DEVELOPING ARABIC WRITING SKILLS USING FACEBOOK

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Abstract

Writing is a challenging task to many foreign language learners. This study describes an attempt to use Facebook to teach writing to Arabic learners. Facebook allows users to share messages, not only in one-to-one but also in one-to-many mode of communication. The thread of communication posted on the wall was analysed. The posts revealed that Facebook was widely used by students to communicate. A total of about 89 comments or feedback were given by peers for every writing activity, with an average of four comments made on each student's work. Arabic was used by the students, and the feedback focussed on grammatical and spelling errors. The survey revealed that majority of the students preferred using the Facebook to develop their writing skills.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to investigate Facebook as a tool to develop second language learners writing skills. Writing in second language is one of the most challenging phases of learning a second language (Kassim R. 2009). In the context where the language is hardly used for writing purposes, the learners will face difficulties to develop and practise their writing skills. As mentioned by Schlig (2007) that writing in the second language is often done only in the classroom. So, providing a good environment for fostering students writing skills outside classroom environment is a need crucial for this type of learners.

Today with the existence and the booming of technological era, the complexity of developing second language skills has changed. Students are now surrounded with the advantage of web where the world today is connected by the latest version, Web 2.0. The network is now the fundamental structure of social organization both real and virtual (Mason & Rannie,2007 p.6). For second language or foreign language learners, they now have the opportunity of live communication and online discussion with their classmates through this social network web. Such system may encourage students to apply the language skills that they are learning. Rozina & Nuraihan (2003), mentioned that the technology can hence increase students' opportunities for collaboration and active participation. It also gives them more opportunity to participate as everybody can contribute their ideas without having to wait for their turn.

Facebook, a famous social network site, becomes the integral part of students' daily lives and most people's daily practices (Cloete, Villiers, & Roodt, 2009). Facebook users can share messages, not only in one-to-one but also in one-to-many mode of communication. Such attributes may facilitate collaborative reading and writing (Warschauer and Kern, 2000 as cited by Rozina & Nuraihan 2003) This study is therefore conducted to investigate how Facebook can be utilized as a platform to develop students' writing skills through the concept of peer editing. As mentioned by Chandra (2003), peer editing in context of the teaching of writing is defined as "*interaction between writers and reader to help the writer to improve his/her own abilities and to produce his/her own text*" (p.11).

Therefore, the issue of finding firm platform for writing activities for students may be overcome with the usage of Facebook. This social website may offer a more conducive learning environment where students are not only able to gain help from native speakers but also to collaborate with each other to enhance their writing skills.

This paper is an attempt to investigate Facebook as a platform for developing Arabic learners' writing skills. Zainol Abidin (2003) stated that the problem with Arabic language learners is that they are incompetent in writing. The limitations are evident in exercises, tests, examinations and other activities. It is therefore believed that, classroom

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activities and schedules only are inadequate to fix the incompetency. Furthermore, the Arabic-speaking surrounding is only confined within the classroom schedules. Thus, it is fundamental to set up a platform for students to write and interact through writing with the initial focus is to make these students accessible to the native language speakers.

2. Literature review

2.1 Peer review in writing

Good student writers can be well trained using peer editing. As stated by Brokens (2002), that "good writers will become great writers if opportunities are given to them to receive feedback pertaining to their work" (p.43). Therefore, it is important to train writing students how to respond to other students' writing. This is the key to improve their writing skills (Brokens, 2002).

The concept of peer editing or peer review is based on the view that writing activities is social in nature and that writers belong to a discourse community. So, student writers, peers and teachers are part of a discourse community that gives opportunity for the process of idea generation and revision of a piece of writing. Peers can give feedback to enable the writer to revise his prose. On the other hand, teachers may offer guide, support, and advice wherever needed in the process of writing (Chandra, 2003). Franklin (2010), stated that through peer review activity, students can build their community beyond the classroom.

2.2 Writing and web 2.0

Web 2.0 is a writable webpage in which users can read and write. This technology provides a new platform for writing activities which are more engaging and more connecting to an audience (Keller 2009). This application of social interaction allows users to connect, communicate and collaborate directly, be it in oral or written form (Feham, 2006). According to Hartshorne & Ajjan (2009), "web 2.0 applications depend on user contributions and interactions as driving forces, providing settings and opportunities for both social connectivity and collaborative environments, each considered by many constructivist theorists as important elements of effective teaching and learning environments" (p. 185).

