'quiet' during the teaching learning process. When the teacher or a

group of students finishes presenting learning materials and offers the classroom members for questions or comments on what has been presented, very few students respond them voluntarily. The teacher's comprehension checks as 'Do you have questions?' or 'Do you understand what I mean?' very often are responded by silence. This kind of silence very frequently happens because students really don't have anything to say, the material is not engaging, or they need some more time to process and understand the topic presented. They, therefore, feel reluctant to interact and participate in learning activities.

It is believed that exposure and interaction are crucial in language acquisition or language learning since interactions either between teacher and students or between student and student will expose learners with real language use (Lier, 1988). Through interaction, students can have more inputs and, therefore, their language store will increase as they listen or read materials. Students will have opportunities to develop their production of language they are learning as they listen to their friends in the classroom (Rivers, 1987). It is, therefore, language teachers, including content subject teachers, are expected not only present the content materials but also engage students to use the target language as intensive as possible both inside and outside the classroom. For content subject teachers, the benefits of making interactions are twofold. First, the students are more exposed to the target language, and the second the contents will be better understood because of knowledge sharing among the members of the class. However, having observed common conditions and practices of traditional classes as described above, the teachers are now facing with the challenges.

Internet technology can offer help to solve the problems of traditional classes as time and space constraint so that the learners will have more time and opportunities to use the target language. One of them is by the use of social networking sites (SNSs) as Facebook, Twitter, Weblogs, Youtube, etc. Research found that those kinds of social network tools support educational activities by making interaction, collaboration, active participation, information and resource sharing (Selwyn N. , 2007).

This research was aimed at seeing how Facebooks – more specifically online English discussion via Facebook- could provide English learners in a content subject class to have more opportunities to use English as the target language in an academic setting. What it means by an academic setting in this paper is learning activities in content subject itself, in this case topics presented and discussed in the course of the Introduction to Second Language Acquisition.

## **Literature Review**

### **Online Discussion**

Online discussion is a type of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in which individuals in different places can communicate, share ideas and feeling on certain topics either synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous communication means the communication is conducted in a real time and there is no delayed response, while in an asynchronous communication, delayed response is possible because the individuals involved in the communication don't have to be bounded in a real time framework. In education, online communication is an advantage considering that teachers and students cannot always be in the same classroom at the same time, while learning should be extended beyond the classroom wall.

Research found that the use of online discussion forum promotes students' higher-order thinking skills as well as students' critical thinking and enable equal participation (Zhang, Gao, Ring, & Zang, 2007). It is because online discussion, especially the asynchronous one, provides the participants with more time to understand topics and ideas of the discussion, think and create their own responses (Yildiz & Bichelmeyer, 2003); students can reread, revise and proofread before posting (Hewitt, 2000). Online discussion forum can also provide insightful reaction to others' contribution (Black, 2005) , but it did not improve students' performance in reading, grammar, and vocabulary (Zhang, Gao, Ring, & Zang, 2007). In an EFL context, online discussion can promote and accelerate L2 development (Omar, Embi, & Yunus, 2012).

### **Facebook**

For SNSs available today, Facebook which for the first time was designed and introduced by Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard student, in 2004 as a Harvard-only social network site, is the most popular with more than 900,000,000 estimated unique visitors per month (www.ebizmba.com). It is also the

most popular SNS the young people and students (Petrovic, Petrovic, & Jeremic, 2012). In the United States of America, 90% of Facebook users are students (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), between 85% to 99% university students used Facebook (Junco, 2011), and more than 90% of students of 18 to 23 years old used Facebook on daily basis (Alhenshiri, 2011).

With its popularity and potential, together with other factors as usefulness, ease of use, social influence, facilitating condition as well as community identification (Mazman & Usluel, 2010), it is not surprising that teachers and educators are now adopting Facebook as teaching-learning platform either to substitute or to complement the teaching activities in their traditional classrooms. For teachers, with Facebook they can easily post announcements, course materials (texts, photos and videos), provide links to useful learning sources, provide feedbacks, etc, while for students, they can share ideas and information with both teachers and friends, and in the same time maintain social relation with other users with personal profiles. This adoption is positive as studies found that social network tools support educational activities as facilitating interactions (Selwyn N. , 2007), creating collaboration opportunities and information sharing (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008), facilitating interaction and collaboration (Mason, 2006), providing informal learning opportunities (Mazman & Usluel, 2010), promoting active learning and collaboration (Malony, 2007), and improving students' awareness, attitudes and skills (Martin, 2006), increasing students' productivity (Petrovic, Petrovic, & Jeremic, 2012), and participation (Pollara & Jie, 2011).

