USING FACEBOOK TO DEVELOP THAI STUDENTS' ENGLISH SKILLS

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Abstract

Since the world has stepped up to the 21st century, the technological advancement affects all humans, including English students and teachers. This study explored ways of using Facebook to develop the English skills of Education students studying at the Faculty of Education in Thailand. The research was aimed at non-English major students attending the English course. The main objectives were to study a real need to use Facebook; to examine different ways of using Facebook; and to find out any problems associated with using it with regard to improving Thai students' English. The analysis of data through the use of questionnaire revealed that the students realize that they need better English skills to use Facebook faster to keep up-to-date with news. Regarding their studies, the students benefit from using Facebook, because it encourages them to pay more attention to their subjects and be better prepared to learn new materials. For how to use Facebook, the students normally use it for pleasures or entertainment: playing games; listening to music; or sharing photos, rather than for their university studies.

Keywords: English Skills, Facebook, Thai Students

1. Introduction

Undeniably, the information era has directly influenced the changes of the world today. The technological advancement in particular, affects all humans on earth (Kellner, 2009), including English students and teachers. Presently, several studies focus on the student's production at different levels to get the qualification that can correspond with the fast-changing world of the 21st century. The students need to be trained to learn the technological skills that are needed in the 21st century (Trilling & Fadel, 2009), including assimilating new knowledge, information, media, and technology skills. It is important to note that technology or 'Instructional Technology' is a vital tool that offers benefits in both learning and teaching; this modern teaching tools can make the teacher's instruction more effective and motivate students to pay more attention and understand the content.

2. Benefits of technology

Havenstein (2008) pointed out the benefits of technology for education that it does not only make the instruction more meaningful, but technology helps students to learn what they are interested in faster and with a wider perspective. According to Borsheim, Merritt and Reed (2008) and Brown (2000), technology is different from other kinds of media, it is a huge resource of wisdom for the students at this time. Bonwell and Eison (1991) supported that technology can lead students to the creation of new knowledge and they can access information resources around the world without limitation while Griffith and Liyanage (2008) claimed that technology can respond to the differences, attentions and needs of the students individually. Since education has changed from a closed system to an open one, technology obviously gives students the freedom and opportunity to learn from limitless sources related to their subject.

Studying researches as stated, we have come to the conclusion that technology has played an important role in education management throughout the modern world, not only for students, but also teachers. According to Ellison (2007), it is supported that in a technology era, using technology is a special way for the teacher to increase his/her teaching's effectiveness. Yan (2008) and McBride and Hackney (2003) similarly pointed out that

technology helps the teacher's instruction much more powerful, whether using all the available hi-tech equipment or some part of it to meet expected learning outcomes or the planned objectives. It makes teaching easier and quicker: related knowledge and resources become easy to gather, which helps teachers to create good class materials as well as distribute knowledge widely. According to McBride and Hackney (2003) and Chermay (2008), it is important that the teacher keeps up with technological development and progress. Technology helps teachers have more time for their students through this channel. Ellison (2007) and Oberlinger and Oberlinger (2005) supported that using technology for teaching is a special way which encourages professional teachers and their students are able to work together from different locations and they can communicate together fast, conveniently and effectively. In terms of the positive relationship between students and the teacher, technology is very important because it is the channel which allows the students and the teacher to connect to each other closely and bond.

3. Network communication and the role of English

Acceptably, with the advance of technology, the internet network has become advantageous for all educators, teachers, and students in several ways. A global network of communication, MSN, Skype, and Facebook, for instance, has been popular for both teachers and students in Thailand. In this study, the researcher relied on this phenomenon. To be able to access networks, however, English language plays an important role for both searching and communicating. Moreover, one policy of the Ministry of Education in Thailand is to focus of developing student's English skills in schools. This means that teachers should have to improve their technology skills and provide their students the opportunity for practicing English skills through these technological activities.

4. Facebook communication in Thailand

As explained previously, communication through Facebook is tremendously popular worldwide including in Thailand. The website named 'social-baker' indicated the state of social media or network communication in 2015 that there were 30 million Facebook subscribers in Thailand, followed by other media, such as YouTube, twitter, and Instagram. Moreover, the user activities on Facebook in Thailand are much higher than the global average. Additionally, the Thai Facebook accounts was ranked 16th in the world, it has been rising every year. These statistics reflect that Facebook has played an important role for Thais, comparatively more than other countries in AESAN. For this reason, the researcher is interested in finding an answer to how Facebook can help non-English major Education students to develop their English skills. It was also expected that the results of the study would be useful to encourage students to pay more attention to improving their English skills in various fields and enjoy developing their English skills as a good support for their future.

