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TRANSFORMING THE EFL PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TOWARDS DIGITAL AGE THROUGH ONLINE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (CoPs)

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ABSTRACT

Since most conventional classroom learning in which English is a Foreign Language (EFL) is still characterized by learners' traditional roles and lacks such dynamic collaboration and interaction, EFL learners are increasingly using Social Network Sites (SNSs) as online Communities of Practice (CoPs) in adopting collaborative learning and transforming the EFL pedagogical approach as a new strategy towards achieving success in the modern digital age. Based on the theoretical background of CoPs, the current study aims to investigate the application of SNSs as a CoP in providing EFL students with the opportunity to use English, and to improve their learning through collaborative interaction in the language. The subjects of this study were 24 active and regular members of the Only for English Learning Facebook (FB) Community – a group developed and maintained by the researchers – for EFL learners coming from different countries. As to gain further information and understanding from the participants of how such EFL learning practice could be improved, online questionnaire, semi-structure interview and commentary exchanges of interaction posts were used for data collection and analysis. The findings proved that such online CoP was perceived as an effective learning environment conducive to promoting the EFL learners' writing, grammar, reading and personal and socio-cultural skills and domains. Their perception of this CoP significantly increased during the period of collaborative learning.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, Facebook Groups, Community of Practice, Transforming EFL Learning, Development, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the increasing use of these collaborative technologies makes it possible for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) to construct their own communities of practice (CoPs) or groups of members. This recently emerging revolution has not only been restricted to personal, social and cultural identities and relationships, but it has

also been ushered in education for the last few decades. As pointed out by Beer & Burrows (2007); Cloete et al. (2009); Boyd & Ellison (2011); Lim (2012), Social Networking Services (SNSs) in education offer the opportunity for such self-direction with their ability to restructure hierarchies, inform and reconfigure communication, and transform relationships with knowledge and people. Having their unique features and capabilities of re-organizing the way knowledge is acquired and used among people, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that “these technologies are dramatically transforming the basic patterns of communication and knowledge interchange in society” and are redefining “what it means to know, understand, and ... become a „literate“ or „educated citizen“” (p. 12). Facebook is another informal system equipped with tools designed for social interaction that students are re-appropriating for learning purposes (Lampe et al. 2011). Although such technological devices are potential for EFL learners, the majority of EFL classrooms tend to lack the necessary characteristics of CoPs in which learners cannot be engaged in active participation and dynamic interaction to use and practice English for various authentic purposes. Therefore, the present research aimed to explore the role of SNSs as CoPs in providing EFL learners with opportunities of practicing English outside the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wenger (1998) defines a CoP as a group of learners or practitioners being involved in an active learning environment with particular and obvious goals and purposes through social interaction. CoPs are also defined as „a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice“ (Lave and Wenger 1991:98). They are available everywhere and can be „an entity as broad as a society or culture, or as narrow as a particular language classroom“ (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001:148). Learners belong to several communities of practice at any given time, e.g. the community of family, school, work place etc., and the communities of practice to which they belong change over the course of our lives. This theory of CoP can be the basis for forming any online CoP of learners.

According to this theory of legitimate periphery participation of Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is perceived as „an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice in the lived-in world“ (p.31). It is a process by which newcomers become included in a community of practice, developing skills and knowledge (including language) through active participation in a given communities“ activities and by interacting with more experienced community members (Lave and Wenger 1991). Thus, “learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world“ and it „involves the construction of identities“ (Lave and Wenger 1991: 49 and 53). Thus, as elaborated by Plastina (2009), this theory stresses

the existence of full participants as an essential key element in successful PoCs, which denotes the individual social relations as an empowering process enabling newcomers to progress by pushing them to move from the periphery of the community towards its centre. Therefore, learners of that particular CoP need to be encouraged as to develop a sense of belonging to the community.

According to Beer and Burrows (2007), despite the evidence of the potential of SNSs in assisting learners to share, exchange and construct knowledge and form various modes of communication, interaction and collaboration, the exciting potential of such new technologies for especially in ESL/ EFL contexts is yet to be fully explored. Therefore, collaborative technologies play a key role in shaping community environment and interaction, as they compensate for the lack of physical space.

METHOD

1.1 Participants

The population of the study involves all the members who joined the Only for English Learning FB Community since its creation, and they were 5,213 members by 4 May 2012. However, for the current study, it was only based on the data collected from some of them who were (1) the most active participants, (2) most of them time present in the group, (3) responsive and (4) at college levels (First, 2nd and 3rd levels) and (5) aging between 20 years old and 30 years old. The total number of the participants in the pre-and post survey and interview was 24 EFL learners coming from different Arab and Asian countries

1.2 Data Collection Procedure

This type of mixed research was selected because it involves planning the action needed to be carried out and then, this is followed by one's or practitioner's reflection on how the action or practice has been working" McNiff& Whitehead (2006). Thus, after conducting the action project from the day the group was created till 19 July 2012, a period during which the participants practiced English learning and the instructors acted as facilitators for the group, and the researchers followed these two major stages:

1.2.1 Pre-and Post -Survey Distribution

A few instruments that were specifically designed aiming to assess the language- related development and socio-cultural development among the 24 EFL learners participating in this study. The first main section of the instrument covers the language development in terms of writing and mechanics (5items), grammar and structure (5items) and reading and vocabulary (5items). For the second main section of the instrument, it covers personal and socio-cultural aspects in terms of cooperation,

self-confidence, responsibility, social relations and expansion of cultural horizons. A five-point likert-type rating scale (1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Undecided, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree) was used.

