

## **ESL Reading Activities on Facebook among Malaysian University Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The integration of Facebook into English as a Second Language (ESL) environment are prevalent in many higher institution settings, but not many focuses on the receptive skills of reading. This study examines university students' perceptions of Facebook for ESL reading activities. To accomplish this, three methods of data collection were employed; a questionnaire, an informal Facebook group (IFG), and interviews. The findings show that students with good reading ability undertook more reading activities on Facebook, perceived the highest development of language skills after using Facebook and had the most positive attitudes towards English language learning on Facebook compared to students with moderate and poor reading ability. The students saw the effectiveness of the IFG in ESL, but, participated more as silent readers and believed that a higher involvement from the moderator would further enhance ESL progress. They preferred to read non-academic content on Facebook, particularly creative productions like short stories and poems to further cultivate ESL reading habits, develop reading comprehension and boost reading interest.

*Keywords:* English as a Second Language (ESL), Facebook, Malaysian university students reading ability, reading activities

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In an English as a Second Language (ESL) environment, reading is a fundamental skill that needs mastery. It is through reading that students recognise the relationships between letters and sounds (Al-Awidi & Ismail, 2014), become aware of new

vocabulary, learn new ideas and concepts, acquire skills such as skimming, scanning and making references and inferences, as well as flourish creatively and critically. Furthermore, content reading provides students with models of language forms and functions, that expose and transform them into good language users (Reid, 2011). For instance, recent studies on Facebook and English language learning reported students' improvement in online communicative abilities and intercultural communication by observing and reading the interactions among peers (Kasuma, 2017; Özdemir, 2017). Krashen (1993) summarised the benefits of reading as the only way we become good readers and spellers with decent writing styles, ample vocabulary, and advanced grammar.

However, many ESL classrooms suffer from time constraints and differing language abilities among students, which restrict in-depth engagement and prolonged activities. Furthermore, Azmuddin et al. (2014) stated that a branch of reading, i.e. extensive reading, was particularly absent in tertiary education in Malaysia. The lack of reading interests among Malaysian students urgently calls for new strategies to cultivate reading habits and interests. This could be more conveniently done on popular and accessible platforms of social media as the current generation of students are frequent consumer of social media content, highly competent and function at the forefront of multimedia creation (Zdravkova, 2016).

Manca and Ranieri (2013) believed that the new generation of students were

ready for a technological change in the classroom. They are the digital generation who flourish in online environment, and the consumer of a copious amount of multimedia content. Despite their physical presence in the classrooms, the students' minds and activities are perpetually connected to the social media realms such as Facebook and Instagram, connected by their mobile gadgets (Richards, 2015). Their constant social media interactions with online users and content, urge educators to indirectly reach them in their spaces (Manca & Ranieri, 2013). The students' dependence on mobile technology allows exposure to a variety of reading content at their fingertips; hence grounds the incorporation of technology-based instructions into the syllabus (Sah, 2015).

This study incorporates an informal Facebook group (IFG) to support students' ESL learning. Based on their experience in the IFG, their perceptions of reading on Facebook are examined.

### **Problem and Aim of the Current Study**

Many studies on ESL reading and technology have shown positive results (Lin, 2014; Yunus et al., 2013). For instance, a group of students who used mobile devices to conduct English reading activities achieved better results and showed greater appreciation towards the Extensive Reading Programme (ERP), than that of their peers who used PC (Lin, 2014). Furthermore, the participants in Reid (2011) read for pleasure on Facebook, hence, were not concerned with formal English and the necessity to appear diligent

and in control of their reading. Accordingly, many teachers saw the use of ICT in ESL reading and writing activities as attracting attention, facilitating learning, improving vocabulary and promoting meaningful academic processes (Yunus et al., 2013).

In keeping up with students' progressive technological needs, many scholars justified bridging formal and informal learning, that calls for the harnessing of social media potential in academia (Chen & Bryer, 2012; Davis III et al., 2015; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). A form of social media, the social networking sites (SNS) are popular among internet users. SNS are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). The two terms (SNS and social media) are used interchangeably in this study, although social media is more commonly used in many previous literatures.

Looking at the benefits of social media in ESL, this study examines university students' perceptions of Facebook for ESL reading activities. Facebook is chosen due to its popularity among the demography of college and university students (Akarsu & Dariyemez, 2014), accessibility and stability. Essentially, students showed a positive perceptions of using SNS for educational purposes (Lim & Richardson, 2016) and Facebook is viewed favourably as a platform to deliver learning material in a

flipped classroom for language teaching and learning (Quyen, 2017). This study follows Lankard's (1995) notion of incidental learning, that views learning as a byproduct of other activities. In this case, the leisure reading of ESL content may improve students' language acquisition. Incidental learning is articulated in an earlier study by Kabilan et al. (2010) that highlighted Facebook's ability in assisting university students' ESL development in terms of vocabulary, sentence structures, and writing styles. However, it was also emphasised that students learn better when they focus their attention to the language forms and functions (Kabilan et al., 2010).

