"Facebooking" across Asia – Learning English along the Way?

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ABSTRACT

Facebook (FB) is the most popular social networking sites (SNS) in the world at the moment. This factor alone has prompted many educational researchers to investigate how Facebook can be utilized for educational purposes, focusing on the social interaction between users, particularly in the higher education contexts. In terms of language teaching, researchers are also beginning to be aware of Facebook's potential to enhance and enrich English language teaching and learning at all levels since the written language is the main form of communication in the Facebook environment. Driven by these trends and practices, the researchers carried out an international study involving Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia and Maldives to investigate and compare higher education students' perceptions of Facebook as an environment for learning English. Using survey questionnaire, we find that learners from the four countries view Facebook as an online environment that encourages and facilitates incidental learning of English, but with a few variations according to the countries. Several implications on the use of Facebook for English language teaching and learning in higher education are also discussed.

Keywords: Facebook, incidental learning, learning English, online environment, perceptions of learning English

INTRODUCTION

Facebook (FB) is the most popular social networking sites (SNS) at the moment with 2.167 billion active users (as of December 2018) worldwide (https://www.statista.com). This factor alone has prompted many educational researchers to investigate how FB can be utilized for educational purposes, focusing on the social interaction between users, particularly in the higher education contexts (Godwin-Jones, 2008). FB can have a huge impact on learners in higher education because of the sheer number of college and university students who are active FB users. For example, Junco (2012) in the investigation of a large sample size found that 92% of students in an institution of higher learning used FB and spent an average of 100 minutes a day on it.

In terms of language teaching and learning, researchers emphasize FB's potential to enhance and enrich English language teaching and learning at all levels since the written language is the main form of communication in the FB environment (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Kabilan et al., 2010). Kabilan et al. (2010) conducted a study with university students on how FB contributed to their English language learning from the incidental learning perspective and concluded that

> *technologies that support FB (Facebook) and features that characterize FB are able to engage students in meaningful language-based activities, even though their initial intention of joining FB is to socialize. If planned appropriately*

as part of an educational project, the same technologies and features of FB would be able to facilitate and produce effectual and meaningful learning of English within an online community of English language learners

Driven by the above trends and practices, we carried out an international study involving Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia and Maldives to investigate and compare higher education students' views of FB as an environment for learning English. We would like to examine and determine if Asian students regard FB as beneficial in terms of learning the English language. Hence, the research questions of this study are:

1. What are students' general practices or uses of FB?

2. Do the students consider FB as an online environment that facilitates their English language learning? If yes, in what aspects?

The significance of this study is that researchers and educators, can now, based on the findings of this study, make informed decisions about using SNS, in general, and FB, in particular, to enhance English language teaching and learning. The comparisons would enable practitioners, academics and teachers in other countries/settings to glean meaningful practices and apply them suitably when it concerns FB and English language education. In the context of Asian English language learners, this study would increase teachers' awareness of effective language learning activities that they would be able to participate and engage

in with other learners from different settings. This is because FB could be, as Hyland (2004) implied, a 'private domain' that was a rich and meaningful environment for out-of-class language learning since it was 'less threatening to identity and is also easier for the student to control' (p. 180).

Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives

Studies on the use of FB for educational purposes have proliferated tremendously since 2010, yielding both negative and positive outcomes. Junco (2015) and Junco and Cotten (2012) find negative relations between multitasking and academic grades and performance while using FB among college students. Similarly, Junco's study (2012) establishes that number of logins and time spent on FB by college students are related to lower overall academic results and performances. Kirschner (2015), based on a number of studies on FB and learning concluded that 'there is a long road to travel down' before FB could be 'effectively and efficiently used as tools for knowledge construction and knowledge creation' (p. 4) and reasoned that the tools available in FB could not fulfill satisfactorily the demands of teaching and learning. On the contrary, there are many studies that highlight positively the benefits of using FB for educational aims. In a study of learners' cognitive processing patterns in a collaborative problem-solving teaching activity, Lin et al. (2014) concluded that learners' 'diverse and continuous cognitive processes,' especially application and analysis, were evident in their FB

