

## The Use of Facebook to Promote the Learning of Spanish as a Foreign Language outside the Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

*As the age old adage goes, 'practice makes perfect' and this is especially true for language learners. In order to polish language skills, students are advised to practice the language outside of the dedicated class time. For students learning Spanish as a foreign language in Malaysia, this can be a challenge due to several factors such as having no one to speak to, the fear of making mistakes, and the fear of embarrassment. This paper looks at the use of a Facebook group as a platform for students to practice Spanish outside the designated classroom time. The study was conducted on a group of 12 undergraduates enrolled in a beginner-level Spanish language university elective course, who were given the daily task to publish posts in Spanish according to a list of given topics during a five-week period. The effectiveness of the task and the Facebook group was assessed by a questionnaire answered by the students at the end of that duration. Findings reveal that using Facebook provided more opportunities for students to practise Spanish and aided in the retention and recall of the language.*

*Keywords: confidence, Facebook, foreign language learning.*

### INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, Spanish is considered a 'foreign language' as it is neither the official language nor the mother tongue of a significant part of its population (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). Hence, the teaching and learning of the Spanish language in Malaysia is also considered the teaching and learning of a foreign language because it occurs in a society where it is not spoken outside the classroom (Moeller & Catalano, 2015).

Being so far removed from the target language (TL) community proves to be a challenge for any foreign language learner, as learners lack the necessary input and practice to grow their language proficiency. Without the environment and due to the want of practice, learners in turn become hesitant and lack confidence to use the TL. Hence, foreign language instructors constantly look for ways that allow students to use and practice the TL, whether oral or written, outside the designated classroom time. However, this too, has proven to be a challenge, such as the lack of conversational partners, the fear of making mistakes, and dealing with the perceptions of other people when speaking in the TL, amongst others. This creates a conflicting situation where learners' lack of confidence is due to the lack of practice; and their lack of practice is due to the factors mentioned above. Arnold and Paulus (2010, p.188) state that "providing additional venues for interaction is especially valuable for foreign language learning, where exposure to the target language is often limited". Therefore, there is a need for language instructors to look for other avenues where learners are able to use and practice the TL, which are not affected by the concerns above.

Fortunately, the advancement in technology has provided language instructors with more alternatives and solutions to issues pertaining to the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Since learners faced many challenges in using the TL outside the classroom, an alternative would be to make use of the internet, which, without a doubt, is currently the best resource available.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN MALAYSIA

Universities in Malaysia are transitioning into a more blended learning environment, and this generation of undergraduates are more technologically savvy than before, and they are no strangers to using technology to aid their learning, with some referring to them as “Generation M” (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (cited in Arnold & Paulus, 2010) mention that computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools may offer benefits such as more opportunities for student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction outside the designated class time.

The Internet Users Survey 2016 published by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reveals that 77.6% of Malaysians are internet users, with 76.1% of those users belonging to the 20 - 49 year-old age group. Apart from that, many Malaysian students in the current generation own a smartphone. According to data published by Statista, in 2016, there were 16.4 million smartphone users in Malaysia. In 2017, this number was estimated to reach 17.8 million, which is more than half of Malaysia’s estimated population of 31.7 million, in 2016.

### SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS) AND FACEBOOK

Social Networking Sites (SNS) are platforms or websites that are part of the social media sphere. Lomicka and Lord (2016) add the wider focus of social media is the creation of information and the transmission of information to others. Some of the most widely used SNS are Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. These SNS are easily-accessible from any devices that are connected to the internet, and registration is quick, easy, and free. SNS are primarily used to stay connected with friends, share personal thoughts, photos, and to share and stay updated on news. In Malaysia, 80.0% of internet users visited SNS, third to communication by text, (92.7% of users), and getting information (90.1% of users).

Out of the various SNS platforms, Facebook recorded a total of 1.94 billion active users at the end of 2016, making it the biggest social media platform in the world, according to an article published by CNN in May 2017. Researchers have identified Facebook as a platform that allows its users to engage in community building (Lomicka & Lord, 2016; Chartrand, 2012; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, Witty, 2010).

