When a Facebook Group Makes a Difference:
Facebook for Language Learning

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Abstract
This paper investigates what Iraqi students gain from interacting in English in a Facebook group in an EFL context. An online questionnaire of eight multiple-choice and two open-ended questions was provided to the participants, who are university students studying English. Thirty-five participants responded to the questionnaire. In addition, four participants and one teacher were randomly selected for phone interviews. For data analysis, mixed methods analysis was conducted since the data were both qualitative and quantitative in nature. For the qualitative data analysis, the “grounded” approach was used to identify “patterns” or “themes”, and an “a priori” approach for the focused questions and responses previously determined by the researcher. As for the quantitative data analysis, percentages of responses of each Likert-scale question were calculated. The outcomes of this study are potentially important to both students and teachers who want to expand learning opportunities for students outside the classroom.

The use of Facebook is becoming increasingly prevalent in society today. For example, some students from the Department of English, Translation and Interpretation, College of Arts, University of Mosul, Iraq, keep a Facebook group for sharing ideas, translations, and other language-related aspects. A student in the group may, for instance, post an idiom and ask other members of the group to discuss its meaning. Another student may ask other students to give feedback on his or her translation, or offer corrections on the grammar used in a certain text.

Upon observing the increasing number of students joining this group and interacting in it, I thought it would be intriguing to look at what students believe they gain from it, especially when no one has explored the use of Facebook in the Iraqi context. This paper discusses the
use of a Facebook group created for a group of students from the University of Mosul for English pedagogic purposes, and examines students’ perceptions of the benefits resulting from interacting in the Facebook group. It also highlights the factors that help learners engage or interact in English with their peers and teachers in this group.

Although other studies have focused on interaction and motivation in using Facebook for educational purposes, which overlap with my study, their focus was mostly on teacher perspectives and use inside the classroom. This study, on the other hand, focuses on the perceptions of a specific group of learners who have limited opportunities for language practice and use the Facebook group as a venue for practicing English outside the classroom. More specifically, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What do students believe they gain from using Facebook to practice their English communication skills?
- What social, psychological, and linguistic factors contribute to students’ willingness to interact on a Facebook page?

Benefits of Facebook for the Learning of English

Facebook interaction can occur among learners in a specific group created by their teacher. Teachers can create private groups for their students to share knowledge within the group, give comments on posts and ask and answer questions (Baran, 2010; Richardson, 2010). Thus, Facebook may be used as an ELT supportive tool.

Students who use Facebook can notice improvement in their writing over an extended period of time (Najafi & Hashemi, 2011). One of the reasons is that posts and comments remain for a while, so learners can see them and compare old posts to new ones.

Additionally, Manan, Alias and Pandian (2012) report that Facebook activities increase the level of interaction among learners through providing a safe learning environment. Learners at a low proficiency level feel more comfortable and less threatened when they participate in online activities than face-to-face in-class discussions, which are mainly dominated by the high proficiency learners. Further, Facebook enables students to collaborate and engage in healthy competition with each other, which, as a result, increases their learning (Harris & Rea,
2009). For example, through engaging in discussions, asking questions, and requesting for feedback and opinions, learners can notice the progress their peers are making and feel motivated to do better.

**Students’ Willingness to Use Facebook**

According to MacIntyre, Burns, and Jessome (2011), willingness to communicate has to do with how likely it is that individuals will get involved in communication with others when there is no obligation for them to do so. As mentioned, this study looks at willingness to use Facebook. According to MacIntyre (2007, p.568), “Intergroup motives stem directly from membership in a particular social group, and interpersonal motives stem from the social roles one plays within the group.” If MacIntyre is right, learners’ motivation to use Facebook can come from their motivation to learn from each other and their perceptions of the individuals as belonging to a group.

Baran (2010) showed that learners believed that interacting with their peers on Facebook motivated them to learn due to the competition that occurs among learners of various language proficiency levels. Additionally, Hayashi (2011) suggested that what makes the students more willing to participate is that they control the information they share and the materials they post, and they decide on the difficulty of the subjects they discuss with others, which helps them avoid embarrassment, thus creating a safe environment.

**Method**

The study was based on a questionnaire that was designed using Survey Monkey (see Appendix 1). Phone interviews were also conducted with the five participants to verify the findings of the questionnaire. The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, while the data collected from the interviews were only analyzed qualitatively.