This study has two broad aims. The first is to identify the university students' perceptions of reading on Facebook to improve their ESL abilities and attitudes. The second is to examine the effectiveness of a Facebook group created to promote ESL reading engagement. Many studies that investigated the effectiveness of Facebook in ESL environment reported positive findings in terms of vocabulary development, writing styles and organisation, and content engagement (Mabuan et al., 2017; Shih, 2011). It would, thus, be fruitful to examine whether Facebook as a SNS add values to ESL reading activities. It is hoped that the findings of this study would provide some suggestions to elevate reading activities in online environment.

This study observes the following research questions:

RQ1:

a) What is the relationship between the

university students' perceptions of their reading ability and the reading activities they undertake on Facebook?

b) What is the relationship between the university students' perceptions of their reading ability and their English language development from their engagement with Facebook?

c) What is the relationship between the university students' perceptions of their reading ability and their attitudes towards English language learning on Facebook.

## RELATED LITERATURE

### Issues Related to Facebook and ESL Reading

Reading is a fundamental literacy skill that governs students' capacity to succeed academically. In ESL, students are taught many reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, making references and inferences, and critical thinking. Academic researchers have painted the pictures of social media such as Facebook as facilitating reading abilities, especially in the acquisition of vocabulary and sentence structures (Mingle & Adams, 2015; Shih, 2011). Students also benefitted from reading the conversations and comments on Facebook as they learned the way to effectively respond to and communicate with other people (Chiu, 2009; Kasuma, 2017).

However, not many studies have specifically examined the effect of Facebook on reading skills. Existing studies were more focus on writing skills, communicative abilities and vocabulary learning, with the underlying presumptions that all of these

happen when students engage with and read the content on social media. For example, a group of Romanian students improved their vocabulary knowledge from their interaction in a Facebook group by doing reading, translating, and comparing activities (Ariana & Mirabela, 2014).

In many Asian countries, the cultural and environmental factors posed many challenges to ESL/EFL reading due to the lack of interactive opportunities in the target language, examination-oriented learning process, and language learning anxiety (Yen et al., 2015). Relatedly, many Malaysian students of Malay descent who lived in the rural areas disliked English language reading, faced writing and grammar issues, and had general difficulties learning English language (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003). There are also some challenges to using social media for language learning, especially when it involves students from low socio-economic backgrounds and those living in remote areas (Alnujaidi, 2017). The students and teachers in Saudi reported that their poor EFL reading comprehension skills stemmed from many reasons including the lack of exposure to the language, low motivation, limited vocabulary, inadequate parental involvement, insufficient reading skills trainings for students, and restricted teacher training programs that lead to poor teaching skills (Qahtani, 2016).

Many ESL/EFL strategies were implemented by educators to overcome the issues. Al-Awidi and Ismail (2014) revisited Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and discovered that CALL helped

students develop reading strategies and boost learning motivations by widening opportunities for active interactions and differentiated instructions. However, there is often a lack of resources of suitable hardware and software in institutions to warrant continuous use of CALL activities in the classrooms (Al-Awidi & Ismail, 2014). Therefore, the availability of Facebook as a popular, cost-effective and accessible social media might fill the technology gap in the ESL/EFL classrooms.

Research that examine the use of social media in ESL/EFL environments is progressing at a slow rate, as the effort is not consistent and concentrated (Toetenel, 2014). Even with their potential to increase students' learning cognitively and affectively, the roles of SNS in the classroom is unconvincing (Akcaoglu & Bowman, 2016). Another issue raised by Golonka et al. (2014) was, in spite of the copious amount of literature on technology in ESL/EFL environment, its evidence of efficacy was limited. Likewise, a number of studies reported a mismatch between students' potential interests/perceptions and actual behaviours when Facebook was presented to them for academic purposes (Donlan, 2014; Irwin et al., 2012; Kasuma & Wray, 2015). While they saw the values of Facebook in facilitating learning, they were not ready to participate actively in the process of knowledge creation and contribution. However, they accessed and read the shared information when it is student-directed, on their terms, and has a definite purpose and relevance.

The current study thus hopes to add more knowledge to the field of reading activities on Facebook to fill in the gap outlined in previous literature.

### **The Benefits of Facebook in ESL Environment**

Social media incorporation into ESL/EFL environments offers tremendous benefits for both instructors and students in the development of language skills and critical literacy from online writing and discourse functions (Alnujaidi, 2017; Buga et al., 2014; Ekoc, 2014; Pempek et al., 2009; Sah, 2015). In these studies, Facebook was often used as the online platform that assists ESL learning.