discussions (p. 55). Likewise, in Bowman and Akcaoglu's study (2014) of the use of FB in mass lectures, students' keenness in using FB for learning had resulted in the cultivation of cognitive and affective learning outcomes. The affective learning factor is also a key element when it comes to the question of whether FB has educational values or not. Jong et al. (2014), for instance, discovered that when there were strong ties among learners/peers, the usage of FB for learning were convenient, deep, meaningful and purposeful, in particular the discussion of educational matters, sharing educational resources, immediacy of learning what teachers posted and interaction with others. Succinctly, the above studies indicate two differing outcomes of using FB for educational aims – one that exposes the downsides, limits and limitations of FB as an educational tool, and the other that promulgates various benefits of FB in the attempt of enhancing learning.

The current study is an effort to show what FB can or cannot do and/or achieve in terms of contributing to learners' meaningful learning and thus, enriching the related literature, specifically the use of FB for English language learning and teaching in the Asian context. In this respect, most studies indicate positive and encouraging outcomes. In comparing face-to-face group (FTF) and a FB group learning English as a foreign language, Akbari et al. (2015), found there was a significant difference, whereby learners in the FB group believed they were more autonomous, competent and related. The notion of becoming competent

and being related was also observed by Shepherd (2015) in his study of writing students and their FB use i.e. the students had the ability to enact skills such as audience awareness, awareness of rhetorical situation, invention, and process writing form their experience on FB. Similar outcomes are also acknowledged earlier by Promnitz-Hayashi's (2011) study of low proficiency Japanese university students using FB to learn English. It is found that meaningful activities created on FB have assisted them to become more comfortable in online discussions, giving opinions and developing close relationships with other learners (Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011). These forms of learning are made possible by the computer mediated communication (CMC) environment and tools in FB, as they are capable of supporting interactions between learners that are mainly in the form of written communication. There are numerous other pedagogical studies on the use of FB for the purpose of English language learning. These studies support the cause for the use of FB to contribute or/and enhance various aspects of English language learning such as language learning strategies (Alias et al., 2012), personality traits (Kao & Craigie, 2014), communication (Shih, 2013), motivation and engagement (Felea & Stanca, 2015) and, interaction and collaboration (Kabilan et al., 2016; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2013,) among others.

It appears that FB is emerging as a meaningful and relevant source or platform to learn English. The tools available in FB allow for interaction and activities that connect learners in 'spaces that combine different sociocultural practices', whereby traditional or conventional forms of learning are 'challenged and new spaces for participation and involvement are made possible' (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2013, p. 300). Such interaction in 'spaces' of sociocultural practices would mean that learners' experiences of the real world are enriched and re-constructed all the time whilst developing language skills (especially reading, writing, communicating/interacting and thinking) in an authentic manner, beyond school language use and in a community of practice. This echoes what Wenger (1998) postulated i.e. as a community of practice (CoP), learners learn language successfully because they were 'focused on the experience of meaning rather than on the mechanics of learning' (p. 266). Blattner and Fiori (2009) further explained of the functions and mechanics of CoP that were built in the FB environment in terms of language learning:

> *… facilitate the development of socio-pragmatic awareness and competence in second language learners through meaningful intervention, and can promote cross-cultural understanding…. present(s) L2 (second language) learners with opportunities for intercultural communication with authentic native speakers of comparable age….develop relationships with native speakers who share similar*

interests and who will interact on a regular basis in L2. (Blattner & Fiori, 2009, p. 22)

The community of practice is an important notion that may well explain how learners in the FB environment may interact, collaborate, share and engage in meaningful socialization activities and processes. Learners work together in FB on 'a shared objective or topic' and thus create and develop a network of people who trust and support each other, leading to a sense of belonging and community (Llorens & Capdeferro, 2011, p. 205) by sharing their personal stories in the form of words, pictures and videos (Cheung et al., 2011). This social element or presence is the most important factor that attracts learners to engage with others for learning purposes in the FB environment (Llorens & Capdeferro, 2011). It is this informal learning experience that augments their potential to construct and re-construct knowledge, and to develop skills.

