

Facebook Could Motivate EFL Learners to Develop Genre Based Writing Skills: A Study on Bangladeshi Undergraduate Learners' Emersion in Free Writing Space

Md. Abu Sufian
and

Md. Mahbubul Islam

Lecturers, BRAC Institute of Languages
BRAC University, Dhaka

Abstract: It is observed that EFL learners from mainstream education taking admission in different undergraduate programs at different public and private universities in Bangladesh are very weak in L2 writing. Because of the HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate Examination in Bangladesh) question pattern and traditional methods of teaching, it is observed that almost ninety percent students are weak in free writing in L2. The learners do not have any idea of different genre of writing in L2. It is also found that the learners are not motivated enough to write in L2. They somehow try to avoid the writing from their creativity. Often teachers complain that the learners take much time than they are given to complete the writing, since they did not get enough opportunity to practice creative writing in the class room. However, they need extensive writing skills at university level in L2. Therefore, the teachers of undergraduate programs are facing a challenge to develop their writing skills in L2. It has also been observed that because of limited vocabulary, the newcomers cannot write according to the requirements. To help these students, the researchers have observed that proper guided Facebooking can motivate students to write L2 on their own. For this research, the researchers will go through mixed method research. The researchers have collected data through a questionnaire for teachers, a questionnaire for students and interviews. The findings of the research will definitely help both the teachers and students at undergraduate level.

Keywords: Facebook, genre based writing, EFL, undergraduate

Introduction

It can be assumed that the 21st century in human history will remain memorable for its profound opportunity of connectivity and global inclusion. The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the use of the Internet have fueled the process at such a speed that human civilization has never seen such progress before. As a result, the world has grown smaller over the last century. Social Networking Sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter and a few others have facilitated this opportunity with significant changes in our everyday affairs like communication, business, and education. The young generation is spending much time online, especially on Facebook, mainly for social and personal communication, sharing and discussing ideas with a view to having virtual interaction. The questions that can be raised with regards to the amount of time young people are spending online are: (1) whether Facebook could be used as a platform for learning and

(2) how the learning process can be managed meaningfully. Though there is a huge pool of resources at our disposal in the form of the Internet and SNSs, how far the educators have realized the potentiality of these resources as a means of alternative method of educational instructions is a matter of serious examination (Yunus and Salehi, 2012). The researchers, therefore, have taken an initiative to investigate the feasibility of exploiting these resources to develop genre based writing skills using Facebook groups among some Bangladeshi EFL educators and learners of undergraduate level.

Objectives of the study. This study involves the following objectives:

1. To explore the attitude or perception of the Bangladeshi EFL learners and teachers of undergraduate level about using Facebook as a platform for academic instruction.
2. To examine the feasibility of developing genre based writing skills in Facebook groups supervised by a teacher.

Research questions. The following are the research questions upon which the present study was done:

1. What are the perceptions of Bangladeshi EFL learners and teachers of undergraduate level about Facebook as a platform for learning?
2. Is it possible to develop genre based writing skills of undergraduate level EFL learners through Facebook groups mentored by a teacher and how?

Significance of the study. At present, Facebook has about 936 million daily active users and about eighty three percent users are from outside the US and Canada (Facebook Newsroom, 2015). In this huge crowd, about 2.8 million users are from Bangladesh, the majority of whom are between 18 to 24 years old (Kabir, 2012). The EFL learners of undergraduate level who constitute the target participants of the present study belong to this age group. As these learners spend certain amounts of time online in SNSs like Facebook, it may be possible to make them interact in groups with a view to learning and practicing genre based writing which involves a lot of social interaction and use of language (Hyland, 2007).

Literature Review

The researchers did not find any conclusive study directly linked to the research but did locate some newspaper reports and internet articles which show that the research is essential. It is found that a huge number of students of undergraduate level are using Facebook for different purposes in Bangladesh. The researchers decided to take advantage of the situation to examine how to it can be used to improve students' genre based writing. Clive Thompson's "The New Literacy" (2009) was also part of the motivation. Andrea Lunsford (as cited in Thomson, 2009) has stated that writing ability is not being destroyed by technology. Rather technology helps to revive and direct it properly. Referring to the results of her research, she has also said that online socializing helps the new generation to write more text than the old generation. In the research she and her team have found that about forty percent of students' writings is done out of the classroom. It is called a paradigm shift by Lunsford. She has further added that when the students write today on Facebook, Twitter, or any other SNS, they are writing for a different audience which makes them think and produce good writing.

Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook in 2004 to facilitate social interaction among the Harvard University students. Now Facebook is widely used by educational organizations and universities (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010).

In connection with Facebook as one of the SNSs, Roblyer and Wiencke (2003) distinguished five components that underlay interaction in online settings and one of them is student-teacher engagement. So it is no wonder that this engagement is likely to facilitate learning of the EFL learners in a significant way.

Methodology

For collecting the data, the researchers applied both qualitative and quantitative methods. The researchers also examined relevant sources to collect information, and visited two public and three private universities. The researchers collected data from teachers and students using questionnaires. With a view to completing the research, the researchers collected data in three stages.

