

## Using Social Media to Improve Students' English Writing Skills: A Mixed Method Study

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### **Abstract**

*The growing popularity and use of social media have influenced every facet of our lives. This research study aims to explore the potential of using social media to develop undergraduate students' English writing skills. Mixed method research design was used to carry out the research. The instruments used in this study included a survey, single group pretest and posttest experiment and focus group discussion with students. An opinion survey was conducted to explore the tendency of using different forms of social media by undergraduate students at a public sector university in Pakistan. An experiment was carried out to compare students' English writing skills before and after discussions on Facebook followed by a focus group discussion to get in depth information about students' attitudes towards use of Facebook for improving writing skills. The results of survey point out that most of university students use Facebook and have easy access to social media through their mobile phones. The results of the experiment revealed that using Facebook as a forum for discussion in English helped to improve students writing skills. Moreover focus group discussion with students highlighted that students found it as an interesting and motivating experience to use Facebook for writing practice. Most of the students were of the view that it is a new experience of learning writing by engaging in discussion with the peers and teachers through Facebook*

**Keywords:** Social media, e-learning, Facebook, ESL learners, writing skill

### **Introduction**

Technology has influenced almost all facets of our lives and education is not an exception. It has revolutionized the traditional methods of teaching by introducing modern and innovative methodologies. With continuing popularity and growth of social media, many educators are considering the potential of using social media for educational purposes as they are of the view that social media have the ability to

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encourage active learning and collaboration among students (Maloney, 2007). However few educators are also concerned about the negative impact of social media on students' academic performance and discourage its utilization in education (Brabazon, 2007). Pakistani social media/Facebook users are growing rapidly but the use of social media for educational purposes is little explored in Pakistan. Despite the popularity and incorporation of social media as a tool for language teaching inside and outside classroom, research on role of social media in Pakistani context focused on investigating the trends of its use among students and there is a lack of empirical research investigating the impact of using social media on language learning. In this scenario, it is necessary to conduct empirical research to examine the impact of using Facebook on students' writing skills.

### **Literature Review**

Developments in the field of internet and advent of networked technology in communication have given rise to use of social media all over the world. Safko considers social media as “user-generated content; blogs, audio, video, music, news, photos, tweets—working together with digital technology in [an] environment [where] everything is accessible from everywhere and everything is connected” (2009: 24). Grahl (2013) classifies social media into six different categories i.e. social networks, bookmarking sites, social news, media sharing, micro blogging and blogging. Facebook, Twitter, Skype are some of the Social Networking Sites (SNSs) relying on social media technology.

Social networks are used for the purpose of socialization with peer, to be in touch with family and friends, to obtain new information and to advertise and promote the products (Wankel, 2011). The findings of a research study conducted by National School Board Association (2011) reveals that Facebook membership in the world have reached 200 million marks which reflects the success of social media in communication. Language production is considered to be an important component of language acquisition process. Use of social networking sites by students in a language that is not their own can help students to learn the language. Output Hypothesis by Swain (2007) considers “the act of producing language (speaking or writing) as the part of the process of second language learning.” Swain and Lapkin (1995) are of the view that a need to produce the language supports language learning. Therefore motivating and encouraging students to speak and experiment with the use of language is important for learning a language.

Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis considers the linguistic interaction brought about by face to face communication as important for language development. Based on Vygotsky's work Lantolf's (2000) socio-cultural approach to language

acquisition emphasizes the role of interaction within a community of learners. Social networking sites can provide opportunities to learn through observation as students will observe others behavior and will able to amend their language to interact with others on social media. Use of social media for interactional purposes engages students in meaningful language tasks.

Research studies reveal that technology-assisted instruction is more effective than traditional methods to help students in language learning. It is found that participation on social networks like Facebook and Twitter helped students to enhance their vocabulary and also improved their writing skills (Li, 2010; Yunus et al. 2012). However, Schmidt and Brown (2004) are of the view that the use of social media should be taken as combination of online and traditional classroom teaching. Warschauer (2009) conducted a study on use of laptops to improve writing skills. The findings of the study revealed that there was a significant improvement in students' writing as use of laptops helped them to easily access the information to plan their writing, in drafting the papers and publishing their works after having immediate feedback and frequent revision.