Mabuan et al. (2017) and Özdemir (2017) used Facebook groups to conduct online discussions. The experience resulted in the students to view Facebook positively as an innovative and strategic alternative tool that delivered ESL lessons. In the Facebook groups, they engaged with content, created a space for self-expressions and promoted intercultural communicative competence. Likewise, the Thai students in Tananuraksakul (2015) saw Facebook group as a tool that enhanced English learning through error corrections. They felt that the platform was convenient, easily navigated, and gave a sense of power balance between teachers-students.

Facebook is also commonly integrated in blended and flipped classrooms. In ESL/EFL writing, the use of Facebook in blended learning environment was effective as students reported improvement in their

content knowledge and language ability, i.e. grammar, writing structure and organisation, and vocabulary and spelling (Shih, 2011). Students learned more interactively and collaboratively with each other at the pre-writing stage when Facebook was used (Razak et al., 2016) and improved their writing ability based on peer feedback they received on Facebook (Wichadee, 2013). Besides writing skills, it was discovered that the students who underwent flipped or inverted instructions on Facebook and Twitter became active learners who improved their verbal communication skills (Tazijan et al., 2016).

Realising the importance of tying social media technology with ESL writing, Yen et al. (2015) and Yunus et al. (2016) and suggested a number of suitable activities, such as combining Facebook and Skype in role-playing activities to improve their ESL/EFL speaking and writing skills synchronously and asynchronously. Similarly, the combination of Facebook and Moodle have positively contributed in easing learning processes and building a sense of community among students by reinforcing communication skills and engagement in formal collaborative processes (Dogoriti et al., 2014).

In accordance with online learning, social presence plays important roles in determining students' engagement with community and resources (Kear et al., 2014). Kear et al. (2014) discovered that personal profiles and photos assisted online learners to feel more connected with each other. Lim and Richardson (2016) stated that the

intensity of using SNS did not significantly correlate to students' perceive social presence, but positively influenced students' perceptions of using SNS for educational purposes. In a collaborative writing tasks on Wiki and Skype, it was shown that social presence and team leadership significantly affected knowledge sharing and students' participation (Hiew & Tan, 2014). Hanif and Hammond's (2016) findings added values to social presence as they discovered that in the online environment, users felt obliged to help their communities in return or as a 'pay forward' for help they received in the past; which may have also increased social presence. However, while social presence is positively related to the quality of cognitive presence, high cognitive presence density does not equate the promotion of higher order thinking skills (Lee, 2014).

Previous studies have identified many benefits of Facebook in the ESL/EFL environment, mainly in the productive skills of speaking and writing. This study adds to the literature by focusing on the receptive skill of reading on Facebook.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Procedure**

This study primarily examines university students' perceptions of ESL reading activities and attitudes on Facebook, as well as the effectiveness of a Facebook group to promote ESL reading activities. The data collection was conducted in three stages.

First, 621 students answered a questionnaire that gauged their perceptions and attitudes towards reading activities on

Facebook. The students were asked to rate their reading ability from three scales (i.e. Poor, Moderate, Good).

Second, they participated in an informal Facebook group (IFG), created to assist language development by content reading, and promote interaction with an instructor and peers. The group activity was conducted for 10 weeks, and had approximately 400 members. In the IFG, the instructor and members shared a variety of social posts and ESL content and interacted with each other. The content included ESL reading articles from newspapers and online resources, weblinks to ESL exercises and texts, grammar quizzes, videos and music. In an earlier study, Reid (2011) similarly identified that tutors used a closed Facebook group to share interesting readings, newspaper texts and YouTubes to encourage interactions and participations.

Third, 25 students were interviewed to discuss their perceptions, experiences, and effectiveness of the IFG in improving reading skills and cultivating reading habits.

### Participants

The study was conducted at a research university in Malaysia. The participants were selected based on convenient sampling.

All 621 questionnaire respondents reported to having at least one Facebook account that they used daily. The students were enrolled in a similar English proficiency class for the semester. They were a mix of students from various disciplines with the highest from the schools of Arts, Education, Communication, Pharmacy, and Management. Others included Social Science, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Industrial Technology.

The students rated their reading ability as shown in the Table 1. Table 1 shows that a majority of the students rated their reading ability as moderate, then good, and poor. More students perceived that they had good reading ability, compared to those who rated their reading ability as poor. The extracts below support this notion.

IW8: My reading skills during MUET was rated the highest, but my listening is the weakest. Yes, listening where we listen and we answer the questions.

IW10: My writing is okay, reading and listening are also okay, but reading comprehension is the worst.