- i. Collecting data from students using questionnaires
- ii. Collecting data from teachers using questionnaires
- iii. Interviewing some experienced and expert teachers

Procedure and instrumentation. The questionnaires were designed for non-native speakers of English in an EFL setting. A five-point scale for responses was used to encourage clear indications of agreement or disagreement. During the completion process of the questionnaire, the researchers were present physically to monitor and also to help the respondents understand certain parts.

Participants. For the study, 80 students of undergraduate level were randomly selected from five public and private universities in Dhaka. Among the 80 students, 36 students were selected from private universities and 44 from public universities. It is also worth mentioning that among 80 students, 34 were female and 46 were male. 15 teachers were also selected randomly for the study from two private universities in Dhaka.

Results and Findings

Results of different findings are given here under three different headings. In questionnaires, there were also open-ended questions for teachers and students. The results of these questions are also included here.

Questionnaire for students. The researchers collected data from eighty students by distributing questionnaires. According to these questionnaires, the results of a student's affiliation with Facebook, the student's views on Facebook for teaching and learning, and how far the student was ready to use Facebook for learning writing have been given here.

Regularly	Often	Sometimes	Rare	Never
50%	18%	21%	06%	05%

Table 1: Student's affiliation with Facebook

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
34%	53%	10%	02%	01%

Table 2: Student's thinking about Facebook for teaching and learning

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
24%	35%	20%	18%	03%

Table 3: How far the students are ready to use Facebook for learning writing

Responses from open ended questions

In response to the question 13 in the questionnaire, the researchers have found a variety of data. Hence, a list of responses on how Facebook helps undergraduate students is given below.

- Notifications from teachers and institution
- Learning new academic lessons
- Discussion on academic or career based issues
- Maintaining a study group
- Communicating with friends and relatives
- Knowing about a class test
- To get important images and articles
- Discussion with the faculty members can be more interactive and fruitful in Facebook than email
- Can help to become a freelancer
- To become an extrovert/self-confident

- Getting information from other countries and people
- Getting in touch with mentors
- Practicing spelling perfectly
- Can help to improve grammar
- Finding a lost friend

Question 14 also elicited a variety of data. A list of responses on how Facebook helps undergraduate students improve their genre based writing is given below.

- Comments become descriptive at times
- Comments become argumentative at times
- Getting different opinions in others' writing
- Interesting posts encourage comments on the issue
- The platform allows students to write something where others can comment on the writing
- Mistakes in writing can be corrected from the comments in given on Facebook
- Comparing with others' writing can improve the particular genre based writing
- Debating on a particular post can improve argumentative writing styles
- Creating social awareness in Facebook (cause and effect)
- Posting in Facebook may develop students' critical thinking skills
- Teachers may use Facebook for assignments on descriptive or argumentative topics every week

Questionnaire for Teachers. The researchers collected data from fifteen teachers through questionnaires. According to these questionnaires, the results of the teacher's affiliation with Facebook, the teacher's attitude towards Facebook for teaching and learning, and how far the teachers are ready to use Facebook for teaching writing have been given here.

Regularly	Often	Sometimes	Rare	Never
17%	15%	43%	17%	08%

Table 4: Teachers' affiliation with Facebook

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
27%	60%	10%	03%	0%

Table 5: Teachers' thinking about Facebook for teaching and learning

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
14%	38%	31%	08%	09%

Table 6: How far are teachers ready to use Facebook for teaching writing

Responses from open-ended questions

The teachers were asked to answer two open-ended questions. In response to question 13, teachers have said how Facebook can help them.

- Facebook works like media to communicate with students
- Works like a notice board
- Useful for uploading relevant links for students' academic purposes
- Helps to give students useful instructions
- Useful for uploading the assessment of progress
- Useful for collecting write ups and giving feedback
- For notifying students quickly about class timings or other information

- Communicating with the absentees

Question 14 in the questionnaire also showed a variety of data. A list of the responses on how Facebook helps teachers supervise undergraduate students to improve their genre based writings given below.

- Uploading topics from any of the genres allows students to give their own opinions
- Posting rubrics for students to help improve a paragraph
- Scaffolding group members with a more able peer leader
- Posting images related to certain genres and asking students to write on them
- Uploading an assignment and detailed feedback on Facebook can help shy students
- Uploading samples of writings in the group for comments or opinions
- Arranging discussion sessions on a Facebook group
- Allocating bonus marks for posting can encourage genre based writing
- Assigning group write ups to be posted and after receiving feedback, students can post individual write ups incorporating the feedback
- Assigning mentors to check others' comments on Facebook

Discussion and Analysis

Questionnaire for students. According to the questionnaire, it is clear that students agreed on the point that Facebook could help them improve their writing skills. It is observed from Table 1 that 50% participants participate actively on Facebook. Table 2 shows that 34% strongly agreed that Facebook could be used for teaching and learning. Interestingly, 53% agreed that it is possible, so it may be assumed that both categories of students (87% in total) are already in the process of learning using Facebook. In Table 3, we see that 24% strongly agreed and 35% agreed that they are ready to use Facebook to learn writing. In this category, 20% are neutral so they may be motivated if they receive proper direction. Therefore, after analyzing Table 3, it can be said that more than 80% students are ready to use Facebook as a parallel free space to learn genre based writing.