Tiene (2000) found that written communication by using social media allows students to actively participate in discussions at a convenient time and also facilitates them to express themselves in a more clearer, planned and structured way. On the similar note Deng and Tavares (2013) also found that students' participation in discussions on the cyberspace can help to cultivate reflective ability and critical thinking skills in these students. A survey of 2,462 teachers conducted by Purcell, Buchanan and Friedrich (2013) revealed that use of social networking sites and texting on cell phones is helpful to improve students' writing as digital technologies are facilitating young students' personal expression and creativity, and encouraging them to write in different formats.

Abdulateef (cited in Alfaki and Alharthy, 2014) conducted a study about using Facebook to improve students writing skills and concluded that students were highly motivated to practice English writing informally because writing on the Facebook allowed the freedom of expression and convenience of time and the support from their peer comments and feedback. According to Bandura's social learning theory (1986) learners' peers and situations both affect individual's learning. Social learning theory "basically explains how the environmental and cognitive components collaborate to affect an individual learning and behavior pattern" (Ainin et al, 2015). The socio-cognitive approach to language teaching and learning emphasizes the meaningful interaction in authentic discourse situations. Social media provides a learning environment which encourages the constructivist learning by supplying authentic

activities and substantial variety of tasks combining different formats such as text, graphics, audio, and video.

### **Research Methodology**

Mixed method research design was used to collect data for this study. Mixed method research design enabled the researcher to get a detailed view of potential of social media to improve English writing skills of students. A survey was conducted to examine the trends of using social media especially Facebook among university students, then an experiment was conducted to explore the impact of using Facebook discussion forum on students' English writing skills. Finally a focus group discussion with the students who participated in the experiment helped to collect the in depth information about students' opinion and their attitude towards using Facebook for improving writing skills.

### ***Data Collection Tools***

#### ***Survey***

The first objective of this study is to examine the trend of using social media among university students. For this purpose survey approach was adopted to collect data. 800 students of the undergraduate Programs at University of Education Multan Campus made the population of the study and 200 students were randomly selected from these students as a sample for the survey. A survey consisting of 10 items was distributed personally to the participants in the classes in order to maximize the return ratio.

#### ***Experiment***

An experiment was conducted to study the effects of using Facebook on students writing skills. A single group research design was employed in the experiment. 25 students were randomly taken from BBA (hons) 3rd semester who were enrolled in communication skills course as participants for the experiment. Using Facebook for discussion is the independent variable, whereas paragraph writing skills served as dependent variable in this study. The randomized pretest-posttest single group design was employed. The same group was measured twice. The first measurement served as the pretest, the second as the posttest which served as the data collection tools in the experiment.

#### ***Procedure of Experiment***

First of all the teacher gave lecture to students about paragraph writing in the class. They were taught about the structure and components of paragraph writing. In the second class students were asked to write a paragraph on 'My Family' which served as the pre-test. A secret group was formed on Facebook page consisting of 25 students who had easy access to Facebook. The subject teacher and the researcher were also the

member of the group. The group was named as BBA Writing group. Researcher observed students' participation and also participated in discussion when it was felt that students' participation had decreased and there was a need to motivate them to actively participate in the discussions. The subject teacher performed the role of a moderator in the group.

Before starting the discussions on the group page few rules of conduct were agreed upon by students, teacher and researcher which are given below:

1. A topic will be given on alternate days on the Facebook group page and students have to post their views, opinion on the given topic or comment on other students' posts.
2. Every student has to comment or post at least four times a week for a period of four weeks.
3. The size of students' post should be 50 to 100 words i.e. not too small and not too large.
4. The size of comment can be about 15 to 25 words.
5. Be respectful to other members' posts and behave appropriately.
6. Do not misuse the group page.
7. Students can also suggest the topics for discussion.

