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Enhancing Opportunities for Language Use Through Web-Based Social Networking

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***Abstract*—The aims of this study are to understand the ways that web-based social networking can be used to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) students with the opportunity to use English, and to reflect on and improve our own practice with a view to create an atmosphere where web-based social networking can be used as a medium to enhance students' interaction in the language. The subjects of this study are members of English Speaking Zone (ESZ) Facebook group – a group created and maintained by the researchers – for students in a residential college at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). We used an action research methodology because our intention was to improve our own practice and to learn from the participants. We analyzed the data gathered from the content analysis of the interactions on the Facebook group and also conducted interviews with 20 participants. The results show that the interactions (number of posts) in ESZ Facebook differ according to different phases of the use of the technology.**

Keywords-web-based social networking sites; second language learning; language learning technology

I. INTRODUCTION

According to a study conducted by the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers the lack of industrial training and poor English are among five factors why graduates are unemployed [1]. Employers view English language proficiency as an essential competency for the growth and progress of the individual as well as the competitiveness of a firm. Similarly, Sharifah Hapsah (2008), the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, notes that "we have with us today a sizeable number of students who are unable to string proper sentences in English [and] even those with passable proficiency shy away from speaking for lack of confidence." She suggests that the way to address this issue is to provide more opportunities for students to communicate in English but not through more theoretical courses in English. She argues that only through constant practice and with proper guidance can our students develop the proficiency so that by the time they graduate they will be more confident to use the language. Hence, the strategy is to designate residential college as English Speaking Zone (ESZ) where students are encouraged to use the language."[2].

The study examines an initiative taken at the ESZ namely the creation of an ESZ Facebook group to encourage students to interact in English. This study investigates the benefits of using this web-based social network site as a forum for students to communicate and in the process use the language. We hypothesize that the use of this popular technology can provide real opportunities for language use and also lower the anxiety and nervousness associated with low proficiency when using a second language. Facebook, in particular, has become hugely popular among college students since its inception in 2004. While participation in sites like Facebook has raised some concerns, the use of Facebook, as a tool to enhance interaction for second language learning remains relatively unexplored. The tool has the potential to help learners use the language at their own leisure and at their own convenience. Due to its interactivity, the use of social network such as Facebook can encourage students' participation and interaction to use the language in real communication situations. Accordingly, Facebook is of interest to us in two respects: (1) as a mass social phenomenon in itself where it functions as a communication tool, and (2) as a unique window for observation and analysis on the interaction through the feedbacks and responses in the Facebook.

This study focuses on the utilization of Facebook to enhance students' interaction using English in the English Speaking Zone. In undertaking this study, we have two research objectives: (1) to understand the ways that social network namely Facebook can be used to provide the students with opportunities to use English as a medium of communication, and (2) to reflect on and improve our own practice with an aim to create a Facebook environment that can continue to be used to enhance opportunities to use the language.

II. CONTEXT

It would be useful if we, as action researchers, gave a short personal history of our involvement in the action research 'English Speaking Zone' (ESZ). The 'English Speaking Zone' was launched in April 2008 by the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia as an effort to provide students living in residential colleges with the opportunity to use English. The strategy of designating residential colleges as 'English Speaking Zone' is so that students will acquire the skills of communicating in English through college activities. The emphasis is on the use of English for communication. Moving away from traditional formal classroom settings, the experienced language teachers could now bring English to students'residential colleges which are their home away from home.

We believe that this action research enquiry provide us the opportunity to work in the direction of some of our

professional values. First, we believe that learning should be an ongoing lifelong process and not limited to formal contexts of learning. There should not be a wall or time to learning and everyone can participate and have some control over their own learning. Hence, we feel that students should have opportunities to explore their proficiency in English through interaction during non-contact times outside the classroom while they are at their residential colleges and that interaction should take place at all times and in all contexts (including 'non-physical' environments/ virtual). Second, we believe that knowledge of a second language can provide these students with a much wider cultural and educational experience. Baker (2007:10) notes that the advantages of bilingualism include cultural awareness of 'different systems of behaviour, folk sayings, stories, histories, traditions, ways of meeting and greeting' [3]. Third, the current development of technology, especially with the popularity of social network (Facebook) among college students can be utilized appropriately to enhance English language interaction among the students.

III. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative action enquiry method (McNiff & Whitehead 2006) is employed to gather the evidence and data [4]. The selection of action research is a natural choice because it is a type of research that presumes that an action will be initiated and is practitioner based. It involves a reflection on one's practice, a plan of action to improve one's practice, the implementation of that plan and then reflection on how the action worked. It also involves communications with others so that one's action is informed and committed. It also gives rise to more reflection and action and suggests the sharing outcomes of this research. Issues such as equality, both socially and educationally are fundamental to us and these values underpin our beliefs as a researcher and ESZ Facebook moderator. As mentioned by McNiff & Whitehead (2006: 5):

> *"Action research is about the practitioners creating new ideas about how to improve practice, and putting those ideas forward as their personal theories of practice. It is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work."*

A content analysis of the interactions on the ESZ Facebook group is conducted. Content analysis is one of the sources of information that can be invaluable to qualitative researchers. Hansen (1995) in his study of technology teachers in training analyzed journal entries and memos written by participants [6]. In this study, the entries, interactions and comments for ten consecutive months from July 2009 to April 2010 on the ESZ Facebook group are analyzed. The analysis was based on the interaction between the moderator and the learners and among the learners with their peers.

An interview with 20 participants is also conducted during the second phase of the research (October 2009 to February 2010). The interview questions are open, informal and semi-structured questions. A semi-structured, informal interview allowed for greater flexibility. At the same time, semi-structured interviews could take many directions according to the information being sought by the interviewers and the responses provided by the subjects. In addition, a semi-structured interview was employed to allow for richer interactions and more personalized responses [5]. Nevertheless, we, as the interviewer, remain in control of the direction of the interview at all times. Being aware of the ethical issues of protecting individual rights and preserving anonymity, permission to use the materials on the Facebook were sought from the participants. In addition, participants were kept fully informed of our intentions and progress, and we took a sensitive approach throughout the enquiry, an absolute necessity when working with the students.

IV. ASPECTS OF THE ACTION ENQUIRY

A. What is our concern?

Our concern is that students do not have enough opportunities during non-contact time (outside the classroom) to practice and use the language (English) they have learned during the contact time (in the classroom). Besides, they have no chance to interact with each other in English at their residential colleges and also that they did not have many authentic opportunities beyond the lecture and academic classroom.

B. Why are we concerned?

We are concerned because the students need to gain language competency in English as a second language and they are not provided with sufficient opportunities to do so beyond their experiences outside the classroom. It is also our desire to help the students in residential colleges in UKM to improve their confidence in using English, especially in non-formal contexts.

C. How do we show the situation as it is and as it unfolds?

In a pre-interview with some of the students, we have found that some of the students lacked confidence and struggled to sustain a conversation in English. We can conclude that they appeared very nervous and lack the language proficiency to respond to our questions. Students also do not use current technology as a resource to help them in improving their language proficiency.

D. What can we do and what did we do?

Based on our discussion with students and brain storming among the researchers, we outlined the contexts of language use and the aspects we would like to improve. After examining various options and based on students' interest, we decided to set up an ESZ Facebook group to maximize opportunities for students to communicate and interact in English.

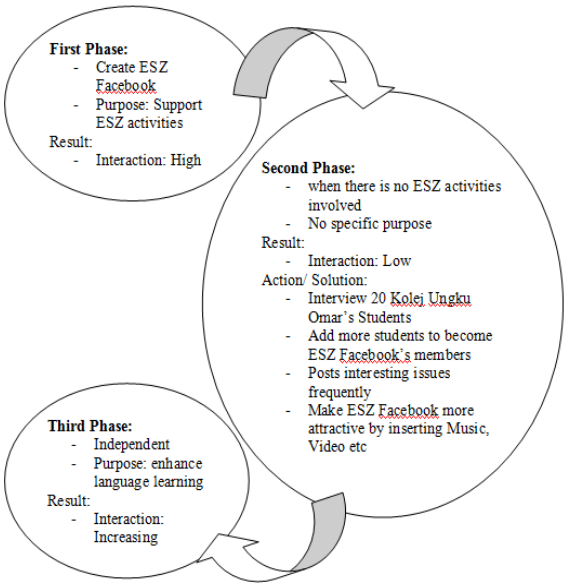

Figure 1. Phases of the Research.