The first question in the survey was inclusive of most if not all constructs addressed in the research questions, including interactional, psychological, social, and linguistic factors. That same question overlaps with the rest of the questions, in particular question 4, because there was a need to see if there was consistency in responses. In this first question, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with certain statements on a scale of 1 to 6 with 1= strongly
agree, 2= agree, 3= somewhat agree, 4= somewhat disagree, 5= disagree, and 6= strongly disagree. The responses with their percentages are presented in figure 2.

**Participants**

The 35 respondents in this study were undergraduates and MA students who study English at the Department of English, and Translation and Interpretation, College of Arts, University of Mosul in Iraq. The students were all members of the Facebook group, which had a membership count of 138. Most, if not all, the participants spoke Arabic as their native language and English as their second language, and most had had little or no contact with native speakers of English. The participants’ age range was 20-30 years old. The MA students represented 62.9% of the participants, fourth year students 17.1%, third year 14.3, and second year 5.7%.

Five male participants (four students and one teacher) were chosen for a follow-up interview due to their experiences with the Facebook group and also their high English proficiency levels; the teacher is the only one who did not participate in the questionnaire. The four students are Ayman, Muhanad, Yousif, all of whom are English MA students, and Hani, an English BA holder who had just finished university (2013) and is now planning to pursue an MA. The fifth participant, Furat, is an English MA holder, teacher and administrator of the Facebook page. All five participants started learning English in the fifth grade of primary school. The phone interview participants were all male because it is not culturally appropriate in Iraq for men to telephone women who are not their relatives.

**Analysis of Questionnaire Data**

The questionnaire data were analyzed using mixed methods analysis (qualitative and quantitative analyses). For the two open-ended questions (questions 9 & 10), qualitative analysis was used. Quantitative analysis was used for calculating the percentages and the number of respondents who responded to the rest of the questions. The assumption was that this study would showcase the students’ perceptions of interacting in English on the Facebook page. The results of each question will be discussed in order. However, question 1 will be discussed together with question 4 because they overlap.
Willingness was also interpreted roughly in terms of how many times students visit the page. Most participants reported in question 3 that they visit this page once a day. Some visit it more than once a day as we can see in Figure 1. Based on the responses, I believe that the number of visits to the page can somehow reflect a student’s willingness to communicate on Facebook. As we can see from Figure 1, the majority of respondents reported that they visited the page once a day at least. Further, other respondents stated that they visited the Facebook page more than two times a day.

Figure 1: Frequency of students’ visits to the page (question 3).

The responses from question 1 of the survey indicate that 54.3% of the participants mostly used the Facebook page for socializing in English, 48.6% used it for vocabulary learning, and 25.7% used it for seeking feedback and for improving translation skills. Otherwise, 31.4% acknowledged the importance of the page for course work and classes. As mentioned, question 4 was used to verify the results from question 1. Results from both questions were similar. The set of results from question 4 as presented in Figure 2 indicates that participants mainly used Facebook to practice using English, learning new vocabulary, and socializing. The category where the students had to explain “other” uses presents some interesting findings. One of the respondents reported, “I visit this page in order to know the level of education that the members of this page have reached.” Another response was, “I use this page to exchange different ideas and communicate with other students, and teachers.”
When a Facebook Group Makes a Difference

Figure 2: Uses of the Facebook page (question 4).

Figure 3 shows students’ responses to question 5, which asked them about their feelings about other members of the group. It shows that students commonly felt comfortable with other members. More specifically, 71.4% of respondents felt comfortable sharing their posts with others. Others felt motivated when they received positive feedback. In the “other” category, a student reported, “I feel comfortable when I make mistakes and one of the members correct it, because I feel that there is someone takes care of me.”

Figure 3: Students’ feelings about other members of the group (question 5).
The learners’ perceptions of the effectiveness of using the Facebook page for learning are shown in Figure 4 (question 7). Over 50% of the respondents said that the page helped them learn vocabulary and motivated them to learn and practice English. Over 40% felt that the page improved their social networking.
Responses to the Two Open-ended Questions

Two open-ended questions were posed in the survey. The first question asked the students about their most enjoyable experiences they had had on the page. The responses varied. However, the most common themes that emerged from the data include learning from discussions about language, sharing ideas with others, and giving and receiving feedback. Figure 5 presents an example on how students may learn from discussion on Facebook posted by one of the teachers. On the other hand, some respondents replied with “nothing in specific,” indicating that they did not enjoy using the page. The other question asked about the most unpleasant experience that students had on the page. The responses also varied but the most common themes were discussions about unfavorable topics such as politics, and misunderstanding among the group members due to cultural and ethnic differences.
To make change, you don’t have to be a VIP, president, or whatever big thing you may ever imagine, to make change, you need to be brave, and you need to wholeheartedly believe in your cause. Iqbal was just a child with big dreams. He had a just cause and that is why he broke the chains and widely spread his wings to the promising horizon. From a rotten rug carpet factory into the whole world, he spoke out and up. Governments were put in a corner, and that is just because that simple child wanted to do something. IQBAL is my hero, how about yours?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0D6K18wq8A