According to Kabilan et al. (2010), incidental learning is a form of informal learning experience that can be used as an underlying principle in the examination of computer-based technologies used for teaching and learning purposes. It addresses the elements of unintended learning outcomes – positive or negative or both – that may impact the students. This is because incidental learning in education may transpire or begin from other activities, regardless if those activities are academic or non-academic (Kerka, 2000). These activities may then propagate students'

learning that is developed from the concept of 'learning from mistakes, learning by doing, learning through networking, and learning from a series of interpersonal experiments' (Ross-Gordon & Downing, 1995, p. 315). In the FB environment, recent studies show that learning through networking and interpersonal experiments are highly likely and beneficial (Felea & Stanca, 2015; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2013).

METHODS

This research is a comparative study of how university students in Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia and Maldives use FB for the purpose of learning English. It is based on a study carried out Kabilan et al. (2010), who examined Malaysian university students' uses of FB for English language learning. Using an incidental-learning framework, they explored the various learning activities that the students' were engaged with in FB, and it was found that majority of the 137 respondents agreed that FB could be used as a platform for learning English. For the purpose of this study, the methods and approaches used in Kabilan et al. (2010) were replicated for this study, where appropriate. In certain aspects, some adjustments to the questionnaire had to be made to cater to the specific learning conditions in Japan, Indonesia and Maldives.

Participants and Sampling Techniques

The participants for this study were students from the following institutions of higher learning: (1) Malaysia: Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM); (2) Japan: Yokkaichi

University (YU), Kyoto Sangyo University (KSU), and Kyoto University of Foreign Studies (KUFS); (3) Indonesia: Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) and; (4) Maldives: Villa College (VC). All students from these institutions were doing a degree programme and were enrolled in an English course. A quantitative survey was administered to all the students from the four countries. This survey examined the students' general practices or uses of FB, and their views on FB as an online platform to learn English.

The sampling technique used was a combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques. An academic from each university was assigned to identify students as potential participants, select them, distribute questionnaire to them and collect the questionnaires once completed. At the first level of sampling, convenience sampling was employed, whereby the academics identified groups of students who were accessible to them i.e. students whom they had taught previously or whom they were teaching at the time of data collection. The second level of sampling technique is the purposive sampling technique, whereby only students with FB accounts were identified as respondents for the study. As a result, a total of 456 students from all the four countries participated in the study

and returned the completed questionnaire (Table 1).

Instrument and Data Analysis

The questionnaire used for this research was adapted from Kabilan et al. (2010). Only minimal changes were made to questionnaire by the respective academics. The changes were mainly instructional in nature such as revision of standings instructions to suit the local settings, as well as insertion of instruction in the students' own language to facilitate comprehension. Basically, the questionnaire is divided into two main sections. Section A required the students' demographic information and language usage. Section B consisted of a construct with 16 items that investigated students' practices of FB in terms of learning English (Appendix 1). This construct, which used a 5-level Likert scales of 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree', had a Cronbach alpha score of 0.98, which is very high. This questionnaire was developed by Kabilan et al. (2010) based on studies by Blattner and Fiori (2009); Kabilan (2004); Kabilan and Embi (2006).

As was done by Kabilan et al. (2010), similar data analysis techniques were used. For the analysis of the demographic data, frequency and percentages were used; whereas for the description of the 16 items,

Table 1

Frequency and percentage of respondents

	Frequency (f) and Percentage (%)			Total
Malaysia	Indonesia	Maldives	Japan	
163 (35.7)	87 (19.1)	93 (20.4)	113 (24.8)	456

mean scores, frequency and percentages were utilized to describe and explain the students' practices and views on the use of FB to learn English. It has to be noted here that the data for Malaysia used in this study were secondary data that were obtained from Kabilan et al. (2010).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