Thus, in terms of their receptive skills, the interviewees in majority saw their reading ability as good, but found ESL listening difficult.

Table 1

*The participants' perceptions of their reading ability*

Reading Skills	Poor	Moderate	Good	Total
f	43	435	143	621
%	7	70	23	100

## Data Analysis

There were three stages of data analysis. First, the questionnaire was analysed in terms of the following: a) the students' perceptions of their reading ability, b) the relationship between their reading ability and reading activities they conducted on Facebook, c) the relationship between their reading ability and English language development after engaging with Facebook, and d) the relationship between their reading ability and attitudes towards ESL after engaging with Facebook. Some sample questions from the questionnaire are:

### Part A: Activities on Facebook

Instruction: Select the frequency of doing these activities (Never, Seldom, Sometimes, Frequent, Always).

1. I do the following activities on Facebook:

- a. Interact with friends and family.
- b. Read and share opinions.
- c. Read and share useful information.
- d. Read and share multimedia elements.
- e. Read and share academic related information with my course mates and lecturers.
- f. Create networks of friends for academic purposes.

### Part B: The Effects of the Facebook Environment on English Language Skills

Instruction: Select one response for the statements (No, Unsure, A little, Moderately, A Lot).

1. Ever since I began using Facebook, I find that:

- a. My English proficiency has increased.
- b. I am more confident to read in English.
- c. I am more confident to speak in English.
- d. I am more confident to write in English.
- e. I use English more often than before.
- f. I learn new English words.
- g. I learn new English sentences.
- h. I am motivated to communicate in English.
- i. I like learning English as a second language.
- j. Learning English is easier.
- k. Learning English is more interesting.

Two statistical tests are used to analyse the items: a) the Kruskal Wallis test identifies any significant differences between more than two categories of variables, and b) the mean scores test determines the group of students who scored higher than others.

Second, the threads from the questionnaire were gathered to examine students' interactions. The interactions do not necessarily contribute to the findings and discussions of the study, but are important in showing students' level membership and participation in the IFG. The interaction threads were gathered and analysed qualitatively using content analysis to derive at relevant themes. Arguably, it is difficult to differentiate students' consumption of reading materials on their general Facebook pages and the IFG due to the rapid circulation

of information. In this sense, it could only be done by asking the students specifically of the reading activities they undertook in the IFG group or motivated by the IFG group, during interview sessions.

Third, 25 members of the IFG group were conveniently selected to be interviewed for their perceptions of their reading activities in the IFG. The data were analysed qualitatively to derive at relevant themes. The results are used to substantiate and triangulate the quantitative findings from the questionnaire.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The findings are presented and discussed by triangulating both questionnaire and interview data. Some samples of interaction threads from the IFG are presented to support the arguments.

**Research Question 1: What is the relationship between students’ perceptions of their reading ability and the reading activities they undertake on Facebook?**

Table 2 shows the relationship between students’ reading abilities and reading

activities they undertake on Facebook. The Kruskal Wallis test indicates significant differences between the students’ reading ability and the reading activities they undertook on Facebook. The students with good reading ability scored the highest mean scores for all three items; while the students with poor reading ability scored slightly higher for items (b) and (c), i.e. Read and shared multimedia and academic information, than the students of moderate ability. Despite the majority in numbers, the moderately-abled students participated less frequently than the students with good and poor ability in reading and disseminating information on Facebook.

The students reported that they became members of the IFG to improve ESL knowledge, interact with friends, and gather new information about the English course.

IW6: I wanted to participate and comment, but I don’t know how to get involved in other people’s conversations ...

IW11: I want to see the activity in the group, the ESL posts, so that I can improve my English language command ... You [the moderator] like to share articles and English

Table 2  
*The relationship between students’ reading abilities and reading activities they undertake on Facebook*

Activities	Mean Scores		
	Reading Skills		
	Poor	Moderate	Good
a) *Read and shared useful info	3.7442	3.7494	3.9375
b) *Read and shared multimedia	3.5000	3.4437	3.6923
c) *Read and shared academic info	3.4773	3.3419	3.5833

*\*Items that show significant differences based on Kruskal Wallis Test*

cartoons from which we can improve a little ...

IW25: I feel confident with my English. It is my chance to improve it and to express my eagerness. The IFG helps me a lot to speak and comment in English.

This emphasises the benefits of the IFG as an avenue for university students to improve ESL; by passively engaging in silent reading activities or actively interacting with other members. This highlights the importance of an online ESL group to cater to students' technological needs and support learning.

**Research Question 2: What is the relationship between students' perceptions of their reading ability and their English language development from their engagement with Facebook?**

Table 3 shows the relationship between students' reading ability and English language development after engaging with Facebook.

