

Facebook Activities and the Investment of L2 Learners

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Abstract

The article discusses the investment of L2 learners in the English language on Facebook that they portrayed through their Facebook activities. It studied four informants consisted of diploma students in a Malaysian university. The study consisted of 14 weeks of online observation and semi-structured interviews. Data were collected from online observation and semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis and Second Cycle Coding. The findings revealed that there were five Facebook activities that were used by L2 learners to improve their English language proficiency: (a) writing posts and comments in English, (b) reading news feeds in English, (c) participating in interest-based Facebook groups, (d) watching movies in English, and (e) communicating with foreign Facebook friends. The most popular Facebook activities were writing posts and comments in English and reading news feeds in English.

Keywords: investment, L2 learners, Facebook

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, English is considered as a second language since Malaysian university students have learned the language for more than eleven years in formal contexts. However, the undergraduates often face challenges in mastering the language. Maesin, Mansor, Shafie and Nayan (2009) indicate the lack of conducive language environment to practise the language skills contribute to the poor English language proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates. L2 learners in Malaysia find it difficult to exercise their English language skills outside of their formal classes due to lack of language opportunities (Shima, Ghazali, & Roselan, 2012). Nooreiny and Indira (2015) state that one of the difficulties faced by university students was the inadequate time spent practising the English language during class hours and these L2 learners resorted to their own alternatives such as reading English materials, practise the language with friends and watching movies. Therefore, Web 2.0 technologies offer more language opportunities to L2 learners.

Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis, social network sites, Twitter and Instagrams are commonly used by people to collaborate, interact and express their ideas, create and retrieve information (Lomicka & Lord, 2009; McBride, 2009; Wang & Vasquez, 2012; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). Social network sites allow people to interact and communicate regardless their locations to share ideas and opinions which benefit L2 learners. In addition, Web 2.0 technologies are embedded in university students' social and academic lives (McBride, 2009). Therefore, the initiatives of higher education institutions to incorporate Web 2.0 technologies in learning and teaching are applaudable to accommodate the needs of the Millennials or Generation Y. Web 2.0 technologies positively affect L2 learners (Buzetto-More, 2012; Shih, 2011; Wang & Vasquez, 2012).

The most popular social network site in Malaysia is Facebook as Facebook expects to reach 10.6 million Malaysian users in 2016 (Statista, 2016). Being the most popular social network site, Facebook offers rich language learning environment to L2 learners as many L2 learners realise they do not have enough language learning opportunities outside their formal learning opportunities. However, the instructors need to identify which Facebook activities that the students invest in to improve their English language proficiency. The study is important as the findings shed lights on the effective Facebook activities chosen by L2 learners so the instructors could incorporate these Facebook activities in their lessons.

2. Literature Review

It is essential to know L2 learners' investment in learning the English language on Facebook. Norton Peirce (1995) explains that learners invest in a language because they want to acquire symbolic and physical resources

to increase their cultural and social capital. Norton and McKinney (2011) propose an identity approach to second language learning which considers L2 learners as having multiple changing identities and aims to understand the participants' experiences. Initially, the usage of Facebook in formal learning contexts was doubted as Facebook is used for informal learning purposes; however, it is currently used at higher education institutions (Leaver & Kent, 2014). Latisha, Aizan and Paramjit (2015) propagate that Malaysian university students invested in learning the English language on Facebook for the occupational, academic and empowerment purposes as English is recognised as the international language and Facebook is chosen as the social network site was the most popular social network site in Malaysia.

Studies indicate that the extensive usage of social network sites (SNSs) in the students' lives influence their learning styles (Mazman & Usuel, 2010; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Munoz & Towner, 2009; Omar, Embi, & Yunus, 2012). The students show positive attitude towards Facebook. Other studies indicate that students improve their language learning proficiency that prompted instructors to look at Facebook for ways to incorporate in their teaching (Lockyer & Patterson, 2008; Nakatsukasa, 2009) as Facebook became the most popular social network site for education purposes (Omar, Embi, & Yunus, 2012). Facebook improve language learning and facilitates language teaching as the students were more engaged with learning and their investment in the second language increased as they were sharing their work with their Facebook friends (Mills, 2011; Solomon & Schrum, 2007).

Many studies show that Facebook encourages students' involvement and investment in language learning (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Harwood & Blackstone, 2012; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Mills, 2009; Shih, 2011; Wang & Vasquez, 2012; Yunus & Salehi, 2012). Gamble and Wilkins (2014) studied 97 students of three private universities in Japan on the impacts of using Facebook in L2 learning. The findings suggested that the students had favourable impressions on using Facebook. However, the students prefer social topics rather than academic topics and they detested long discussions as they had difficulties of the discussions due to the chronological structure of Facebook.