After analyzing the responses of question 13, it is evident that students on Facebook are getting different kinds of help including from academia. Examining the responses of question 14, the researchers have summed up that if teachers help the students by monitoring and giving constructive feedback, they will improve their skills in genre based writing.

Questionnaire for teachers. From the questionnaire, it is also confirmed that teachers are affiliated with Facebook. Table 4 shows that 17% of teachers “regularly,” 15% “often,” and 43% “sometimes” use Facebook. This means that 75% teachers are affiliated with Facebook, though some may be more active than others. Table 5, regarding Facebook for teaching and learning, we see that 27% strongly agreed and 60% agreed that the medium can be useful. It means about 87% teachers believe that Facebook could be used for teaching and learning. From Table 6, we see that 14% strongly agreed and 38% agreed. This means about 52% teachers are ready to teach genre based writing using Facebook. Interestingly, 31% teachers were “neutral,” which means they may also be ready to help students in this medium if given proper guidelines. Facebook is a free space where teachers can involve a good number of students and motivate them to utilize the free space for writing through fun.

From the responses to questions 13 and 14, it is clear that Facebook can be very helpful for teachers and teachers can use it to teach genre based writing.

Interviews. For the purpose of the research the researchers have interviewed some educational experts and experienced teachers. All responded that Facebook’s free writing space could be utilized for teaching and learning. Some of them have said that Facebook is a great option for developing slow or shy learners. Moreover, it may help them gear up their writing. One experienced teacher said that after a class on genre based writing (e.g., compare and contrast), teachers may upload two images (e.g., old city and new city) to a Facebook group where all the students can write comments. He added that teachers can nominate a few mentors who will comment on others’ postings and the teachers can supervise the whole process. Another teacher said that teachers can upload grading rubrics for specific types of writing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has tried to find an alternative solution for undergraduate students to develop their genre based writing. For this purpose, the researchers have found that the free space of Facebook could be used to guide students in developing their genre based writing. In Bangladesh, many students are not very good at academic writing because of the traditional question pattern which encourages students to mainly rely on memorization as a strategy for their writing. Many of them do not have any clear idea about genre based writing. Therefore, when they are enrolled at the undergraduate level, they face problems in writing academic papers. However, teachers have tried different strategies to assist them. To further help these students, the researchers have thought of utilizing the free space of Facebook. From analyzing the data recovered from the questionnaires and interviews, the researchers have come to the conclusion here that since students are already on Facebook, they will be motivated to learn genre based writing using their favorite free space.

It is a good opportunity for teachers to use Facebook in developing students' genre based writing. If teachers make Facebook groups for their students, it will be more convenient to facilitate genre based writing. Teachers may divide the Facebook group into a few more sub-groups according to the number of students. Some mentors may be selected to help each sub-group. Teachers will supervise the process by monitoring the posts and comments. Teachers may allocate some bonus marks for the students who are posting regularly. Bonus marks will motivate the students to make posts according to the teacher's directions. Teachers may upload grading rubrics to the Facebook groups for specific genre based writing so that students can check their writing themselves and discuss for better understanding. As part of their Facebook time, students will posting to the Facebook group and develop their skills in genre based writing. In a nutshell, if we can make use of students' affinity for Facebook and its free writing space, it will be a big step towards the emersion of Bangladeshi undergraduate learners in acquiring genre based writing skills.

References

- Alaamri, K. S. (2012). *Using Web 2.0 technologies to enhance academic writing proficiency among EES students in Sultan Qaboos University: An example of Facebook and blogs*. Retrieved from http://conference.pixel-online.net/edu_future2012/common/download/Paper_pdf/66-ENT60-FP-Alaamri-FOE2012.pdf.
- Asad, S., Mamun, M.A. & Clement, C.K. (2012). The effect of social networking sites to the lifestyles of teachers and students in higher educational institutions. *International Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 1 (4), 498-510.
- Facebook Newsroom. (2015). Retrieved from <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>
- Hyland, K. (2007). Genre pedagogy: Language, literacy and L2 writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16, 148-164.
- Kabir, F.H.M.H. (2012, August 14). 2.80m people use Facebook in BD. *The Financial Express*. Retrieved from http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/old/more.php?date=2012-08-14&news_id=140191.
- Roblyer, M.D., McDaniel, M., Web, M., Herman, J., & Witty, J. V. (2010). Findings on Facebook in higher education: a comparison of college faculty and student uses and perceptions of social networking sites. *Internet and Higher Education*, 13, 134-140.
- Roblyer, M.D. (2003). Exploring the interaction equation: validating a rubric to assess and encourage interaction in distance course. *The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 8 (4), 24-37.
- Thompson, C. (2009, August 24). The New Literacy. *Wired*. Retrieved from http://archive.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-09/st_thompson.
- Yunus, M.M. & Salehi, H. (2012). The effectiveness of Facebook groups on teaching and improving writing: students' perceptions. *International Journal of Education and Information Technologies*, 1 (6), 87-96.