On the field of language learning, there have been some studies on the use of Facebook. The findings among others are as follows: Facebook can provide learners with attractive social interactions as well as a new way to find cultural information that stimulates language learners to further explore a target culture on their own, thereby becoming active partners in discussion and exchange (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012), students' attitude towards Facebook use in language classroom was mostly positive (Eren, 2012), online discussion in Facebook group could generate an authentic and more effective discussion in English learning (Omar, Embi, & Yunus, 2012), Facebook can effectively assist college students in learning business communication in English (Shih, 2013).

## **Method**

This study adopted classroom action research as the method which, following Gall, Gall & Borg (2005), is done by practitioners to improve their own practice. What was to be improved was the level of students' participation in discussions of topics assigned to them. By getting involved in the discussions, they would have opportunities to use the target language in a meaningful way. Students' participation in classroom discussion was mostly very low and the lecturer was very concerned about this. When the teacher or the moderator had the sessions for question-and-answer or discussion sessions, usually only one to three students really responded. When asked why not participated in the discussions, some students said that it was not easy for them to quickly find ideas to respond. They wished they had more time to think and to understand what the real issues were. Secondly, some other students did have ideas to respond, but they were very reluctant to participate because of their language problem. They were afraid that the language they were using for making questions or comments would be considered as 'inappropriate'.

The participants of the research were the students of College of Languages of Sultan Agung Islamic University who were taking the course of *the Introduction to Second Language Acquisition*. It is an obligatory course for the students of English Education Program. There were 45 students and they had one classroom meeting in a week and the writer was the lecturer of the subject. Though, the students were encouraged to use English in and outside the classroom, their main everyday languages were actually Indonesian and Javanese.

The study started on the second half of the semester after the students had midterm examination. It was announced to the class that besides having regular meeting once a week as scheduled, the class would use Facebook to support the teaching and learning process for the rest of the semester. A Facebook group was created and the students were added as members. The teacher then posted topics related to the course and asked students to have an online discussion. The teacher would play a role as a moderator and as a motivator at the same time.

The research used 2 types of data for the study. The first were the discussion threads in the Facebook group. The writer copied the discussion and analyzed. The second data were collected to



focus group discussion. The objective of this data collecting was to understand how students felt about the method. The data were then analyzed qualitatively.

## Results and Discussion

During the first week of the implementation of the action, the lecturer simply posted a topic on the wall and waited for responses. This did not work well, however, the lecturers' post concerning the topic of the study was not really responded. Very few comments appeared. The writer found that the students were still very reluctant to participate; they were not confident enough to respond or share ideas about the topic on the wall. Therefore, in the following weeks, the lecturer changed the plan. In every beginning of the class, the lecturer spent around 10 minutes reviewing comments already made by the students, displayed the facebook group activities in the classroom using LCD, rewarded students who had participated by click "like", and encouraged them to do more.

On the following weeks, this method of encouragement, slow but sure, worked well. More and more students participated in the discussion. Forty five students taking the course of *the Introduction to Second Language Acquisition* joined the group, 30 students (66%) participated in the interactions by making new posts or comments. Although it was only 66%, this was much higher than the number of students usually participated in regular classroom sessions. Surprisingly, many of the students who posted comments on Facebook were not quite active in the classroom. Some of them were even labeled as the "shy and silent" students.

This is an example how the discussion happened. Once, the teacher posted the topic about the role of grammar teaching in SLA. The post said "*Does anyone like to give comment on the topic we discussed this week on the Role of Grammar Teaching / formal instruction in SLA? Are you really favor of Krashen that grammar teaching is not necessary? or on the contrary that grammar teaching is helpful for acquisition?*" On the same day, this post was responded by 6 different students with 8 posts. On the following days, the topic was still responded until finally the teacher closed it and offered the students a new topic. Overall, it lasted (from the beginning of the post to the last comment made by student) for 25 days involving 17 students with total 31 comments and 5 moderating comments from the lecturer. These figures clearly show that online facebook discussion was highly more effective in providing the learners opportunities to use their English. The total number of students participated in and the total number of comments made were much higher than the total number the ones usually happened in traditional classroom discussions.