The members of the writing group used Facebook discussion forum for writing practice by participating in discussion on different topics as given by their teacher. Students were posting their comments and were engaged in discussion with the teacher and peers. Students were also motivated to initiate the discussions by suggesting topic of their own choice. This practice continued for four weeks (16<sup>th</sup> April to 15<sup>th</sup> May 2016). The teacher and researcher also participated in the discussion by commenting on students' posts to stimulate and motivate students' participation and also to give them feedback about their writing.

After four weeks students were asked to write a paragraph on "Our responsibilities as a patriotic Pakistani" which served as posttest. The students' pretest and posttest paragraphs were analyzed in terms of five writing components, content, vocabulary, organization, grammar and mechanics. The pretest and posttest comprised of 25 marks each. Each writing component was allocated 5 marks. The marks of pre and posttest were analyzed and compared to find out the impact of discussion on Facebook on students' writing skills.

### ***Focus Group Discussion***

At the end of experiment researcher also used focus group discussion with the students to gain in-depth information about students' opinion regarding using Facebook

in language teaching and their attitude towards using Facebook to improve their English writing.

### Data Analysis

Students' responses to the survey questions were calculated using the percentage method. The data collected through pretest and posttests was analyzed through SPSS and paired sample t-test (dependent t-test) was employed. Moreover data collected generated through focus group discussion was analyzed by employing content analysis.

### Research Findings

This study was conducted to explore the use of social media as a forum for discussion to improve undergraduate ESL students writing skills.

#### Survey Results

Results of the survey which was conducted to explore university students' use of social media reveal that almost 87% of students use social media in their daily life. It was found that Facebook is the popular form of social media among university students as the result of the survey shown in figure 4.1 points out that about 90% of university students prefer to use Facebook than other social networking sites e.g. twitter, blogs, instagram etc.

**Figure 4.1 Use of different Social media sites by University Students**

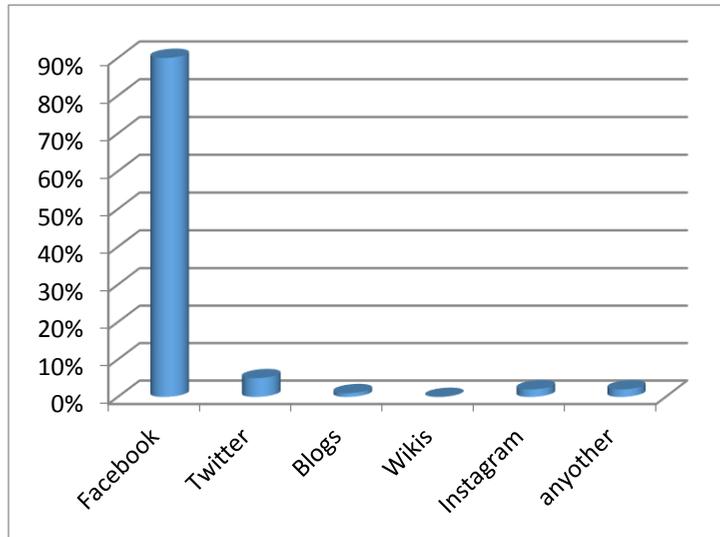
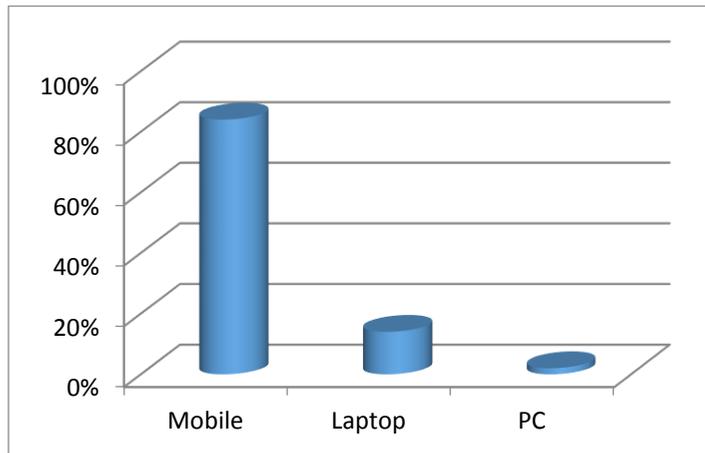


Figure 4.2 below shows the sources which students use to access social media.