The focus of this study is solely for academic writing, not any posts on free chat but more towards controlled academic setting. Besides, according to Cintrch & Zeccola (2009), the communication through web social made " children lose the ability to pick up on nonverbal cues when they rely only on written text" p. ?

There are numerous applications on Web 2.0 that provide platform for writing and engaging activities on the internet such as blogs and wikis, yet this study will only focus on the most popular social networking website among users especially students, the Facebook.

2.3 Pedagogical aspects of Facebook

Facebook, as was started by Mark Zuckerberg when he was a student at Harvard, is one of the largest and best-known social-networking web site, offering people a chance to find and connect with friends and individuals with similar interests (Lerner, 2008)

A study by the National School Boards Association and Grunewald Associates found that 96% of students online are already in the social networking. What is surprising is that over half of the students use these tools to talk about education, school, researching college options, and doing homework. The study points to the huge potential of these tools to revolutionize education (Harver, 2007).

Social networks like Facebook have growing pedagogical potential, because it offers an opportunity for students to share ideas, knowledge, and individual and group activities (Cloete, Villiers, & Roodt, 2009).

Facebook serves as a stunning tool in teaching a second or a foreign language as mastering a second or a foreign language necessitates students' involvement in outside-classroom activities. "*The successful mastery of a foreign language will depend on learner's autonomous ability to continue their journey beyond the classroom and the teacher*". (Brown, 2007: 70).

According to Fovet (2009), Facebook has become an extreme importance for students with their adaptation to school and their management of peer relations (Fovet, 009). In addition to this, Cloete et. al (2009) has listed some potential advantages of making Facebook as a educational tool (p. 17) ;

- It is already integrated into students' daily life.
- Higher level of engagement.
- Adds "social" peer-to-peer component

2.4 Theoretical framework

The theory of learning in this study is called "social constructivism". Learning throughpeer editing in Facebook environment can create a Zone of proximal development (ZPD). As cited form Lantolf and Thorne (2006:p.86) "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers".

3. Statement of the problem

In the classroom, teacher-student and student-student interaction is limited hence has failed to assist in developing writing skills (Zawawi, 2005). This may due to the limited exposure to the target language in the classroom interaction. In the case of Arabic language in the context of Malaysia – where the language is hardly used- an authentic environment for learning the language has to take place. This authentic environment can be provided by the facilities on Facebook which its popularity has grown extensively at universities and colleges (Cloete, 2009). Writing is a social activity (Chandra, 2003). In addition to that, writing, the "academic contexts is governed by the communicative purposes shared, and communicative conventions sanctioned, by the member of specific discourse community" (Zhu 2004 p.29). Social networking web, Facebook can be a great platform for this because it will create community discourse among members. Students will receive feedbacks from their peers and then this may improve their writing. There are a lot of research findings discussing the positive effects of using web 2.0 technology like Wikis and blogs in teaching. But, there are not many studies done on Facebook. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap by focusing on the use of Facebook to develop second language learners' writing skills through peer editing.

3. Research methodology

3.1. The research questions

Since such researches are rare, the following research questions are raised to investigate the actual potential of Facebook in developing writing skills among students;

1. Can Facebook be a good platform for students writing activities?
2. Did peer editing using Facebook platform improve Arabic writing skills?

In short, this study aims at investigating the use of Facebook to develop Arabic writing skills through peer editing.

3.2. The research setting

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Research on using Facebook for educational purposes especially in developing writing is a recently initiated concept. Therefore, the researcher chooses to use case study method as it can cope with complex phenomena and it widely used for exploratory purposes (Robson, 1993). It is assumed that case study method is able to assist researcher to investigate learning process and patterns of interaction in Facebook based activities.

The participants in this study are the undergraduate of Teaching Arabic as a Second Language in Institute of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia. There are 18 students in the class, ranging in age from 21 to 24. The students in this Arabic Skills class meet once a week. One of the skills taught is writing skill. The lecturer is a native speaker with Phd in Arabic Language Curriculum. He has been teaching Arabic as a second language for more than 25 years in Malaysia.

