

# **USE OF FACEBOOK GROUP AS BLENDED LEARNING AND LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN WRITING**

by **Noparat Tananuraksakul**

Huachiew Chalermprakiet University

18/18 Bang Na-Trat Rd, Bang Phli District,

Samutprakan 10540, Thailand

Noparat2000 @ yahoo.com

## **Abstract**

In this paper, I will report qualitative research findings on how undergraduate students at a small-sized university in Thailand perceive Facebook group usage in a writing class. The findings suggest that the Facebook group can be used as blended learning (a hybrid instructional model) and learning management system (posting announcements and comments relevant to the class and their writing assignments) for the students to learn with, not to learn from, as facilitated by the instructor. The reasons were that they positively viewed the Facebook group usage as a practical, trendy and beneficial teaching tool, which helped to motivate them to learn English virtually and enhance their positive attitudes towards learning the language. When they encounter virtual communication apprehension, the Facebook group usage appeared to be a booster neutralizing their positive attitudes towards virtual interactions. Such positive results may derive from the fact that the students grew up as digital natives and the Millennial Generation using Facebook, the prominent social network site, as parts of their daily life. Teachers of English, who may be seen as digital immigrants or digital immigrant accent, may need to consider use of learning technologies in their writing class.

**Keywords:** Facebook group; blended learning; learning management system; writing

## **1. Introduction**

The current globalised era has witnessed its impacts on human ways of living, especially young people whose life is much dependent upon innovative technologies. This aspect definitely affects their styles and preferences of learning. Prensky (2001) argues that it also creates a huge gap between teachers and students because the former are uncomfortable to adapt their teaching styles to the latter's diverted learning. He describes today's students as digital natives while teachers as digital immigrants and for those who cannot cope with use of digital equipment or computer as digital immigrant accent (Prensky, 2001: 1-4). With this generation gap, Prensky also proposes a new way of teaching all contents through invented computer games online so that students who normally go there for search of information can be intrinsically motivated to learn. VanSlyke (2003) calls this idea edutainment.

What Prensky (2001) found in his research results mentioned above has led Dalton (2009) to make suggestions for teachers of English that young people feel connected to people and the global knowledge. In contrast with the classroom setting, they may feel disconnected and isolated because it seems to them that school is irrelevant to their lives. Dalton (2009) further addresses these implications. Firstly, teachers might try to use learning technologies in the classroom whenever they can so that they make the learning experience relating to their students. Secondly, teachers might take on the role of trainer instead of engineer. Finally, they might find out which social networking site their students are using the most.

## **2. Previous studies into the use of social networking tools**

In a Thai social context, information technology has been increasingly used among educators for the main purposes of teaching and learning, and it is beyond doubt that many tools have been concurrently created to meet such goals. Anything with online tools and applications seems popular because users are able to access those without limits of space or place. Past studies show that there are more investigations into the use of e-learning and Internet application in English language teaching than social network. For example, Tantaphalin (2011) investigated whether digital storytelling through collaborative scrapbook could enhance EFL learners' motivation in knowledge sharing online. The results showed a positive confirmation in that learners could enjoy elaborating their ideas and creativity for composition and decoration rather than telling their own story through the text with a few visuals. It also interested other learners and helped them gain attention in knowledge sharing. Muangnakin (2011) asserts that blog is one of the popular tools for language learning because of its simple use and versatile capabilities enabling writers to publish their work electronically. These ideals convinced him to examine the benefits of blogs for Thai university students majoring in English to practice their news article writing for the English in Newspapers Course. The outcome demonstrated learners' positive opinions of blogging experience, which helped to motivate them and heighten their sense of professional practice in the English course. This positive result was in line with Asawaniwed's and Boonmoh's (2012) research into attitudes of Thai EFL learners toward use of blogs.

The implications made by Dalton (2009) encouraged the present author to consider use of learning technologies in a writing class during the first semester of 2012 (from mid June to the beginning of October). It had to be checked which social networking site students who would be enrolled in two writing classes used the most. Through a few students, who

were both the researcher's advisees and networks on Facebook, it was found out that most of them were actually active on this site. Despite the fact that Facebook is one of the most popular social networking sites with high communication capabilities in both synchronous and asynchronous activities, research into integrating use of Facebook group into English language teaching in a Thai social context is limited. For example, Suthiwartnarueput and Wasanasomsithi (2012) as well as Kajornboon (2013) studied how Facebook facilitated interactions among students and their peers and between teacher and students in a writing class. Kultawanich et al. (2011) argue that Facebook as a blended learning (BL) tool supported the collaborative learning environment and knowledge integration well while applying Social Constructivist theories for the design of learning activities.

