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Impact of Using Facebook on Improving English Communication Skills - The Case of Implementing the English Language Course as a model at Al-Quds Open University

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Impact of Using Facebook on Improving English Communication Skills - The Case of Implementing the English Language Course as a model at Al-Quds Open University

أثر استخدام الفيسبوك في تحسين مهارات التواصل باللغة الانجليزية - مقرر "استخدام اللغة"
في جامعة القدس المفتوحة أنموذجاً

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of using Facebook on improving the communication skills in English through a blended teaching approach. The subjects were 50 second-year students majoring in Methods of Teaching English at Al-Quds Open University (QOU) in Palestine who were studying a course titled "Language Use" in the first semester of the academic year 2013-2014. The students were divided randomly into a control group and an experimental group. The control group studied the course through the traditional face-to-face instruction while the experimental group used both face-to-face lectures in addition to using Facebook through a Facebook group entitled "Language Use QOU Palestine". Both of the two groups sat for a pre- test at the beginning of the experiment and a post-test at the end of the experiment. The results revealed statistically significant differences in the achievement of the experimental group due to using Facebook in addition to significant differences in the achievement of the experimental group before using Facebook and after using it.

Keywords: Communication skills, Facebook, English Language, Al-Quds Open University.

ملخص

هدفت الدراسة إلى فحص أثر استخدام الفيسبوك في تحسين مهارات التواصل باللغة الانجليزية من خلال طريقة تدريس مدمجة. تكونت عينة الدراسة من 50 طالبا وطالبة في السنة الثانية من تخصص أساليب تدريس اللغة الانجليزية الذين كانوا مسجلين لمقرر "استخدام اللغة" في جامعة القدس المفتوحة في فلسطين في الفصل الأول من العام الجامعي 2013/2014. وقد تم تقسيم الطلبة إلى مجموعتين ضابطة وتجريبية حيث درست المجموعة الضابطة من خلال الطريقة التقليدية الواجهية بينما درست المجموعة الثانية باستخدام الطريقة التقليدية إضافة إلى المشاركة في مجموعة على الفيسبوك أنشئت لهذا الغرض وسميت "مجموعة مقرر استخدام اللغة/جامعة القدس المفتوحة/فلسطين". خضعت المجموعتان الضابطة والتجريبية لامتحان قبلي في بداية التجربة وامتحان بعدي في نهايتها حيث أظهرت النتائج اختلافات دالة إحصائية في تحصيل المجموعة التجريبية التي درست باستخدام الفيسبوك بالإضافة إلى وجود اختلافات كبيرة في تحصيل المجموعة التجريبية قبل استخدام الفيسبوك وبعد استخدامه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفيسبوك، مهارات التواصل، اللغة الانجليزية، جامعة القدس المفتوحة.

Introduction

Technology is seen vital to offer the potential for providing more learning opportunities and better means for learners to interact with each other and learn effectively. In this regard, while Chang et al. (2008) maintain that knowledge constructed by the learners cannot be efficiently shared by the learners in the traditional classroom settings, Fernández and Gil-Rodríguez (2011) point out that social networks are an important space for sharing learning resources and an opportunity for the collective construction of knowledge. In this sense, web-based, technology-enhanced learning seems to be able to stimulate and support the learning process and enhance learning outcomes (Lee & Woods, 2010). Wang (2009) also reports that web-based learning has been supported by learning theories that emphasize the creation of an environment where learners can access and share knowledge and resources with one another. Taking into account the various benefits of social media, Hutchens and Timothy (2014) argue that Facebook communication can blur the personal and professional boundaries that students and professors are accustomed to while Walsh (2012) maintains that Facebook group is a great way to distribute content and create a central place for communication for a course or class. Both learners and tutors can share

their experiences and can record their conversations or produce their own oral essays and file them or share them with others. Li and Chen(2009); however, point out that online asynchronous discussion forums enable students to collaborate, share knowledge without the need to meet physically in person, or to work simultaneously.

Shih (2013), meanwhile, argue that the advent and growth of Web 2.0 technology (e.g. YouTube, Flickr, blog, and Facebook) enable knowledge exchange in ways such as online meeting and discussion that were not possible before. Through these applications, users are able to exchange, interact, collaborate, and socialize with others in virtual communities (VCs). Instant Messaging learning environment, for example, provides students with more relaxed and comfortable learning environment. It avoids the tension and boredom of the classroom and increases students' motivation (Hanif, & Rozilawati. 2006).

One of the new trends in education nowadays is using Facebook not only for social networking but also for educational purposes in general and for teaching English as a foreign/ second language in particular. Such trend might be due to the fact that Facebook is equipped with a number of features and applications that make it educationally attractive and appealing such as bulletin boards, Timeline, instant messaging, emailing, posting photos and videos, attaching files, downloadable applications and the like. These can supplement the educational functions of Facebook and help instructors everywhere to connect with learners anytime and anywhere. Shih (2013) adds more advantages of Facebook which can help users and learners interact and collaborate with each other actively in a virtual community. This trend led the learning process to be transformed from in-class teaching into learning outside the classroom. Therefore, students will be able to sustain the inter-relationship among the group members through effective group communications and discussions in such a cooperative learning environment (Yang and Chen, 2008).

