

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON VOCABULARY LEARNING CASE STUDY-FACEBOOK

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Abstract: *The paper aims at investigating the impact of computer and social media in improving students' knowledge of English language namely vocabulary acquisition (focused on Facebook) with intermediate and upper intermediate first and second year ELT students in Economics at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea. Social media technologies take on many different forms including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, wikis, social networks, podcasts, pictures, videos etc. Technologies cover blogging, picture-sharing, wall-posting, music-sharing just to name a few. Nowadays Facebook technology seems to play an important part for the social life of so many becoming more and more popular as a main means of communication, that it could also meet an educational need. Thus it could play a distinguished role in foreign language learning and teaching. Several studies investigate using different technologies in learning and teaching, in particular, foreign language learning. Still, rare studies were interested precisely in the role of Facebook in learning foreign languages. In this study was intended to assess the role and effectiveness of Facebook use in vocabulary learning. Particularly, the research attempts to answer the question: 'Can social media affect students' development and progress in the foreign language?' In order to discover the answer to this question of the study, a project based on Facebook for the experimental group was conceived. It was assumed that significant differences were to be found between the groups using social media for learning purposes and those who did not in developing vocabulary knowledge. The study was conducted with a number of 127 students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, 1st and 2nd year students following the specializations: International Business, Management, Marketing, Finances studying in the academic year 2013-2014. The development in each group was measured and it clearly demonstrated a more significant improvement in vocabulary knowledge of the group exposed to the Facebook group. It is a rather innovative study as there are not many similar studies using the value Facebook can add to learning performed in Romania. The results of the study did not support the assumption that the experimental group would outperform the control group, as the differences between the two groups were not that significant. However, there was an improvement in both of the groups from pre-test to post-test scores.*

Keywords: social media; Facebook; learning languages, vocabulary

JEL classification: Y90

1. Introduction The consequences of the fast development in science, technology and media are reflected in the key verbs for foreign languages learning nowadays: challenge, engage, and interact as it is perfectly embedded in the ancient Chinese proverb: *Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand.*

Therefore the classic language class structure has changed dramatically in point of the methods employed for teaching. Relying on textbooks and course books only in order to increase proficiency and fluency in a foreign language will not yield immediate and efficient benefits. As the Internet grows one of the latest methods of teaching languages in general, vocabulary in particular, is obviously connected to it bringing along clear improvement in the field of foreign language learning. The Internet and computers offer so much especially because mastering a language means more than just words, definitions and grammar rules. Consequently, foreign language classes must take advantage and they actually do from the tremendous potential provided by technical devices as TV, video projector, laptop, DVD player, computer into the classrooms leading to what Krashen (1982:10) calls 'subconscious language acquisition'. Knowing a language requires getting beyond textbooks, it means understanding the cultural dimension as well. Listening to music, watching TV in a foreign language – be it movies, shows, cartoons, using computers effectively, with everything they may offer can turn boring and sometimes ineffective language lessons into real language learning laboratories.

The present study attempts to explore the impact of computers and social media on intermediate and upper intermediate first and second year ELT students. Particularly, the research aims to answer the question '*Can social media affect students' development and progress in the foreign language?*' It is assumed that significant differences will be found between the groups using social media for learning purposes and those who do not in developing vocabulary knowledge. This study focuses on the vocabulary development process, rather than on reading or listening comprehension. While doing this, it uses a vocabulary test applied to participant students twice to assess changes or improvement of performance as vocabulary acquisition is a continuum of development. Another innovation of the study is using Facebook as a medium for language input. There are no similar studies using the value Facebook can add to learning performed in Romania.

2. Main Concepts

2.1. Social Media

Social media is a fairly new concept since almost nobody heard or use social media 10-15 years ago. Nevertheless, nowadays websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn have more than 1 billion users and account for almost 25 percent of Internet use. According to an article posted on Facebook, it appears that only Facebook's monthly active users now exceed 800 million and their daily active users, exceeds 400 million (Facebook a, 2012). It looks like almost overnight, social media has grown indispensable to our lives--from friendship and dating to news, weather forecasts and business issues. Social media is a phrase used to describe various websites or other forms of technology where people can connect and interact with one another and share information. After all, why are people attracted towards using social media? They satisfy two basic human needs: to meet new people and to strengthen existing relationships.

As defined by Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010), social media is 'a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.'