Figure 5: Learning from discussions on Facebook

Findings from the Interview

The interview questions were quite focused and the responses were categorized and labeled. For example, responses to Q1 (How do you think students can use this FB page to practice English and learn new vocabulary?) were categorized as English practicing or vocabulary learning. Data patterns from responses to Q5 (Do you think this page is useful in helping you communicate with other students as well as with teachers? If so, how?) were categorized as communication with teachers or others. Due to the space limitations, I will only focus on the recurring themes that the questionnaire did not cover, and also those that reinforce the findings. The themes are Facebook for vocabulary learning, Facebook for socializing, and Facebook and WTC.

Facebook for vocabulary learning
The data gathered from the interviews suggest that Facebook is useful for learning new vocabulary. Muhannad commented that “I learn new vocabulary mainly when other members of the page post a new word or idiom.” Yousif suggested that not only through others’ posts does he learn new vocabulary, but also through their comments on his posts. He said, “When they comment on my post, I learn new vocabulary from their comments.” The findings reveal that the Facebook page helped students learn new vocabulary through their posts and also their friends’ posts.

**Facebook for socializing**

The Facebook group is considered a friendly environment that allows learners to socialize in English and learn about the second language culture, which is important given the limited opportunities they have elsewhere. Using this page for socializing, Ayman reported that “I have got many benefits from joining this page. First of all, to know people who are specialized in English helps me improve my language and learn about others’ culture.” Hani added that:

> You know, in Iraq, there are not many places to speak English. For me, I have no opportunity to speak English because my brothers do not speak English. So this page helps me not only improve my language but also learn about the culture when somebody posts about differences between languages and cultures.

Furat, the page administrator, concluded that “what is important on this page is to socialize in English. One of the regulations of the page is to speak only about language in English. It also includes knowledge exchange and culture exchange.” An example of the learning through interaction and socializing is illustrated in Figure 6.
Muhammad said, “one day, a member of the page posted about Halloween. I didn’t know in detail what Halloween is, but when I read the post, it was very interesting to me.” The following figure is an example of learning about the second language culture.
As for willingness to give and receive feedback on posts, the participants expressed their willingness to use the Facebook page for sharing ideas and knowledge, and also to learn from others. Hani reported “It motivates me to post something to teach others about a certain subject.” Muhannad added that “sharing ideas with others even if they do not agree with you is important because it makes you understand the way others think and behave so that you can behave accordingly.” When asked about willingness to communicate on Facebook, Yousif viewed it from a psychological point of view. He reported that “Of course I feel happy and willing to communicate more on this page if I see more ‘Likes’ or ‘Comments’ under my post.”

I believe that the interview data supplemented the questionnaire data in the sense that they supported findings from the questionnaire, such as the usefulness of Facebook for practicing
English, and socializing. The respondents provided further insights and specific examples on the patterns emerging in the analysis concerning using the page for learning and socializing.

Discussion
This study investigated students’ perceptions of the benefits of using Facebook to practice their English communication skills. The results show that the students benefit mainly from using this page to practice their English, learn new vocabulary, and socialize with others. Additionally, students felt motivated and willing to learn more as a result of their interaction on this page, and also believed that the page is a place where they could give and receive feedback from others.

Research Question 1: What do students believe they gain from interacting in English on a Facebook page?
Data from the interviews show that the page allowed the students to interact and learn new vocabulary from each other’s posts and comments. Participants also emphasized that this Facebook page was a good place to give and receive feedback on their language in general. Furthermore, students believed that the page gave them space to discuss topics of interest, socialize, and share knowledge. This view is consistent with Baran’s (2010) and Hayashi’s (2011) observations about Facebook as a forum for sharing knowledge in educational contexts. The students also reported that they could learn about other cultures, especially English culture, as discussed in Muhannad’s example earlier about Halloween.