In an American context, Radel (2011) found that Facebook is used and valued as a BL tool in tertiary institutions. Martyn (2003: 22) posits that blended learning is a hybrid model that encompasses face-to-face and virtual instructions viewed as good practice because it provides interactions and prompt feedback among users. In a Singaporean context, Wang et al (2012) discovered that a Facebook group has the potential to be used as a learning management system (LMS) for making announcements, sharing resources and virtually participating in weekly discussion and activities. With these arguments, it was decided to use a Facebook group as BL and LMS in a writing class.

### **3. The study**

#### **3.1. The aim of the research**

This study, therefore, primarily aims at exploring undergraduate students' experiences in English language learning through the use of Facebook group as BL and LMS. There are two key research questions put forward in the study:

1. Has the use of a Facebook group helped to improve students' English writing skills?
2. If yes, in what way has the use of a Facebook group improved students' English writing skills?

#### **3.2 Procedure**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2012, I created a closed Facebook group named Paragraph and Essay Writing taken from the course title. It was open only to students enrolled in this course and invited to join the group. I felt reluctant to make the group public because I aimed to use the group as a medium of communication and instruction outside the class, where all students and myself could come into contact and make connection through use of English without

intimidation. They could share and exchange their writing knowledge, and I would post weekly announcements and selected readable paragraphs and essays so that all members could see and learn from one another. Although this course consists of writing paragraphs and essays, this paper will only report on students' experiences in the use of the Facebook group in the first half of the semester that involves four genres of paragraph writing.

After the success of creating the Facebook group, I used a snowballing technique to invite those prospective students to join the Group. Johnson and Christensen (2012: 231) explain that in this kind of sampling research, participants who volunteer to take part in a study will be asked to suggest their friends who may be interested in participation. In the case of the present study, I firstly invited a few of my advisees who have already been in my Facebook friend list and then asked them to invite their classmates to join the Facebook group. By the first week of the semester, I had 82 student members participated in the group.

With the use of BL (Martyn, 2003) and LMS (Wang et al, 2012) addressed previously, during the first seven weeks, I taught in the classroom according to weekly lesson plans and virtually interacted with the students in the Facebook group by means of posting announcements and comments relevant to the class and their writing assignments. In the first two weeks, the students learned about paragraph components and brainstorming their ideas while during weeks three and seven they learned how to write paragraphs of description of both person and place, of process and of classification. Through each lesson, they were required to practice their writing skills and handed their work to me. Before mid-term exam in week eight, the total number of writing assignments along with their brainstorming was four. I would then check their individual work and give them feedback mainly based on how relevant and coherent and secondarily how grammatically correct they were.

All along the first six week, I observed that not many students would make comments on my postings and their classmates. The majority would enjoy clicking 'Like' and the same few faces would continue to make explicit comments. Therefore, I decided to post this question with guidelines for the students to give me their feedbacks: "What do you think about the use of the Facebook group for this class? It can be both positive and negative. Please feel free to express yourself as it does not affect your grades".

Although many of them expressed their positive feelings, it was not that explicit because 69 students saw the posting, three people clicked 'Like' for it and seven commonly posted their positive comments. For example, "absolutely positive", "100% positive of this page...it's very useful", "positive, it's very good for me", "I totally think that this page is very useful", "I think so", "I think so too", and "it's very useful for everybody in this class".

Interestingly, 15 students voted for “absolutely positive”, while 7 for “100% positive of this page...it’s very useful”, and 2 for “positive, it’s very good for me”.

In order to get more explicit opinions from the students and instead of one-on-one interviews, I asked them to write down their views on a piece of paper anonymously to the following questions:

1. What do you think about the use of the Facebook group?
2. Since many of you expressed positive feelings on the use of the Facebook group, do you think it improves your English?
3. Why don't you make any comment, why do you only click ‘Like’, or why don't you participate in making comments and clicking ‘Like’?

### **3.3 Results and findings**

Through the qualitative research technique using structured open-ended questions, I had 53 students’ explicit opinions on the use of the Facebook group. The technique was appropriate for the study because it was not primarily concerned with numerical measurement but with students’ personal experiences of a phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2004), which helped me understand their presuppositions and allowed me to develop my teaching styles for the rest of the course that could fit their learning styles better. The data were then thematically analyzed, which were constructed into critically common themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), reported in the next section. The qualitative data analysis reveals the students’ positive views on the use of the Facebook group with two common themes emerging. The first theme regards their personal perceptions of how and why they learned and improved their English through the Facebook group usage. The second is about their preferences of teaching and learning strategies.