Wong et al. (2011) argue that students at all levels are heavily immersed in social network sites such as Facebook and YouTube. Furthermore, introducing social networking sites such as Twitter or

Facebook can help students increase their own language learning in a fun and motivating way. Facebook on the other hand can help keep topics grouped together in one place, which is easier for students to read and they have more control over the length of their posts. They can attach links, share photos and videos, send private messages, add notes or easily chat online synchronously (Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011).

Phillips (2010) point out that Facebook can provide students with the opportunity to effectively present their ideas, lead online discussions, and collaborate. It can facilitate student-to-student collaboration and provide innovative ways for the teacher to involve students in his or her subject matter. Lenhart and Madden(2007) mention another advantage for using Facebook in teaching which is that some students who have speaking difficulty because of disabilities or who care a lot about making mistakes in writing, online social networking can be an immense help for them. Such shift, thus, is hoped to help the new generations acquire the 21st century skills which requires the necessity to empower student –centered approaches at the expense of teacher-centered approaches. Shraim (2014) maintain that the proliferation of Facebook use among students and teachers has created a new learning culture by providing innovative ways for teachers to enable learners to engage actively in different activities.

In this regard, according to (<http://expandedramblings.com/>), Facebook is the largest social network in the world with over a billion and a half monthly active users. Hence, and as a result of the current trend of using Facebook in education, recent empirical studies called for exploring the effect of using Facebook on students' achievement and their attitudes toward Facebook and its potentials (Shih, 2013; Ghalib, 2014; Shih, 2011; McCarthy, 2010; Yang and Bradford, 2013; Lampe et al. 2011; Cvijikj and Florian, 2011). In response to these calls and recommendations, the current study aimed to investigate the effect of using Facebook on improving the communicative skills in English through a blended teaching approach.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the effect of using Facebook on improving the communication skills in English through a blended teaching approach. The study -in particular- examined the following questions:

1. Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the achievement of both the experimental group and the control group due to using Facebook ?
2. Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the achievement of the experimental group before using Facebook and after using it?
3. To what extent do the quality and quantity of the synchronous and asynchronous online interactions among students and between students and their instructor contribute to the improvement of communication skills?

Significance of the Study

As this study aims to investigate the effect of using Facebook in improving the communication skills, the results are hoped to explore how Facebook can be used to encourage students who seem reluctant of using the academic portal and the e-course through (<http://ecourse.qou.edu/>) to use Facebook with its attractive features as a supplementary tool. As a result, the learning process in the classroom can be extended to a virtual environment where language acquisition can also take place.

As a consequence, the results of the study are hoped to contribute substantially to integrating the Facebook into the settings of educational institutions in Palestine and at QOU in particular. More specifically, administrators and decision-makers at distance and open education institutions will find this study of a value in planning for the best employment of the Facebook in education. Thus, the results of such a study may inspire QOU to develop its methods and techniques of delivery through using Facebook so as to help students find edutainment through bridging the gap between study and fun which can lead to

increased productivity. In brief, this study adds to the body of scientifically based research literature on student achievement directly linked to the use of Facebook for educational purposes.

Literature Review

Integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into education has become an urgent necessity in this fast-changing world. As a result, Facebook is currently used by elementary, secondary and college students for social and academic objectives to the extent that many educators and researchers are currently investigating uses and effects of using Facebook in education so as to maximize the potential for using this social networking site to achieve educational aims (Aubry, 2013; Shraim, 2104; Shih, 2013; Ibrahim, 2013).

As far as Facebook potentials and uses are concerned, there is a growing body of research exploring the potential benefits of using Facebook for educational purposes. For instance, Daher (2014) attempted to explore the consequences of using Facebook in learning. For this purpose, fifteen students/teachers were required to attend mathematical Facebook site. The research findings showed that the actions/interactions of the participants, together with the various conditions influenced the consequences of students' educational work in the social networking site. To a similar end, Shraim (2014) aimed to investigate the potential use of Facebook to support faculty in a social constructivist approach. To achieve this objective, 240 students enrolled in four sections of an undergraduate Educational Technology course, who were encouraged to participate in a number of formative activities through Facebook. The results showed that a majority of students showed a positive attitude towards learning via Facebook, being provided with more opportunities to engage personally, communicate and work collaboratively and develop 21st century skills for life and learning.

The effect of instructor's self-disclosure using the Facebook platform on students' motivation was investigated by Aubry (2013). The participants were 104 students enrolled in an online French course at a university in the southeast U.S. The participants were divided into a

Facebook group, where they could access the instructor's Facebook profile throughout the semester, and a control group. Post-treatment results indicated that participants assigned to the Facebook group experienced a significant shift in motivation type that research has determined as being beneficial for language learning.

To examine the potential benefits of Facebook groups in education, Shih (2013) explored the impact of incorporating blended learning with Facebook and peer assessment for English for Business Communication course for college students. A total of 111 students from a public technological university were divided into three Facebook groups. A mixed method consisting qualitative and quantitative approaches was employed to analyze the collected data, including the pre- and post-tests, qualitative data of peer assessment on Facebook sites, interviews, a student self-efficacy scale, and a self-developed satisfaction survey questionnaire. The findings indicated that incorporating Facebook in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course effectively assisted college students in learning business communication English. Moreover, students were able to improve their professional knowledge not only from the in-class instruction but also through peer assessing on Facebook. Additionally, the blended learning approach significantly enhanced students' learning motivation and interest.