### THE BRIDGE BETWEEN FACEBOOK AND LANGUAGE USE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

So, why use SNS, or Facebook, specifically, for TL practice outside the language classroom? Godwin-Jones (2008) states that it is only logical to take advantage of the reliance of the current generation of students on social networking in order to support language learning. McBride (2009) also suggests that involving learners with pedagogically useful experiences such as SNS activities may motivate learners to spend more time on their foreign language tasks. This would lead to more engagement in the TL in learners.

In a study done by Su, Y.L., Kaur, M., Ganapathy, M. and Fatin Najwa Amelia (2015), the authors found that Facebook instils a positive attitude towards foreign language learning in students as well as incorporates the learning process in the students’ daily lives. This corroborates the results of a study done by Moskovsky, Alrabai, Paolini, and Ratcheva

(2013), where it was found that one of the motivational strategies in language learning was relating the tasks and subject content to the learners' own background and daily experiences.

Moreover, in a study done by Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010) on the use of Facebook as an online learning environment for learning English in institutions of higher learning, they found that students agreed that Facebook facilitates their language learning in terms of the improvement of their language skills and their motivation, confidence, and attitudes towards English language learning. Chartrand (2012) views Facebook as an excellent way to motivate learners to share ideas and thoughts, which is difficult to achieve in a classroom setting. Daqaruni (2015) shares her classroom experiences where students were hesitant to answer simple questions and would keep silent in class, even if they knew the answers.

Therefore, here are three reasons for using Facebook as an avenue for students to practice the TL outside the language classroom: (1) it is free and easily accessible; (2) it is familiar and user-friendly; (3) it provides a sense of community which motivates students to practise the target language.

Firstly, as mentioned, there is no cost involved in signing up for a Facebook account. Apart from that, it is easily accessible from any device (computer, laptop, smartphone, tablet PC) that is connected to the internet. Websites, apps, or platforms that are difficult to access or require payment are an unnecessary hurdle for learners and thus, ease of availability and access are important factors to consider.

Secondly, due to its wide usage, Facebook is a familiar environment which promotes a relaxed atmosphere to learners. Being in a non-intimidating environment would put the learners at ease and results from Stevenson and Liu's (2010) study revealed that the user-friendliness of a website affected students.

Lastly, a sense of community can be achieved by creating a Facebook group for the learners. Since learners in a foreign language context have little to no interaction with others that speak the TL, having and being part of a community that speaks the TL is one way to simulate immersion in a TL speaking community. On Facebook, communities are created using Facebook groups. The creator of the group can then invite people to join the group. Everyone in the Facebook group will be able to view the posts published by its members, which can be considered a form of meaningful TL input. Receiving input in the TL is an essential part of foreign language learning (Krashen, 1994), as learners can improve by comparing their own language system with the input they receive and then identify their errors to improve their oral or written production (Lomicka & Lord, 2016). According to Swain's Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2007), the production of language (spoken or written) comprises the process of second language learning. Hence, in the Facebook community, learners receive input when they read posts published by other members of the group; while language output are posts published by the learners themselves.

## PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main purpose of this study is to investigate students' opinion regarding the effectiveness of the Facebook group as an avenue for practice of Spanish outside the designated classroom time.

Therefore, the research questions are:

- 1: Is Facebook an effective avenue to practice Spanish in a foreign language setting?
  - a) Do students feel that posting on FB provides them opportunities to practise and apply their knowledge of the Spanish language?
  - b) Does posting on FB assist students to retain vocabulary and phrases?
- 2: Does Facebook provide students with a sense of community?

## METHODOLOGY

The students of this study are 12 Malaysian undergraduate students taking the Spanish language university elective module at Taylor’s University. These students are absolute beginners, meaning they have no prior knowledge of Spanish before enrolling into the module.