3.3. Facebook group for Arabic writing

The researcher set up a Facebook group account named "maharah al kitabah" which is accessible through the URL: *http://tinyurl.com/kitabah*. To access and to be a member of this Facebook closed group, the user must have a Facebook account. Once the permission to join the group has been approved by the group administrator, the member can start to participate in the group activities. Opening a Facebook group account is less complicated and require no 'ask friend' for connection. To put it simply, students' personal profiles are not accessible from this account. Earlier researches pointed out that students are normally against the idea where lecturers can access their profiles (Wan Ahmad 2011). What makes this Facebook closed group account fascinating is every post and comment made by the members will be notified to all. Thus this allows the researcher an effective observation as members are always alert with friends' posts and comments. The essential features in writing activities are 'doc' and 'comment'. A Facebook group will be created by the researcher with the help of the lecturer involves in teaching the course. Students will be told that homework for the course will be conducted through

Facebook and all students have to register themselves into the group. This Facebook group task comprised of three stages :

Stage 1 : Every students will be asked to write an Arabic a short summary using Facebook note editing and post it to the wall. They are required to summarize an Arabic short story entitled "قصة مصور مسكين وأسرته" which is selected by their lecturer between 50 – 80 words. The summary writing is chosen for this task because it is the most typical writing skills and real-life challenges for L2 learners in academic contexts (Baba, 2009: 191). Students will be awarded a total of 20 points for the summary. They are allocated one week to complete this task.

Stage 2 : Students will be asked to give feedbacks and comments to help each other to improve their writing within the given period. They may also edit their colleagues' works directly by opening the post and clicking the 'edit' button. When editing process is done, the names of editors will appear under the post. They may edit their works based on the feedback and comments. The researcher observes the comment threads and editing done by peers. The score for the summary after peer editing will be recorded. The Assessment Scale for written work adopted from Jacob et. Al (1981) as showed in Table 1, was used by the researcher to rate the students' writing. But, for this summary writing assessment, only the aspects of language will assessed.

Language	30-27	**Excellent to Very Good**: Confident handling of appropriate constructions; hardly any errors of agreement, tense, number, word order, articles, pronouns, prepositions; meaning never obscured.
	26-21	**Good to Average**: Well-formed sentences, but constructions are not always appropriate to task (register); some errors of agreement, tense, number, word order, articles, pronouns, prepositions; meaning sometimes slightly obscured.
	20-15	**Fair to Poor**: Insufficient variety of constructions available; problems mainly in complex constructions; several errors of negation,

		agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions; meaning sometimes obscured.
	14-9	**Very Poor**: Major problems in sentence construction; frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions; meaning often obscured.

Table 1 shows the assessment rubric in language aspect used to asses.

Stage 3 : After the writing activities are completed, a short online survey is posted by the researcher to the members of the group. The survey consist of 6 questions on students perception on the use of Facebook for Arabic writing skills.

4. **Findings**

4.1 . *Findings from the Facebook wall posts*

This students' task in the Facebook closed group took 3 weeks. All footprints left by students on the wall were evidence of peer editing activities and learning process. It demonstrated that students are able to learn from Facebook writing activities. The most important observation through students' interactions and comments on the post revealed the usefulness of this social web to be used as a learning tool in learning writing. These findings supported the suggestions that the technology can hence increase students' opportunities for collaboration and active participation (Rozina & Nuraihan 2003). The posts and rapid visit by students in daily basis revealed that Facebook is widely used by students to communicate and this will encourage students' engagement with the subject learnt making the process a more meaningful and motivating.

4.2 *Comments by peers*

There are 89 comments or feedbacks posted by peers on every writing activity (Refer to table 4) with an average of 4 comments received by every student on their writing. This indicates a good interaction between students in these activities. The members of the group seem to give feedbacks on their friends' writing especially on language parts. The peer editors mostly focused on grammatical errors and spellings. Figure 1 shows one of the writing activities and comments on the Facebook wall. Students also used Arabic language in their interactions. The peers not only respond to their colleague's writing through comments, but some also went directly to the post and edited the writing. Figure 2 shows a writing edited directly by a peer. The name of the peer editor appeared below the post.