#### **3.3.1 Theme one: Positive perceptions**

Although most of the students perceived the use of the Facebook group positively, students 1, 12, 15, 27, 34 and 46 thought that it was disadvantageous for those who did not have access to the Internet. This aspect was parallel with students 11, 12 and 14 who stated that they did not have a computer at home and were too busy with their part-time jobs to be active online. Student 39 did not use Facebook, but at the end of the writing course joined this social networking site and was on my friends’ list.

Students 1, 9, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26, 29, 32, 33, 35, 38, 47, 48, 49, 50 and 53 admitted that they mostly clicked ‘Like’ and made hardly any comments. They reasoned that

they only clicked 'Like' because they were embarrassed and unconfident with their low levels of English performance, especially grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Students 2, 4, 6, 41, 42, 43 specified that they wanted to show their gratitude and likeness or acknowledgement of a topic posted online to the instructor. Despite the negative feelings they encountered, the Facebook group usage was rather positive as they continued to participate virtually by clicking 'Like'.

Students 8, 14, 17, 18, 22, 27, 30 and 47 claimed that the Facebook group is a practical means of teaching aid for the writing class. They all gave their reasons why it was practical for them. Student 8 said that "it helps me practice my writing to the next level that could be more widely accepted". On the other hand, "it promotes interactions outside the classroom" for student 14. Students 18, 27 and 47 reasoned similarly that "it is convenient and easy to contact the instructor and learn at all times". Both students 22 and 30 agreed that "it is an online medium that group members can access it, and if they miss any weekly class, they can review the lesson later". Student 17 concluded that "it saves our time [as we can communicate with the instructor and classmates virtually]".

Students 3, 5, 6, 15, 18, 25 and 37 particularly viewed the Facebook group as a trendy teaching aid due to different reasons. Student 3 said "it helps me understand more of the lessons" while student 5 thought "it is a kind of learning integration since the instructor can update the information to it". Students 6, 15, 18, 25 and 37 saw that "it is easy to follow and quick to learn".

Apart from being practical and trendy, Students 4, 16, 22, 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 37, 39 and 44 thought that the Facebook group was a beneficial teaching aid, basically because they could learn something out of it. For example, Student 4 said "I can always learn something from the instructor...different writing styles" whereas Students 16, 22, 28, 29, 33 and 37 stated in the same vein that "it is a space for everyone to share and exchange writing skills, which help us improve our English". Students 28, 29 and 33 elaborated on their views that "posting weekly readable writing examples and pointing out our errors help us correct our own writing. Students 31 and 39 thought "it is useful when students need to ask the instructor about assignments or lessons at any time". Student 44 admitted that the weekly postings were still useful for her although she could hardly understand them because "I can always visit the group page for review after each class and know of what to prepare before the next session".

### **3.3.2 Theme two: Teaching and learning strategies**

Many students said that use of the Facebook group in the writing class appealed to them in the aspect of its use in teaching and learning. Most of them mentioned that it allowed them to re-visit the page as much as they wanted and this motivated them to learn more. Students 2, 18, 19, 21, 25, 26, 27, 33, 34, 35, 40, 41 and 42 particularly expressed their joy of interactions with their instructor and classmates online. Student 40 emphasized the point that she liked to “participate in making comments in English with her classmates who were mostly active on Facebook”

Students 7, 34, 37, 42, 47 and 52 pointed out that they liked when the instructor corrected their writing tasks. They thought that they learned to improve their English from the errors they made. Students 2, 15, 16, 17, 24, 32, 35, 45, 46, 47 and 53 liked when the instructor posted weekly announcements. Students 47 and 53 offered their views in detail that the announcements helped motivate them to review what they learned in the classroom, while Students 16 and 17 learned more English vocabulary from looking up in a dictionary.

Apart from the instructor’s correction and weekly announcements, students 2, 15, 24, 26, 28, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46 and 52 also liked when she posted weekly readable writing tasks. Students 39, 44, 47 and 52 explicitly shared that they compared their writing assignments with their peers’ which were selected to be posted online. They thought doing the comparison helped improve their writing in English. Students 19, 21, 45, 49 said they “learn new words and expressions from the postings and the instructor’s comments”. Students 3, 8, 11, 19, 20, 21, 29, 34, 35, 36, 37, 45, 46, 49, 51 and 53 said they “learn to write better” by putting ideas in sequences, recognizing and fixing their own grammatical errors”. Students 29, 49 expressed in detail that they “can write sentences and paragraphs better”, while Student 36 emphasized that “I understand more of importance of sentence connectors and paragraph components”.

