

## FACEBOOK GROUPS IN SUPPORT OF ACADEMIC LEARNING

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the article is to describe the use of Facebook groups in the English language education of first-year students at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics at Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”. A survey was developed and conducted to explore the opinion and personal experience of participants in Facebook groups dedicated to studying English and an analysis of the results was performed. Some conclusions have been drawn regarding the relevance and efficiency of the use of social media in education.

**Keywords:** social media, Facebook group, English language education

### 1. Introduction

The benefits of using technology both inside and outside the classroom to enhance the students’ learning are numerous. The application of technology stimulates more class discussion and involves students more efficiently in their own education. Web 2.0 technologies can serve various educational purposes such as creating and delivering multi-media classroom presentations including clips from the Internet, listening to podcasts, audio and video materials, participation in video conferencing, demonstrations, blogging, and many others. Recently, the employment of social media in the process of education has become more widespread although many teachers still have some reservations about the appropriateness of using it as a learning environment. One such social media platform that can be used for teaching purposes is Facebook.

On the one hand, Facebook is a place for private social interactions with friends. Teachers may choose to share personal information, photos, videos, etc. with their connections who might also include fellow teachers. Students often share materials which can be considered as potentially exposing or embarrassing so they may not be willing to make their posts public. On the other hand, both learners and teachers are familiar with the platform and already exploit it extensively facilitated by the universal use of portable digital devices such as mobile phones and tablet PCs. Thus, instead of ignoring the students' engagement with Facebook and disregarding its potential, educators could put the social media to use to derive academic advantages.

## 2. An overview of publications on the topic

In relation with the use of Facebook for teaching purposes, various problems have been discussed in a number of articles and blogs, including the steps to create a Facebook group [1, 2], some privacy concerns [3], should teachers “be friends” with their students in the social media [4], and others. Teachers share their experience in using Facebook to enhance independent student engagement [5 – 8]. Many authors publish lists of best practices worth following when using social media. For example, some of the tips of what to do on Facebook include **to** [9]:

- Control your privacy settings;
- Take care when posting pictures of others;
- Disconnect from negativity;
- Show what you're proud of when you have achieved something great, etc.

In contrast, Facebook users are advised **not to**:

- Comment on status updates of students, even if it's positive;
- Follow students on Facebook;
- Post party or beach pictures;
- Post during work hours;
- Overpost (offer continuous updates on personal activities), and others.

A number of teachers recommend ways of using Facebook in the classroom [10, 11, 12]. To mention just a few:

- Share book reviews as a teacher- or peer-reviewed project;
- Create your own news source for sports results, academic competition results, and other campus news;
- Participate in a challenge;
- Share multimedia with the entire class;

- Make announcements or send out reminders about upcoming tests, upcoming due dates, or any classroom news;
- Brainstorm;
- Share interesting websites;
- Post homework, etc.

### **3. Our experience with Facebook groups**

Facebook groups were introduced in English language classes at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics during academic year 2015/2016 with two groups of first-year students mainly to facilitate communication between learners and the teacher. Students also used a dedicated website [13] to keep informed about teaching materials, homework, project task deadlines, etc. As self-study tests are integrated in the teaching methodology, students are required to complete a weekly test at home on the covered material. In case students are not happy with their results, they can do the test again [14, 15, 16]. However, they need to contact their teacher and ask for a new validity of the current test. Before the launch of Facebook groups students used email every time they required a new test validity, or if had some questions and needed clarifications. The first real benefit of using Facebook was that the speed of communication increased rapidly. The teacher did not have to explain the same things many times to individual students and by seeing peers do tests more than once, learners got motivated to work harder. As a result of their additional efforts, both groups achieved high final grades in English.

One of the two Facebook groups was created by a student and the other one by the teacher with equal enthusiasm on the undergraduates' side. There was only one hard and fast rule – to communicate only in English. All the students adhered to it, participated willingly in the discussions and kept a positive tone.

The role of the teacher is very important. It is true that in the age of social media he or she is no longer the center of learning [12]. However, using Facebook without instructor guidance doesn't promote academic engagement. It is the teacher's responsibility to manage the group well, to provoke the students' interest by setting various demanding tasks which are appealing to them, to post challenges and offer assistance.

Students at FMI work on a variety of project tasks, for example they take pictures and write descriptions of wall paintings, graffiti, people and objects that inspire them and upload them as text, audio and video materials. Figures 1 and 2 show examples of student assignments posted in their Facebook group.



**Figure 1. A description of graffiti**



**Figure 2. A description of graffiti**

Moreover, Facebook groups are very useful for making announcements or posting messages to the whole group in case of emergencies. For example, if the teacher or students are detained in another class or a meeting and need to inform the others about that, a Facebook message works much more efficiently than sending emails to individual students.