Suthiwartnarueput and Wasanasomsithi (2012) studied 83 first year students at a university in Thailand and indicated improved their writing due to the grammar discussion they had on their Facebook pages. Shih (2011) advocates that students learn grammar, vocabulary, writing paragraphs and spelling. Meanwhile, Promnitz-Hayashi (2011) says Facebook activities can help lower proficiency students to engage with their Facebook group members as their study of 27 lower proficiency students taking part of a secret Facebook group, they became more expressive and interacted with their classmates.

L2 are more active when they use Facebook because they become engaged learners (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Djiwandono (2015) explains in his study which included blended learning that consisted of face-to-face learning with informal learning on Facebook that learning on Facebook discourages passive participants. Whereas, Sari (2014) reveals that Facebook motivates discussions among members since the students felt the sense of belonging to a community. Blattner and Fiori (2009) revealed that Facebook encourages community building among Facebook users.

Even though many studies indicate that Facebook stimulates students' interests in language learning, some students are reluctant to participate in some Facebook activities. Kasuma and Wray (2015) highlighted even when the participants professed positive interest in using Facebook in learning the English language, they were passive and failed to contribute significantly to the actual Facebook group discussion. The participants were passive as they perceived the topics discussed in the Facebook groups were irrelevant as the topics did not support their language learning needs and they were overwhelmed by their academic demands. The participants were interested in interest-based topics such as entertainment, grammar and the university. Chen (2016) advocates that since many instructors use Facebook language learning in their classes, the lack of effective pedagogies of teaching English language on Facebook is worrying to ensure the efficacy of learning English on Facebook.

3. The Study

3.1 Research Question

The study was conducted to investigate the investment among four L2 learners on Facebook. The following research question was stated below:

- 1) How do the informants invest in learning the English language on Facebook?

3.2 Research Design

The study uses a qualitative multiple case study that allows the researchers to understand the informants' investment in learning the English language as their second language. Multiple case study enables the researcher

to compare the different cases to predict similarities and differences (Yin, 2003). The study consisted of online observation and semi-structured interview.

3.3 Informants

The study consisted of four diploma students who were active Facebook users and were selected using purposive sampling with criterion sampling strategy. The informants had to fulfill two criteria: (a) diploma students, and (b) Facebook users. The researchers posted the call for the informants of the study in their Facebook accounts. Six potential informants contacted the researchers, but four of them attended the briefing for the research. During the briefing, the potential informants were informed about the research. All of them agreed to participate in the research. The informants consisted of two male informants and two female informants aged between 18 to 21 years old.

Table 1. Profiles of the informants

Nickname	Gender	Age	Level
Rara	F	20	Intermediate
Kembara	M	20	Intermediate
Hati	M	20	Intermediate
Nan	F	20	Upper Intermediate

3.4 Research Context

The research context is Facebook accounts of four informants. The university is the state campus of the largest university in Malaysia. The campus is located in the north Peninsular Malaysia, and the majority of the students are diploma students. The language of the instruction is English; however, the medium of communication is Bahasa Malaysia. The semi-structured interview was conducted in a quiet office on the campus.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

The study involved the online observation of four informants' Facebook accounts for fourteen weeks. During fourteen weeks, the researchers observed the informants' Facebook accounts to determine the informants' activities, which were pertinent to their English language learning. At the end of fourteen weeks, the informants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The informants were interviewed at a comfortable office on the campus. Each informant was interviewed for 35 minutes. The informants were asked questions based on the online observation such as "Why do you often comment on your friends' status?", "How does Facebook help your English language learning?", and "What are the benefits of Facebook groups to your language learning?". The transcripts were transcribed verbatim.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data collected were managed using Atlas.ti 7 and were analysed using thematic analysis to identify the experiences using two cycles of coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Member checking was conducted as the researcher allowed the informants to read the transcripts of their interviews and the findings of the study. The study also included peer debriefing where an experienced qualitative researcher checked the coding process.

4. Findings

The results of the study are described based on the research question:

4.1 How do the informants invest in learning the English language on Facebook?

The data suggests five emerging themes from the online observation and the informants' interviews.

4.1.1 Theme 1: Writing Posts and Comments in English

Kembara showed he was committed and invested in learning the English language. His investment in learning the English language was clearly depicted on his Facebook as he communicated with his Facebook friends in English although he struggled to improve his language proficiency when he. Kembara was an active participant on Facebook. He described:

Extract 1

When I am bored, I will scroll up the updates and I just write from that Sometimes when I feel angry, boring. Just to express feelings. To share ideas with each other. Sometimes they post information. No, actually just read.because it makes notifications crowded. Share pictures. I want to share my friends the latest of me. My Fb, I choose the language – English to improve my English. (Kembara)

Kembara wrote Facebook comments in English and used non-verbal communication (emoticons) to convey meaning.