**Figure 4.2 Access of Social Media**



Survey also revealed that most of the students use mobile phone to access social media as it is highlighted in the figure 4.2 that about 84% of students use social networking sites through their mobile phones, about 18% students do not have facility of android cell phones and they use their laptops and personal computers to access social media especially Facebook. Use of mobile phones to access social media enables the students to use social media conveniently without time and space constraints.

Figure 4.3 points out the different purposes of students' use of social media. It is clear from the results that about 43% students use social media in order to socialize with friends and relatives. There are 27% students who use social media forms for entertainment purpose and 22% students were of the opinion that they use social media to share pictures, videos and other materials with family and friends. It was found that there are 3% students who use social media for the purpose of learning too.

**Figure 4.3 Purpose of Using Social Media/Facebook**

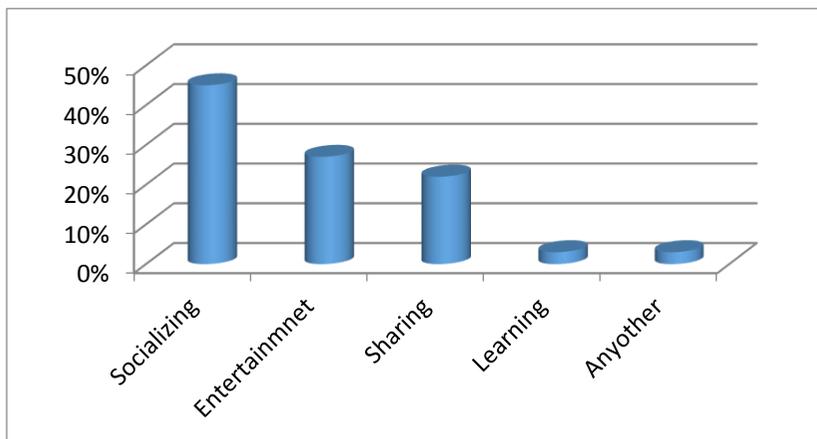


Figure 4.4 shows the result of survey revealing the time spent by students spent on social media. It was found that about 39% students spent 1 hour daily and 44% students use social media for about 2-3 hours daily. 13% of the students responded that they spent just few hours in a week on social media as they do not have easy access to internet. So on average university students use social media for about 2 hours daily.

**Figure 4.4 Time spent on Social Media by Students**

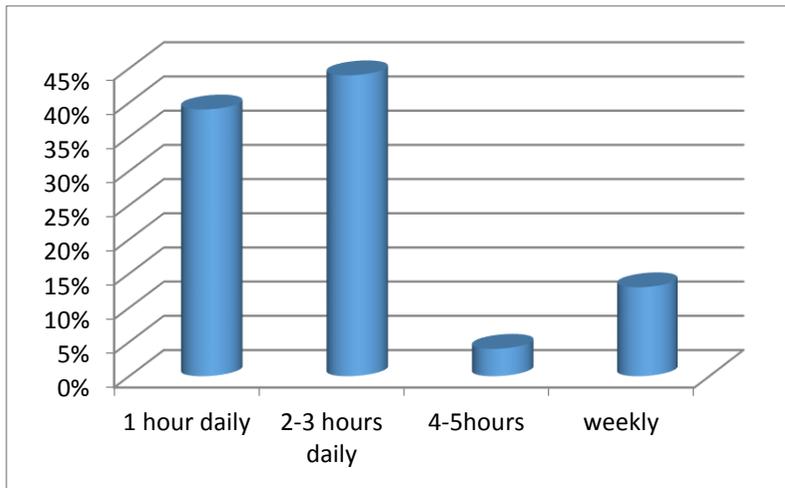


Table 4.1 presents the results last five items of survey. As shown in table 4.1, 97% students are of the opinion that their teachers do not use Facebook or any other social media for teaching purposes in classroom and 95% of students said that social media can be used as a tool for teaching purposes in classroom. 89% of students believe that use of social media can be an effective tool to resolve different educational and professional issues and about 63% students in the university use social media for sharing different materials like time table, date sheet, notes etc. and most these students believe that use of social media is not the waste of time. The survey highlighted that majority of university students do use Facebook as a social networking site and they believed that Facebook can be used as an effective tool for teaching purposes. After this survey the experiment was planned to use Facebook to improve students’ writing skills.

