International Group Membership on Facebook
Students' Experience

Riza Weganofa, Umiati Jawas, Ayu Liskinasih, Rizky Lutviana and Henni Anggraini

Universitas Kanjuruhan Malang, Jl. S. Supriadi No. 48 Malang, Indonesia

rizaweganofa@unikama.ac.id

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Abstract: The massive use of social media urges teachers, curriculum designers, and students to bring it into class discussion. This study aims at describing students' experience when they were assigned to join an international group membership on Facebook. By using descriptive design, this study pictures out the challenges that the students encountered, such as cultural gap, time and spatial gap, age gap, and topic familiarity as students were free to choose the group. Thus, this study gives a space for students' voice about integrating Facebook into learning. This study proves that students develop their skills in maintaining communication resembled to the natural communication setting, but still find out that cultural misunderstanding, difficult topics being discussed, and linguistics problems which triggered them become silent readers. It implies that when teachers bring Facebook into classroom, they need to see it as a medium which is not developed for learning purpose.

1 INTRODUCTION

Students in the classroom nowadays are claimed to be digital natives (Presky in Liu (2010)) because they are born with technology that are highly developed surround them. Some people might call this generation as alpha generation, in which the way they build social community differs from the previous people (Shier in Bosch, 2009). This condition, further, affects the way teachers deliver their materials in the classroom. There are also various applications that are merely developed for learning needs, such as Hot Potatoes, Quipper, Edmodo, Moodle, or others. On the other side, some teachers also use applications that are basically built for social networking, instead, such as Youtube, Twitter, Whatsapp, Facebook, and some others. Facebook is claimed to be the most favorable social media among youngsters due to its several characteristics, such as participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness (Mayfield in Rodliyah, 2016). Tess (2013) summarizes that 94% of university students are active users of Facebook and spend 10 up to 30 minutes a day and have got 150- 200 friends.

Several studies have proven the benefits of integrating social media into classroom. McLoughlin and Lee (in Tess, 2013) argue that social media can be used as a media in inquiry-based and collaboration learning. They add that social media encourage active participation, self-directed students, and personal meaning construction. Liu (2010) believes that social media help students to be more independent in learning and researching. Upon this, Facebook favors constructivist learning theory in which it leads to autonomous learning.

Despite its popularity among students and teachers, however, Lie (2013) warns that not all of students have Facebook and Twitter accounts, use Google to search for information, use Skype, online shop, and network through social media. She witnessed that a couple of her students showed discomfort and anxiety towards social media she used. It is true that Facebook enhances interaction between students and teachers, but teachers should notice that Facebook has not yet been proven to enhance learning (Julia, 2012). This finding supports Karpinski in Julia, 2012) who said that Facebook's users have significantly lower grade-point averages (GPAs) than those who do not.

As Facebook users are able to join any virtual community, students are able to choose any 'international group' whose members are from different countries. Facebook serves advantage to accommodate various languages as well as cultures. This poses challenges, however, for teachers to design materials which enable students to be wise and friendly users of social media. Some of other

challenges that students might find are linguistics problems, different background knowledge, cultural gap, age gap, off-topic discussions, cyber-bullying (Whittaker and Kowalski in Alfarhoud, et al., 2016), and even pornography exposure.

This paper tried to shed the light on the possible difficulties that Indonesian students, especially those who are in the pre-intermediate level of English proficiency, face during their time joining an international group on Facebook. This paper differs from previous researchers in which the researcher tried to bring the participants to natural setting of conversation through Facebook. This researcher has nothing to do with either Facebook's effects on students or students' scores in learning English.