5. Method & Research design

Regarding the English background of the target students, the researcher believed that if Facebook was used to arrange a communication activity between the teacher and students, it would be a good way to encourage students' attention and develop their English skills. Thus, three specific objectives of the study were set out: firstly, to study if there was a real need to use Facebook; secondly, to examine different ways the students used Facebook; and thirdly, to find out problems associated with using Facebook with regard to improving the students' English. Then, the research plan was defined. It included; firstly, determining the scope of the study by using Facebook techniques in post–teaching in the English course for Early Childhood Education students; second was setting the duration of the research which was within one semester; and third was selecting the target students for the research.

That is, the ninety-nine fourth year of Education students who enrolled in EH3206 (English for Early Childhood Teachers) course were chosen as the purposive subjects of the study. The questionnaire was employed as the research instrument; however, the communication through Facebook between students and the teacher, as well as the student's behaviors in

class were also considered as the supported data. For gathering data, the researcher started by collecting the basic information from involved people, observing the students' behavior to define the questions, studying related instructional literature, and preparing teaching activities at each stage of the lesson: pre-, during and post- teaching. That is, all stages of instructional activities were firstly arranged; and then a Facebook activity was added up in post-teaching. It means that after that, the data was collected. Throughout the course, the teacher and students communicated through Facebook. In the 14th-15th week of the course, the questionnaire was administered: asking students to answer three required topics of using Facebook in post-teaching at different determined points.

6. Results and Discussion

The results were classified into three aspects including: First, student's needs of using Facebook; second, possible ways of using Facebook; and third, any problems of using Facebook. Additionally, the students' opinions and suggestions about using Facebook for their English study were presented and summarized.

Student's needs of using Facebook

The findings of the study revealed several needs of using Facebook: 1) Facebook was the channel that gave students a chance to comment, talk or consult with the teacher intensively. In particular, sometimes they were afraid of asking questions in class when they had some doubt, but Facebook was a channel that gave more privacy, did not interrupt class, and encouraged the students to open up; on Facebook the students dared to ask the teacher things so that they could clearly understand the lesson. The students also realized that asking questions was a way of learning more and Facebook was a good tool that connected the students with the teacher; 2) Communicating through Facebook could be integrated learning because it involved not only clear details of the course, but also the previous lesson for students to revise. Students could understand the contents of the course they learned, the relevance of contents, as well as having fun, and getting ready to learn new things; 3) Each time students used Facebook it helped them learn new English vocabulary because every time they accessed Facebook, they always met with new English words and looked them up; so this proved the usefulness of using Facebook. Besides, using Facebook also let students study, follow news in the field of their academic area, and follow other threads on-line at the same time; so it saved them time and money. To conclude, the results clearly showed students' needs using Facebook because they were aware that Facebook is a good way to help them improve their English skills. In terms of learning in course EH3206, the students preferred to use Facebook because it motivated them to pay more attention to learning and made them more interested in learning new things. It is a modern perception that Facebook is fast, convenient, and something that the new generation needs. This is associated with what Oberlinger and Oberlinger (2005) stated in his article 'Educating the Net Generation' that the new generation of young need to keep pace with technology and keep well-informed of hi-tech and communication improvements.

Possible ways of using Facebook

The results showed that most of the 99 students (79%) often use Facebook while some of them (21%) rarely use it. Considering how much time students spend on Facebook, the results showed that most of them (84%) use Facebook for over 1 hour per session, but some of them (16%) use it for less than 1 hour per session. However, if we consider how often students use Facebook for their studies, it was found that only 26% often use Facebook for academic purposes. It can be seen that the students do not use Facebook much for academic purposes.