In this module, there is an assessment component in which the students need to publish posts in Spanish on Facebook daily, for the duration of five weeks. Firstly, all students were required to join a Facebook group created by the instructor. Then, they are given a list of topics to adhere to daily, and the number of posts that they need to publish on that day, which is either one or two posts. These topics correspond to the topics of the lessons which are taught in class (refer to Table 1 below), which also relates to the students’ daily experiences.

Topic	No. of Items
Greetings, Basic Words & Phrases.	2
Write about the day.	1
¿Qué hora es?	1
Vocabulary (masculine noun + definite article)	1+ 1
Vocabulary (feminine noun + definite article)	
Vocabulary (masculine noun + indefinite article)	1+ 1
Vocabulary (feminine noun + indefinite article)	
Introducing Myself - Full name, Country of Origin & Nationality	1
Introducing Myself - Occupation, Age (with TENER), Languages (with HABLAR), & Birthday	1
Write a sentence using Tener. (años, hambre, sed, sueño, calor, frío, suerte)	1
Write a sentence - Estudiar & Trabajar	1+ 1
Write a sentence - Comer & Leer	1+ 1
Write a sentence - Vivir & Escribir	1+ 1
Write a sentence - Ser & Estar	1+ 1
Write a sentence - Ser & Estar	1+ 1
Write a sentence which includes an adjective.	1
Post a picture of your school supplies or classroom objects and name 4 items.	1

Table 1: List of topics

Students must publish their posts according to the given topic, accompanied by a relevant picture. If the student published a post correctly without any errors, the instructor acknowledged it by clicking the ‘like’ reaction on that post. If there were errors (orthographical, grammatical, or lexical) in the post, the instructor would click the ‘shocked’ reaction on that post. Then, either the instructor would point out the error(s) directly to the participant, or they could look for the error(s) themselves. The students were then allowed to correct the error(s) in their posts by editing them. If there were no more errors in the post, the instructor would then proceed to change the reaction from ‘shocked’ to ‘like’ for that post. The objective of using the reactions (e.g. “like” and “shocked”) were twofold: one, to give positive reinforcement to students who had used the language well, and accurately; and two, to allow students to actively look for their error(s), and in the process, raise their consciousness on the type of errors they commonly committed. Figure 1 below is an example of a post published by a student.



Figure 1: Sample post

This study employed the use of questionnaires to collect participants' responses. The first questionnaire was answered at the beginning of the semester, and its purpose was to determine the background of the respondents, such as their native language, and the other languages spoken by them; their interest in learning foreign languages, and their preferred languages to learn.

The second questionnaire sought to determine the effectiveness of the online posting assignment on Facebook as a good way to practise Spanish outside the classroom, to gauge if students perceived they were part of a community, as well as to ascertain if the use of Spanish in the assignment aided the students' retention of the language. The responses were collected at the end of the five-week duration of the Facebook posting task.

Prior to the main study, the questionnaire was piloted with a group of students. The students did not encounter any difficulties in answering the questionnaire. All students signed consent forms to participate in this study and agreed to allow their responses to be used for research purposes, as long as their identity is kept anonymous.

## LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations in this study. The first limitation is its small sample size. With only 12 students participating in this study, the results are not representative, and the conclusions drawn from this study therefore, cannot be generalised. Secondly, due to the nature of the online posting task being a component of the students' coursework which contributed to their grade, the student output is forced and hence may not be as authentic as desired (McBride, 2009). They also needed to adhere to the topic of the day which was determined by the instructor.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the first questionnaire, the students rated their interest learning a new language on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 was ‘uninterested’ and 10 ‘very interested. All students rated their interest from 8 - 9, which indicates that the students had a strong interest in learning a new language. The survey also revealed that Spanish was the first choice of half the students enrolled in the Spanish language module; with the others stating that their first choice was French or Mandarin.