Research Question 2: What social, psychological, and linguistic factors contribute to participants’ willingness to interact on a Facebook page?
The results of this study reveal that students interacted on this page and felt motivated to share knowledge with others and socialize in English. Baran (2010) suggests that learners are motivated to interact with their peers on Facebook. Motivation is reflected in students’ responses throughout the present survey. The findings show that a source of motivation lies in the prospects of learning about English culture, particularly when they could interact with a few native speakers of English who were members of the page, as Muhannad and Hani reported. They also reported that they made new friends with students from other levels.
As Yousif reported, the number of likes and comments that a student receives from other members of the page also matters. One of the most interesting findings related to the psychological side was the fact that the more “likes” or “comments” are received, the more willing the student is to post and communicate on this page.

Another important factor that motivates students is the opportunity to learn new vocabulary. They also post questions about a certain text or any subject material, especially when they have an exam coming up, to learn.

**Pedagogical Implications and Future Research**

Using this Facebook page, learners became aware of the benefits resulting from interacting on this page. They could use it as a tool for sharing knowledge and discussing different academic language topics. Students can also use this page for peer evaluation through giving and receiving feedback on their academic material. It is also a place where they can practice their English and learn new words.

Teachers can use such a Facebook page as a platform for presenting and organizing their teaching materials. They can be members of the page and observe students’ improvement, strengths, challenges, and needs, and plan their lessons accordingly. The fact that teachers are members in the page can develop a type of interaction based on equality (Pittaway, 2004). Teachers can also post discussion topics and instructions for students. Students feel more comfortable and prepared if they are given the topic on Facebook and some time to prepare for class discussion (Hayashi, 2011). Furat, the group administrator, emphasized the importance of having teachers as members in the group. In fact, the students also wanted more teachers in the group to give them feedback.

For future research, one may take students’ various proficiency levels into consideration. This study did not consider proficiency. However, students of different proficiencies might have different perspectives or perceptions about the use of this page as a learning tool. What a low-proficiency student considers important might not be what a high-proficiency student considers important. This could explain why some students reported unpleasant experiences in addition to their enjoyable ones; they were more proficient. Further, the interviewees were all male members of the Facebook page. For future research, female members may be
interviewed to investigate their perspectives on the page, taking cultural issues into consideration.

In summary, this study investigated the perceived benefits of interacting in English on a Facebook page. The results revealed that students think that there are benefits in using a Facebook page for socializing, sharing knowledge, giving and receiving feedback, and learning new words. Using this page also helped students become motivated and more willing to learn.

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I would also like to thank the staff of the Higher Committee for Education Development in Iraq (HCED), for their encouragement and support during my study abroad.

References


Appendix 1: *Survey Monkey Questionnaire*

*1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: 1= Strongly agree, 2= Agree, 3= Somewhat agree, 4= Somewhat disagree, 5= Disagree, 6= Strongly disagree.*

- I use this Facebook page to learn how to be more social in English.
- I use this Facebook page to learn more grammar.
- I use this Facebook page to learn more vocabulary.
- I use this Facebook page to see if my friends will correct me.
- My English would not be as good if I didn't use this Facebook page.
- Using this Facebook page helps me learn more about my errors.
- Using this Facebook page helps me improve my translation skills.
- Using this Facebook page helps me improve my paraphrasing skills.
- I have learned things on the Facebook page that have helped me in my classes and/or course work.
- This Facebook page helps me build my confidence.
Likert-scale questionnaire data presented in detail