Here are some excerpts taken from the threaded discussion about the topic:

Student_1	<i>i choose teaching grammar is important. because without grammar our utterances will be mess.</i>
Teacher	<i>great. there are reasons to believe so.</i>
Student_2	<i>As for me, I'm in favor with krasen's words that said Grammar is not necessary. Because for second language acquisitioner 1. it takes so much time to master all the rules of grammar, not to mention that not all the rules are completely described, not all the rule are included in the textbook, teachers do not teach all the rules and so forth.. 2. If we think to much about grammar, its too difficult to make a good conversation in real life also 3. By thinking grammar we automaticly will also thinking about the correctness or focusing on form, that makes us hard to deliberate the emotion while communicating a message of interest. In conclusion, grammar is likely important for most people when they take a grammar test and it can improves writing skill rather than speaking skill in real life conversation.</i>
Student_3	<i>To answer this question, I remember this sentence: "learning doesn't make fluent". Whereas fluency is very important in acquisition. So, i choose grammar is not necessary because acquisition focuses on fluency, not the rule of grammar..</i>
Student_2	<i>but without grammar, we may make our friends confuse about what we r talking.</i>
Student_3	<i>Misunderstanding can be helped by having many vocabularies and using gesture to communicate with others. Yapz, this question is debatable. So, it's okay if we have different opinion as long as it's reasonable.</i>
Student_4	<i>It depends on the context of situation, In writing skills grammar is a must, but in speaking skills grammar not really necessary, because in communication the main point is the</i>

	<i>speakers can understand what do they deliver each others, even native speakers themselves don't use grammar in their daily conversation.</i>
Student_5	<i>well, gramar is an important thin but also we can say the opposite,,i can say it depend on the context we stand.</i>
Student_6	<i>Grammar is also important, If we focus on fluency,but do not consider about grammar rules ,It would be fosilized...for students...</i>
Teacher	<i><a href="#">Hart</a> Excellent discussion, really ENLIGHTENING (mencerahkan). OTHERS, we're waiting for your participation. and please THUMB UP (or jempol) if you like. and those who have commented, please provide more arguments to defend your position. the member who get the most thumb, will be considered as the the most favourite. Hooowoowww keren.</i>
Student_4	<i>Just to strengthen my argument, most of american native speaker will say: "where gonna go"it should be where do you go, " you gotta class " it should be, you have class. "We get a go" it should be, we have to go,etc.... Moreover just reflect to yourself when do you want to say" apakah kamau mau makan? You will simply say " mau makan g? Apakah kamu sudah makan? You will simply say" dah makan lum? Finally, to me, grammar is not really necessasry in communication , H ð ð =D H ð ð =)) H ð ð =)) H ð ð. What do you think?</i>
Student_7	<i>grammar is important for writing skill..., for speaking skill is not really important.. but grammar also help in speaking..</i>

When comments are grouped into 2 categories namely focused –when the comments are relevant to the topic- and unfocused –when they not relevant, the analysis found that all comments made to respond the topic belong to focused category. All were relevant to the topic being discussed. This meant that the students were serious. While Student\_1 responded directly to options provided by the teacher by saying that (teaching) grammar is important because without grammar the language will be mess, Student\_2 proposed a very elaborated argument in favor of Krashen. The discussion then developed with more students participating and more arguments presented in different perspectives.

The excerpt of the threaded discussion above also shows that, despite the problem with language especially in spelling, the comments were carefully thought before being posted. Students must have had a certain level of understanding and could apply a critical thinking skill to be able to comment. Consequently, they should have undertaken some reading activities on the relevant materials. As the lecturer of the course, the writer did not present the argument for and against the teaching grammar elaborately, however, the comments made by students clearly demonstrated that students were able to build the knowledge on the issue independently through reading, listening, information sharing and exchanging with other group members.