Rara posted her status and comments in English. Rara learned from the feedbacks she received on her status such as free grammar lessons when her Facebook friends corrected her language. She stated:

Extract 2

instead of using Bm, I use English for my FB. Sometimes I update my status in English because my mom taught me why don't you try to write your status or everything in English.my mom is confident by writing in English.. It was fun when I was reading my status in English. I don't expect to write in English better. I love to write in English. In a facebook group usually we have more than one race not just malay, Indian and chinese ..just like my friends at school. The chinese and Indians will talk in English with their family so we ..the malays will talk in English with them sometimes..So I have to post in English..depending on the situations. (Rara)

She indicated that her mother was her role-model of a fluent English speaker as her mother was confident in writing in English. Her mother suggested that she should express her opinions and feelings in English on her Facebook so that she could improve her writing skills. Rara followed her mother's suggestion. She realised she needed to practise her English on her Facebook. Moreover, she had friends from other races who she communicated in English.

Hati disclosed that he only responded on academic topics as he used his Facebook to keep track with academic events, classes and campus news. Hati admitted:

Extract 3

I do participate when about something important like information about new assignments or newsfeed or news about colleges. (Hati)

Hati did not participate in other topics as he used his Facebook account for academic matters.

Meanwhile, Nan wrote her comments in English if her Facebook friends wrote in English as she did not want to offend her friends as most of her Facebook friends used Bahasa Melayu as the language to communicate. She described:

Extract 4

I will comment in English because they use English so I respond in English. (Nan)

4.1.2 Theme 2: Reading News Feed in English

All four informants confessed that they improved their English language proficiency by reading their news feeds in English. Nan preferred to read articles and posts shared by her Facebook friends. She rarely posted on her Facebook unless if she was tagged by her friends or the post stirred her interest. She believed her News Feed, which listed updates of her Facebook friends on her Facebook home page, was helpful to assist her English language proficiency.

Extract 5

I don't like to update my status. Because sometimes I don't know what to post in Fb so I just like to read other people's posts. Sometimes people post about articles and if I find it interesting...I will read it..Newsfeed because people share the articles (Nan)

However, Kembara refused to comment sometimes due to the notification function of the Facebook. Once he commented on a post, he would be notified whenever Facebook users commented on the same post. He admitted:

Extract 6

When I get notifications, they will be In English.and friends from other countries, use English to communicate. I think news feed is useful...when somebody updates their status in English. (Kembara)

Hati preferred reading the posts on his Facebook. In the example below, Hati illustrated his Facebook activities.

Hati also acknowledged that Facebook helped his English proficiency as he was able to read articles and journals shared by his Facebook friends. He used his dictionary to find out the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Extract 7

FB is really helpful in improving my English because when there is articles or journals or something posted in English, I will read them and sometimes when there is something I don't know, I will check in my dictionary to improve my vocabulary. (Hati)

Rara believed that reading her Facebook friends' news feeds improved her English language proficiency as there were many of her Facebook friends who had high English language proficiency who could help her improve her English language. She summarised:

Extract 8

because maybe there are people who speak English and have better grammar than me.(Rara)

Rara hoped that reading her friends' Facebook news feeds helped her learn more about the English language which could assist her English language proficiency.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Participating in Interest-based Facebook Groups

The first emerging theme is participating in Facebook groups disclosed that the informants invested in learning the English language. Hati invested in learning English language by communicating in English with his Facebook friends in his Facebook groups. He confessed that he was active in three Facebook groups which revolved around Japanese culture as he was interested in Japanese culture. In these groups, he learnt basic Japanese in English as the members of the groups communicated in English. Thus, he learned to improve his English proficiency at the same time as he learnt Japanese. He described:

Extract 9

I have found 3 online groups that post every day about Japanese lifestyles. Moreover, they have the words and sentences and the meanings which help me to know how they talk. I comment and they reply. I usually ask in English and they reply in both languages; English and Japanese. My Japanese is not that good yet. I am active in 3 groups... The groups post a lot on pronunciation and grammar. (Hati)

Hati concluded that the members of his Facebook groups taught him to improve his language proficiency.

In Rara's case, she was active in a Facebook group which consisted of international Korean Pop fans who loved Korean movie stars and singers.

Extract 10

Sometimes when we talk about similar things..yes such as Korean pop groups... It was fun when I was reading my status in English... I don't expect to write in English better. I love to write in English. maybe the informants in the group will speak more English rather than Bahasa melayu. I should write more in English may be (Rara)

She conversed in English with her Facebook friends who shared a similar interest in Korean Pop culture.

Nan only participated in Facebook groups only when the posts were based on her interests such as jokes, food and entertainment. She elaborates:

Extract 11

if the post is interesting, I will comment. If they talk about something hilarious or something interesting like film star or food.