Moving on to the second questionnaire, the data indicated that all the students enrolled in the class have had a Facebook account for 5 or more years. However, their frequency of use varied. The students were asked to rank their use of Facebook on a scale of 1 to 8, where 1 indicated that they do not check their Facebook accounts daily, and 8 indicated that they check it 8 or more times a day. Table 1 shows the distribution of the frequencies.

	Scale of frequency of Facebook use per day							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
No. of responses (%)	1 (8.33%)	1 (8.33%)	2 (16.67%)	1 (8.33%)	0 (0.00%)	2 (16.67%)	1 (8.33%)	4 (33.33%)

Table 2: Frequency of students’ daily Facebook usage

We can observe that while more than half of all the students used Facebook more than 5 times a day, there was one student who did not use Facebook once daily.

As for the challenges faced by the students to complete the task, 41.67% responded that the task was not difficult. Some challenges the rest of the students faced were, punctuality (25%), lack of time (25%), typing in Spanish (16.67%), and finding a relevant picture (8.33%). Almost all the students (91.67%) responded that they read posts published by others, where 41.67% usually, and 41.67% sometimes reading others’ posts.

## PRACTICE

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
	(1) %	(2) %	(3) %	(4) %	(5) %	
Q9. You have found that publishing posts in Spanish a good way to apply what you learnt in class.	0.0%	0.0%	8.33%	25.0%	66.7%	4.58
Q10. Writing and publishing posts in Spanish enabled you to practice your Spanish grammar.	0.0%	0.0%	8.33%	25.0%	66.7%	4.58
Q13. The Online Posting Task is an effective way to practice the Spanish language.	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	58.3%	4.42
Q14. This task is an effective way to practice the Spanish language.	0.0%	0.0%	8.33%	25.0%	66.7%	4.58
Q18. Typing in Spanish helped you gain familiarity in spelling Spanish words.	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	75.0%	25.0%	4.75

Table 3: Student responses to questions related to practice

The results in Table 3 show the student’s opinion towards posting daily on Facebook as good practice of the language. In question 9, 66.7% of students strongly agreed that publishing posts in Spanish a good way to apply what they learnt in class, while 25.0% of them agreed to the statement. This result also corresponds to the students’ response to a similar item which is question 10, with 66.7% and 25.0% still strongly agreeing and agreeing respectively, that writing and publishing posts in Spanish was a good way to apply what they have learnt in class. In question 13, 58.3% strongly agreed that the assignment was an effective way to practise the Spanish language. Apart from that, 75% of the students agreed that typing in

Spanish helped them gain familiarity with spelling Spanish words. These results tie in with the findings from the study done by Su et al., (2015) where they found that using Facebook in teaching a foreign language supports and strengthens the language learning process.

#### RETENTION AND RECALL

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean Score
	(1) %	(2) %	(3) %	(4) %	(5) %	
Q8. The photos and pictures help you remember the words, phrases, and sentences you have used in your posts.	0.0%	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%	33.3%	4.00
Q11. Writing and publishing posts in Spanish enabled you to recall the vocabulary (words) you have learnt in class.	0.0%	0.0%	8.3%	16.7%	75.0%	4.67
Q12. When there are words and phrases you don't understand, the pictures help you recall their meaning.	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	4.00
Q19. You are more likely to remember the words, phrases or sentences you have used in your posts than those you have not.	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%	4.25
Q27. Publishing posts daily kept the lessons fresh in your mind, even when you had no Spanish class on that day.	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	66.7%	4.33

Table 4: Student responses to questions related to retention and recall

The students responded that the assignment generally helped them to remember the words, phrases, and sentences they have used, with two-thirds of students agreeing and strongly agreeing. However, there was also 16.7% of the class that disagreed. Moving on, although in question 11, it is shown that 75% of the class strongly agreed that writing and publishing posts in Spanish enabled them to recall the vocabulary they learnt in class, in question 19, 25% of the students indicated that they are also more likely to remember the things they used in the post while 50% neither agreed nor disagreed.