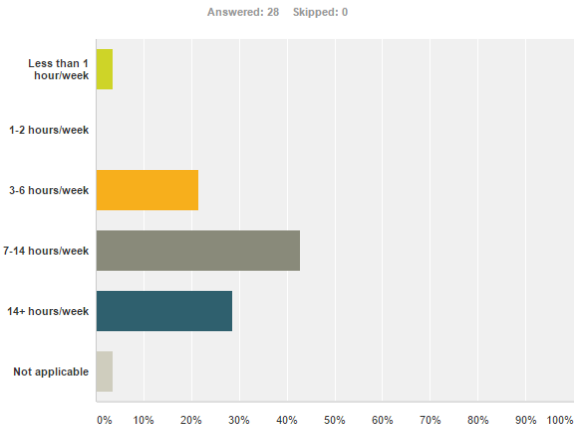
#### **4. Conducted survey and results**

To get feedback on the students' practice of using a Facebook group in the education a brief survey was performed with first-year students majoring Informatics. Twenty-eight students took the survey which included questions about their general use of Facebook, overall participation in groups, their best and worst experience of using the social media and their personal opinion of possible advantages and disadvantages of employing Facebook in the process of education.

All the university students who are currently using Facebook in their English language learning already had an account in the social media. The survey results show that the majority of respondents (43%) spend approximately 1-2 hours a day on their accounts (7-14 hours/week), 29% devote more than 2 hours a day to Facebook (14+ hours/week), and about 21% spend 3-6 hours/week on it (Figure 3).

Most of the students (57%) take part in 6-20 Facebook groups which indicates that they are competent users, while 39% are members of 1 to 5 groups. About half of the students dedicate approximately the same amount of time to Facebook as before (46%), followed by 43% who use it more than they did 6 months ago and 11% of respondents who spend less time on it.

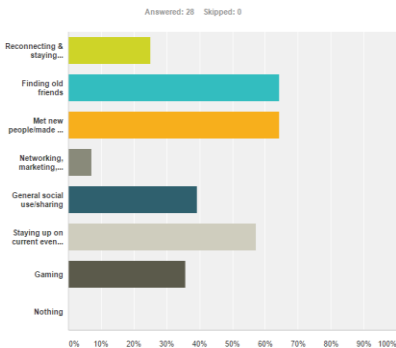
**Approximately how many hours do you spend on your Facebook account each week?**



**Figure 3. Time spent on a Facebook account**

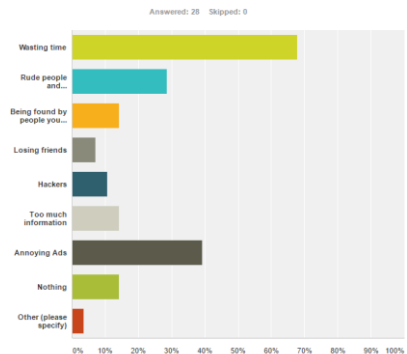
The majority of the students access their accounts via their mobile devices (96%) and personal computers (89%) (Respondents were allowed to check more than one answer). To the question “What is the best thing that has happened to you as a result of your Facebook activity?”, the same percentage (64%) have selected the answers “finding old friends” and “met new people/made new friends” (again, more than one answer was allowed). 57% chose “staying up on current events and news”, followed by “general social use/sharing” with 39% and “gaming” – 36% (Figure 4).

**What was the best thing that's happened to you as a result of Facebook use?**



**Figure 4. Best Facebook experience**

**What was the worst thing that's happened to you as a result of Facebook use?**



**Figure 5. Worst Facebook experience**

The most commonly selected answer to the question about the worst thing that has happened to students as a result of their Facebook use was “wasting time” with 68%, after which came “annoying ads” (39%) and “rude people and embarrassing posts” (29%) (Figure 5).

To answer the question “What do you typically use the class Facebook groups for?”, the largest number of respondents selected “online question and answer sessions with teachers” and “online studying with other students” (57% each), followed by “looking at past comments posted about the class by others” and “forming groups for class projects” with 54% each (Figure 6). The response added as “other” was “I check out what homework assignments we have to do.”

Answer Choices	Responses	
Organizing face to face meetings with teachers	14.29%	4
Organizing face to face meetings with other students	32.14%	9
Online question and answer sessions with teachers	57.14%	16
Online studying with other students	57.14%	16
Looking at past comments posted about the class by others	53.57%	15
Getting to know fellow students better	28.57%	8
Getting to know teachers better	32.14%	9
Forming groups for class projects	53.57%	15
Social activities independent of class	32.14%	9
Other (please specify)	Responses	3.57% 1
Total Respondents: 28		

**Figure 6. Typical uses of class Facebook groups**

Students were also asked the question what they thought would happen if they actively contributed to the Facebook group. The majority of the respondents answered “I will learn more in the class” (64%), followed by “other students will be friendly with me” (43%), “I will get a better grade in the class” (29%), “I will be respected by others in the class” (21%), and “the teacher will praise me” (18%). The response “other” selected by one learner stated that they would help other students (Figure 7).

