

EFFECTS OF FACEBOOK TUTORING ON LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Social media use has become increasingly embedded in everyday life. Among various social media, Facebook is a highly interactive virtual social communication tool and it has become increasingly popular on college campuses. Research results have indicated that Facebook could be an effective platform for informal learning. However, most of current studies in the educational use of social media seem to pay more attention on college students or adults. This study, however, explored the effects of Facebook tutoring on learning English as a second language for children. 60 elementary students from a supplementary English tutoring program were evenly divided into Facebook tutoring group and traditional classroom teaching group. Instructional strategies of communication, collaboration, and information sharing were given to both groups. The results indicated that children participated the Facebook tutoring generally exhibited a positive attitude toward this new type of learning experience. The learning achievement for the Facebook group was also significantly higher than the traditional classroom group. It is concluded that providing with proper strategies, both student's learning attitude and learning achievement were positively affected by the Facebook tutoring.

KEYWORDS

Facebook, learning English as a second language, social network, supplementary tutoring

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, people frequently use the Internet as a social medium to interact with each other and expand their social circles, share information and experiences, and organize communities and activities (Bourlard, Krishnamurthy, Sun, Zhao, & Liu, 2012). Social media provide multiple dimensions for developing creative learning strategies that allow students to connect formal and informal learning settings. Students can find like-minded people and organize informal knowledge exchange for educational purposes (Wodzicki, Schwämmlein & Moskaliuk, 2012). The use of social media applications in teaching and learning has garnered substantial interest among educators (Cain & Policastri, 2011).

Web-based social networking platforms such as Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook offer users communication and interaction channels to link with friends, family, and community. Among them, Facebook has become increasingly popular on college campuses. Any Facebook user can easily search and view any user's Facebook page through the Facebook network (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007).

Most current studies in educational use of social media seem to pay more attention on college students or adults. However, many younger children have begun to bring social networks into their daily life. They may be a substantial group with the potential to learn with social networks as children rely on interaction with others who share their interests in new experiences.

Children are curious, active and creative while learning language (Lin, 2008). Blattner & Fiori(2009) indicated that various usages of Facebook can be integrated in foreign language courses. Children could experience authentic language interactions and develop socio-pragmatic awareness (e.g., language use in specific contexts, relationship building...), which are often absent in textbooks. In Taiwan, such notions are particular interest since learning a second language, especially English, is considered to be the most important supplementary work after the regular classes for many school children.

This paper provides a successful example of learning English as a second language via Facebook for Taiwanese children. We believe the promising results found in this study could draw better attention to the issue of learning a second language via social network interactions.

2. EDUCATIONAL USE OF FACEBOOK

In recent years, social networks have been widely accepted as efficient platforms for academic communications, especially on university campuses. According to Blattner & Fiori (2009), Facebook is the largest social network that boasts more than 100 million members, and it is one of the fastest-growing and best-known sites on the Internet. As McLoughlin and Lee (2008) pointed out, Facebook has multiple functions of communications, information sharing, and collaborative construction and modification.

Although early in the Facebook appeared, the main reason for students using Facebook was keeping contact with friends (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007), Wodzicki, Schwammlein and Moskaluik (2012) later discovered that students would be in favor of exchanging informal experiences if a collaborative and sharing environment is embedded in the Facebook. Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, and Witty (2010) found that in compare with traditional face-to-face interaction, students prefer to communicate with teachers via Facebook. This may reduce an immediate embarrassment. Cain and Policastri (2011) claimed that Facebook provides an informal learning environment for presenting contemporary topics and the thoughts of guest experts not affiliated with a college or school, thereby exposing students to relevant “real world” issues.

Mazman and Usluel (2010) recognize Facebook has three types of educational functions: communication, collaboration and resource/material sharing. Communication consist of activities such as enabling communication among students and their instructors, facilitating class discussions, delivery of homework and assignments by teachers, informing about resources and links related to courses; consist of activities such as people's joining to academic groups related to their schools, departments or classes and carrying on group works by sharing homework, projects, and ideas; collaboration consists of activities such as exchanging multimedia resources, videos, audio materials, animated videos, resources and documents.

3. SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Harrison and Thomas (2009) recognized that web 2.0 technologies have been advanced as potentially transformative in the area of foreign language learning. They believed that web 2.0 technologies are presenting new opportunities for developing diverse online learning environments and enhancing interactivity, participation and feedback between students, their peer groups and teachers. They further argued that language learning is not only how learners develop their language skills, but also how the learning process impacts on their overall personal development in terms of cultural values and beliefs, something that has been generally overlooked in computer-assisted language learning research to date.

Blattner and Fiori (2009) indicated that Facebook could be an effective platform for language interactions. Godwin-Jones (2008) also believed that Facebook could benefit interpersonal communications. They believed that unique functions of Facebook provide a constructive learning environment while maintaining a certain degree of privacy and safety.

Some evidences have been established for the fact that Facebook helped language learning. Ajjan & Hartshorne (2008) recognized that active users could improve their communication and writing skills through virtual social interactions with Facebook. Mill (2009) discovered that language learning with Facebook was effective as virtual social activities help students develop better verbal communication competences in the real world. Moreover, Shin (2011) used Facebook as the platform to perform peer evaluation. The result indicated that peer evaluations at Facebook significantly improved student's learning interest and learning motivation. These positive results all supported that social interactions via Facebook affect the outcomes of language learning.

4. LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN TAIWAN

English is the most popular language in the world. Most countries take English as second language. Private supplementary tutoring of English has a long history in parts of East Asia (including Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan). In Taiwan, many Taiwanese parents send their children to language cram schools to learn English in order to get a competitive educational advantage. Most of the teachers at cram schools use their own teaching materials. Some teachers are emphasized their textbooks are very effective. Many cram schools treated English as a formal learning subject and mainly focusing on reviewing school textbooks therefore students had no time to practice communicating each other with English (Su, 2011). Promising development is that some of the supplementary tutoring program at cram schools have recently employed social network as the communication and teaching platform (Suchiao and Yachin, 2012).

5. METHODS

An experiment was done to examine the effects of Facebook-facilitated English tutoring. The instructional context was a series of home assignments for an after-class remediation program in which activities requiring peer-to-peer and teacher-to-peer communications via Facebook were designed. Experimental subjects were divided into Facebook communication group and traditional classroom group. After the experiment, a learning motivation questionnaire and an achievement test were given to collect data. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the effects of Facebook-facilitated tutoring on student's learning motivation?
2. What are the effects of Facebook-facilitated tutoring on student's learning achievement?
3. How do the students learn with the Facebook?

5.1 Subjects

Subjects were 60 elementary school children in an English supplementary tutoring program in Taipei City of Taiwan. They were under age from 9 to 12 and were randomly assign to the experimental group (Facebook-facilitated group) and control group (traditional classroom teaching group). Before the experiment, subjects in the experimental group all had Internet connection at home. The experiment lasted for 6 weeks.

5.2 The Instructional Design

A six-week instructional material was designed with two major emphases: vocabulary and grammar. The same material was applied for both experimental group and control group. Each week, an independent topic was taught with a variety of instructional strategies including discussions, explorations, and information searching/sharing. The experimental activities were executed upon the reinforcement section, in which the fallible parts of the material were reviewed. For the experimental group, Facebook was used as the communication platform in which students discussing and collaborating to achieve reinforcement learning tasks, as well as sharing each own resource with other participants. For the control group, traditional drill and practices, group discussions, questions and answers were performed in the classroom. The major difference between the two groups was that for the control group, there was no Internet activity involved. Table 1 describes the experimental process for each group and Figure 1 displays the sample Facebook learning screen.

Table 1. Learning activities

| Activity | Experimental group (via Facebook) | Control Group (in classroom) |
|------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Communication | Teacher-student dialog | Teacher's lecture |
| | Student-student dialog | Students raise questions |
| Collaboration | Teacher announce discussion topics | Teacher announce discussion topics |
| | Student online discussions | Students discussions in groups |
| Sharing resource | Student uploading assignment | Teacher hand out remediation material |
| | Teacher/student feedback | |



Figure 1. Sample Facebook learning screen

5.3 The Research Instrument

In order to collect data for statistical analyses, two major instruments- a learning motivation questionnaire and an English achievement test were designed.