It was also revealed that the students found the images that accompanied their posts aided them to remember the words, phrases, and sentences even after they used them in their posts. The students also indicated that writing and publishing posts in Spanish enabled them to recall the vocabulary (words) they have learnt in class, with 75.0% strongly agreeing, 16.7% agreeing, and 8.3% neither agreeing nor disagreeing in question 11.

In question 12, a third of the students strongly agreed (33.3%), and another third agreed (33.3%) that the picture helped them to recall the meaning of words and phrases they did not understand. The remaining third of the class were neutral (33.3%). Besides that, two-thirds (66.7%) of students strongly agreed to the statement that publishing posts daily kept the lessons fresh in their mind, even when they had no Spanish class on that day, while the final third of the students (33.3%) remained neutral.

These results indicate that the pictures that accompanied the students' posts assisted in the retention of vocabulary, and helped them recall meanings of words which were in the posts, but did not understand. This reveals that text combined with images is a good method for recalling and retaining the language. Since the pictures that the students published in their posts were chosen by them, and many students used their personal photos, these images were meaningful to them personally. This enabled the students to use Spanish in their personal context, such as to express their feelings, or to describe the things shown in the picture, or talk about what they were doing in the picture, which is an integration of the language learning process into their daily lives (Whiddon, 2016; Su et al., 2015).

#### COMMUNITY AND INPUT

In terms of a sense of community, 50% of the students strongly agreed, and 25% of the students agreed that the Facebook group made them feel like they were part of a Spanish-speaking community. Moreover, 11 students (91.7%) indicated that they read the posts published by their fellow classmates, with one student (8.3%) in indicating the negative. However, in the next question, this particular student indicated that she ‘seldom’ read others’ posts, which is contradictory to her indication that she did not read others’ posts. Among the students that read others’ posts, 9.1% indicated that they always read others’ posts, 45.5% indicated that they usually did so, and the remaining 45.5% indicated that they sometimes read others’ posts.

Out of all 12 students, 5 (41.7%) strongly agreed that reading posts published by their classmates assisted them in improving their language skills, 3 (25.0%) others agreed, 2 (16.7%) were neutral, and the remaining one (8.3%) disagreed.

One reason a Facebook group was chosen as the platform for the study was that it would enable the students to be part of a Spanish-speaking community, even if it were on of beginner-level speakers. Being a part of a community gives its members not only the opportunity to produce (output) the language, it also enables them to receive input from its other members. From the results collected, we can surmise that almost all of the students were playing their part as members of a community by providing and receiving input from one another, by publishing posts and by reading them. Even if there was no active participation such as holding a conversation in the comment section of each post, and the students were lurking, i.e. not engaging in dialogue or interaction, this does not mean that the students’ “vicarious interaction” (Arnold & Paulus, 2010) through reading posts contributed by others was not a sign of disengagement.

#### OUT OF CLASSROOM USE OF SPANISH

The results of the survey showed that 41.7% of students used the Spanish language outside the dedicated class time, while the other 58.3% did not. The students rated the frequency of their language use and the data indicated that 50% of students seldom used the language outside the classroom, 33.3% occasionally used the language, 8.33% of students frequently used the language, and the remaining 8.33% of students hardly used Spanish outside of the classroom. However, it is interesting to note that despite not using Spanish outside the classroom much, all of these students indicated that they have used Spanish in their texts messages, and 75% of students have also used Spanish on their social media.



