

USING SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS TO FACILITATE INTERACTION IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

การใช้สังคมออนไลน์เพื่อส่งเสริมปฏิสัมพันธ์ในห้องเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

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ABSTRACT

A good relationship between teachers and students is considered to be an important factor to foster effective teaching and learning. Because of the recent growth of web-based communication, this new form of communication has an impact on everyday lives as well as on classroom teaching and learning. In this study, the online social network "Ning" was used in a language classroom in order to facilitate the relationship and interaction among the teacher and the students. All class members' profiles and activities on Ning and responses on a questionnaire were analysed. Reasons for student participation in or refraining from Ning were also presented. The results show that most interactions occurred between the teacher and students while very few interactions occurred among students themselves. In addition, interactions among students appeared to occur only on the network of those who have close relationships with one another and between the partners for the project assigned in class. Implications for teachers in using social networks or other forms of web-based communication more effectively are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Social network, Interaction

บทคัดย่อ

ความสัมพันธ์ที่ดีระหว่างอาจารย์และนักศึกษาเป็นปัจจัยที่สำคัญที่จะช่วยส่งเสริมประสิทธิผลของการเรียนการสอน ความก้าวหน้าทางการสื่อสารผ่านระบบออนไลน์ ทำให้การสื่อสารในรูปแบบใหม่นี้มีผลต่อการดำรงชีวิต รวมทั้งการเรียนการสอนในห้องเรียนด้วย ในงานวิจัยนี้ ได้ประยุกต์ใช้สังคมออนไลน์ "Ning" ในห้องเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อส่งเสริมความสัมพันธ์ที่ดี และผลักดันให้เกิดปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอาจารย์และนักศึกษา ผู้วิจัยได้วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลบนสังคมออนไลน์ของทั้งอาจารย์และนักศึกษา และข้อมูลจากแบบสอบถาม เพื่ออธิบายปฏิสัมพันธ์ที่เกิดขึ้นในสังคมออนไลน์ รวมทั้งเหตุผลของนักศึกษาในการตัดสินใจเข้าร่วมหรือไม่เข้าร่วมสังคมออนไลน์ครั้งนี้ ผลจากศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าปฏิสัมพันธ์ส่วนใหญ่ที่เกิดขึ้น เป็นปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอาจารย์และนักศึกษา และพบปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างนักศึกษาด้วยกันเองเพียงส่วนน้อย นอกจากนี้ ปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างนักศึกษาจะเกิดขึ้นเมื่อนักศึกษามีความสนิทสนมกันอยู่แล้ว ส่วนปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างนักศึกษาที่ไม่คุ้นเคยกันจะเกิดขึ้นเมื่อนักศึกษาต้องทำงานที่อาจารย์สั่งในชั้นเรียน ร่วมกัน งานวิจัยได้เสนอแนวทางสำหรับอาจารย์ในการใช้สังคมออนไลน์หรือการสื่อสารผ่านระบบออนไลน์รูปแบบอื่น

คำสำคัญ: สังคมออนไลน์ ปฏิสัมพันธ์

Introduction

A good relationship among teachers and students creates a comfortable and supportive environment, and this is considered to be crucial for success in classroom teaching and learning (Muller-Hartmann, 2000; Senior, 2006, 2007). The comfortable and supportive environment provides great benefits in terms of class interactions, willingness to participate in classroom activities, cooperation, class management, and learning motivation. However, classroom teaching can become ineffective if teachers fail to establish a good environment (Heah, 2007; Senior, 2007; Silver, 2007).

Nowadays, computer-based communication plays an important part in our daily lives, including its role in supporting a learning environment (Kanniah & Krish, 2010). There are different forms of web-based communication which have been integrated in classroom-based activities (King, 2004; Smith, 2009; Shin & Son, 2007; Mak & Coniam, 2008; Bikowski & Kassier, 2002). This new form of learning also positively influences language learner motivation (Egbert, 2003; Fotos, 2004;

Warschauer, 1996; King, 2004).