**Table 4.1 Survey of University Students’ Trend of Using Social Media/Facebook**

Question	Yes%	No %
Do your teachers use Facebook or any other social media for teaching purposes in the class?	3%	97%
Do you think social media/Facebook can be used as a tool for teaching purposes?	95%	5%

Do you think social media can facilitate to resolve educational and professional issues adequately and timely?	89%	11%
Do you use social media for sharing of educational materials e.g. presentation, handouts, timetable, date sheets etc.	63%	37%
Use of social media is the wastage of time for youth.	86%	14%

### ***Experiment Results***

The data collected through pretest and posttests were analyzed through SPSS and paired sample t-test (dependent t-test). The statistical comparison of results of pre- and post-test are given in table 4.2.

**Table 4.2 Comparison of pre-test and post-test by Paired Sample (dependent) t-test**

Pre and post test	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Correlation	Mean difference	SD Difference	t-test
Pair 1 Pre-Content	2.56	25	.507	.101	0.351*	1.00	0.577	8.66***
Post-Content	3.5600	25	.50662	.10132				
Pair 2 Pre-Organization	2.08	25	.277	.055	0.316	1.08	0.759	7.11***
Post-Organization	3.1600	25	.80000	.16000				
Pair 3 Pre-Grammar	2.56	25	.507	.101	0.575***	0.32	0.476	3.36***
Post-grammar	2.8800	25	.52599	.10520				
Pair 4 Pre-Vocabulary	2.16	25	.374	.075	0.417**	0.60	0.50	6.00***
Post-vocabulary	2.7600	25	.52281	.10456				
Pair 5 Pre-Mechanics	2.60	25	.500	.100	0.665***	0.08	0.40	1.00
Post-Mechanics	2.6800	25	.47610	.09522				
Pair 6 Pretest Overall	11.96	25	1.207	.241	0.690***	3.08	1.75	8.78***
Posttest overall	15.0400	25	2.35372	.47074				

\*P<0.10, \*\*P<0.05, \*\*\*P<0.01

The overall marks obtained by pre-test group and post-test group are statistically significant as p-values is smaller than 0.01 significant level. Students' average marks were higher in post-test than their average marks in the pre-test indicating students' discussions on Facebook had a positive effect on their English writing skills. Similarly students' pre and post-test marks in four writing components i.e. content, organization, grammar and vocabulary are statistically significant. However the marks obtained by pre-test and post groups in mechanics are statistically non-significant as the p-value shown in the table 4.2 is greater than 0.01 which means both pre-test and post-test group have equal marks in mechanics indicating that

students' participation in discussion on Facebook does not improve their mechanics i.e. spellings, punctuation and capitalization.

**Table 4.3 Relationship between all measures and number of posts on FB Writing group**

	Number of Posts On FB group	Content	Organization	Grammar	Vocabulary	Mechanics
Number of Posts on FB group	1	.329*	.441**	.422**	.338*	.484**
Content		1	.717**	.366**	.667**	.300*
Organization			1	.552**	.689**	.270
Grammar				1	.452**	.546**
Vocabulary					1	.410**
Mechanics						1

Table 4.3 shows the relationship between students' number of posts on FB group and different components of writing. The results point out that relation between students' participation in discussion in terms of their number of posts and different writing categories are statistically significant and have positive relationship between them. It means that more the number of posts in FB group more marks by students, higher marks were obtained by them in content, organization, grammar and vocabulary. Similarly, relationship between content and organization is statistically significant and has positive relationship between them. The strength of relationship is strong which means that higher the marks in content more mark will be in organization. Moreover there is also positive relationship between content and vocabulary which means that students who got higher marks in content also had good marks in vocabulary indicating that improvement in content of students' writing also improves their vocabulary and vice versa.