2 METHOD

This is a preliminary descriptive research. There were 13 students voluntarily joined this research. They were in the third semester and were in pre-intermediate level of English proficiency. At the beginning of the semester, the researcher asked them to select and join an international group on Facebook, with minimum 100 members who come from different countries. The researcher asked them to choose the group based on their hobby or interest. Some of the students joined their idol fan-based group, fashion, entertainment news, and few on English learning group. After a month, the students were asked to screenshot their chats and report it. This activity was done for three months. The screenshots later were analyzed. At the end of the process, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire. It asked about students' familiarity with Facebook, their frequency of using English on Facebook, and their opinions towards their membership on international group on Facebook.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims at exploring students' experience in joining international group membership on Facebook. Interestingly all of the participants have been familiar with Facebook for more than six years with low frequency of actively using it. There were only five students who accessed it almost every day, while the rest surfed on it twice a week. Further, more than a half of the participants confessed that the most frequent activity they did was reading statuses; and four participants mentioned that the top activity was

reading their international group. Besides giving comments using English in their international group, they also used English to comment on other friends' statuses which were written in English.

There are two categories of participants' writings that are gathered from the screenshots; comments on someone's status without any further discussion and comments that were resembled to 'real' communication in which there were 'turn taking' acts and 'maintaining conversation' modes. Five participants out of 13 did 'real' communication. Three of them were engaged in English learning group and the others talked about hobbies, such as photography and favorite rock band. One of the participants, FF, could maintain conversation smoothly by initiating intriguing questions that lead to further discussion as stated in the transcript:

FF   : ***What happen with Michael?***
Sabrina: He got a haircut
FF   : He looks more mature
Sabrina: That too. Plus more scruff
FF   : ***Btw, where do you come from?***
Sabrina: Canada
FF   : ***Have you ever met 5sos so far?***
Sabrina: Not yet sadly, have you?
FF   : Not yet. 5sos will come to my country in March but I can't get the ticket. What should I do …

Posing questions to initiate further discussion also noted on NW status screenshots. It can be seen below:

NW   : Fantastic
Sean : Thank you
NW   : You're welcome. ***Is that you?***
Sean : Yes it is
NW   : It's so creative
Sean : Thanks I like to think outside the box
NW   : The car like bumblebee of transformer film ***right?***

Besides posing intriguing questions, declaring clarification that commonly happens in 'real' communication. Rodliyah (2016) in her research confirms that "Facebook offers authentic language used through statuses and comments. She ensures that the use of informal writing, such as abbreviation, acronyms, and informal language are indicators that her students really communicate using authentic language". This is probably rarely achieved through textbooks or classroom talks. Also noted on FF conversation. The transcript of it can be seen below:

Kasey : But she was in Bali the same time as the boys
FF : *Sorry, when 5sos went to Bali?*
Kasey : Around December

Asking for clarification is also spotted on other screenshots from MF. She posted a status and got several comments.

MF : *Mm. can you give me some tips to learn English?*
Med : Audios ☺
MF : *Can you be specific, please? I mean. Audios is to general. Audios what??*

Another way to maintain conversation is simply saying thank you and addressing the speaker. It happens to IL in the transcript below:

Marina : Hello IL, nice to meet you. I am from Germany.
IL : Hello *Marina*. Nice to meet you ☺
Marina : IL, nice to meet you, too. I live in Germany, in Berlin and I have learned English in my school for long time. ☺
IL : Oh that's good, I'll need you hehehe. Help me to learn English please ☺ *Marina*
Shakhawan : Nice to meet you, I am from Kurdistan
IL : Nice to meet you too *Shakhawan Akram*, thank you for your responds guys, sorry I want to take a rest, thank you for today, have nice day and see you ☺

When it is being cross checked with the results of questionnaire, these five participants showed a positive attitude towards their involvements in international groups on Facebook. They argued that they enjoyed it because of several reasons; 1) they could learn English and improve vocabulary, 2) they could apply the theory in the classroom into real life communication with native speakers, and 3) they could learn the way native speakers write, which they said that it is different with the way Indonesian people think. However, although the other eight participants had no 'real' discussion, they only commented on someone status without any further discussion on the topic, they admitted that joining international groups was interesting.