Li et al. (2013) intended to integrate Facebook-based learning platform with blended learning model and flip learning strategies for sophomores, juniors and seniors. The results showed that the platform helped learners to promote online learning and that learners' participation in blended learning and flip learning was higher than that in traditional learning.

To evaluate the effect of Facebook on the social life and behavior of medical students at Dow University Of Health Sciences Farooqi et al. (2013) found that most of the participants admitted that they were considered as shy in real world (39.0%) while in the world of Facebook they were considered as fun loving by their friends (60.3%). Majority of participants denied any effect of Facebook usage on their studies (53.5%) and GPA (Grade Point Average) (64.5%).

On the other hand, Wong et al. (2013) presented findings from a small scale study exploring the first year students' experiences on social networking usage and their perception on using it for e-learning. The data were collected quantitatively, consisting of surveys on students' experiences on using social networking as a communication and collaboration tool. Findings indicated that students were inclined to utilize social networking for performing many learning tasks. Furthermore designing some learning activities based on social networking enhanced collaborative learning amongst students.

In the Palestinian context, for the purpose of investigating the effect of using Facebook on improving the students' writing skills, Ibrahim (2013) used a sample consisted of 40 ninth grade students who were divided into an experimental group and a control group. Results revealed positive effects of using Facebook on improving the students' writing skills.

In a different context, Shih (2011) investigated the effect of integrating Facebook and peer assessment with college English writing class instruction through a blended teaching approach. The subjects were 23 first-year students majoring in English at a technological university in Taiwan participating in an 18 week English writing class. The students were divided into three groups with three Facebook platforms. Research instruments included pre-test and post-test of English writing skills, a self-developed survey questionnaire, and in-depth student interviews. The findings suggested that incorporating peer assessment using Facebook in learning English writing can be interesting and effective for college-level English writing classes. In addition, Facebook integrated instruction can significantly enhance students' interest and motivation.

However, Blattner and Lomicka (2012) aimed to examine the use of Facebook (FB) as a social networking tool in an intermediate French class. Results suggested that students responded in a positive manner toward the use of FB in education and highlights some differences in the way FB is used in both personal and academic settings. Furthermore, the results revealed that students viewed participation positively in online collaborative experiences. In the pedagogical realm, FB was

implemented in ways that promoted communication, collaboration, and student-centered activities that facilitated student learning and encouraged high academic achievement. On the other hand, Wong et al. (2012) presented findings from a small scale study exploring the potential benefits of Facebook on personal, social, academic and career development. Data were collected from interviews and messages written by the students on Facebook. The results indicated that students and teachers would benefit from this new approach.

Regarding the effect of Facebook posts, Cvijikj and Michahelles (2011) analyzed the effects of moderator posts characteristics such as post type, category and posting day, on the user interaction in terms of number of comments and likes, and interaction duration for the domain of a sponsored Facebook brand page. The results showed that there is a significant effect of the post type and category on likes and comments.

For a different purpose, Wong and Leung (2011) investigated how Facebook can enhance collaborative learning and knowledge building. Two classes of sub-degree students have been chosen to participate in this study. The data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively consisting of students' posting messages and comments on the Facebook, surveys on the students' reflective experiences using Facebook as communication and collaboration tools, and group interview with each instructor. Results indicated that Facebook could enhance communication and collaborative learning between learners.

Wang et al. (2011) explored the use of a Facebook group and students' perceptions of using Facebook in two teacher education hybrid courses in Singapore. The instructors for each course created a Facebook group before the course started. The findings of this study confirmed that students were satisfied with the use of the Facebook group and agreed that those using Facebook were able to make announcements, share resources, take part in online discussions and participate in weekly activities. However, some older participants did not perceive Facebook as a safe environment for teaching and learning. Most of them were worried that their academic performance could potentially be discovered by their

social friends, or were concerned that information about their personal lives might be accessed by the instructors.

Promnitz-Hayashi (2011) examined how simple activities in Facebook helped a lower language proficient class to become more comfortable participating in online discussions. Results showed that many of the more introverted students became more motivated in class and were actually talking more with their classmates. It was also noticed that students began to express more opinions and give extended reasoning in not only their face-to-face interactions but also in their written classwork. Ruiz (2011) found a direct relationship between site use and out-of-class sociability: the more time a student spent on Facebook, the more likely that student was to be involved with extracurricular activities.

The relationship between Facebook and cooperative learning was discussed by Miyasone (2007) who found that cooperative learning could improve students' communication, friendship, trust, interaction, active learning, and learning attitudes. Additionally, Facebook-integrated blended learning approach can assist students' English learning organization, grammar and structure, content, vocabulary, and spelling. The feature of the “like” icon on Facebook could moderately stimulate the students' learning motivation for English writing.

Based on the aforementioned literature review, it can be realized that Facebook has great potentials to enhance the outcomes of the educational process in many areas. Students and teachers both can make use of Facebook for social, instructional and collaborative purposes. However and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, not many studies investigated the effect of integrating Facebook into teaching and learning in the Palestinian educational context. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the effect of using Facebook on improving the communicative skills in English in one of the most pioneering Higher Education institutions in Palestine which adopts the philosophy of distance open education.