Student	No. of comments
1	4
2	2
3	16
4	9
5	5
6	0
7	4
8	4
9	5
10	2
11	4
12	3
13	10
14	3
15	3
16	4
17	7
18	4
Total	**89**
Av.	**5**

Table 4 : The Number of comments on the students' writings.

Fig. 1. Facebook wall displaying a student's writing and peer comments.

Fig. 2. A post directly edited by peer through edit button.

4.3. *Findings from the scores rubric received after and before peer editing*

Despite having peer editing at every post pasted by students, the researcher discovered that there is an improvement in terms of language use in the writing. Table 5 shows us the results of students writing assessment in terms of the language.

Student	Before Peer Editing	After Peer Editing
1	23	24
2	19	19
3	20	23
4	22	23
5	20	20
6	19	19
7	22	22
8	19	19
9	18	19
10	19	19.5
11	20	21
12	20	20
13	23	23.5
14	22	22
15	21	21
16	19	20
17	20	22
18	22	22

Table 5. The result of summary writing assessment.

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre Peer Editing	20.44	18	1.542	.364
	Post Peer Editing	21.06	18	1.688	.398

Table 6: The means scores and standard deviation of assessment rubric for pre and post peer editing.

The mean score of the summary writing essays was increased by .61 from pre peer editing activities to after peer editing activities. This indicates that there is a statistical improvement in the essay scores from the pre to the post peer editing activities (see table 6).

4.4. *Findings from the short online survey*

This study also examines students' perception of Facebook use for Arabic writing skill course. Out of 18 students involved in this study, 14 students responded to the survey. The result of the survey shown in Table 1.

1. In general, do you prefer Facebook Group for your writing skill activities?

Always	29%
Usually	36%
Sometimes	29%
Never	7%

2. Do you trust your peer-editor's comments and respond to them in your writing through Facebook?

Always	29%
Usually	21%
Sometimes	50%
Never	0%

3. Are your colleague comments helped to improve your essay?

Always	36%
Usually	57%
Sometimes	7%
Never	0%

4. Do you feel your comments helped your colleague improve his/her essay?

Always	43%
Usually	29%
Sometimes	29%
Never	0%

5. How would you rate the "coolness" of Facebook Group for peer review in Arabic writing?

Excellent	36%
Good	50%
Average	14%
Poor	0%

6. Would you be more likely to join Facebook Group for other courses for next semester?

Always	57%
Usually	14%
Sometimes	21%
Never	7%

Table. 3. The online short survey result on the use of Facebook for writing skill course.

The survey shows that 65% of students involved in the study prefer the use of Facebook group in writing class activities. Only 29% preferred to use Facebook sometimes. Most students trusted their peer editing and they believed that the editing improved their writings. An important finding of this study is that 76 % of students rated Facebook is a cool platform for Arabic writing activities while 14 % rated as average. Similarly, majority of the students preferred the use of Facebook for other courses. A very small percentage had negative feelings toward use of Facebook for this academic purpose.

5. Discussion

On the whole, the research reveals that Facebook is an excellent platform for activities in teaching a second language. It is also observed that writing activities motivate students' collaboration in Facebook group through peer editing. Furthermore, they also encourage students' engagement to the subject. Students, moreover are not only engaged with the posts on the wall but also become more observant of their friends' writing.

Since members are always notified for all updates and comments received, students are eager with the respond made by their friends. It is just like allowing students to meet the audience who give responds to their writing. The result of the online survey depicts that students agree if Facebook is used as a teaching tool in the courses they followed.

This research also proves that there is writing improvement after peer editing process in Facebook. The improvement degree is small because 50% of the participants are unconfident with the corrections made by their friends. This might be caused by the uncertainty of the corrections made by their friends.

In answering the research questions, it can be said that;

(1) Facebook can be a good platform for students writing activities. There are a lot of positive effects of using these tools for second language learning such encouraging collaboration and making students to get the audiences to read and respond to their writings.

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(2) Peer editing using Facebook as a platform can help students to improve quite fairly in their writing.

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