General Practices: Activities Undertaken in FB

In general, respondents from Maldives, Malaysia and Indonesia were quite active in FB, engaging in various activities and utilizing many of tools that are available. As for the Japanese respondents, they were quite inactive in FB compared to the other three countries. It was also the same in terms of the language used while undertaking activities on FB. Malaysian and Indonesian respondents were more comfortable in using their national language, and quite frequently, mixing both their national language and English. The Maldivian

respondents frequently used English only as the main language of communication in FB (more often than Dhivehi i.e. the national language of Maldives) as well as a mix of Dhivehi and English when they were communicating with their peers from Maldives. The Japanese students, in comparison to their counterparts, used English the least during activities in FB. Table 2 shows the frequent sharing activities that are done by the respondents in this study. The Malaysians, Maldivians and Indonesians had this in common – they frequently shared ideas (mean scores of 3.34, 3.29 and 3.07 respectively) and opinions (3.42, 3.29 and 3.19 respectively). However, the Japanese tended to share photos (2.76), which was more frequent than the Malaysian and Maldivian students.

In terms of writing comments, the Malaysian, Indonesian and Maldivian students had the same practice i.e. they frequently commented on what others had shared or commented on (Table 3). The

Table 2

Sharing activities on FB

Activities on FB: Sharing of….	Mean Scores			
	Malaysia	Indonesia	Maldives	Japan
personal-intimate-type of feelings	1.99	2.34	2.36	1.61
general-type of feelings	3.15	2.91	2.78	2.15
ideas	3.34	3.07	3.29	2.05
opinions	3.42	3.29	3.19	2.08
daily life events	3.19	2.93	2.27	2.07
photos	2.89	2.59	2.52	2.76
videos	2.17	1.86	1.48	1.61

Table 3

Commenting on FB

Activities on FB: Commenting on….	Mean Scores			
	Malaysia	Indonesia	Maldives	Japan
other's sharing	3.37	3.44	3.65	2.61
other's comments	3.54	3.50	3.66	2.54
own photos/videos	2.48	2.55	2.82	1.98
others' photos/videos	3.13	2.97	3.57	2.48

Japanese students did less on these. They also very seldom commented on their own pictures or videos that they had uploaded (1.98).

For the Malaysian and Japanese students, FB was a helpful way of keeping in touch with friends (mean scores of 3.53 and 2.90 respectively). As for the Indonesian and Maldivian students, the other activity that they frequently engaged in was chatting with friends (mean scores of 3.66 and 4.08 respectively). In general, for all the countries, inviting or searching for new friends was not something the students frequently did, with the Japanese having the lowest mean score i.e. 1.63 (Table 4).

As the data indicate, higher education students at these four nations do engage in various activities using different tools that are available in FB. Some activities are well liked and some are not. Nevertheless, many activities (with mean scores of more than 3) indicate that these activities converge into a socialization process that is both active and dynamic in many ways. According to Yang and Brown (2013), the socialization process in FB is intentionally done by higher education students and 'is connected in complicated ways to their psychosocial well-being' (p. 410). Since culture is an integral component in ones' conceptualization of psychosocial well

Table 4

Mean scores of other activities in FB

Other activities on FB	Mean Scores			
	Malaysia	Indonesia	Maldives	Japan
Asking questions	2.85	2.96	2.74	2.12
Asking for information	2.94	3.21	2.70	2.13
Sending private messages	2.65	2.97	3.00	2.52
Updating your profiles	2.81	2.73	2.90	2.22
Chatting with friends	3.21	3.66	4.08	2.39
Search for old friends	3.28	3.40	2.98	2.26
Invite/Search for new friends	2.96	2.47	2.34	1.63
Keep in touch with friends	3.53	3.33	3.80	2.90

being, such as thoughts and self-beliefs (Lu, 2008), it is easy to comprehend why the students from different cultures in this study prefer certain activities compared to others. In terms of English language learning, an important related issue is how these socialization activities could lead to the learning of English language, which will be analyzed in the next section of findings.