Methodology

Participants

The purposive sample for this study comprised 50 sophomore English students (12 males and 38 females) in the department of methods of teaching English as a foreign language at QOU in Nablus /Palestine. The students whose native language is Arabic learnt English at school for 6-10 years as some of them started learning English from the first grade while others from the fifth grade. Their English proficiency level, however, was between low and intermediate level since they had only completed two general English courses at QOU: English I and English II. At that time, they were taking a Language Use Course, the main objective of which is to refine their communication skills, especially oral skills. The participants were selected using a combination of random and purposive sampling techniques in the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014. Since the participating students were studying at QOU which adopts open distance education, they were on average between 19 -30 years old.

For the purpose of the study, the participants were divided into two groups: experimental and control. Twenty- five students were randomly assigned to the experimental group that joined a closed Facebook group entitled Language Use Group for 8 weeks while the control group was taught face-to-face using traditional methods. The experimental group received treatment (i.e., use of the Facebook group) in addition to the textbook and lecture-based instruction for all units of the study. The control group received only the textbook and lecture instruction but did not use the Facebook group. During both instructional conditions, the same teacher administered textbook and lecture –based instruction in presenting the same material to both groups of students and later both groups sat for a pretest and a posttest.

The course

The participants of this study were taking a course entitled Language Use which is a three-credit hour course aiming at developing the students' fluency and communicative competence in English through

recycling and applying their previous knowledge. It also aims at providing them with opportunities to communicate freely on various language functions, both spoken and written, such as introducing oneself and others, asking and providing information, agreeing and disagreeing, asking for and giving directions, advising, apologizing, taking and leaving a message, describing people and places, and making appointments. Furthermore, such functions are explicated in a variety of topics and themes. At the end of this course, the students are expected to express different daily language functions in appropriate contexts, carry out a series of task-based activities which exploit the language covered in the ten units, develop basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and understanding, use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking and communicating, use electronic resources for the sake of accomplishing the main objectives of the course.

With regard to methods of assessment and evaluation, a summative grade for the course was determined by using both written and oral tests and activities. To this end, 40 % of the total evaluation was given to in-class participation and oral presentations in addition to an oral test.

Instructor's Roles

According to Mazzolini and Maddison (2007), instructor's participation can be classified into four categories: asking questions, answering the questions posted by the students, a combination of answer and follow up questions and other administrative or housekeeping related posts. Thus, the researcher in this study played the roles of the instructor of the course, the monitor, the facilitator, the moderator, the motivator, the subject expert and the group admin as well. Being the researcher and the instructor simultaneously, the researcher was given the admin tools and roles that included approving or removing abusive posts by group members, blocking or removing blocks, editing posts, changing the privacy of the group, limiting who can join the group, uploading videos and files, pinning a post at the top of the group (the agreement), starting chatting with members, and reviewing posts before they appear for the group.

Based on the above-mentioned roles and responsibilities, the instructor of this course, firstly, created the Facebook group before the course started. The activities were maintained and carried out in the Facebook group throughout the semester. Then, the instructor and the students in the group outlined specific regulations as a contract that organized and regulated all activities in the group so as to sustain formality and interest. The instructors' main role was to encourage the students in the experimental group to join and participate in the Facebook page, therefore, he used to visit the group daily to have synchronous chatting with students to answer questions, give feedback, post relevant materials and monitor the Facebook group activities. Students, meanwhile, were asked to actively participate in discussions that corresponded with themes presented in the course textbook. During the Facebook group life the instructor spent a great deal of time and effort in evaluating, correcting, examining, and responding to the students' comments, feedback, and assessments which required a great workload and time commitment from the instructor. The instructor paid attention to students' writings and comments in terms of the presentations of grammatical errors, structure, and ideas. This means that the instructor's role was crucial and students made use of this opportunity to ask questions and to make contact with their instructor.

Instrumentation

For the purpose of the study, a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques was employed with the aim of ensuring more reliable data and reliability that contributes to the results of the study. The quantitative techniques involved the use of a pretest and posttest which were developed by the instructor with the help of three colleagues who have been teaching this course for about 7 years. The two tests included three sections according to the regulations of QOU testing department. The first section contained 10 true/false statements awhile the second section included 15 multiple-choice statements. The third section included three essay –type questions that required students to respond to specific situations taken from the textbook units.

The qualitative techniques involved a brief investigation and analysis of the activities and students' posts, comments and contributions during the Facebook group life including the quality and the quantity of posts, comments, likes and discussions in addition to asynchronous interaction between the learners and the instructor. Investigating such elements seems to be crucial as these can give clear and straightforward indicators of students' improvement in communication skills as Rovai (2000) maintained that online asynchronous discussion is argued to have many benefits for student learning, such as helping learners negotiate higher levels of understanding to share and develop alternative viewpoints.