Nowadays, learners can learn and work together through various web-based communication media-instant messaging, email, blogs, and chat rooms, with a special emphasis on social networking websites-as the new forms of communication. Social networking websites are web-based services which allow individuals to create public or semi-public profiles, share photos and links, and share connections with others' online networks that contain lists of friends (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Hockly, 2009; Hockly, & Dudeney, 2009). Furthermore, these websites become popular as they provide new venues for people to meet, collaborate, and reinforce both new and existing relationships (Davis, 2009). In a classroom situation in particular, they also foster and strengthen relationships through the use of different features which have proved to provide positive psychological benefits and enhance classroom practice (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007 and Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006 as cited in Devis, 2009).

In recent years, Facebook, My Space, Twitter, Bebo, and Ning have become popular and many students have integrated some of these social networking websites in their personal life (Hockly, 2009). Previous research studies into using social network and computer-based communication in language classroom mostly aim at integrating the networks for teaching purposes or integrating them as part of compulsory classroom activities. Bray (2010) uses Videomail (vmail) and social networking sites such as Facebook as the communication area between Japanese students and students in Hungary, USA, Taiwan and Turkey. Carney (2008) also uses blogs, wikis, Skype text, voice and video chat, and the exchange of homemade DVD movies in a language exchange project between English language learners in Japan and Japanese language learners in the United States. However, from a teaching perspective, Crystal (2001: 237) questions the correct form of language use on computer-based communication. He suggests that many scholars argued that language on the internet is often less complex and less accurate than language use in other forms. Consequently, there is a caveat on this nonstandard use of language which can influence learners' language learning and acquisition.

Based on these perspectives, although social networks provide potential benefits for classroom teaching and learning, teachers should be aware of the language students use. This study aims to share the teacher's (the researcher's) experience in using social networking in the language classroom in terms of enhancing good relationships and facilitating interactions among teacher and students. To focus on the communication aspect, the teacher deliberately avoided using the network for learning the language at this stage. However, English language instruction was partly embedded in the network. Ning, a social network which is used in this study, has

functions similar to other well-known sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Ning allows users to create their social networks, and participate in other networks. The moderators can decide the appearance and select features and functions for their profiles given by the network service, such as photos or videos, lists of network members and events, groups within the network, and communication tools such as forums or blogs. They can set whether the site is public or private. Also, they can decide what information is required from users who would like to join the network. The users can operate Ning without any special technical skills. (Educause Learning Initiative, 2008). More information about Ning is available at <http://www.ning.com>.

In this study, the teacher constructed her Ning profile in November 2009 and operated it over the period of a 15-week course to allow students to contact the teacher and their classmates outside the class. The students met only in a three 50-minute session on Monday each week, so Ning was set up to bring everyone together on the network to create a supportive environment from outside the class. It was expected to be used as the venue for information sharing, viewing or leaving comments on others' profiles, sharing photos, and facilitating other forms of interaction among class members. The applications included on the teacher's network were wall - to share information with students, photo - to post and share photos, video - to post videos for English learning purposes, blogs - to provide the content summary of each lesson, and note - to post interesting websites for students to practice English related to the content of each class. The network was in an "English only" environment. In order to facilitate students to be more confident in using English, the site was set out to be private, so that only invited students could view or join the network. Although the teacher's expectation

was to have everyone communicate through Ning, in practice, it was not very successful. It appeared to be used by a limited number of students.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the interaction in Ning, and the reasons why the students did or did not use Ning. Through this case study, the researcher hoped her experience can help other teachers in operating and making decisions on how they can and should more effectively use this form of technology in their classroom context.