FB As an Online Environment to Learn English

More than half of the respondents agreed (f=261; 57.2%) that FB could be a platform for learning English. This is also reflected in the mean scores of other items that are related to the learning of English such as reading, writing, vocabulary and communication skills (Table 5). Malaysian and Maldivian students, as a result of engaging in FB, were using English more often (mean scores of 3.33 and 3.20 respectively) compared to Indonesian and Japanese students (mean scores of 2.88 and 3.04 respectively). Of the 261 respondents who agreed, the Malaysian

students made up the biggest number with 43.7% (f =114). Both Malaysian and Japanese students had higher mean scores compared to the Maldivian and Indonesian students in this respect i.e. 3.72 and 3.70 respectively. But in terms of vocabulary and enhancing communication skills, it was the Japanese students who emphasized the two items the most – mean scores of 3.90 and 3.94, which also turned out to be the two highest mean scores in this construct.

In terms of motivation, Table 6 shows, on average, respondents from the four countries were motivated to use English in their FB. In communicating with friends from the real world and FB friends, the students were generally motivated to communicate using the English language. However, the Japanese and Indonesian students were not so keen communicating with their lecturers using English as compared to the Maldivian (3.64) and Malaysian (3.44) students. Of all the items in this construct, it also recorded the lowest mean score i.e. 2.85.

Table 5

Mean scores of FB as English language learning environment

Items	Mean Scores			
	Malaysia	Indonesia	Maldives	Japan
Language learning	3.72	3.59	3.57	3.70
Students use English more often in daily life	3.33	2.88	3.20	3.04
Practice reading in English	3.77	3.67	3.61	3.70
Practice writing in English	3.81	3.62	3.60	3.78
Learn new words in English	3.77	3.77	3.66	3.90
Enhance students' English language communication skills	3.81	3.64	3.68	3.94

Table 6

Motivation of using English in FB

Students are motivated to:	Mean Scores			
	Malaysia	Indonesia	Maldives	Japan
communicate with friends in the real world using English	3.34	3.34	3.45	3.52
communicate with FB friends using English	3.23	3.21	3.31	3.38
communicate with lecturers using English	3.44	3.05	3.64	2.85

In a broad spectrum, the respondents in this study had a more positive attitude after engaging in FB activities in terms of the 6 items listed in Table 7. As a group, the Indonesian students now have a more constructive mind-set of English as a second language (3.60). The Maldivians were most positive in terms of not fearing making mistakes in English (3.64), unlike the Japanese who were otherwise (2.85). Nevertheless, the Japanese students believed the use of FB was an interesting way of learning English (3.52) and learning it was useful through FB (3.38). As for the Malaysians, they had a favourable attitude of learning English as a second language (3.44) and deeming it easier to learn than they thought before (3.41).

Respondents from Maldives and Malaysia generally experienced confidence in terms of all the five items in this construct (Table 8). The Indonesian students were confident in certain aspects, while respondents in Japan felt FB did not help much in terms of using English for writing (2.76), speaking (2.71) and reading (2.76). Most of the students from all the four countries agreed that they had gained confidence in learning new English words, with an average mean score of 3.46 (Note: this item has the highest average mean score for all the four countries).

Table 7

Students' positive attitude

Students have a more positive attitude in terms of…	Mean Scores			
	Malaysia	Indonesia	Maldives	Japan
English as a language	3.40	3.60	3.38	3.25
learning English as a second language	3.44	3.40	3.36	3.14
learning English, which is now easier	3.41	3.39	3.40	3.30
learning English, which is more interesting	3.34	3.34	3.45	3.52
learning English, which is more useful	3.23	3.21	3.31	3.38
making language mistakes	3.44	3.05	3.64	2.85

Table 8

Students' confidence

Students has more confidence	Mean Scores			
	Malaysia	Indonesia	Maldives	Japan
in using English in writing	3.27	2.91	3.37	2.76
in using English in speaking	3.17	3.00	3.34	2.71
when reading materials in English	3.45	3.20	3.61	2.76
in learning new English words	3.59	3.50	3.45	3.31
In learning new sentence structures in English	3.30	3.17	3.19	3.17