The number of comments made by students clearly shows that online discussion via Facebook increased students’ participation. This was amazing. While a topic presented in a classroom would only had one to three responses, the topic presented in an online discussion had a very much higher number of responses and involved a bigger number of students. Thirty comments as responses to Topic 1 were made by 17 students, while 11 comments in Topic 2 were made by 8 students. This increased student participation is in line with Zang et al (2007) and Yildiz & Bichelmeyer (2003). It was also observed that even students who were used to be passive in a classroom discussion took part in the discussion. They seemed to be confident enough to participate.

When classroom session is constrained with time and walls, OLD is very flexible. The discussion can still go on throughout the days, even when the week changes. This is very evident on the above data. Topic 1 was effective for 25 days, and Topic 2 was for 14 days. This means that the opportunity to participate in the discussion and, therefore, use the target language for discussing academic topics is open wide. It is also very interesting to see that the members of the group could present and elaborate ideas in response to the topic very well which would rarely happen during traditional classroom session.

When students were asked to comment on the use of online English discussion, 16 students responded. Except the problem related to wifi facilities for internet connection, they mostly agreed that the online English discussion via Facebook was positive. It was evidence from the following comments:

*I myself feel it is effective enough for the important case which is generally felt by almost of students : a bored condition to do anything also giving any assignments which always happen in the class, just like refreshing our mind, while we open to the social network to get relax, then we also can check any subject posted there, so have fun and no more nervous feeling before we think twice that's just a modified form of class condition moved, the others is same, about materials, exercises, or an announcements related to the subject, a notice for us, sometimes we still underestimating this kinds of time solution, tough the benefit is so clear include to utilizing the sophisticated of internet itself certainly, to make our work easier as make a study group like this one, so it can managing a batch of students in the same subject taken, than if we can move forward to the next step to be better, why not?*

*Yes sir.... this group is very interesting n help full for improving our knowledge.*

*I can learn more from this group.*

*There are more than 10 comments in every status or argument which has been made by mr. Hartono. so, we can conclude that this new method is quite good. although in others class this method is not running well. but so far this method helps us to be brave to give or put our arguments. but, there are so many problems in this method, and the most important problem is about internet connection,, I will bravely says that our WIFI facility is really bad. most of us is middle class students and we need free internet connection and in our university the internet connection or the hot spot is not running well. yeah, so please repair or improve our internet facility first and then we can use this method so well.*

*i'll make an addition here that this media (facebook) is good for developing students' ability in English, especially for their writing and grammar and through this media students could express their opinons without feeling of shy as what we know that many students are shy or unconfident to express their opinions or comments when they are in the class, but through this media i think not ..... In my opinion using facebook in learning is very useful for improving English. In other side there are some students prefer writing in expressing their language , rather than speak in front of the class.*

.....

To complete the data, at the end of the semester, focus group discussion (FGD) was organized to explore possible encouraging and discouraging factors that might motivate the students whether to take part or not to take part in the online discussion. The FGD involved students who did take part in the discussion and those who didn't. Those who agreed with the online discussion said that the online discussion was less stressful and less face-threatening than the classroom discussion because they were not required to respond very quickly, they had enough time to understand the topic and prepare opinions. Some students also mentioned that although they knew the topic discussed in general, very often they didn't know the details so they were not confident enough to take the turn. More time was required for them to formulate and consolidate ideas before they finally could firmly believe that the response they wanted to make would not embarrass them.

Students who did not participate in the online discussion explained that their problem was the availability of internet connection, they could not always follow the discussion time by time. When they finally got free internet connection as at campus, there have been a lot comments and theirs were about the same.

## **Conclusion**

The research was conducted to see the effectiveness of online discussion using facebook to give students more chances to use the target language in academic setting. It was found that based on the number of participants involved in the discussion, online discussion successfully engaged more students to contribute in the discussion which means that more students practiced using language in a meaningful way. Online discussion provided an extra place for students to exercise their English and in the same time built their knowledge on academic topics by applying more student center learning. Students could have more flexible time to analyze as well as synthesize information, prepared argument pro and against the proposition and built confidence to speak out. Students found that the use of facebook in that way was positive. Online English discussion via Facebook could

compensate the time and space constraints of traditional classrooms as well as build better academic knowledge for the students. Teacher could adopt this type of social media to support their teaching practice. Observing these kinds of benefit on learning, universities should not ban facebook at campuses. If social media are used wisely, they will help us improving the quality of learning.

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