The students with good reading skills scored the highest mean scores for all four items; which indicates their willingness to use English language daily, perhaps, as a practice, or as a natural way of communication. Perhaps, it was due to this that they had a more positive outlook that their reading activities on Facebook improved vocabulary and sentence structures, than that of the students with moderate and poor reading ability. Notably however, the students with good reading ability scored much higher for items (b), (c) and (d), compared to item (a); hence shows that despite their reading ability and enthusiasm for English learning on Facebook, they were still quite hesitant about using English more in daily lives.

Accordingly, many interviews reported that they experienced improved language skills in terms of reading and speaking ability, as well as self-confidence. They were also able to recall past lessons such as

Table 3

*The relationship between students' reading ability and English language development from their engagement with Facebook*

Reading ability	Mean Scores		
	Reading		
English language development	Poor	Moderate	Good
a. Use English more in daily lives	2.8864	3.1148	3.3776
b. Learn new English words	3.3256	3.6659	4.0909
c. Learn new English sentences	3.3864	3.5691	4.0352
d. More confident to read in English	2.9318	3.4720	4.1538

grammar (e.g. tenses) and develop new ideas from the ESL reading activity in the IFG.

IW13: When we comment, we generate new ideas where we have to think about the structure of the language, so it improves the way we talk. I think I can improve English through chatting. The way they post and get information can influence our way of thinking and improve ideas.

IW15: I participated in the conversation because it helps me a lot to improve my English writing and it is fun to see the feedback and share some thoughts.

IW24: Facebook helps people who have low confidence. They can try to improve their confidence from Facebook ... from reading skills and speaking skills ... they may improve all of it as Facebook has Skype or video calls ...

Many of the interviewees reported the IFG's ability to improve ESL knowledge from the variety of content it circulated. At times, the students were challenged to think about the accuracy of common English phrases they used in daily lives. This, to some extent, suggests that the content in the IFG developed critical thinking and correct wrong English usages.

IW4: There are interesting content ... the picture of the grammar mistakes ... the one on past tense, present tense ... that is interesting because in class I make a lot of mistakes like that, so, there should be more pictures like that ...

IW7: Try and comment correctly in the correct grammar, sentence ... no shortcut or short form ...

IW12: In some ways [it improves my language skills] ... like I said, the *thank you* and *congrats* really make me think. I was thinking before replying which one was the best ... so, it increases my fluency. Facebook improves English interaction, but, when it comes to English grammar and vocabulary, especially spellings, we use a lot of short forms, which spoils it a bit.

In accordance with the above argument, Mingle and Adams (2015) found that Facebook improved Ghanaian students' reading skills and the sharing of resources; but negatively affected grammar and spelling, learning progress, and academic achievement.

On the other hand, the students with poor reading skills, obtained the lowest mean scores, especially for item (a), which suggests lower English language usage in daily lives. The finding could be seen in relation to their self-confidence and interest in approaching the subject of English language. Item (d) substantiates that the students with poor reading ability had the lowest confidence to read English language content, compared to the students with moderate and better reading ability.

IW16: Recently, you [the moderator] posted about a movie, a romantic one ... Notting Hill. I have written a comment to respond to say that it's my favourite movie. I felt embarrassed so, I deleted it. I just read and like [the posts and comments] here and there. I think these are the types of posts that would be attractive to students ... movies ... current issues do attract a lot of silent readers because not many are aware of them ...

In the above excerpt, IW16 was interested to respond to a post, but decided against it due to the lacked confidence to publicly use the English language.

**Research Question 3: What is the relationship between students’ perceptions of their reading ability and their attitudes to learn English language after their engagement with Facebook?**

Table 4 shows the relationship between the participants’ reading ability and their attitudes towards learning English on Facebook. The students with good reading ability scored the highest mean scores across all three items, which indicates the highest positive attitudes towards learning English on Facebook. Perhaps, these students felt more comfortable and motivated with the language and content presented.

The students of poor reading ability were highly positive that they liked learning ESL on Facebook. However, they scored the lowest for all items, especially noticeable is item (b); in which they disagreed that

learning English was easier on Facebook. Perhaps, the students preferred teachers’ explicit guidance in learning English language and were not aware that the content on Facebook could contribute to their knowledge. For example, several interviewees believed that it was the group moderator’s task as an authority to circulate relevant ESL content in the group.

IW1: It’s because you [moderator] keep on posting, so we read the posts because I’m naturally passive.

IW18: You [group moderator] should be responsible to share the content so that we learn something from it.