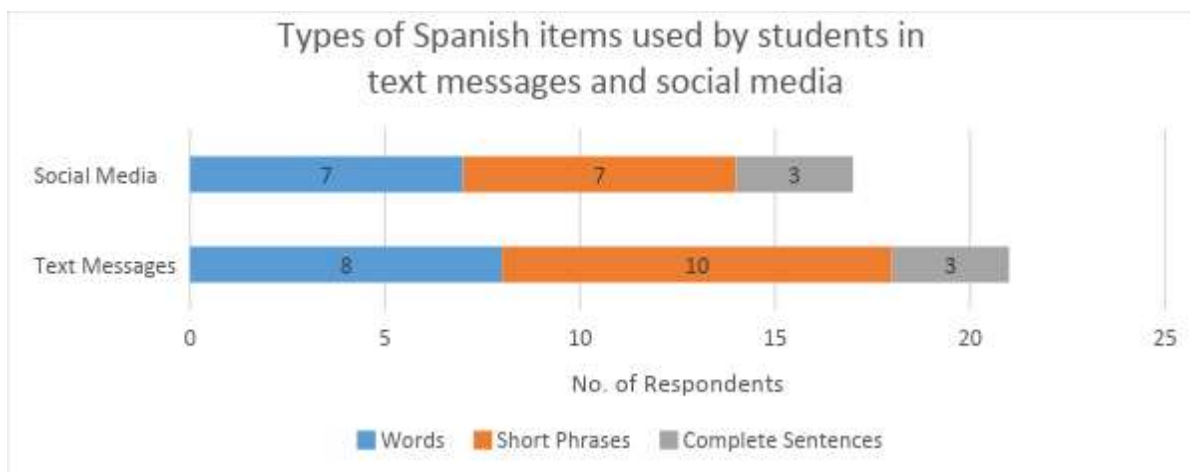


Figure 2: Types of Spanish items used by students in text messages and social media

### CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS

The data collected re-affirmed that the biggest challenge for these students with regard to using Spanish was that they had no friends who spoke the language. Surprisingly, all students had indicated in the survey that they had classmates enrolled in the same Spanish module.

Besides that, another hurdle that prevented these students from using Spanish outside the classroom was that they were afraid that other people may feel that they were showing off. The students also indicated that they were afraid of making mistakes. The table below illustrates the challenges the students enrolled in this Spanish module faced and the number of respondents that agreed.

Reasons for not using Spanish outside the classroom	No. of respondents who agree
1. I have no friends who speak Spanish.	10
2. Others may feel that I'm showing off when I use Spanish.	4
3. I find Spanish pronunciation difficult.	3
4. I am afraid of making mistakes.	3
5. Other	3

Table 5: Reasons students do not use Spanish outside the classroom

The other reasons contributed by the students were: “Unable to form perfect sentences without grammatical errors”, “I’m used to communicating with people in languages other than Spanish”, and “I don’t have friends who speak fluently to correct me if I’m wrong”. This re-affirms Munjayanah’s (2007) findings, which named four issues foreign language learners face in speaking in the target language, namely: inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and mother tongue use.

It is also interesting to note that most students cited not having any friends to speak Spanish to as a reason that they did not speak Spanish outside the classroom, even when they had indicated in a previous item that all of them had friends or course mates taking the Spanish module. Perhaps these students considered someone who “spoke Spanish” either a native speaker or a non-native who spoke the language fluently, as they certainly did not consider their fellow course mates and friends enrolled in the same course as “someone who spoke Spanish”.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has shown that the use of a Facebook group as an avenue for language learners to practice the TL, in this case, Spanish, outside the designated classroom time to be good and effective. In addition, the students felt a sense of community by joining the group, and gave them a chance to provide and produce input for the members of their community. Although they may not have actively participated in creating conversations, their lurking, which is an activity that is invisible to the instructor, is one way they had engaged with the language.

Future studies could use the same concept of posting daily on a Facebook group, but to allow students to post freely without assigning them a topic, so that the output of the students can be more authentic, personal, and spontaneous, which may spur conversation between members of the Facebook group. One other consideration would be to add native speakers into the Facebook group, so that students are able to see, experience, and learn how a native speaker would interact with others, and that they gain an opportunity to interact in the target language with someone who spoke Spanish fluently. These studies would contribute to the current body of work and shed more light on the use of Facebook, or social media in general, to increase foreign language learners' use of the target language outside their designated classroom time.

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## APPENDIX

Posts published by the students.

(Note: The student's names and profile pictures have been removed to protect their identities.)