Though students from these countries show different inclination in terms of English language learning, in general, quite a number of them are positive towards learning of various aspects of the English language using the FB environment, while displaying motivation and confidence in the process. One possible reason is that, FB engages and involves students in various teaching and learning contexts related to reading and writing (Aydin, 2012), as well as encourages learners to be 'willing to express their own ideas in writing and more willing to interact with other people' (Shih, 2011, p. 841). These are done collectively, in a CoP whereby, the students socialise in FB, creating and developing a network of people who trust and support each other (Llorens & Capdeferro, 2011) that lead to having positive attitudes and becoming motivated and confident in learning English.

CONCLUSION

In general, respondents from all four countries agree that FB can and has helped them improve English language learning. Findings show that respondents from the four countries are motivated to use English in their FB as they communicated with friends from the real world and FB friends using the English language. In addition, the respondents have gained some level of confidence in using and learning English with some differing outcomes between the four countries. Hence, this research confirms that, to some extent, learning of English occurs in the FB environment incidentally, as well as structurally, and aided by the students' awareness of FB's capability to enhance their learning of English. Findings related to the motivation and confidence constructs indicate that the respondents are well aware of them learning certain elements of language, specifically communication and learning new words. Such learning is possible when the FB environment is used in pedagogically meaningful ways, which will then facilitate the 'development of socio-pragmatic awareness and competence in second language learners through meaningful intervention' that can also promote cross-cultural understanding (Blattner & Fiori, 2009, p. 22).

Based on the findings of the study, several pedagogical implications can be forwarded to further proliferate and strengthen our

existing knowledge of using FB for effective language learning experiences. It is found that learners from different countries need /prefer /require/ focus on different skills / elements of language learning in the FB environment. For example, the Japanese learners focused very much on learning new words of English and emphasized on communication skills; the Maldivians preferred the learning of English through chatting (synchronous messaging); the Malaysians on writing and; the Indonesians needed to change attitude towards learning English. Therefore, teachers, academicians and researchers, in using FB for learning purposes, ought to identify their learners' interests, patterns of uses and behaviours in the FB environment and how they use FB tools before they plan, organize and implement their teaching-learning activities, ideas or projects. They also need to identify the language learning needs of their learners, and plan and implement accordingly because, as indicated by the findings of this study, different learning contexts mean that there are different learning needs and interests. Identifying and understanding the above are important because, previous literature have strongly suggested that different tools in the FB environment have different purposes, different interaction types and can fulfill different learning needs (English & Duncan-Howell, 2008; Hsu et al., 2011; Lampe et al., 2006; Meishar-Tal et al., 2012). In addition, the role of 'cultures and educational practices in local contexts', as suggested by Manca and Ranieri (2013), should also be considered and taken into account since this study examined learners from four distinct cultures and educational settings.

In terms of further research, this study has opened the door for other possible research questions that need to be explored. The first is 'How can teachers utilize FB to promote learning among students in different countries?' This question directly would help solidify the main pedagogical implication of this study i.e. identifying the patterns, needs, uses and behaviours of learners before implementing FB as a learning platform. The second question 'What are some learning activities that teachers can apply in FB effectively?' which would address the remaining pedagogical implications. Also, studying the use of FB in other countries, contexts and communities would give us more helpful insights into the planning, organization and implementation of FB as an educational environment or platform.

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Appendix 1

Items for aspects of learning English in Facebook

Items	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Slightly Agree 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
Practise writing in English					
Practise reading in English					
Enhance students' English communication skills					
Enhance students' confidence to write in English					
Enhance students' confidence to read English materials					
Enhance students' confidence to communicate using English					
Enhance student's motivation to communicate using English					
Enhance students' motivation to read English materials					
Enhance students' motivation to write in English					
Make learning English more interesting					
Learning English					
Learn new words in English					
Inculcate a more positive attitude towards learning English as a second language					
Inculcate a more positive attitude towards English as a language					
Make learning English easier					
Tolerate language mistakes					