Researchers argue that the impact of social media relies on the fact that they employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, create and co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Ahlqvist, 2008). Mikolaj Jan Piskorski (2011) argues that the secret of successful ones – and here he refers to the business rather than the social success – is that they allow people to fulfil social needs that either cannot be met offline or can be met only at much greater cost. This insight provides another perspective on social media: it does help not only social communication, but also the business world. It implies that companies can leverage social platforms to create a sustainable competitive advantage. Companies need to help people interact with each other before they will promote products to their friends or help companies in other ways.

Examples of Social Media

There are many different forms of social media including Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, podcasts, pictures, video, and rating. In 2010 Kaplan and Haenlein created a classification scheme for different social media types by applying a set of theories in the field of media research -social presence, media richness and social processes -self-presentation, self-disclosure. According to them there are six different types of social media: collaborative projects, blogs and micro blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual communities.

Technologies cover blogs, picture-sharing, vlogs (video blogs), wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing and others. Many of these social media services can be integrated via social network platforms.

Some Facts about the Social Media

According to a report by Nielsen (2012) 'In the U.S. alone, total minutes spent on social networking sites has increased 83 percent year-over-year. In fact, total minutes spent on Facebook increased nearly 700 percent year-over-year, growing from 1.7 billion minutes in April 2008 to 13.9 billion in April 2009, making it the No. 1 social networking site for the month.' As of 2012, Facebook has 152,226,000 unique PC visitors and 78,388,000 unique mobile app visitors. Twitter reported 37,033,000 unique PC visitors and 22,620,000 unique mobile app visitors. Pinterest reported 27,223,000 unique PC visitors and 14,316,000 unique mobile web visitors. Google+ reported 26,201,000 unique PC visitors and 9,718,000 unique mobile app visitors.

Whereas according to the Highlights of the Pew Internet Project's research related to social networking (2013) : 'As of 2012, social media has become one of the most powerful sources for news updates through platforms such as Facebook, Blogger, Twitter, WordPress, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google+ Tumblr, MySpace and Wikia; fully 40% of cell phone owners use a social networking site on their phone, and 28% do so on a typical day; as of September 2013, 73% of online adults use social networking sites.; as of the same September 2013: 71% of online adults use Facebook; 18% of online adults use Twitter; 17% use Instagram; 21% use Pinterest; 22% use LinkedIn.'

On the other hand, from a linguistic point of view, the impact of social media is mirrored in the new words or expressions like: *news feed*, *viral*, *hashtag*, *wiki* –just to randomly pick some- which did not make any sense few years ago, or meant something completely different than they do nowadays. Even respectable dictionaries, such as the Oxford dictionary, add *derp*, *selfie*, *phablet*, *emoji*, *unlike*, and other fashionable items of vocabulary that only recently came into general usage, many driven by these fast-moving trends in technology and culture.

Brief presentation of the media channels for socializing purpose- with reference to their utility for language learning purpose

Twitter – I twitter, do you? - is an online social networking and micro blogging service created in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, Biz Stone and Noah Glass. The service

rapidly gained worldwide popularity, with 500 million registered users in 2012, who posted 340 million tweets per day as it appears from the List of virtual communities with more than 100 million active users published online. Registered users can read and post tweets, but unregistered users can only read them. Users access Twitter through the website interface, SMS, or mobile device app. It enables users to send and read 'tweets', which are text messages limited to 140 characters, which forces users to choose words carefully and to convey the message clearly. This is excellent for improving your English as unnecessary words are eliminated. Twitter helps users improve English reading skills too. A variety of short messages on a myriad of subjects can be read, therefore users are exposed to reading new words, facing turns of phrase, and jargon, which all helps in building and expanding the English vocabulary.

Facebook According to its own description to be found on the starting page, 'Facebook is a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them', founded on February 4, 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg with his college roommates. Its name comes from a colloquialism for the printed or online directory given to students at some American universities consisting of individuals' photographs and names. Facebook users must register first and then they can create a personal profile, add other users as friends, and exchange messages; it is a web portal for keeping in touch with others. In addition to text, messages can also contain photos, videos, music and links to other websites. Moreover, Facebook can be an excellent tool for building or improving several English skills: writing - users may gain English writing experience through composing various messages; reading skills – users have the chance to read an varied range of messages, leading to learning new words; English in use – users are given the opportunity to study their way with words, as well as their word choice.