After this, a pilot study was conducted and administered to 24 participants on May 3rd in 2012. The administration and collection of the instrument and the analysis of the results took about two weeks. For the statistical analyses, Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated to examine the internal consistency of the survey. Table (1) shows the results of the overall reliability of the survey in its two main sections.

Table (1): Reliability Statistics of the Survey

Survey	Reliability Statistics	
	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Language Related Development	0.79	15
Socio-Psychological Development	0.82	5

On July 19th in 2012, the same survey and 6 semi-structured interview questions in the group as a secondary data collection instrument.

1.2.2 Post- Interview Distribution and Online Interaction Exchanges

On July 19th in 2012, 6 semi-structured interview questions in the group as a secondary data collection instrument. The participants were kept fully informed of our intentions and progress, and we took a sensitive approach throughout the enquiry. In addition, all the posted activities, exercises, comments, videos, etc were archived, and only a few of the learners' posts and comments were utilized as secondary data collection instrument to support the qualitative data obtained from the participants through the interview. Moreover, a few samples of the participants' natural interaction exchanges were collected for the micro-analysis of the processes of the language selection as well as those of constructing EFL learning opportunities.

1.3 .Data Analysis

1.3.1 Inferential Analysis

The paired-samples t-test was employed in the study since there was one group of learners and the data was collected on two different occasions and under two different conditions (Pallant 2001). This analysis was used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the participants' perception and awareness of the effective this facebookCoP in their EFL development in the pre- the post- surveys as a

whole and in terms of writing and mechanics, grammar and structure, reading and vocabulary and personal and socio-cultural aspects.

1.3.2 Qualitative Analysis

In analyzing the data from the participants' responses to the online posted semi-structured interview questions, a qualitative analysis was conducted. This is as stated by Schilling (2006) that such a type of qualitative analysis suits such data especially the data generated or collected from interviews after being transformed in written transcripts in order to reveal or model people's information related behaviors and thoughts. The analysis was proceeded in the following steps adopted from Weber (1990); Patton (2002); Schilling (2006); Zhang and Wildemuth (2009): preparing the data, defining the participants' answers and comments as the unit of the analysis, developing categories and coding schemes according to the emerging themes, testing a sample of the data, coding all the data, rechecking it, making the sense or meanings from the data and reporting the findings by describing, identifying and interpreting these themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

By using the same paired sample t test as to measure the level of significance in the participants' perception of the Only for English Learning CoP in Enhancing their EFL writing skill and mechanics in the pre-and post-surveys, the results as presented in Table (2) revealed that the writing activities were useful and helpful in enhancing the participants' EFL writing since their perception of such CoP activities in the results of the post survey (M=14.7083, SD=3.05713) was higher than their perception as reflected in the results of the pre-survey (M=7.9167, SD=2.51805). Thus, such difference in the participants' perception is also statically significant ($t(23) = 8.319, p < 0.05$).

Table 2: The Participants' Perception of the Only for English Learning CoP in Enhancing their EFL Writing Skill and Mechanics

Activities In Writing	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Post Writing	24	14.7083	3.05713	23	8.319	.000
Writing Pre	24	7.9167	2.51805			

$p < 0.05^*$

Concerning the first and second interview questions, most of the responses were focused on the development of language skills in English. This included writing skill. Some of them pointed out at the how the group helped them to read the posts and comments and responding to such posts and comments by writing, thus,

attempting to overcome a few of these problems encountered by them in writing skill and enhancing their writing.

“Actually I have some problems in writing because of misused of joining verbs and grammar but I tried to read most of the comments written in this group to improve my skills in writing”.

In addition, the monthly posted writing activities in the group were perceived as effective since the participants were assigned by the instructors to write paragraphs on different topics relevant to their own past experience, situations or description of other personalities. Therefore, such online writing activities provided them with opportunities to express their ideas, feelings and opinions.

“The group helped me to enrich my vocabulary, develops my writing skill, provided me with the opportunity to express my feelings, ideas opinions.

And since after writing the assigned paragraphs and sending them via emails to the instructors, the participants were assigned to be involved in weekly collaborative discussions and group work as to provide corrective feedback and scaffold each other till they reached to a well-written paragraph provided by the instructors based on the corrective feedback they were exchanging.

“However, I do find that the group helps me mainly to enhance my writing skill as I’ve acquired so many new expressions that help me to better elaborate my thoughts.