This thus calls for language instructors to actively create, share and circulate a variety of ESL content in cultivating students’ reading skills when Facebook is used to support learning. Nevertheless, several interviewees perceived that their language ability would have been further improved if more participants participated actively in the IFG:

Table 4

*The relationship between the students’ reading skills and their attitudes towards English language learning on Facebook*

Attitudes	Reading Ability		Mean Scores	
			Reading	
	Poor	Good	Moderate	Good
a. Liked learning English as a second language	3.5455	3.8972	4.2958	
b. Learning English was easier	2.6429	3.1145	3.6783	
c. Learning English was interesting	3.2791	3.6238	4.1469	

IW13: It's quite hard if we want to improve because not everyone participated in the group.

IW20: Yes, I think that everyone wants to improve their language, but at the same time you can see the lack of English grammar. I admit that my grammar is not that good but at least I try to ... I do feel a bit embarrassed because I don't post anything. I don't have anything to share but the group is unexciting ... very dull ...

From the above excerpt, we could see that while IW20 felt the need to improve her language ability, she required other people (i.e. peers and authorities) to help her achieve it. The students' dependency on others could be related to her prior learning experience; where spoon-feeding was common to cater to exam-oriented curriculum (Musa et al., 2012).

### **Academic vs Non-Academic Content on Facebook**

In accordance, many interviewees felt that non-academic content are more interesting to be read on Facebook than academic ones. These include newspaper articles, interesting facts, and games (e.g. crossword puzzle).

IW4: I like the grammar quizzes. The one on tenses was fun. It jogs my memory of what I've learned in school.

IW12: I read English newspapers a lot, but since I got into university, I have lesser time to do it.

IW19: Not academic, non-academic things like news or interesting science facts might attract people to read the posts.

Besides that, from prior learning experience, the students felt strongly that creative productions such as short stories, excerpts from popular novels, movie reviews, and poems should be circulated more frequently in the IFG as they improved reading interest and language skills.

IW10: [Do more] short stories because they're easy to read, you could teach some words too, like how to use the words and make sentences, as I'm quite poor at that. I don't know how to use the words because I don't know their meanings, but sometimes when you [people] speak to me [using the words], I know what to say [how to respond], but I don't know how to use it.

IW14: It's like poems in books, although we don't practice it, when you read it once you will remember it.

IW19: My friends don't read grammar books, they read stories and English newspapers. I also love to listen to English songs on YouTube, I find the song title with lyric, but I don't like the videoclip, then I read the words. When I don't understand the words, I search in dictionaries. My teacher teaches poem and she will relate it to past tense, she uses different ways like poems to teach us.... In the group [IFG] I just read ...

IW22: For example, in [the course] there are a lot of grammar and short stories so, we can discuss short stories. From the short stories we learn grammar rather than "okay today is grammar past participle" ...

Short stories in the form of storytelling have always been associated positively with language learning as it develops language skills, improves comprehension,

creates classroom interactions, builds communities, and promotes multi-cultural understanding (Nguyen et al., 2014). A UK-based study highlighted that teenagers' reading habits and motivation predicted their comprehension and summarisation skills and text reading speed; and these traits were especially related to fiction books (McGeown et al., 2015). These scholars asserted that our brains were wired to comprehend best through narratives, thus, storytelling in fictional content would highly benefit the development of L2 skills, comprehension and interaction (McGeown et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2014). Therefore, promoting short stories as reading materials on Facebook might boost the students' reading interests, enhance ESL acquisitions, and encourage reading attainment.

### **Silent Readers in Online ESL Environment**

It is not unusual to discover that students with better ESL ability have higher confidence to use more of the language. This is because, effective learners are usually aware of the language learning strategies they use (Alias et al., 2012). Thus, with more ESL knowledge and familiarity, the students with good ability may feel at ease using it.

On the other hand, the students with poor reading ability were the least developed in English language acquisition and self-confidence and had the least positive attitudes towards ESL on Facebook. Like IW16 (earlier excerpt), IW6 demonstrated low self-confidence of her ESL ability that she would type and delete her comments without postings in the IFG.

IW6: I really wanted to participate, but I don't know why I will type and delete my comments. I did that many times.

This occurrence is quite common among students with poor English language skills; and the reasons for low proficiency have been identified as; having fewer opportunities to be exposed to the L2, the lack of L2 teachers' expertise, a general dislike towards English language reading, difficulty in the mastery of grammar and writing, lack of motivation and parental involvement, as well as anxiety (Al-Qahtani, 2016; Alnujaidi, 2017; Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Yen et al., 2015)

Nevertheless, many of the interviewees saw reading on Facebook as a natural process. Many of them participated as silent readers who wished to be exposed to more language input by the moderator and their peers. They concurred that they read most of the input shared in the IFG and preferred to access and read the content than actively interacting.

IW4: I'm naturally quiet on Facebook. I rely on notification, so I read everything shared in the group, but I don't participate.

IW7: It depends on how I feel. Usually when I'm in no mood to participate I'll just read everything shared. If I like a post, I will click like.