Facebook group Materials and Activities

Facebook groups make it easy to connect with specific sets of people, like family, teammates or teachers and instructors. Groups are dedicated spaces where members can share updates, photos or documents and messages. McCarthy (2010) maintained that the primary features of Facebook, including “wall”, “info”, “blog”, “friends”, “like”, “unlike”, “comment”, “poke”, “send message”, “share photos”, “links”, and “video” provide users with a variety of means to communicate and interact with each other and to make new friends all over the world. In particular, the “share status” feature plays an important role in Facebook activities. People can almost instantly discuss and share all types of information and knowledge through the share status function.

For the purpose of this study, the instructor set up a Facebook group titled **Language Use QOU Palestine Group**. The group was set to be a closed group believing that an open Facebook group will be more tiring to control and manage. Therefore, joining the group was limited to the participants in the experimental group only who required to ask for the administrator approval. These participants were given the opportunities to use the Facebook group for educational purposes through contributing to the various activities and materials posted by both the instructor and the students for about two months. This Facebook group helped achieve what face-to-face meetings could not achieve. One explanation for this might be the different features of the Facebook groups provided by the Facebook management such as: uploading photos and videos and files,

chatting, messaging, creating files and events and the like. During the seven weeks of Facebook group life, there was a large number of varied activities and posts posted on Facebook group for students to complete, make comments, and give feedback on other's works. These include quotations, proverbs, jokes, pictures, flags, songs, videos, dialogues, and interviews.

Procedures

The study lasted for 8 weeks in the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014 after the mid-term exams. To achieve the study objectives, a closed Facebook group was created and initiated on the 18th of October 2014 with the help of an expert in the field of social networking. Students in the experimental group were asked to join the Facebook group. Messages were posted on Facebook and students and the instructor took part in discussions while all lecture materials were still available face-to-face. After that, the first activity asked the participants to sign an agreement which pinned to the top of the group. This agreement was meant to strengthen learners' commitment towards the completion of the course tasks and requirements throughout the experimentation process and to help the group to be active and responsible for their own learning outside face-to-face lectures. Then, the instructor initiated the start of the discussion. During the eight –week experimentation, the instructor who was the group admin was responsible for all activities carried out on the group as mentioned above. Therefore, he used to post relevant materials and activities and monitor students' participation so as to provide regular feedback about information posted by the students. Moreover, he used to meet students online from 8 to 10 every night to chat with them and to reply to students' emails and inquiries. It is worth mentioning here that in the 7th week before the implementation of the Facebook activities, the pretest was employed. The posttest was administered in the 14th week after the Facebook activities completed. The posttest was the final exam (written and oral) to compare the results between the control group and the experimental group on one hand, and the experimental group before and after the experiment, on the other hand.

During the life of this Facebook group, the instructor was responsible for monitoring discussions, providing and guiding learning resources and collaborative activities. This continued for 8 weeks and during which students were encouraged to navigate through their own Facebook group and update their profiles, add pictures, videos, photos and files. Students, moreover, had to visit or join the group two hours daily from 8-10 in the evening to be online and to chat with the instructor and with each other as well. Students, however, were not required to be friends in order to post and practice out- of -class discussion opportunities related to in-class materials. One pedagogical implication of these opportunities was that they were fun and engaging, and did actually mean that students can use English for communication outside the walls of the class.

Data collection and analysis

The collected data were taken from the posttest after being corrected by the instructor according to an answer model. The results of the students were and analyzed using SPSS software to find out means, percentages and frequency. The significant value was set at 0.05. More specifically, means, standard deviations and t-test were used to obtain the performance and achievement of both the experimental and the control groups. Furthermore, students' posts and admin posts and activities were tallied and analyzed in terms of quantity as will be shown in the coming section.

Results and Discussion

This study investigated the effect of using Facebook in improving the communication skills in English through a blended teaching approach. To achieve these objective, three major questions were addressed and the results were as follow: 1-Results related to the first question: Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the achievement of the experimental group and the control group due to using Facebook ?

To answer this question, the means and standard deviations of pretest scores were calculated for both the control group and the experimental group. Regarding the means value and standard deviation of the control group they were (69.80) and (9.57) respectively, while they were (73.16)

and (13.61) for the experimental group. The t -test result ($t=-0.98$, $p > 0.05$) showed that there were no significant differences between the two groups; consequently, it was evident that the two groups had equivalent prior knowledge before the experiment, as shown in Table (1). This results may also suggest that students in both groups had the same background since they studied English as a foreign language at school and then finished two courses at QOU which were English I and English II.

Table (1): T -test result of the pretest for experimental and control groups.

	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig.*
	Experimental	25	73.1600	13.60760	-0.985	0.334
	Control	25	69.8000	9.57288		

* Significant at 0.05 level.

After the experiment, a matched pairs t-test was used to test the differences between the two groups using the pretest and posttest for both groups; the experimental and the control. Regarding the experimental group, the means value and standard deviation of the pretest were (73.16) and (9.58), while the means value and standard deviation of the posttest were (77) and (5.94). The result of the matched pairs t-test ($t=-3.089$, $p < 0.05$) showed that there were significant differences between the two tests in favor of the posttest, as shown in Table (2). This result revealed that the participants of the experimental group made significant progress on their posttest according to the results of paired t-tests of total scores. Such result might be due to the fact that the Facebook group with it features provided a good opportunity for the instructor to familiarize himself with students when Facebook enabled the instructor to connect faces and personalities with names outside the classroom. This view agrees with that of Wang et al. (2011) whose study confirmed that students were satisfied with the use of the Facebook group and agreed

that those who used Facebook were able to make announcements, share resources, take part in online discussions and participate in weekly activities.