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: 1= Strongly agree, 2= Agree, 3= Somewhat agree, 4= Somewhat disagree, 5= Disagree, 6= Strongly disagree.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I use this Facebook page to learn how to be more social in English.</td>
<td>14.3%(5)</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>20.0%(7)</td>
<td>5.7%(2)</td>
<td>0.0%(0)</td>
<td>5.7%(2)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use this Facebook page to learn more grammar.</td>
<td>20.0%(7)</td>
<td>17.1%(6)</td>
<td>28.6%(10)</td>
<td>17.1%(6)</td>
<td>14.3%(5)</td>
<td>2.9%(1)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use this Facebook page to learn more vocabulary.</td>
<td>25.7%(9)</td>
<td>48.6%(17)</td>
<td>11.4%(4)</td>
<td>2.9%(1)</td>
<td>8.6%(3)</td>
<td>2.9%(1)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use this Facebook page to see if my friends will correct me.</td>
<td>25.7%(9)</td>
<td>17.1%(6)</td>
<td>20.0%(7)</td>
<td>20.0%(7)</td>
<td>11.4%(4)</td>
<td>5.7%(2)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My English would not be as good if I didn't use this Facebook page.</td>
<td>8.6%(3)</td>
<td>11.4%(4)</td>
<td>20.0%(7)</td>
<td>17.1%(6)</td>
<td>28.6%(10)</td>
<td>14.3%(5)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using this Facebook page helps me learn more about my errors.</td>
<td>17.1%(6)</td>
<td>17.1%(6)</td>
<td>54.3%(19)</td>
<td>0.0%(0)</td>
<td>11.4%(4)</td>
<td>0.0%(0)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using this Facebook page helps me improve my translation skills.</td>
<td>22.9%(8)</td>
<td>25.7%(9)</td>
<td>25.7%(9)</td>
<td>11.4%(4)</td>
<td>8.6%(3)</td>
<td>5.7%(2)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using this Facebook page helps me improve my paraphrasing skills.</td>
<td>11.4%(4)</td>
<td>17.1%(6)</td>
<td>40.0%(14)</td>
<td>17.1%(6)</td>
<td>11.4%(4)</td>
<td>2.9%(1)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have learned things on the Facebook page that have helped me in my classes and/or coursework.</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>14.3%(5)</td>
<td>25.7%(9)</td>
<td>20.0%(7)</td>
<td>8.6%(3)</td>
<td>0.0%(0)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Facebook page helps me build my confidence.</td>
<td>20.0%(7)</td>
<td>22.9%(8)</td>
<td>14.3%(5)</td>
<td>25.7%(9)</td>
<td>8.6%(3)</td>
<td>8.6%(3)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answered question 35
Skipped question 0
2. Which year in school are you?
   - Freshman (1st year of college)
   - Sophomore (2nd year)
   - Junior (3rd year)
   - Senior (4th year)
   - MA student

3. How often do you visit this Facebook page? (Choose one.)
   - I seldom visit this page.
   - I visit this page once a week.
   - I visit this page one time a day.
   - I visit this page twice a day.
   - I visit this page more than two times a day.
   - Other (please explain)

*4. What do you use this page for? (Check all that apply.)
   - I use this page just for fun.
   - I use this page to be social.
   - I use this page to improve my grammar.
   - I use this page to learn new vocabulary.
   - I use this page to get feedback on my English.
   - I use this page to practice my English.
   - I use this page to give feedback to my friends.
   - I use this page to improve my translation skills.
   - I use this page because it is one of the only places where I can practice my English.
   - Other (please explain)

*5. How do you feel about other members of the page? (Check all that apply.)
   - I feel comfortable sharing my posts with others.
   - I feel embarrassed when other members see my errors.
   - I feel frustrated when someone in the page corrects the errors I make.
   - I proofread my posts before I post them to the page.
   - I do not care if I make errors others can see.
- I like to get feedback on my posts.
- I feel motivated when others give me positive feedback.
- Other (please explain)

*6. Aside from this Facebook page, what have you used to practice your English in the past? (Check all that apply.)
- Emails
- Blogs
- Cell phone text messages with friends
- Computer software
- Skype with native speakers of English
- Chat online with native speakers of English
- Other (please explain)

*7. Using this Facebook page ____________ (Check all that apply.)
- is effective in improving my grammar.
- is effective in improving my vocabulary.
- is effective in improving my networking and social attitudes.
- has a positive effect on my class assignments.
- increases my willingness to use and learn more English.
- is effective in improving my paraphrasing skills.
- is effective in improving my translation skills.
- Other (please explain)

*8. Using this Facebook page does NOT help me _____________ (Check all that apply.)
- improve my speaking skills.
- improve my listening skills.
- improve my interpretation skills.
- Other (please specify)

9. Tell about the most enjoyable experience you have had on this Facebook page.

*10. Tell about the most unpleasant experience you have had on this Facebook page?
Appendix 2: Phone Interview Questions

1. How do you think students can use this FB page to practice English and learn new vocabulary?

2. How useful is this page to you as a place for socializing with others?

3. Do you think that this page is useful for sharing knowledge? If so, how?

4. Does interaction on this page make you willing and comfortable to share with others and give and receive feedback? If so, how?

5. Do you think this page is useful in helping you communicate with other students as well as with teachers? If so, how?

6. How useful is this page for you to observe your and others’ progress in English?

About the author

Adnan Al-Hammody is a native of Mosul, Iraq. He earned his BA in Translation and Interpretation in Arabic and English from the University of Mosul in 2009. In May 2013, he graduated with an MA in TESOL from the Monterey Institute of International Studies, and then returned to Iraq to teach English to college students.