Due to its easiness to be operated, Facebook offers some benefits that students can get. Facebook offers an opportunity for its users to share resources, talk, discuss ideas, and collaborate (McLoughlin and Oliver in Richard-Amato and Snow, 2005, p. 372). As Facebook's features are improved, students and teachers can create learning activities which boost language acquisition. Many useful links are shared, such as books, scholarship road shows, concerts; also users can easily upload live streaming events without signing to other sites.

Other benefit is all students have the same opportunity to actively say what they are thinking. Working through computer enables more collaboration and exploratory talk (Light and Maverech; Repman; Mercer in Richard-Amato and Snow, 2005, p. 369) in which students can pose opinions, against for, confirm statements, and elaborate ideas. Introvert students might also take benefit of this because they are not having "face to face" communication, rather they can hide behind their profile being shown. Also, students can freely choose their role in "online community" either as active users who are actively pose statuses or comments, or as silent readers who are enjoying their times reading comments and scrolling statuses, or as emoticon users who love to express their feelings through likes and emoticons.

The most commonly advantage that they got from joining the groups is they learnt how to write in English and how to pose opinions. Among 13 participants, five participants admitted that they also learnt about foreign culture.

Learning a new culture will produce misunderstandings, somehow. It was experienced by EK that is transcript below:

AT : Thank you … and so I like chatting with you…
Momodou : U are welcome love
AT : *Why you say that. We are friends*

In this transcript, AT feels uncomfortable with the word 'love' which she interpreted as 'a special word shared between lovers'. This cultural and value gap might hinder further conversation. For students who do not massively use Facebook might find these difficult. The students might misunderstand or feel being offended by someone's comments and the other way around. It is quiet common for some Indonesian students to ask personal questions, such as marital status, age, or occupation. Meanwhile, these questions are considered as irritating for other cultures. On the other hand, it is not common to be

addressed as 'Darling' and 'Babe' although in fact it does not always mean 'love' in a relationship meaning. Crystal (2006, p. 63) has warned that internet is not as global a medium as it might at first appear to be, in practice the types of communication which take place are much more restricted and parochial. People choose with whom they want to talk with, and they do this not in random, based on their interest, however. This happens because they tend to be eager to share and talk with people only within their comfort zone area.

Another misunderstanding also happened on NW conversation.

Diego : You are women or men
NW : Women. Why?
Sean : If you can't figure that out you need your eyes checked Diego Fransisco
NW : ***OK I will checked***

NW's answer in the dialogue sounds strange because she does not understand the context of the dialogue or the purpose of the question. This was confirmed by her statement in the questionnaire that she found some difficulties in understanding the purpose of the conversation. This problem is also faced by others. Another major problem is difficult topic being discussed. After a month the researcher asked the participants to join an international group, some of them asked to change the group. The reason of doing this was they could not understand the topic being discussed. This might happen because the researcher did not specifically restrict what international group should they join.

Although the language used on Facebook is English, some might still use their native languages. This happened to DR in her conversation:

DR : Pretty design and awesome color. Love it!
Gama : ***Igualito. Que aqui***

Linguistics problems might occur because Facebook is a social network in which the existence of scaffold for comprehension is not apparent. The use of mother tongue as well as idioms and jargons are used by Facebook users, which not all students might understand it, such as "Let's go offline for a few minute" which apparently means let's talk in private and "He's living in hypertext" which means he's got a lot to hide (Crystal, 2006, p. 21). This will alienate those who do not share the same 'path'.

Misunderstanding might happen sometimes, because although Facebook users might use a 'fake'

image profile that they wish others will see them as it is, they subconsciously bring their true identity, including their value, culture, thought, and belief, through their conversation. Bosch (2009) warned that while many students, in Cape Town, had friends across racial groups, most tended to have friends who were similar to them in terms of race.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Joining an international group on Facebook suggests students with abundant opportunities for meaningful communication, where they can practice their linguistic knowledge learned in the classroom and their soft skills in maintaining communication. However, they might find understanding other cultures becomes hurdle that they tend to choose leave the group or become silent readers.

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