The result, in this regard, seems to be in consistent with Shraim (2014) whose study revealed that learning via Facebook provided students with more opportunities to engage personally, communicate and work collaboratively and develop the 21st century skills for life and learning through social interaction. The result is also consistent with Aubry (2013) who found that post-treatment results indicated that participants assigned to the Facebook group experienced a significant shift in motivation type that research has determined as being beneficial for language learning. Moreover, the result agrees with that of Daher (2014) who found that the actions/interactions of the participants, together with the various conditions influenced the consequences of students' educational work in the social networking site. The result also agrees with Shih (2013) whose study revealed that incorporating Facebook in the (ESP) course effectively assisted college students in learning business communication English and helped them to improve their professional knowledge not only from the in-class instruction but also through peer assessing on Facebook due to the potential of the blended learning approach to significantly enhance students' learning motivation and interest. This result, again is consistent with Li et al. (2013) who found that the use of Facebook platform helped to promote online learning and that learners' participation in blended learning and flip learning was higher than that in traditional learning.

Similarly, this result seems to be in consistent with Hussin (2008) who found that for a language class, online forums provide a new environment in which learners can use the language as well as interact with non-native and native speakers of the target language. The learning process in the classroom can be extended to a virtual environment where language acquisition can also take place. For some learners who are shy to speak up before a group of people, online forum offers an element of privacy in social interaction and during the discussion, learners are

believed to be able to express themselves, share their views, and acquire new information or knowledge.

On the other hand, this result is inconsistent with Farooqi et al. (2013) whose study revealed that the majority of participants denied any effect of Facebook usage on their studies and GPA (Grade Point Average). The result, moreover, seems to be inconsistent with Wang et al. (2011) who found that some older participants did not perceive Facebook as a safe environment for teaching and learning.

Table (2): Result of pairs t- test of the pretest and posttest of the experimental group.

	Experimental Group	N	Mean	SD	T	Sig.*
	pretest	25	73.1600	9.57288	-3.089	0.005*
	posttest	25	77.0000	5.94418		

* Significant at 0.05 level.

Regarding the control group, the means value and standard deviation of the pretest were (67.85) and (69.96) respectively while the means value and standard deviation of the posttest were (69.96) and (10.60). The result of the matched pairs t-test ($t=1.192$, $p > 0.05$) showed no significant differences between the two tests as shown in Table (3).

Table (3): Result of pairs t- test of the pretest and posttest of the control group.

	Control Group	N	Mean	SD	T	Sig.*
	Pretest	25	67.8519	15.02486	-1.192	0.244
	Posttest	25	69.9630	10.60291		

** Significant at 0.05 level.

Such result might be due to the fact that the control group studied only by means of the traditional methods of teaching without being involved in the activities on the Facebook group, and they were not be able to communicate with their instructor and their classmates outside the classroom. Such result seems to agree with Farooqi et al. (2013) who found most participants who showed unwilling-to-communicate or shy in their real life, had considered by their friends as fun loving in Facebook world.

2-Results related to the second question: Are there statistically significant differences at ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the achievement of the experimental group before using Facebook and after using it?

Concerning the control and experimental group, the mean value and standard deviation of the control group were (71.56) and (8.81) whereas the mean value and standard deviation of the experimental group were (77) and (5.94). The result of the matched pairs t-test ($t=-2.676$, $p< 0.05$) showed that there were significant differences between the two groups in favor of the experimental group, as shown in Table (4).

Table (4): Result of pairs t- test of the posttest of the control and experimental group.

	Group	N	Mean	SD	T	Sig.*
	control	25	71.5600	8.80852	-2.676	0.013*
	experiment	25	77.0000	5.94418		

* Significant at 0.05 level.

This result might be due to the fact that the experimental group was given many opportunities to collaborate with their classmates using the Facebook group and as a result, participated in the various activities including posts, comments, and discussions. Such view agrees with that of Walsh (2012) who maintained that Facebook group is a great way to distribute learning content and create a central place for communication for a course or class and also agrees with Wong (2011) who found that

Facebook could enhance communication and collaborative learning between learners. Both learners and tutors can share their experiences and can record their conversations or produce their own oral essays and file them or share them with others. The result is also consistent with Miyasone (2007) who found that cooperative learning could improve students' communication, friendship, trust, interaction, active learning, and learning attitudes and that Facebook-integrated blended learning approach can assist students' English learning organization, grammar, structure, content, vocabulary, and spelling.

Overall, it was obvious that students who used the Facebook platform performed better than the non-participating students since they benefited from a variety of posts and activities uploaded onto the Facebook group for 8 weeks. Later on, these activities were commendable and carried over into face-to-face discussions to provide students with more opportunities to practice the communicative functions of English. In class, as a consequence, students were interacting like never before and seemed more comfortable with each other due to the Facebook group interactions. Furthermore, students were able to work at their own pace and also liked the fact that they were able to choose what they wanted to talk about making the activity more autonomous and better learner-centered. It seems then that students felt more confident to express their opinions in a more comfortable online environment compared to face-to-face classroom discussions. Thus, students showed more readiness to reflect, act, learn from each other, and construct meaningful knowledge and skills through collaborative learning Facebook interaction.