V. FINDINGS

To ensure that the findings we make are reasonably fair and accurate, we discussed our results with some of the students involved in the ESZ Facebook for purpose of validation of the content analysis. The researchers and residential college tutors acquainted with the students also commented on the language proficiency and language confidence of students involved in the action. The results show that the interaction on the ESZ Facebook can be divided into three phases. (See Figure 2). The first phase corresponded with the initial period of the ESZ Facebook group being set up (July 2009 to September 2009). Almost all the ESZ Facebook members were students from the same residential college where the ESZ Facebook was launched. The initial period also saw a lot of activities. Participants were active in giving their responses and feedbacks on the ESZ Facebook especially in relation to other ESZ activities. Participants were excited by the novelty of the ESZ Facebook group. Participants were also curious to know the identities and members of ESZ Facebook group as well as the moderator of ESZ Facebook.

Between October 2009 and February 2010, there was a decrease in the entries and interaction in the group. Only a very small group of students gave their responses and feedback to the posts in the ESZ Facebook. This phase corresponded with a period where students were busy with their lectures and assignments and have also become indifferent to the ESZ Facebook group. To overcome this, we interviewed some of the participants for suggestions to improve the ESZ Facebook and to make it more interesting and attractive so that members would continue to post and new members can be recruited. Based on the suggestions, we started to take the action to improve the ESZ Facebook. Active invitation to new members, utilization of Facebook applications and also the frequency of new issues posted by the ESZ Facebook moderator are among suggestions implemented.

Between March 2020 to April 2010, the interactions among the ESZ Facebook members begin to increase with a lot of responses and feedback from various Facebook users. In this phase, the ESZ Facebook group was large enough for continual and sustained interaction among members with occasional introduction of new topics by the moderator.

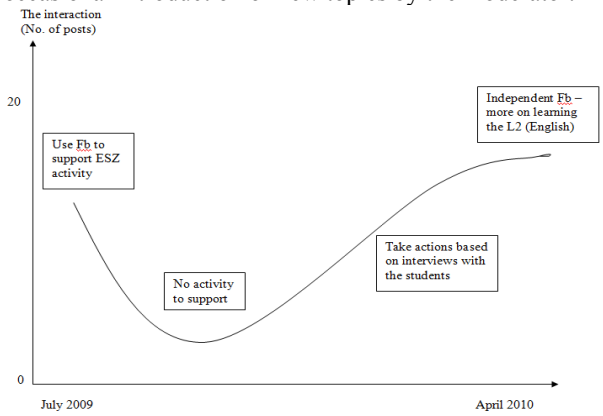

Figure 2. Postings in the ESZ Facebook over 10 months.

The interviews with 20 students revealed the students' perception and awareness of the ESZ Facebook group, students' perspectives on accessing the Facebook and also students' suggestions and ideas on improving the ESZ Facebook.

About 90% of the interviewees stated that they participate actively in the ESZ Facebook group and are aware of the features. The students' awareness of the applications not only can encourage them to utilize Facebook, but also help them to make the interaction become more interesting, exciting and enjoyable. There is also little problem with access as most students in the residential college have their own notebooks and could access the wireless Internet connections in their residential college. Students also agreed that the development of customized tools within Facebook increases the usability of Facebook, expanding the capabilities beyond just a social networking tool, and making it a more versatile tool for language learning. Students are also encouraged by the interesting questions and posting by the moderator and also other members in the ESZ Facebook Group.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has set out to enhance students' opportunity for using the English language in an informal setting using a web-based social networking site. From this enquiry, we have found that the social networking site can provide opportunities for language interaction. However, participant could develop indifference to the technology. To overcome this, new features and applications must be added from time to time. We also learned how important the moderator could be in making the ESZ Facebook more interactive and encourage more participation among the Facebook users. Students also claim that the social network provided them

with a forum for language use which they would otherwise not have. The technology has provided participants with a means of informal language use.

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