5.3.1 Learning Motivation Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed based on Keller's (1983) IMMS (Instructional Material Motivational Survey) and Pintrich's (1989) MSLQ (Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire). It has two factors and six phases. The following table displays these factors and phases in detail.

Table 2. Content of learning motivation questionnaire

| Factor | Phase | Sample question |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Personal (Internal) | Interest of learning | I feel interest in learning English |
| | Professional development | I can spell more words and use correct grammar |
| | Problem-solving | I can solve the problem that teacher raised |
| Environmental (External) | Social learning | I like to share my information with others |
| | Web learning | I like to find answers from the Internet |
| | Self-paced learning | I like to learn with my own pace |

The questionnaire was consulted with two elementary school English teachers. Modifications were made as evaluator's suggestions. The revised questionnaire was then given to 30 students who did not attend the experiment to ensure the reliability. The overall reliability for the personal factor was .758 and environmental factor was .761. These reliabilities were considered to be fairly acceptable.

5.3.2 English Learning Achievement Test

According to the instructional design, student's learning achievements on vocabulary and grammar were tested. The test consists of spelling, fill-in-blank, and short-answer type of questions. The test was given to the same 30 students to verify the reliability. The result was that the overall reliability of the test was .729, indicating the test had very good reliability.

6. RESULTS

This study employed a single-test true experiment. Subjects were randomly assigned to experimental and control group. The experimental context was in a cram school in Taipei City of Taiwan in which supplementary tutoring was provided to enhance regular school education. 30 students were assigned to each group. The experimental group utilized Facebook as virtual communication, collaboration, and sharing platform, while the control group performed the similar instructional activities in a traditional classroom. The instructional materials were designed for remediation and practice. A learning motivation questionnaire and an achievement test were given after 6 weeks of experiment. Following sections discuss the results of the data analyses.

6.1 Facebook Effects Regarding Student's Learning Motivation

Motivational data were collected by the learning motivation questionnaire. Learning motivation divided into two categories: personal (internal) motivation and environmental (external) motivation. A dependent t-test was performed to examine the difference between these two categories. A significant difference was found ($t=4.53$, $p<.001$) in the experimental group, looking up the descriptive data, we concluded that external motivation was higher than internal motivation for the experimental group. Facebook tutoring has more effect for external (environment) motivation. Table 3 displays the result of the t-test.

Table 3. T-test of internal and external motivation

| | <i>n</i> | Mean | SD | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|---------------------|----------|------|-----|----------|----------|
| Internal motivation | 30 | 3.87 | .35 | 4.53** | .003 |
| External motivation | 30 | 4.11 | .72 | | |

$P<0.01$ **

Pearson product moment correlation coefficient process was performed to examine the relationship between learning motivation and learning achievement. A significant correlation was found between external (environmental) motivation and learning achievement ($r=.25$, $p<.05$). However, there was no correlation between internal (personal) motivation and learning achievement. Table 4 displays the result of the correlational test.

Table 4. Correlational test for learning motivation and achievement

| | <i>n</i> | Pearson <i>r</i> | <i>p</i> |
|---------------------|----------|------------------|----------|
| Internal motivation | 30 | ,15 | .21 |
| External motivation | 30 | .25* | .04 |

$P<0.05^*$

6.2 Facebook Effects Regarding Student's Learning Achievement

According to the instructional design, the test was examining student's achievement on vocabulary and grammar. First of all, an independent t-test was performed for the experimental and control group to examine the overall effect of Facebook tutoring, that is, the total score of the two categories (vocabulary and grammar) was employed. The result indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups ($t=2.56$, $p<.05$) in terms of the overall learning achievement. This result indicated that Facebook tutoring had significant effect for overall learning achievement. Table 5 displays the result of the t-test.