However, the interviewees agreed that difficulty with grammar further hampered their active involvement in the IFG, as they believed that grammar mastery makes them better students. Consequently, they worried about committing grammar mistakes on Facebook that would attract negative comments and criticisms.

IW3: I emphasise grammar, because I'm always confused whether I'm using them correctly.

IW14: I want to contribute more to the group, but I'm scared I'll be criticised by using the wrong grammar.

Although a concern, this situation illustrates the perfect opportunity for Facebook to be used as a non-intrusive ESL learning environment. As reading is the best way that students receive a variety of language and semantic input, educators should play active roles in sharing quality ESL content on social media; in this case, the IFG.

Several interviewees asserted that they were happy to play the roles of observers in the group and learn from other member's

sharing. They will make their contribution when they feel more comfortable in the group. This finding follows the results of previous studies that concluded pedagogical lurkers' tendency to digest shared online content, and participate once they grow more in confidence and become familiar with the environment (Chiu, 2009; Dennen, 2008). Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 show IW1 and IW4's interactions. They started as silent readers in the IFG, but as the group activities commenced, they became more active by interacting and sharing more ESL content with their peers.

Nonnecke et al. (2004) identified a number of principal reasons for lurking behaviours that resonated with the finding; the students just wanted to read/browse

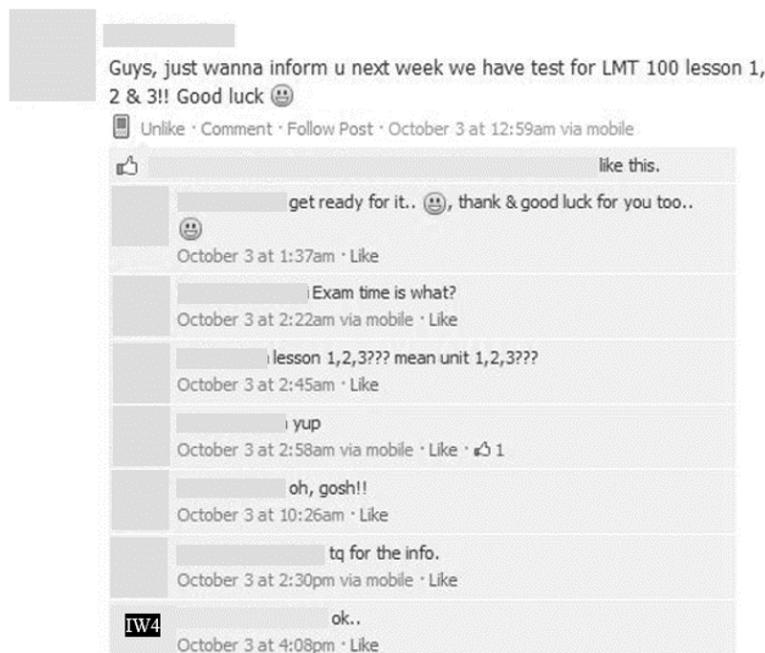


Figure 1. IW4 interaction in the IFG that started as a short comment

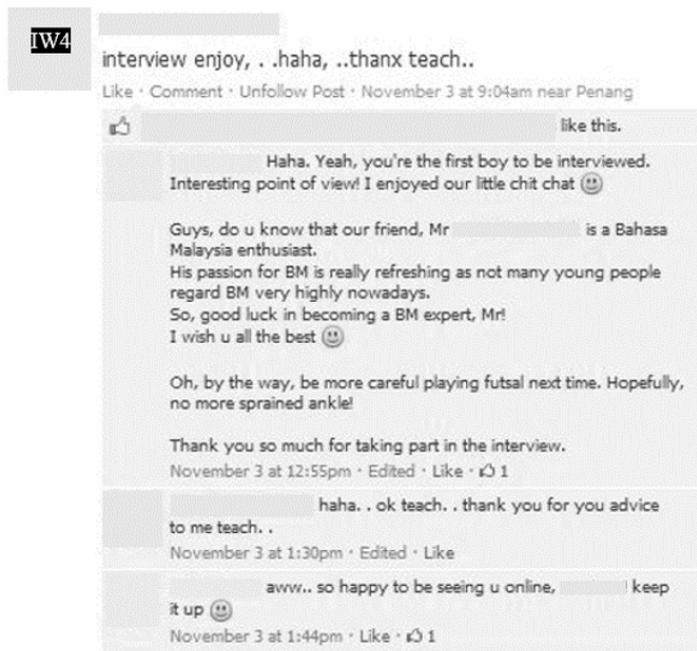


Figure 2. IW4's interaction in the IFG that developed as a post

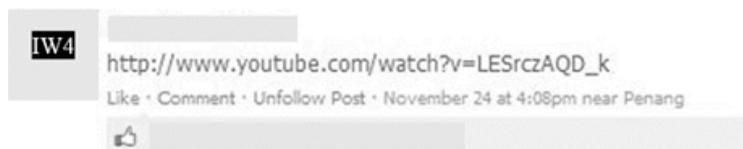


Figure 3. IW4's interaction in the IFG that developed as an academic multimedia post