## Discussion

The findings of the survey suggested that most of the undergraduate students in University of Education have easy access to social media through their mobile phones making it possible for language teachers to incorporate Facebook to assist language teaching. The results of experiment reveal that active participation of students in Facebook discussion forum helps to improve their writing skills specially the content and organization component of their writing. This finding is according to social cognitive theory which suggests that involvement in meaningful interaction helps to

develop language skills (Fahim & Mehgran, 2012). Langacker's cognitive grammar (1987), also emphasize this point as it considers knowledge of language in the form of abstract symbolic units stored in our mind and the constant application and usage of these units without hesitation makes it entrenched and our habit thus enabling its users to develop fluency in language (cited in Evans et al., 2007). The results of the experiment also point out that students' use of Facebook for discussion does not improve the mechanics of their writing. As the participatory observer, researcher noted different reasons which strengthen this finding. It was noted that students' posts on Facebook discussion forum did not follow the mechanics i.e. capitalization, and punctuation marks despite the instructions and rules given to them before the experiment and the feedback given during the experiment and students teacher discussion on facebook. Some examples of students' posts highlighting this aspect are given below:

***Examples of Student's Post on Writing Group Page on FB***

1. *We should plant more trees, drive less walk more so that pollution can decrease, collective action needs to stop deforestation. Everybody should put their effort to clean the environment*
2. *Repair the plants that are damaged by our mistakes, place dustbins so that people can throw garbage in it rather than throwing it on the road try to reduce air and water pollution caused by factories we all have to think that change cannot be made by one person but collective efforts are required to bring a major change in the world*
3. *Small efforts can make dramatic change in the society individual should took steps to clean the environment, place the garbage at proper place, controll air pollution by reducing the use of vehicles*

As it can be seen in the above examples that students did not use full stop and commas in these posts and this practice had a negative impact on their writing. However it was noted that overall students' language usage was significant and more structured and organized. Tiene (2000) was also of the view that social media facilitates students to express themselves in a clearer, planned and structured way. On the similar note Deng and Tavares (2013) also found that students' participation in discussions on the cyberspace can help to cultivate reflective ability and critical thinking skills in these students which can make them logical and coherent in their writing expressions.

During focus group discussion students expressed their point of view that easy access to Facebook made it convenient for them to use Facebook for language practice than the limited time available in classroom. They were able to visit the writing group discussion forum on Facebook without the time and space constraints. As Omar, Amin

Embi, and Yunus also opine that “Facebook has become a significant part of students’ lives, utilizing the tool in a pedagogically sound approach could benefit ESL learners in practicing the language outside their classrooms” (2012: 72). Moreover, students also reported that Facebook discussion forum enabled them to check and recheck other students’ comments and posts in previous discussions and not to miss any of the posts making the forum convenient and user friendly. Omar et al. (2012) also concluded that Facebook is not only convenient and easy to use but it is also useful, enjoyable and interesting for students.

When asked about their experience of using Facebook writing group page, most of the students considered it a good activity as it provided them a favorable environment to interact and engage in discussion with their peers and teacher. It has been found in other researches too that the interactive nature of social media provides favorable environment for language learning. Selwyn (2009) is of the view that social media helps the learners “by allowing them to enter new networks of collaborative learning, based around interests and affinities not catered for in their immediate educational environment.” The interactive nature of Facebook create interest of learners in the ongoing discussion and they are motivated to express their opinion too in this relax and stress-free environment which is sometimes lacking in the traditional classroom. Social media motivates students by providing material richness (Munoz & Towner, 2009). Thus, Facebook provides a forum for extending the traditional classroom by incorporating technology in language learning according to students’ interest and involvements in this digital age. Students shared experience and said that they enjoyed more freedom to express their opinion and ideas about different topics on Facebook as compared to traditional classroom environment.