LinkedIn If Facebook and Twitter sound a bit frivolous for some tastes, LinkedIn is different. It is a social networking site for professionals. This is an excellent site for connecting with other professionals, be it in business, academia, or other organisations.. LinkedIn offers the possibility of building business English skills through writing profiles, and then keeping them updated. Business English skills are also improved through sending messages to others, reading responses, and replying in kind.

YouTube is a video-sharing website. Users upload, share and view videos on this social networking site. It can be a very useful tool when learning English as it involves listening to the language used in the viewed videos. Users can also improve reading skills when looking through the comments posted in English, situated below each video. Sometimes, YouTube videos are actually text presentations in a slide show format, or have subtitles available, so users can actually read English in each screen shot.

2.2. Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary, the core of any language, is probably the most challenging and time consuming part of learning a foreign language. It takes time and flows like a continuous process, once you have settled the fundamentals of a language (pronunciation, orthography and basic grammar). Throughout this process, learners become familiarized with the words they come across. As researchers claim (Nation, 1990; Schmidt, 2001) it is frequency of usage and the number of encounters in different forms and contexts that determine the acquisition of new vocabulary.

When teaching vocabulary the context is really important that is why Warschaur (1995) underlines the more opportunities for real communication students might be exposed to when using the Internet and the e-mail system in language learning. Nader (1996) admitted the great challenge for teachers to design individual and group activities using the Internet resources and also praised the benefits of the students searching for them and thus exploring different cultures more directly and effectively.

University language learners studying English as additional subject, not a major one, still have problems in acquiring vocabulary. The assumption is that this might be due to the strategies used in teaching vocabulary. Thus, language teachers and researchers started considering technology as an option to teaching more effectively. It seems that learners show very little effort to deal with their problems about newly learned words when technology is involved (Meara, 1980). During the lesson teachers often assume that students will deal with this problem of vocabulary building outside the class on their own. However, learners do not have enough knowledge about the vocabulary learning techniques and they have difficulty in dealing with this problem themselves.

3. The Study of Using Social Media (Facebook) in Improving Language Learning

Social Media Language Learning (SMLL) is an innovative approach in teaching languages interactively, linking social media channels to language learning. Students are thus encouraged and supported to develop communication and language skills. This method was originally created by a Spanish company called Idiomplus from Barcelona. Students are enabled to emerge as much as possible in activities which require the use of language, given that all of them will result in learning. *'Can social media affect students' development and progress in the foreign language?'* In other words, are there any statistically significant differences between the students' vocabulary achievement by means of social media input as compared to their achievement following the traditional instructional method of teaching?

3.1. Significance of the Study

First of all it should be mentioned that even if teaching with technology is a pretty fashionable topic, there are few studies referring to teaching vocabulary with the use of the Internet, and even less or almost no such researches in Romania. Therefore the purpose of the study is to present the benefits of using Facebook in teaching and learning vocabulary. The Facebook site is a valuable communication tool for the students -to find out the latest activities, courses and what is generally happening for and around the English class. It is a valuable way for the students to communicate to each, and to communicate to the college with feedback regarding suggestions for improvement and praise for excellent events and training. Facebook provides our students with a unique and up to date information portal regarding our Faculty, being connected to all the breaking news-from scholarships, timetables and all sort of events. Moreover, it attempts to ring a bell and perhaps dare to contribute to the improving and updating EFL curricula and help designers and EFL methodologists develop teaching materials which suit various ways of teaching and match students' level of achievement in vocabulary.

3.2. Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by the following:

- The number of the participant learners, the sample consisted of 127 students.
- The study is restricted to the vocabulary referring to British and American terms in point of similarities and differences.

3.3. Setting and participants

The study was conducted with a number of 127 students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, 1st and 2nd year students following the specializations: International Business, Management, Marketing, Finances studying in the academic

year 2013-2014. The participants of the study took English courses at high school before their undergraduate education in ELT. They all took an entrance exam in English as the necessary condition for them to study English at the faculty. The exam covered questions regarding vocabulary and grammar knowledge. All of the participants were approximately at a similar English proficiency level (i.e. intermediate and upper intermediate) based on their scores obtained at the entrance exam.

3.4. Design and procedure

First of all, the 127 participants were randomly assigned to each group. In Group A (the group exposed to the Facebook posts, or the experimental group), the 70 participants were periodically sent materials and information regarding the vocabulary meant for acquiring and in Group B (the group following only the traditional in-class teaching methods, or the so-called control group) the 57 participants learnt the studied vocabulary items in class, by reading, translating, comparing. Both groups were given the same pre- and post-tests.