## **4. Discussion**

In theme one, the results manifest most students’ positive perceptions of the use of the Facebook group as BL and LMS. Four students could not interact via the Facebook group. Twenty six people went for “like” rather than making comments because twenty of them appeared to be afraid of face loss if they made writing errors online whereas six people intended to signal their virtual participation. The analyses firstly suggest that students with negative perceptions of the Facebook group usage may only be those who cannot access the Internet and those who can access it but do not join Facebook. Secondly, students can

experience communication apprehension, which concurrently causes them to feel down and lose face (Tananuraksakul, 2012) during their virtual interactions in English, even among friends/classmates whom they are more familiar with than the instructor. This aspect reflects their sense of self or identity they construct and negotiate when interacting with others (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Thirdly, since interaction on the Facebook group is virtual, not face-to-face, its usage can neutralize students' attitudes towards learning English or participating in such interactions affected by the encounter of communication apprehension.

The above suggestions can further imply that power relations in pedagogy between the instructor and students may remain culture-embedded (Tananuraksakul, 2011) even in their synchronous and/or asynchronous interactions online. Those students who merely clicked "Like" just because they wanted to inform the instructor of their group participation may be culturally bound to show their politeness and respect by their teacher's power. There may also be subtle power relations in learning among friends/classmates who are self-perceived to be stronger and poorer English users.

Eight students thought that the Facebook group is a practical teaching tool, for it could help them write better, interact more with classmates and the instructor, save time, learn and review lessons anywhere and anytime. Seven viewed it a trendy teaching means because it could help them learn better with easy access and virtually updated information. Eleven saw it as beneficial because it helped them write better and allowed them to revisit the Facebook group at anytime, especially if they missed the class. The analyses firstly suggest that the Facebook group can be a learning tool for this group of students, and it is the tool to learn with, not to learn from (Dalton, 2009), as facilitated by the instructor. This analytical aspect is in line with Radel's (2011) study that Facebook can contribute to tertiary students life-long learning outcomes.

Secondly, students' positive perceptions of the Facebook group usage in the writing class perhaps derive from growing up in the era of the so-called Millennial Generation (Gen M), driven by daily use of innovative technologies, especially Facebook. This particular characteristic may have shaped their ways of living and thinking (Ericsson ConsumerLab, 2013). For this reason, students may feel connected to or identify themselves with the teaching tool. Additionally, as asserted by Bem's (1972) self-perception theory, Facebook group usage may be a booster to develop their positive attitudes towards English language learning. This further suggests that theme one answers the first and second key research questions.

As regards theme two, it was found that error correction via the Facebook group used as BL and LMS can help six students write better, similar to Legenhausen's (2011) argument that language learners must be supportively instructed to pay attention to their grammatical structures, thus further helping them with language analysis. Eleven students appeared to have positive attitudes towards the use of the Facebook group in accordance with the study by Wang et al (2012) that students were satisfied with weekly announcements posted on Facebook group. It, in turn, appeared to motivate them to learn English outside the classroom or virtually in this case.

Fourteen students had positive attitudes towards the use of Facebook group because they thought they could improve their English by learning new vocabulary and expressions and by comparing their own writing pieces with their classmates'. Similarly to other sixteen students, they believed they could write better thanks to the weekly assignments posted by the instructor. The analyses reveal a form of collaborative learning that is facilitated by the instructor (Kultawanich et al, 2011) through the Facebook group. Although collaborative learning strategies aim to foster students' learning in small groups at their maximal pace with peers, in this study they learn to improve their English by making a comparison between their own assignments and the ones the instructor selectively posted online. This particular aspect meets Foote's (1997) claims that collaborative learning offers promising possibilities for promoting active learning.

## **5. Conclusion**

The present study qualitatively explored 53 tertiary students' experiences of Facebook group usage in a writing class at a small-sized university in Thailand. The research outcomes indicated that both themes one and two answered the two key research questions, suggesting that a Facebook group can be used as BL and LMS in writing for this group of students to learn with, not to learn from, as facilitated by the instructor.

Most students regularly used Facebook and they obtained positive perceptions on the Facebook group usage in that it helped motivate them to learn virtually, develop their positive attitudes towards learning English and improve their English because it was a practical, trendy and beneficial teaching and learning tool for them. Those students who encountered virtual communication apprehension felt unconfident and embarrassed, but had positive views on the Facebook group usage, suggesting that the Facebook group functioned as a booster neutralizing their attitudes towards English language learning. They possessed positive perceptions perhaps because they were able to identify themselves with Facebook as

a social networking site prominently used among them. Teachers of English, who may be seen or considered as digital immigrants, may need to adopt learning technologies in their class since today's students grew up as digital natives.