The findings confirm the findings obtained by Sun and Chang (2012) as the researchers found that the mixed-method analysis of seven EFL graduate students’ collaborative dialogues via Web technologies like blogs provided them with opportunities to provide corrective feedback and scaffolds, thus, enhancing their writing tasks and processing academic writing knowledge.

The results in Table (3) revealed an increase in their perception of the learning activities and practice in enhancing their grammar from (M=9.2083, SD=4.21157) to (M=12.7500, SD=4.23495). By using the paired sample t test, it is obvious that the difference is statically significant as shown by (t (23) = 3.479, p<0.05).

Table 3: The Participants’ Perception of the Only for English Learning CoP in Enhancing their EFL Grammar and Structure

Activities In Grammar	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Post Grammar	24	12.7500	4.23495	23	3.479	.002
Gramar Pre	24	9.2083	4.21157			

p< 0.05*

Moreover, the qualitative findings of the current study generated from the respondents' responses to the first and second interview questions pointed out at their realized development in grammar including acquiring knowledge of different rules in grammar such as the different tenses in English, modal verbs, prepositions, phrases, clauses, etc from the daily posts, activities and exercises.

“Sure it has a very important role .It helped me to me to enhance my grammar as I was reading others' comments and discussing different topics with them and that worked for me so well , in grammar and in other skills as well.

Similarly, the study by Yunus&Salehi (2012) revealed that the ESL learners' responses posted in the FB group provided evidence of the effectiveness of FB groups in enhancing the participants' vocabulary as they learned new vocabulary from reading the comments of others in the group.

As shown in Table (4), the results indicated that their perception of the learning activities and practice in enhancing their reading and vocabulary increased from (M=8.2500, SD=1.51083) to (M=11.8750, SD=3.83703). The inferential statistics generated from conducting the paired sample t test support this, thus, showing a statistically significant difference ($t(23) = 4.621, p < 0.05$).

Table 4: The Participants' Perception of the Only for English Learning CoP in Enhancing their EFL Reading and Vocabulary

Activities In Reading	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Post Reading	24	11.8750	3.83703	23	4.621	.000
Reading Pre	24	8.2500	1.51083			

$p < 0.05^*$

The interview responses highly stressed on the development of the EFL respondents' vocabulary as they acquired further knowledge of new words and phrases along with their correct meaning and uses. These particular aspects were promoted through the daily activities and exercises posted by the instructors, and those written posts posted by the participants themselves.

“Of course, I've learned so many new words within the group when answering all the multiple choice questions suggested regularly”.

Table (5) shows that the open activities, posts and discussions in this CoP were perceived to be more increasingly useful and higher in promoting the EFL

learners' personal and socio-cultural aspects since the participants' perception in the post-survey (M=11.2917, SD=3.75881) is higher than their perception of the effectiveness of these activities in enhancing the same dimension of EFL learning (M=8.1250, SD=2.34637) in the pre-survey, and the $t(23) = 5.001, p < 0.05$ is evidence of such statically significant difference.

Table 5: The Participants' Perception of the Only for English Learning CoP in Enhancing their Personal And Socio-Cultural Aspects in EFL

Personal And Socio-Cultural Aspects	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Post Cultural	24	11.2917	3.75881	23	5.001	.000
Cultural Pre	24	8.1250	2.34637			

$p < 0.05^*$

Based on the participants' responses to those two interview questions, findings revealed that other skills and domains potentially promoted through their engagement and interaction in the group were personal, social and cultural related ones. Some of them commented on having their personal domains such as motivation, self- confidence, self-belief, self-efficacy and critical thinking through dynamic interaction:

"This kind of learning or teaching and i mean this fabulous group is very useful because the interaction between the members is productive and helps in learning more vocabularies".

Others commented on social domains such friendship, being exposed to different cultural background, communication using English and socialization that they promoted or enhanced better than they were before.

"I think of this kind of English learning via this Facebook group as a social networking site is so beneficial and extremely helpful as it enables people with different cultural background and languages to easily communicate together using English as their common language".

Of relevance to the findings of the present study are those obtained by McDonald (2008) since the researcher proved the possibility of an online discussion forum in enhancing Japanese EFL learners' communication and collaboration. According to Yu-Chih Sun and Yu-jun Chang (2012), it was indicated that the social and emotional support found in the blog project was a proof of the potential of Web technologies in promoting the type of mutually beneficial social interaction that is conducive to knowledge development.

CONCLUSION

The findings in both the quantitative and qualitative measures employed in this study provided evidence of the effectiveness of such online informal learning in enhancing their English through the existing assistive features of the FB group in terms of listening, writing, vocabulary, cognitive and socio-cultural skills and domains. Although several limitations to such use were revealed, almost all the participants in the study still expressed their over whelmingly positive perception of the effectiveness of this CoP in enhancing their English learning skills, and the online commentary posts were indicative of their active and dynamic engagement and collaboration in the conducted activities in writing and informal discussion.

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