Table 5. T-test of learning achievement

| | <i>n</i> | Mean | SD | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|----------|-------|------|----------|----------|
| Experimental group | 30 | 88.50 | 7.32 | 2.46* | .017 |
| Control group | 30 | 83.83 | 7.36 | | |

$P<0.05^*$

We further looked up the achievement in the two categories. For the category of vocabulary, significant result was also found in the independent test ($t=2.91$, $p<.01$). For the category of grammar, however, the effect of Facebook tutoring was not significant ($t=.374$, $p=.71$). This finding is interesting. We believe that vocabulary is easier to learn and remember than that of grammar, due to the fact that major difference in lingual expressions between Chinese and English does exist. It is hard to learn English times for most of the children in Taiwan. The specific reasons for the non-significant of the grammar learning may need further investigations. Table 6 and table 7 display the result of the t-tests.

Table 6. T-test of learning achievement on vocabulary

| | <i>n</i> | Mean | SD | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|----------|-------|------|----------|----------|
| Experimental group | 30 | 36.25 | 4.55 | 2.91** | .005 |
| Control group | 30 | 32.16 | 6.18 | | |

$P<0.01^*$

Table 7. T-test of learning achievement on grammar

| | <i>n</i> | Mean | SD | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------|----------|-------|------|----------|----------|
| Experimental group | 30 | 52.25 | 6.44 | .37 | .71 |
| Control group | 30 | 51.66 | 5.62 | | |

6.3 How did Student Learn with Facebook

During the experiment, the instructor conducted a reflexive log in which his observations and reflections of student's learning conditions were recorded. We summarized the important notions in this reflexive log in the following sections.

6.3.1 Learning Motivation

We found that there was a gain in learning motivation for the experimental group. With compare to the control group, the students learned with Facebook exhibited more positive attitude and performed more peer interactions. Students seemed to prefer more to discuss the questions on Facebook than in the classroom. Some of the "quiet" students in the class demonstrated high interest in replying questions and argue with peers on Facebook. We believe some students who usually hesitate to express their thought face-to-face may have more intention to communicate with others in a virtual environment.

6.3.2 Learning Activities

Multiple activities (communication, collaboration, resource sharing) were designed as the instructional strategies. Students in either groups felt such activities were interesting. The interactions among peers were tremendously increased. We believe that both groups were benefitted from this multiple learning activities, especially for the experimental group, students experienced learning in a virtual environment. The Facebook provided a more private, more flexible, and more adaptive environment that made the students gain better achievement.

6.3.3 Learning Style

Student's learning style was changed for both groups. Students needed to prepare what to discuss and how to answer the questions raised either by teachers or peers. Students felt they were participants during the learning process rather than listeners. For the experimental group, student's messages posted on Facebook could be seem simultaneously by all class members. Therefore they needed to be more careful to avoid possible mistakes. They also experienced how to review instructional information more cautiously.

7. CONCLUSION

This study intended to explore the effect of Facebook tutoring for learning English as a second language. The children participated the Facebook tutoring generally exhibited a positive attitude toward this new type of learning experience. The learning achievement for the Facebook group was also significantly higher than the control group.

Specific findings regarding learning attitude suggest that for Facebook tutoring, student's external (environmental) motivation was higher than internal (personal) motivation. Further exploration on the relationship between learning motivation and learning achievement also showed that external motivation was highly correlated with the learning achievement. These phenomena may represent that Facebook did provide a flexible environment for students to communicate, collaborate, and share. Positive results were also found in learning achievement. There was a significant difference for learning achievement between Facebook tutoring and traditional classroom teaching. However, there was no difference on grammatical achievement. We suspected that with compare to Chinese, English grammar has major differences in lingual expressions. Further investigations are necessary to develop proper strategies that may help learn English grammar on Facebook.

In summary, Facebook provides the unique functions that facilitate teachers to develop activities incorporating communicating, collaborating, and sharing strategies. These strategies are considered to be effective in learning with social network. This study evidenced that providing with proper strategies, both student's learning attitude and learning achievement were positively affected by the Facebook tutoring.

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