Regarding what the students use Facebook for, it was found that the students use Facebook for 5 main purposes: social-entertainment; study or work; general news: technology knowledge; and personal communication. If we compare the students' preferences when

using Facebook, it was found that the use of Facebook for social-entertainment purposes was 36% while use of Facebook for academic purposes was 30%. The use of Facebook for general news, for example for IT knowledge and personal communication, was 34%. In addition, the open-ended survey data about the students' habits and main activities on Facebook, they include the following: social-entertainment, playing games, listening to music, sharing photos, and academic work; submitting assignments to the teacher within dead-line, searching lesson content, seeking advice from the teacher; searching news including the economy or money, political news, and international news; IT knowledge activities include computer news and technological advances. The students also informed that their favorite and predominant Facebook activity is personal online communication with friends and family. These are activities such as playing games, listening to music, sharing photos more than for academic purposes. It means that the students use Facebook for the above personal reasons more than for activities that are relevant to their university work and their English course, for example submitting work on time to the instructor, searching lesson contents, seeking advice from the instructor about activities etc.

Another use of Facebook is following: political, academic and international news, searching IT knowledge and computer knowledge, technological advances, and online communication activities. The way the students use Facebook, as mentioned above, is in contrast to Chermay (2008) who pointed out a good point of using Facebook is that it helps students to have an independent learning experience and be eager to learn; but this study result showed that the target students in general only rarely use Facebook to develop their academic performance by independent effort.

The problems of using Facebook

The main comments and opinions of the students concerning the problems and obstacles of using Facebook for learning included the following: 1) The internet system is not reliable; that caused usage problems and communication delay; 2) The time when the teacher and students are free to communicate with each other on Facebook does not match, so they cannot chat and respond to each other in real time as they expected; 3) English page contents with instructions of subject assignments make weak and unconfident students think that these English sections are too difficult; the students themselves do not understand what is expected of them, so it is a big problem and frustrating for them. When frequent messages are posted with new content that students need to understand in a limited time, they are unable to keep pace with the lesson. The study result pointed out that its target was not developing English reading skills. 4) Technology equipment: in some cases, students do not possess any device such as a computer or laptop to access Facebook with, so they do not receive messages publicized on Facebook about extra activities outside of class etc. However, modern communication technology has become very diverse and advanced, which helps students to find a way to access online information more easily; so for most students accessing Facebook is less of a problem nowadays. Instructions by the teacher to guide students how to use Facebook and develop their academic performance appropriately is an important need that all teachers should be aware of; they should prepare creative on-line activities to motivate students to develop their English skills.

A critical component for teachers nowadays is to pay attention to developing technology knowledge and keeping up with technological advances for education needs and for students; the students, as 'net generation' (Oberlinger & Oberlinger, 2005) who are being younger and better at keeping in touch with technology advances. For overall comments of students towards using Facebook, there were comments both about strong points and weak points. The good point is that Facebook helps students pay more attention to developing English skills; reading through the threads gives them more knowledge. The weak point, which students need to work on and improve, is that some students do not have enough basic English knowledge to understand English Facebook messages and instructions. Not all

English communication on Facebook during the research was effective or understood, which contradicts the findings of Boyd et al. (2007); this may mean that the level of English competence of Thai students is a main barrier to combining the full potential of technology to improve themselves and their English.

7. Implication for teachers

With regard to the teacher's benefits, the study suggests that the teacher needs to give instructions and advise the students about the objectives and the ways to use Facebook creatively. The teacher should also prepare activities that can be applied to Facebook to develop the students' academic English skills. Using Facebook for communication can create a good relationship between the teacher and students. It is important to note that the teacher plays an important role to help students to improve their English skills; in particular, more attention should be paid to weak students to help them develop their English skills. The teacher should teach students fundamental skills and improve their level of English, so that they can use the potential of technology to develop through their individual effort, as well as learning with others.

8. Suggestions for Future Research

For the future researches, the study should focus on developing integrated English skills and technological skills together because it will help students to develop better all-round English skills in the 21st century. Furthermore, the use of Facebook by English major students to develop various English skills should be studied because it will reflect the instruction and development process organized by the teacher. Besides, the qualitative data should be focused on because it could reveal more in-depth data on the following: facts about the instructional process of developing English skills, some strong and weak points of using Facebook for instruction and more understanding of the problems and academic topics that need to be worked on in the future.
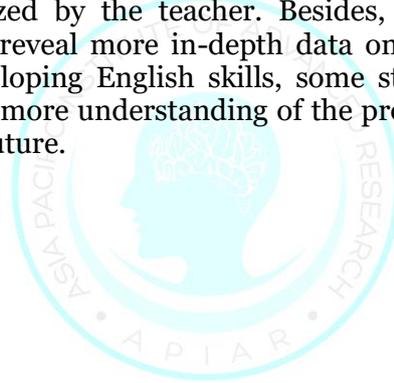
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