for information, the students felt that their needs were met by observation rather than public participation, they were still learning about the group, and they were observing a temporary period of non-posting. Alternatively, when the students did participate publicly in the group, it may be due to their human traits to help other members and also the observation of the practice of an online community (Hanif & Hammond, 2016). However, while lurking is not viewed as a negative behaviour, lurkers were identified as less optimistic and less

positive than those who posted (Nonnecke et al., 2006).

### **The Effectiveness of a Facebook Group in Promoting ESL Reading Engagement**

Facebook exposes students to new vocabulary and sentence structures, and boost confidence to read English language materials. Many of the students with good reading ability perceived highly that they acquired new English vocabulary and sentence structures from their engagement with Facebook. This, thus, indicates two

things. First, the Facebook community that they associated with disseminated high quality English language content, hence enabling them to frequently acquire new vocabulary. Many interviewees agreed that the IFG was a good platform to expose them to more ESL input.

IW2: The group is good because I've been learning English for a long time, but I still haven't mastered it. I feel confused whether I'm using it correctly.

Accordingly, Akarsu and Daryemez (2014) concluded that media and technology affected their students' reading habits, as they now spent hours daily in front of their computers. The frequent exposure to content written in English language may improve reading ability and attitudes towards ESL.

Second, the students were more aware of the learning process that might have taken place from their engagement on Facebook. This argument could be seen in relation to a previous study, where Facebook and YouTube were used by a group of high-intermediate and advanced Taiwanese EFL students to produce informative videos on YouTube and Facebook for international students on campus (Sun & Yang, 2015). Despite having high English language abilities, the participants felt that the social media project had polished their public-speaking skills, built confidence to speak in English, and developed preferred learning processes and strategies. Accordingly, many interviewees agreed that the content shared in the IFG improved their grammar acquisition, which is an important reason for their participation.

IW1: The interaction in the group helps, because I am not very good in English, so when I read posts with correct grammar, I learn. All these while I've been making mistakes. I learn from there, so I don't repeat it in the future.

Thus, in the right social media context and at suitable levels of English language content, good students could further advance in their language ability. In support of this, Kao and Craige (2014) discovered that the Taiwanese university students regarded English usage on Facebook as the strongest predictor of their EFL achievement, rather than personality traits. The students felt that Facebook widens their opportunities to use English language through its many features such as discussions, comments, and questions, in an otherwise restricted classroom environment. Accordingly, the students from 15 US and Canadian institutions reported a higher interest and perceived values in course content, as well as felt closer to the course and instructors, when they participated in a class Facebook group (Akcaoglu & Bowman, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

In comparison with the students with moderate and poor reading ability, the students with good reading ability conducted more reading activities on Facebook, experienced more developed English language ability, and demonstrated more positive attitudes towards English language learning, after using Facebook.

The members' participation in the IFG group indicated their desire to improve ESL ability; thus, emphasises the importance of online ESL reading and interactive groups that support students' formal learning. The exposure to ESL input they received from the IFG improved not only reading interest, but other language skills including speaking and writing ability, grammar, vocabulary and sentence structures. They also acquired new ideas from reading other people's conversations, recalled past ESL knowledge from the activities and experienced a boost of self-confidence over a gradual period.

The students were aware that they needed to improve their ESL ability to advance in education and future career. Their participation in the IFG demonstrated their awareness that active participation in content creation and interaction were required to master the language. Despite this, they did not feel highly responsible over their learning in the IFG, as they believed that it was the moderator's role to circulate course-relevant ESL content that improve knowledge and learning opportunities. This expectation of an authoritarian role demonstrates a strong influence of their past learning experience that emphasises spoon-feeding and exam-oriented productions. Nevertheless, some members who initially participated as silent readers/pedagogical lurkers gradually increased their participation to become more active by sharing course-related ESL information. A prolonged IFG is thus required and would benefit many more of the students who lacked confidence to

publicly use English language to express themselves.

In a technology-infused learning environment, ESL content are easily discovered, retrieved and circulated, which makes reading a lot easier. Based on past learning experience, the students suggested many non-academic reading materials; mainly creative productions of short stories, poems and movie reviews, as well as newspaper articles and ESL games. With the convenience of synchronous and asynchronous platform of Facebook, students might get more exposure and opportunities to explore and engage with a variety of ESL content that could develop reading skills and comprehension.

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