As far as the benefits of using a Facebook group for their English classes are concerned, the greatest number of learners put “Sharing information in a Facebook group helps students to be more successful” in the first place (79%), after that they chose “Communicating in the group offers additional language practice” and “Students get more motivated when they see the work of their peers” with 57% each, then came “Most students do a better job with their project assignments” (54%), followed by “Students develop more useful class-related relationships with other students” (36%) and “Overall, it helps students to be more successful personally in

class” (25%). One student thought that using a Facebook group added nothing to how well students do in the English classes. The written responses claimed that using a Facebook group was motivating, students could ask their teacher for explanations and clarifications in case they needed them, and that communicating in English gave them good language practice (Figure 8).

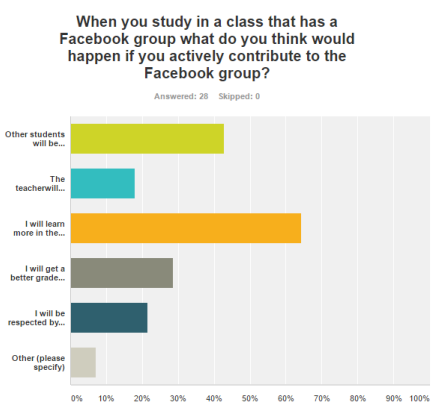


Figure 7. Active contributions to Facebook

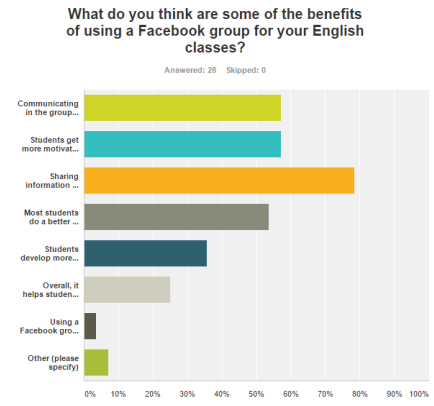


Figure 8. Benefits of using a Facebook group

Finally, students were asked to share additional information about their experience with Facebook groups used for educational purposes. Some of the students’ responses were:

*“My opinion is that it is very comfortable for every one.”*

*“It’s really good to be a part of this group and that helps me working alone.”*

*“It motivates me.”*

*“It helps not to forget about your homework. Teacher gives useful information you can check.”*

*“A very useful thing through facebook group can send files to everyone in the class.”*

*“Facebook group creates a relaxed atmosphere and I don’t feel stressed out.”*

*“When other students post comments I feel motivated to take part in the discussions and in this way we get closer.”*

## 5. Conclusions

The results from the conducted survey show that the great majority of students have a positive attitude to using a Facebook group in their English language education. They believe using a Facebook group is motivating and it is convenient to

check out and post messages at any time and any place on their mobile devices. Students respond to questions and challenges in the group and they show their approval by liking one another's comments, including emojis and stickers, file uploads, and others. Using the social media for academic purposes creates an informal, relaxed atmosphere, makes learning more pleasant and engaging, and offers opportunities to all members to participate equally, even the shyer ones.

Heretofore, we haven't encountered any actual problems. Initially, a female student insisted on sending her project assignments in private messages to the teacher because she claimed she was too shy to have her peers look at her work. Subsequently, with mutual efforts from both sides, she overcame her shyness.

Also, some students sent other members of the group as well as the teacher private study-related messages at all times, including the small hours of the night. They became so absorbed in what they were working on that they didn't realize what time it was.

As a conclusion, the high degree of familiarity that students have with the platform makes it an effective learning environment. Facebook groups allow for easy and fast communication between educators and students. Engaging with materials and discussions through the social media can aid in the development of student reflection and critical thinking. Facebook groups are especially beneficial for learners of English since they provide plenty of opportunities for language practice.

## **Acknowledgements**

This paper is partially supported by the IT15-FMIIT-004 project of the Scientific Fund of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", Bulgaria

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## ПРИЛОЖЕНИЕ НА ФЕЙСБУК ГРУПИ В ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО

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**Резюме.** Настоящата статия има за цел да опише прилагането на фейсбук групи в обучението по английски език на студенти от ФМИ на Пловдивския университет „Паисий Хилендарски“. Разработена и проведена е анкета, проучваща мнението и личния опит на участници във фейсбук група по английски език и е извършен анализ на получените резултати. Направени са някои изводи за приложимостта и ефикасността на използването на социалните медии в образованието.