Research methodology

Participants

The subjects of this study were 37 graduate students who enrolled in the Remedial English course for graduate students. They were from different faculties related to Science and Engineering: 12 students were from the School of Energy, Environment and Materials, 17 students from the Faculty of Engineering, 1 student from the Faculty of Science, and 3 students from the Faculty of Industrial Education. The subjects enrolled in this English course in the evening time. 12 (36.36%) students had full-time jobs and other 21 (63.64%) were full-time students. They spent approximately 4 hours each day surfing the internet and 2 hours each day on social networking. Other than Ning, in which the teacher invited them to join her network, 28 out of 33 students (84.85%) reported that they participated in more than one social networking site including Ning, such as hi5 (71.43%), Facebook (53.57%), MySpace (35.71%), and Twitter (14.29%). The major purposes for using social networks were communication (40.73%), entertainment (25.93%), study (16.67%), and work (16.67%). However, there were 4 students who did not join any other

network. Lack of time and lack of interest in social networking were the two main reasons.

Procedures

The teacher created her network on Ning and invited all students in the class to be the members of the network. On her page, she posted learning content summary for each week's lesson, video related to content, websites for extra activity, and questions for discussion. The Ning network was run for a semester throughout the course. At the end of week 12, the teacher administered a questionnaire about the use of Ning to all students. The students were also informed about research being conducted, and were asked for permission to use the content on Ning as data for this research which included their personal information, posts, and comments.

Data collection

Data for this research were collected from two sources: (1) posts, comments, and messages on Ning from both the teacher's and students' pages, and (2) a questionnaire which was designed to survey the hidden reasons why the students used Ning as a medium for communication with the teacher and other students, or why not. It was administered in the Thai language. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts with both close-ended and open-ended questions. Part I was used to collect data on demographic information including background information on students' use of the Internet and social networks, and Part II included questions about their participation in Ning.

Data analysis

The data collected from the Ning pages and the questionnaire were used for the analysis. The content

from the Ning webpage, from both the teacher's and students' sites, was analysed in terms of students' interactions and activities. Also, the responses to the questionnaire were analysed for the reasons whether the students used Ning or not.

Results

The Ning pages showed that 30 out of 37 students participated in the teacher's network. The 23 members of Ning reported that they accessed Ning approximately 5 times a week for the whole semester. Their main reasons for using Ning were to follow the teachers' posts including suggestions and recommendations on English learning (30.43%), follow classroom information and announcements about the classroom, e.g., homework (26.09%), communicate with the teacher, e.g., talk about their learning problems (17.39%), communicate with classmates (13.04%), access content summary posted by the teacher after every week's class (8.70%), and get to know the teacher, e.g., personal information (4.35%). The other 10 students who decided not to be Ning members reported that the factors influencing their decisions were a lack of interest (4), Internet accessibility problems (2), a lack of technical skills (2), and a lack of time (1). The results suggested that the flow of communication tended to be unidirectional where the students only received messages from the teacher, followed the teacher's activities rather than sharing information with the teacher, and communicating with other classmates.

Students' profiles

The profiles of 10 students showed no activity at all. Other 11 students only updated their profile photo, updated the microblog, created a photo album, uploaded video, added applications, and wrote a

blog without communicating with other classmates. Out of 30 students, 23 had no friends on their friend list except the teacher, while the others had only 1-3 friends on the network.

Students - teacher interaction

Data from the teacher's wall supported by the responses to the questionnaire showed that 10 students (27.02%) posted 16 messages to communicate and interact with the teacher. Only 15 messages were considered as initiated by the students. Some of them preferred to use Ning only for greeting the teacher. They also accessed Ning to ask for advice about their study as well as the projects or assignment given in the class. Of these numbers, 6 messages were questions about their learning (see excerpt 1 and 2), while the other posts were for greeting, chatting, making small talk, and keeping in touch with the teacher such as "Hello, How was your weekend? See you on Monday", and "Have a nice day".

"how can I improve vocabulary and don't lost it forever, please sugest me."

Excerpt 1

"I'm choose issue of reading project is "3G mobile phone". I want to know i choose this issue same other person?"

Excerpt 2

The issues in excerpts 1 and 2 were initiated by the students. While excerpt 1 was a question on how to improve vocabulary knowledge, the latter was posted to ask about a project assigned in the class.