If her Facebook friends' posts were about other topics, she would only read the posts.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Watching Movies in English

Only two informants watched movies on Facebook to improve their English language proficiency. Kembara watched movies in English with English subtitles. When he did not know the vocabulary, he would study the words by using a web dictionary and a traditional dictionary. He explained:

Extract 12

I watched movies and down load the subtitles. When I come across words that are unfamiliar, I would study the words (Kembara).

Whereas, Rara watched British movies to learn about the accents as she was interested in developing British accents. She felt that having the accent accentuated her ability to be a fluent English speaker. She professed:

Extract 13

I read the English subtitles. My favourite movies are Harry Potter movies because they are British English. (Rara)
Rara admitted that she improved her language by reading English subtitles when she watched the movies as she was able to practise her pronunciation and developed her British accent by mimicking the actors.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Communicating with foreign Facebook friends

Kembara realised that being active on Facebook had benefited his English language proficiency since he had been communicating in English with his foreign friends.

Extract 14

The members are foreigners to improve my English. They should have basic and strong grammar and pronunciation. The members help when we ask questions about anything we have problems. share something..they will comment.(Kembara)

One of the benefits he reaped from having international Facebook friends was rich opportunities to communicate in English.

Rara used her Facebook to establish relationships with her international friends by liking pages and initiating Facebook relationships by sending Facebook friends' requests.

Extract 15

I will try asking my foreign friends. I use English when I talk to my online friends. I discuss about Korea..the country..the culture..the food..the film stars..the movies.. (Rara)

5. Discussions

The findings show that Rara portrayed that she employed all five Facebook activities that indicated her investment in learning the English language. Whereas, Kembara invested in four Facebook activities to improve his English language proficiency. Meanwhile, Hati and Nan participated in three Facebook activities. The findings concur with the study conducted by McKay and Wong (1996), who stated that the participants' investment in the language skills depended on the perceived values of these skills which were related to the learners' identities.

There are two most popular Facebook activities. The first one is writing posts and comments in English as all the informants invested in this activity. Kembara, Rara, Hati and Nan believed that when they wrote their posts and comments in English, they would be able to improve their English language proficiency as they expressed their opinions and feelings in English. The informants hoped that they learned from the comments given by their Facebook friends. The second Facebook activity is reading news feeds in English. All four informants confessed that they learnt new vocabulary and improved their language skills by reading their friends' news feeds as some of their friends had better English language proficiency. These friends expressed their views on current issues in English.

The second popular Facebook activity is participating in interest-based Facebook groups as Hati, Rara and Nan confessed that they were only active in the Facebook groups that they had a sense of belonging. This finding concurs with Alm (2006), who suggested that L2 learners improved their language skills when they became active participants in their communities.

Watching movies in English and communicating with foreign friends are the third popular Facebook activities chosen by Kembara and Rara to invest in learning the English language. Hiew (2012) in her study of using 46 informants' dialogue journal using a secret Facebook group indicates the informants' effective way to improve their English is to watch movies. Meanwhile, findings from other studies suggested that L2 learners learn to create global online identities from their international Facebook relationships (Black, 2007; Lam, 2000; Murray, 2005). Apart from that, Sockett and Toffoli (2010) disclose that the students use Facebook to communicate with native speakers.

6. Conclusions

The researchers focussed on the evidence given by the informants for their desire to learn the English language. In all cases, the informants displayed evidences of investment they made to improve their English language proficiency. The informants were active and responsible learners. The most popular Facebook activities were writing status in English for experts' comments and reading Facebook newsfeeds. The second popular activity is participating in Facebook groups' discussions. The least favoured Facebook activities are communicating in English with foreign Facebook friends and watching English movies. A common view amongst the informants

was that the informants chose their language enhanced activities.

All the informants heavily invested in mastering the English language. Their investment was portrayed in various language enhancement activities on Facebook. For instance, Rara invested in many language enhancement activities made available by Facebook by actively participating in online activities by expressing her feelings and communicating with her Facebook friends. The significant difference was the informants' chosen activities that the informants concentrated on to improve their English language skills. For example, Rara sharpened her writing skills by writing posts and comments in English. Hati invested in improving his English language proficiency as he communicated with his Facebook friends in English. Many of his Facebook friends were foreigners and locals who were not Malays. Thus, he was presented with many opportunities to communicate in English. Hati confessed that he used the messenger to have private conversations with his foreign friends while NFranco loved reading articles and posts in English posted and shared by his Facebook friends. Kembara, Hati, Rara and Nan participated in many language activities afforded by Facebook with their Facebook friends. They invested through participating in Facebook activities which benefited their language learning. These findings suggested that the informants actively took part in their preferred Facebook activities so that they could improve their English proficiency as they perceived English as an important language to their present and future needs.

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