Such result seems to agree with that of Wong et al. (2013) who concluded that the students in their study were inclined to utilize social networking for performing many learning tasks and designing some learning activities based on social networking which promoted online community and enhanced collaborative learning amongst students. Such claim tends to go with Promnitz-Hayashi (2011) who concluded that many of the more introverted students became more motivated in class and were actually talking more with their classmates and that students

began to express more opinions and give extended reasoning in not only their face-to-face interactions but also in their written classwork as a result of participating in a Facebook group. This confirmed Ruiz (2011) whose result found a direct relationship between site use and out-of-class sociability and that the more time a student spent on Facebook, the more likely that student was to be involved with extracurricular activities.

The result is also consistent with Ibrahim (2013) whose findings revealed that there was an obvious effect of using Facebook on improving the students' writing skills. The result, additionally, goes with Blattner and Lomicka (2012) who found that the students viewed participation positively in online collaborative experiences especially when Facebook was implemented in ways that promoted communication, collaboration, and student-centered activities that facilitated student learning and encouraged high academic achievement. Facebook; therefore, allowed students to easily collaborate on projects and enhanced the communicative engagement of language learners, and increased their confidence as well as their enthusiasm for the subject matter. The result also agrees with Shih (2011) whose study showed that students who participated in the Facebook group were able to improve English writing skills and knowledge not only from the in-class instruction but also from cooperative learning and that Facebook -integrated instruction significantly enhanced students' interest and motivation to communicate with others using the site.

3-Results related to the third question: To what extent do the quality and quantity of the synchronous and asynchronous online interactions between students and between students and their instructor contribute to the improvement of communication skills?

To answer this question, a conceptual framework proposed by Nandi et al. (2012) for assessing quality in online discussion forums was used. This framework categorized the criteria into three major components: 1-content: demonstrating the expertise of the learners in the discussion topic; 2-interaction quality: looking at the way learners interact with each other online in a constructive manner, which implies that the contribution

should be collaborative and meaningful for the community of learners; 3-objective measures: highlighting how consistently and frequently learners participate in discussion.

Consequently, and to get the required data that can help to answer the third question of the study, the researcher with the help of three participating students and two Facebook experts carried out a quantitative and qualitative investigation of the posts and aspects of participation used throughout the Facebook group life. The results are shown in Table (5).

Table (5): Types of Posts used throughout the Facebook Life.

Type of Post	Admin	Students	Total
Videos	14	26	40
Quotes	3	10	13
Photos and Quote Photos	7	79	86
Comments	1255	4678	5933
Online Activities and Homework	28	6	34
Likes	0	980	980
Total	1307	5779	7086

Table (5) above reveals that the number of overall posts was (7086) and the students' part was (5779) which equals 81.55% while the admin's (the instructor) part was 18.45%. Such percentages suggest that the students of the experimental group actively participated on the Facebook group by means of posting comments, photos, videos, quotes, likes and online homework activities. They were also active in giving their own feedback on the posts and the activities offered by the students themselves and the admin as well.

Such result can be interpreted by the fact that the instructor who was the group admin aimed at encouraging the students to participate and take the lead so as to improve their communication skills. Thus, the admin asked the students to minimize the use of "like" and instead to use words and expressions that help them improve their communication skills. For example, students were asked to replace the "like" with expressions like:

I like it very much/ I like what you have just said /very good/ it seems good / well –done/ excellent/ perfect/ I totally agree with you/ I tend to agree with you/ I couldn't agree more with you/ It's amazing/ Sounds nice/ it sounds good /Sounds wonderful/Oh, great! And other possible expressions posted by the students or the admin as well. Therefore the number of comments was much bigger than the use of the icon "like".

Regarding the videos and the YouTube clips which were posted, they were between 5-12 minutes in length and they talked about useful topics and issues related to the objectives of the course in general and the objective of improving students' communication skills as a whole. Examples of these topics were: *how to improve English speaking skills posted by the admin, some expressions to improve conversational skills posted by the admin, three YouTube songs with lyrics posted by the students, four magic phrases to respond to anything, how to make people like you, expressions for agreeing and disagreeing, describing people appearance and nationalities, let's talk and the like.*

With regard to comments which scored the highest percentage, they were in the form of questions, opinions, analyses, feedback, praise, self-correction and others' correction. Moreover, these comments varied in terms of length and the shortest comments were only one word like: okay, ok, incredible, nice, yes, thanks, good, bye, and so on. Furthermore, there were longer comments which ranged between 2- 51 words and even more. In terms of the topics of these comments, they came in accordance with the posts and activities posted by the admin and the students as supplementary and practice materials relevant to the topics and themes given in face-to-face lectures and according to the course textbook and its intended objectives. For example, students were given the chance to comment and practice different kinds of expressions used for greeting, agreeing, disagreeing, thanking, apologizing, expressing indifference, anger, preference, and so on. It is worth mentioning here that the total number of posts for each topic varied slightly but tended to range between 3 and 41 depending on the importance and the nature of the post.