Then, the research design of the study was tailored using a pre-test - post-test experiment and group framework to find out the impact of the Facebook instructional program on students' vocabulary achievements. The test consists of multiple-choice questions. The students' previous knowledge was assessed by the pre-test administered to both groups (control and experimental) before the study started. The objective of the pre-test was to assess the students' background knowledge of words. The same pre-test was used at the end of the study as a post-test to assess the students' achievement on the topic, that is the acquisition of the new vocabulary items. The objective of the post-test was to assess the effect of both instructional methods (Facebook and conventional) on learners' achievement.

Facebook exposure At the beginning of each academic year a Facebook Group is set up for the English class use only, with a limited profile. Students are used to rely on the group for receiving materials, information, and support regarding the language matters they are interested in. They are in permanent contact with each other and with the teacher as well. For the purpose of this study, several materials were posted to students in Group A, or the experimental group, those meant to be exposed to the Facebook content. The posts referred to the various differences between British and American terms: different words, spelling, and were presented in an attractive manner, colourful, organized, reader-friendly.

3.5. Steps and Procedures

The research was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2013-2014.

The Facebook group was set up.

The instruments of the study were prepared.

The related literature about the roles of using technology in teaching and learning vocabulary was reviewed.

The first common test was given to participants in the second week of the semester (6-11 October 2013); after a month the students were divided into the two research groups at random and were exposed either to the Facebook teaching material or to the traditional lecture material (around 10-16 November 2013); the last common test took place at the end of the first semester 6-11 January 2014 after approximately one month from their exposure to the vocabulary items).

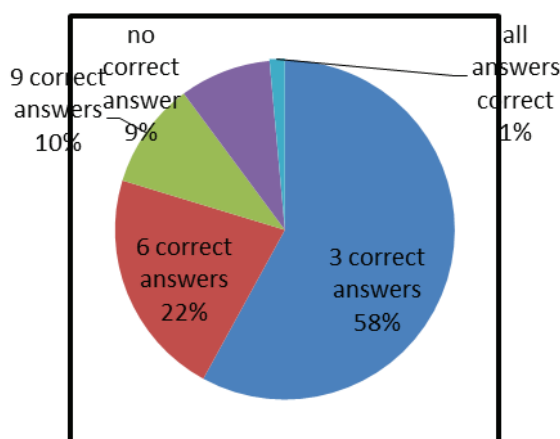
For the confidentiality sake, students were not informed about the aim of the research before they finished with the post-tests. Students were not allowed to use dictionaries or other materials when solving the test. Besides, before the administration of the study the students were reminded that participation was voluntary and there would be no extra marks or rewards. There was a post-test given to both groups.

The results were statistically analyzed in order to reach conclusion and suggest implications and possible recommendations.

4. Results and findings

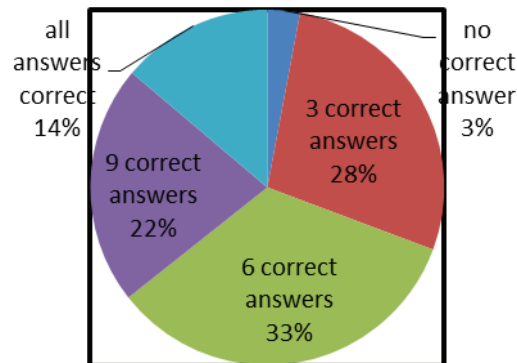
It is clear from Table 1 and Table 2 that there were no statistically significant differences between the performance of the two groups (experimental and control) on the vocabulary achievement in the pre-test: 1% of students in both groups knew all the answers, whereas the majority of 58% proved to be able to answer three questions correctly. There were no major or significant differences between the performance of Group A and B as far as the other items were concerned. This shows that there were no differences in the pre-test for both groups. It is assumed, thus, that both groups had similar knowledge about the target words before they were exposed to the test.