On the teacher's page, 7 videos related to the content the students learned in the class were posted. There were 28 views on those video. The most popular

one, which was viewed by 15 students and commented on by 3 students (excerpts 3-5), was the video called "You should have been nice to me". It was a song which the teacher expected to let students practice using "should" with the perfect infinitive when they wanted to talk about a past event that never happened, while other videos, i.e., content with passive voice, indirect questions, main idea, and adjectives which were presented by cartoon characters and in the narrative format, were not very popular.

"I like this sentence.>>>"You should have been nice to me."and "It wouldn't cost you money." It's good mean."
Excerpt 3

Hu hu +^^ It's musiccally.The lyrics is about Shoud / Could have + V3. AJ is modern and intrend.Good KRa^^
Excerpt 4

I think this song is beautiful song.
Excerpt 5

As mentioned earlier, the teacher prepared a lesson summary for every class from week 1 - 12 and she expected that the students would read it. The program could not trace the times of views, however, there was only one student who left a message to thank the teacher for those summaries. Moreover, the message was posted on a very late week, which was week 9.

"wow wow wow wow wow.Thank you for conclusion of lesson in each week. I will read all for test a quiz. Good night."
Excerpt 6

Although this message showed that this student viewed the summary, it should be noted that his message was posted in the very late period of the semester.

There were 10 messages in the teacher's forum, however, she received students' feedback for only 2 messages. The result suggests that the teacher got replies when she talked about general things such as their interests in social networks and vacations. On the other hand, she did not get any replies when she left a message related to learning-"Have you been preparing for the quiz? Do you have any problems? Whatever you want to ask me, you can post them here." Although the teacher received 7 responses to these 10 messages from the students, the feedback was from the same two students.

To focus more on language practice, the teacher provided many useful links related to the issues they learned in the class every week. However, no student submitted any responses to this section.

From the questionnaire data, 19 out of 23 students read information on the teacher's homepage. Their favorites were the classroom content summary (6), web links for language practice (3), teachers' news, classroom information, and learning advice (3). Moreover, they mentioned that they liked the teacher's reminder about the quiz and test (1), video posts (1), and photo (1).

Although the participation level did not reach the level of expectations, the students did not mention dislikes. Seven students reported that they never read the teacher's posts or comments, because social network was not a convenient way for communication, they had limited time to access the site, and they had loads of assignment in other subjects in their field of study. They tended to prefer an e-mail as the medium. They thought that an e-mail was more convenient for them.

Furthermore, it was more confidential and private. Other reasons they gave for not communicating and having interaction with the teacher via Ning were social skills as they had no idea what to talk about with the teacher and lack of technological skills. One of the most important reasons was that they were not familiar with Ning.

Student - student interaction

The member profile pages were viewed to check whether communication and interaction among classmates had occurred.

Among classmates, more than half of the members had only 0-4 friends on their network and, of this number, there were only two students who communicated with their friends via Ning. One message concerned pair work assigned by the teacher. The student talked to his partner about the project and also left his email for his partner. Then, there were no more messages between these two students. It is possible that they contacted each other by using an email. It should be noted that the student used Thai language to communicate with his partner. Another message was only a greeting written by a student which never received a reply. These two messages suggest that students contacted only friends known previously. They only contacted someone they were not familiar with when they needed to do pair work together.

The responses to the questionnaire revealed that the students were from different faculties, so they were not very close to each other. They also met only once a week in the class. Therefore, the main reason for not having interaction with other classmates was that they did not know each other well. The result suggests that, to use this kind of communication more successfully, the teacher needs to be aware of the student familiarity with one another. Apart from the familiarity issue,

ice-breaking activities or tasks might be needed. Some students also suggested that Ning was unnecessary. They could use other media such as phone calls, emails, MSN, or other personal social networks in which they already have some classmates' contacts. Their responses imply that tasks and activities on Ning are particularly important in order to make Ning become more interesting to them.