With regard to the number of verbal quotes posted onto the group, there were only 13 quotes because students preferred to post quote photos (about 86) that aim to attract the students and motivate them to comment. The themes of these were interesting and motivating such as: love, friendship, happiness, feelings, life, health, fun, books, language, and so on.

Regarding the online activities and homework, students were give 34 activities to work on online and offline and send their answers to the group so as to enrich their linguistic competence and communicative competence as well. Examples of these activities involved :describing the Palestinian flag, comparing between different flags, describing relatives and friends, describing houses and cities or villages, describing the weather, talking about daily routine, revising key terms and topics in the textbook, discussing previous exam questions, writing short dialogues, role-playing, interviewing each other, expressing your own opinion, commenting on YouTube materials.

As a result of this variety of topics, themes and activities, in terms of quality and quantity, students showed impressive collaboration to the extent that they were attracted to the Facebook group so as to read the posts and comments, answer questions, post their views, agree or disagree with other's posts whilst periodical formative feedback was provided continuously by the instructor /the admin. Such impressive collaboration and effective participation seem to go with Cvijikj and Florian (2011) point of view who found that the moderator posts affected the user interaction in terms of number of comments and likes, and interaction duration for the domain of a sponsored Facebook brand page.

Hence, it was interesting to observe the extent of students' commitment and participation throughout the Facebook group life. Different strategies were used by the admin for the sake of encouraging students to participate including praising, thanking, prompting them with new and increasingly more complex questions, and so on. In some cases, when some students for one reason or another showed less interaction and preferred just to read the posts or the comments or even using the "like" or emoticon instead of participating, the instructor used to

intervene by inserting a question, a comment or a more suitable post used as an incentive to enhance participation and involvement amongst learners. However, using the “like” icon and emoticons on Facebook group seemed to be effective to stimulate students' motivation and participation and, thus, enhanced the group members' friendships or interpersonal relationships. Such trend seems to agree with Miyasone (2007) who found that the “like” icon on Facebook could moderately stimulate the students' learning motivation for English writing.

Some students; however, wrote later that even when they did not write something onto the group, they learnt from reading their classmate's comments and posts and then incorporated ideas, vocabulary and structure into their posts or comments. Moreover, to help managing the student's participation and monitoring their feedback, three senior students majoring in English who previously took the course were accepted to join the group as guests so as to help the instructor monitor and provide the necessary help and encouragements. As a result of this cooperation between the admin and the members of the Facebook group, the students felt satisfied since they were able to ask and answer questions, post relevant materials, google the internet to find relevant resources, respond to the instructor and to each other, expand the discussion to cover different aspects of the topic being discussed, use the language meaningfully, share knowledge, communicate and express their opinions freely in a comfortable atmosphere, apply what they learn in face-to-face meetings and use some expressions in meaningful situations similar to daily life situations.

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the effect of using Facebook in improving the communication skills in English. The results revealed significant differences between the two groups in favor of the experimental group which made significant progress in the posttest. In addition to that, it was obvious that the variety of topics, themes and activities helped students to demonstrate impressive collaboration to the extent that they were attracted to the Facebook group so as to read the posts, add comments, answer questions, post their views, agree or

disagree with other's posts whilst periodical formative feedback was provided by the instructor /the admin. Such results seem to support the proposition that Facebook-integrated blended learning for the Language Use course was very effective since students used facebook group materials at their own pace in their leisure time outside the classroom. While participating in the Facebook activities, members of the Facebook group showed great interest in what their classmates and instructor were posting to the group; therefore, they tended to log in daily to check what others had posted to the discussions. Such use, as a consequence, lead students to be more active and more responsible for the their own learning and to move forward towards student-centered approach rather than teacher-centered approach. Students, as revealed on the Facebook group , found this experience interesting and helpful since they were able to practice English as a foreign language when the group allowed them to be socially and academically connected with their classmates and instructor through sharing media resources such as news links, photos, videos, discussions, brainstorming, sharing interesting websites that added fun and knowledge to the class. Students' posts and contributions helped the group to enlarge vocabulary, to be familiar with previous exam questions, to practice a variety of topics, to post educational videos and links for concepts that are currently being discussed in class, to posting a summary of what they have just covered, to ask and answer questions about photos, topics. Consequently, students' friendships, communication, and sense of trust were established and enhanced.

Recommendations

In the light of the above results, this study makes a number of useful recommendations for incorporating Facebook into the academic context. First, since Facebook usage was effective in improving students' communication skills, teachers should make effort to integrate Facebook in students' learning process, such as asking students to use Facebook for connecting to peers and learning materials from different resources. This necessitates the need for learning activities which enhance information acquisition through Facebook. In this regard, teachers who plan to incorporate Facebook in their teaching are recommended to design

collaborative learning activities which ask students to exchange information on target topics through Facebook platform with classmates or other people, including native speakers of English. Second, further research could be done to compare the results achieved by QOU students with other students to investigate possible differences and allow the generalization of the results achieved. More research is needed to replicate the study in different subject areas or skills and at different populations. Third, to make valid assessment of students posts and participation, there is a need to create a comprehensively defined framework that can achieve this objective. This can be done by using clear communication protocols and requirements (rubrics) for evaluating all types of posts.

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