Although the study had a limitation due to its subjective nature of the research method, it offers an insightful implication that power relations in pedagogy between teacher and students exist in the present context. Further research can deal with doing a quantitative study, constructing a questionnaire based on key findings that key research questions and measuring them.

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## Appendix

### Sample activities based on the use of the Facebook group

Can you combine the following sentences into one (taken from your writing assignments)?

1. Adjective clause

1.1 The fourth type is latte. Latte is made with espresso and steamed milk.

1.2 The first type is plucked string instrument. Plucked string instrument is played by plucking the strings.

1.3 The last type is romantic movie. This type of movie is one of the most popular movies.

1.4 The first sign is Aries. Aries is associated with spring.

2. Use of "although"

2.1 Watching movies is my favorite leisure activity. There are many other activities I enjoy.

2.2 Italian food is well-known worldwide. Italian food is not popular in some countries.

Hello guys!

I feel so released as I finished marking your paragraphs. Some could write better while some others (only a few though) didn't seem to improve their writing skills.

Here are some of your common grammatical errors I'd like to point out to you:

1) Many of you still make these errors: subject and verb agreement, use of incorrect pronouns and punctuation omission;

2) Try not to overuse "make" in a piece of writing although it is normal in Thai. For example, try to use "allow", "interest" and "relax". We'll have a look at Kanyarat's writing as an example.

3) Don't use "but" throughout your writing; you can use "yet" or "although" as a connector between 2 sentences.

4) Join 2 sentences with an adjective clause.

5) Use colon (:) when you want to elaborate your ideas.

Cheers

Good morning, everyone!

I finished marking your process paragraph writing yesterday. Here are some points I'd like to make: be careful of using the connectors, writing relevant ideas and putting your ideas in sequences. We will discuss these issues this afternoon in the class.

Morning, everyone. This week I only have one writing example for you. The only thing I want to emphasize is the sequence of your ideas in your writing, so please compare the two following paragraphs and decide which one is a better piece of writing and why so.

My Favorite Superstar (by Nawarat Deethavee)

Naded Kugimaya is my favorite superstar. He was born in Khon Kaen, Thailand. He is 20 years old. He is good looking. He has dark hair, thick eyebrows, enchanting eyes, a prominent nose and thin lips. In my opinion, when he smiles, it makes the world brighter. I like him because he is friendly and handsome. Now he is a superstar in Thailand and I just love him.

Naded Kugimaya is my favorite superstar born in Khon Kaen, Thailand. He is a 20 year-old man. I like him because he is good-looking with dark hair, thick eyebrows, enchanting eyes, a prominent nose and thin lips.

When he smiles, the world becomes brighter. In addition to his nice look, he is friendly to all of his fans. Now everyone in Thailand sees him as a superstar, and I just adore him.

See you in the class soon.

This week I have two paragraphs for you to read here. The first one is about types of movies written by Kanyarat, and the second one is about types of coffee drinks by Sirathip.

Watching movies is what I like to do to entertain myself. Although there are many movie (film) genres, namely horror, thriller, action, romance, comedy, animation, sci-fi and fantasy, these three genres are my favorites. The first is action, which always makes me feel excited. My favorite action movie is "Batman: The Dark Night" because it is not only action but also drama. After I had watched it, I kept thinking about it for a few days. Unfortunately, I did not see it on a big screen in the cinema. The second is romantic movie, which involves love, happiness, sadness and hope. I highly recommend this movie "Sweet November" as the story made me smile and cry at the same time. The soundtrack is also beautiful. The third is comedy, which truly relaxes me. I particularly like the movie "Mr. Bean" whose character is humorous, and it is a good fun just to look at his face.

Coffee drinks have many types, and each of them can indicate drinkers' characteristics. For people who love the first type which is espresso, they are considered serious because it has a bitter taste. The second is mocha, made with espresso and chocolate syrup. Anyone who likes this drink is seen as a friendly person. The third is Americano which is a drink mixed with espresso and water, so drinkers are assumed to be peace and quiet. The fourth is latte, espresso mixed with heated milk with bubbles. People who enjoy this kind of drink tend to be disclosed. The last type is cappuccino similar to latte but has more bubbles. Cappuccino lovers are viewed to be cheerful. For me, I like to drink mocha because it is not too bitter and

I love chocolate in it.

See you tomorrow afternoon then.