Table 1



Source: authors' research data

Table 2



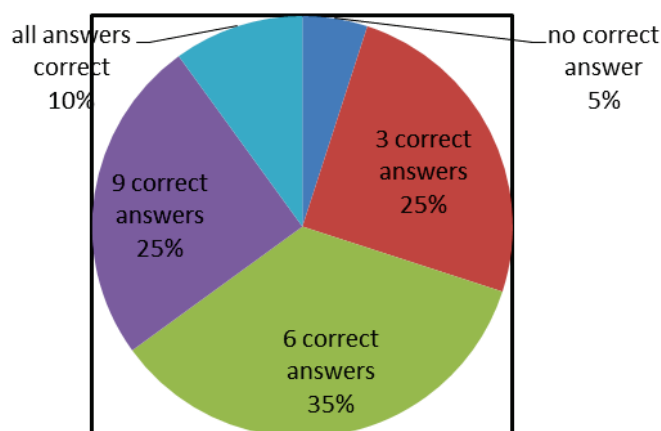
Source: authors' research data

However, the development in each group was measured through the second test. It demonstrates an improvement in each group as it appears in Table 3 and Table 4.

It is obvious from Table 3 and Table 4 that there were statistically significant differences between the performances of both groups - the experimental and control - on the achievement vocabulary post-test. There is an important increase in the number of students giving all the answers correctly: 14% in Group A as compared to the first test when the percentage was 1% and 10% in Group B as compared to the first test when the percentage was the same 1%. Thus in spite of the difference compared with the pre-test of both groups, the difference acquired by Group A contrasted to Group B is not very significant. The percentage of no correct answers decreased significantly with both groups: From 8% to 3% in Group A and from the same 9% to 5% in Group B, thus, the difference acquired by the two groups is insignificant. This is the case for the 3 correct answers entry, where the percentages decreased for both groups, whereas the difference between the two of them is not important 28% in Group A and 25 in Group B from a common 58% in the pre-test. The results of the study did not support the assumption that the experimental group would outperform the control group, as there were no significant the differences between the two groups. However, there were improvements in both of the groups from pre-test to post-test scores.

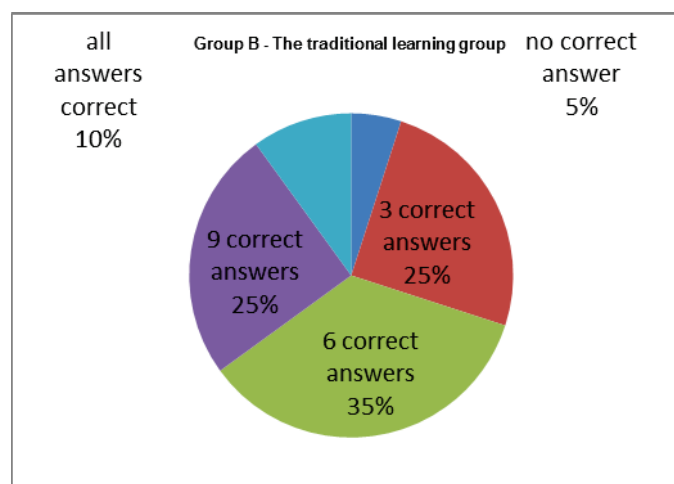
Nevertheless, the overall differences are slightly in favour of the Facebook instructional strategy as revealed for the experimental group. This means that the Facebook strategy in teaching vocabulary proved a little bit more effective than the traditional method, even if not necessarily crucial.

Table 3



Source: authors' research data

Table 4



Source: authors' research data

5. Conclusion

The intent of this paper was to investigate teaching vocabulary through Facebook. It has been assumed that technologies should be used as instructional tool for vocabulary acquisition. It has also been argued that this type of learning is beneficial for foreign language learners, as it considerably builds confidence and increases learners' interest in the topic. The reasons could be the frequency of exposure as a result to an expanded language input. The study showed that students improved in vocabulary performance and confidence (even if slightly) after being exposed vocabulary via Facebook as compared to the case of students benefitting from traditional instruction only. The participants in Group A in the study appreciated this type of vocabulary instruction they were really motivated to challenge themselves to improve their English. Moreover, the participants began commenting and sending some ideas related to the target topic to the teacher and to each other on Facebook. The lessons via Facebook seemed more appealing to students. Working on the Internet and dealing with each other through Facebook anytime and anywhere is trendy nowadays. Consequently, Facebook could

become a very effective tool and medium for backing the traditional learning and for self-learning English vocabulary.

There are some recommendations following the findings of the study:

1. Adopting technology in general and Facebook in particular as a teaching strategy in universities when teaching English skills for effectiveness and better academic achievement.
2. For generalization, validity and applicability, similar studies should be conducted on other language aspects and skills.

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