To give reasons for making a decision to use Ning and all its features, language use is one of the main issues that had an effect on students' participation and initiation in Ning. Almost 80% of the Ning members suggested that the "English only" environment prevented them from using Ning to create relationships among themselves even though the teacher has already set the Ning page as private. These numbers point out that they preferred to use Ning, but did not prefer to use English because they were not very confident in using it. So, they participated less than they were expected of. While the main problem appeared to be writing, e.g., it took time to think and post ideas in English, a reading problem was also mentioned as an issue. Some of them also suggested that they had a limited knowledge of vocabulary. Therefore, teachers should take the language issue under consideration. Thai language may be used in the sections for communication purposes, e.g., wall post, forum, and chat. On the other hand, using English can be considered for the section provided for language learning purposes.

Although it seems that a few students took the initiative to use Ning, more than 80% thought that social networking was still useful and appropriate for uses as a medium for communication, sharing information with the teacher, and among classmates. They thought that everybody used the Internet nowadays, and therefore, social network could be effectively used as a medium

for communication, especially to contact others outside class. The social network sites were interesting in terms of accessibility, interesting features and tools which were provided. To join in a social network like this helped them update information about classmates, create relationships, receive messages from the teacher, share ideas about studying, and practice both English reading and writing skills.

However, there were some students who argued that social networks were not appropriate for use in class. They pointed out that not everyone became familiar with the social network. If it is preferred to be used in the class, other more popular networks such as Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace, should be used. Again, the main factor they mentioned was time limitation. According to students' suggestions, there were some questions teachers needed to ask themselves before using a social network for the purpose of relationship creation - How can I break the ice between students? Is the network I selected well-known to my students? Do my students need an introduction to the program? What issue should I initiate in the network to encourage students' communication and interaction?

Some other media were suggested to enhance communication and information sharing among the teacher and students regularly, e.g., email (43.47%), popular social network (21.56%), and MSN (21.56%). However, 13.41% of students pointed out that Ning was fine and appropriate to be used as a communication tool because it was particularly set up for the classroom without disturbing their personal social networks.

Discussion and implication

Although Ning seemed not to be very successfully used by students in terms of interaction among themselves, there were some regular members who contacted the

teacher through this medium. The role of social networks as the medium to create rapport between the teacher and students is evident. It should not be a stretch to say that social network tools are still useful and helpful for relationship and communication among everyone outside the class (Hockly & Dudency, 2009). However, it can be interpreted from the findings that a social network will not automatically work without careful setting or initiation by teachers as well as careful consideration of both teachers' and students' roles in using the network. Tasks or extra activities related to the classroom lesson are still needed in order to get everyone together at the beginning, such as the tasks conducted previously in Smith (2009); Mak & Coniam (2008); Bikowski & Kassier (2002). Other studies also point out that teachers' abilities to integrate computer-based resources into classroom activities are one of the most important factors for the use of these tools in the classroom (Shin & Son, 2007). However, social networks can still be considered for use as optional or supplementary activities, but not as compulsory ones. Some students have limitations in using a network; they should not lose benefits for not using or participating in the network.

The findings from individuals' profiles clearly show the communication between students and the teacher. The teacher received feedback when she posted a message on everyday conversation on general topics, while students contacted the teacher when they wanted to talk about their study. This implies that just passively giving information on the page was not enough to encourage students to interact with the teacher. Rather, the teacher should actively ask students for comments, give feedback, and give suggestions about the content posted on the webpage.

The messages between students on Ning show that they posted a message to someone they have

already known, and they talked to someone they were not familiar with only when they were partners in a task. It can also be implied that social network tools which are already involved in students' daily lives do not automatically foster communication between members (Senior, 2006). To encourage students to have more activities among themselves, teachers may assign students to invite all classmates to join their network, and assign some activities to allow them to know each other through the network.

As a whole, the findings suggest some related issues that teachers should consider in order to use social networks and other web-based communication more effectively: roles of the teachers and students, student familiarity with one another, task or activities to be assigned, student preference and familiarity with the forms of web-based communication, and language use.

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