Facebook writing group also enabled students to keep in touch with other peers and to talk with friends without time constrains. Students said that they read their friends and peers’ post on the discussion forum and were also motivated to share their opinion and express themselves on the topic. The discussion forum enabled them to read and comment on other students’ post. One of the students said that she read and reread her texts before posting them on the page which helped her to self-correct her mistake. Some students shared their experience that when they read their peers’ posts written in good English, they became more conscious of their own writing and they consulted the dictionary to find the meanings of any new words used by their peers on the discussion forum. This practice is in itself suggests students’ potential as keen and motivated learners. When asked about whether they would like to continue this activity in next semester, they were very much willing to continue it further as they saw it as a great opportunity to learn through interaction with peers and teacher.

Students said that they were motivated to participate in the Facebook discussions because they found it different from traditional classroom environment where they were hesitant to share their opinion with teacher and peers. According to Murphy (2009) Facebook as an online synchronous platform permits anonymous communication which helps to create a state of anxiety-free relaxation. Thus Facebook can be used as a tool to facilitate active participation of shy and reserved students in meaningful activities thereby enabling them to develop confidence and become independent learner as Ziegler (2007) also found that Facebook has the potential to change individuals from passive to active learners. Kabilan et al. (2010) believed that the improvement in social event planning through social media increases active attendance.

It was found that students' increased participation in discussions in stress free and relax environment motivated them to write in a more systematic and organized way. According Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1981) anxiety, self-confidence and motivation play a crucial role in second language acquisition. Students' increased motivation and low stress and anxiety level decreases the Affective Filter which leads to effective language learning. In traditional classroom setting students are reluctant to participate because of fear of being considered as fool and as a result (Warschauer, 1996). Students said that they were more comfortable while writing on face group page and gave their opinion on their own will without any pressure that they must participate and as a result their writing expression was more fluent and logical. It had also been established in the previous researches (Beauvois & Eledge, 1996; Liu & Sadler, 2003) that online teaching provides a non-threatening environment to students. Students were of the opinion that their increased participation resulted in developing a close and friendly relationship with their teacher. Teacher was responding to their posts by commenting on their views and also giving feedback about the mistakes in their writing. Teacher's comments on students' posts and immediate feedback on their work motivated them to participate further and also to develop a positive teacher-student relationship.

Previous studies also indicate that frequent contact of students with the teacher helps to develop a positive relationship between them thereby creating an environment conducive to language teaching and learning (DuBois et al., 2002). It was also observed that posts on facebook initiated by teacher resulted in increased participation by students. According to Terantino and Graf (2011) teachers' discussion with students and their comments on students posts on Facebook can enhance student teacher interaction. To sum up the major findings it can be said that using Facebook as a medium for language teaching helps to develop positive attitudes and relationships, motivates students to participate, encourages a collaborative environment, and helps to

maintain better relationship between teacher and students (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007).

Apart from positive aspects of using Facebook to improve students' writing skills, it was also observed that in initial posts some students used plagiarized material in their posts. Teacher asked them to use their own words for participation by sending them encouraging message in their inbox. Plagiarism is one of the disadvantages of using Facebook for educational purposes as studies found that students develop the habit of copying-pasting from available online sources rather than using their original work (Kabilan et al. 2010, Yunus and Salehi 2012). This points that teachers need to be careful while incorporate technology in teaching Liu (2010) also believes that planning and proper implementation strategies are required to employ social media in classroom. The purpose of utilizing social media tools in language classroom is to improve teaching and learning and if not used properly it can distract students from learning to other activities. (Liu, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude it can be said that with the advancement in technology we need to upgrade our language classes by incorporating social media with traditional classroom practices in order to motivate and engage students in this growing digital world. The study revealed that students' easy access to Facebook makes it a potential tool to be used in language teaching to facilitate language learning. The students were able to improve their writing skills as they were motivated to write in an organized way in a stress free environment provided by Facebook. The use of Facebook increased the student teacher interaction and enabled the students to learn from their teachers and peers through collaborative learning experience. However Facebook should not be seen as a substitute or replacement of traditional classroom learning but as a tool to assist the language teaching in classroom.

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