Using microblogs on Facebook to develop students' academic reading and writing skills

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ABSTRACT

Much research has focused on the use of Web 2.0 tools in the classroom to motivate and encourage student participation. It is considered highly motivating and offers a range of benefits for learners to develop their reading and writing skills. However, whether such tools can develop nuanced approaches to online written communication, particularly with regard to grammatical complexity or pragmatic awareness, has not been examined in detail. This action research (AR) project explored the value of encouraging formal online interactions between students studying pre-intermediate and intermediate level academic English programs through the implementation of task-based classroom activities. Data were collected across three cycles of action research through analysis of Facebook user posts, electronic surveys and face-to-face interviews. Overall, results suggest that there are affective benefits to such an approach and that the complexity of students' writing can be increased through the explicit framing of academic language.

INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this action research project was to address the tendency of international students to use language of limited syntactic complexity when communicating and interacting online. The project aimed to determine whether their written English could be developed to include more formal linguistic features, such as those

taught in academic English programs. The popular social network, Facebook, was used as the learning space in which students were encouraged to write about their experiences and opinions when reading news media. The context of the project was an Australian English language university pathway provider. The students in the study came from a variety of linguistic backgrounds, although the majority had Mandarin as their home language. The educational background of the students varied across the study, with a number of students having already completed undergraduate degrees in their own countries while others were coming directly from high school. Specific details regarding the students in each cycle of the study are presented under 'Method'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review presents research related to the use of social media and technology in the classroom, learner motivation and the methodological implications of the use of technology in the classroom, all of which informed the action research project.

Digital and web-based learning

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL), technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and blended learning are all used to describe teaching and learning approaches that make use of digital technologies such as computer software-based approaches, internet based technologies and mobile devices. Within this field, literature addressing teaching approaches incorporating computer-mediated communication (CMC) in ELT is also of relevance. CMC allows for language acquisition processes to occur through exposure to target language, language production and collaboration and is supported by both socio-cognitive and sociocultural schools of thought on second language acquisition (Hamano-Bunce, 2010; Stahl, Koschmann, & Suthers, 2006). The potential value of CMC-based CALL is due to the affordances provided through the negotiation of meaning during interaction (Peterson, 2010) and its usefulness in multimodal task-based approaches to language learning (Sockett, 2014; Stockwell, 2010). Blended learning approaches typically utilise software-based learning

resources and activities. However, over the past 15 years, a more task-based, active and productive involvement in the learning process has emerged through web-based resources (Thomas & Reinders, 2010). Early research into the value of CMC in CALL showed that it promoted participation and inclusion while increasing lexical and syntactic range, formality and accuracy in written versus spoken language production (Warschauer, 1995). In more recent research, Pegrum (2014, p. 9) notes that the use of learner-generated contexts allows "locally embedded but globally informed (and globally communicated) learning to take place". Furthermore, it has been noted that the use of web-based technologies allows for informal learning to take place as learners carry out meaningful tasks in English in an authentic social context (Sockett, 2014). This social context could be the classroom, an online learning platform or a social network, or all of the above, and it is through such media that learner agency and autonomy can be promoted (Sockett, 2014). There is limited literature on the topic of enhancing curriculum-based classroom practice by applying a blended learning approach using task-based CMC.

Social media and ELT

Recent studies suggest an increasing use of social media in English language teaching. Reinders (2013) examined the potential for social CALL to enhance learner engagement, collaboration and motivation within more decentralised, democratic and learner-centred environments. Other studies cite the strong links between sociocultural theory and the benefits of using social networks in language learning (Hockly, 2015; Toetenel, 2013). Trajtemberg and Yiakoumetti (2011) see the scaffolding of language learning through blogging as beneficial as it can encourage learner autonomy. The availability of the written record of communication through a blog or wiki can promote noticing of target forms, potentially resulting in uptake or acquisition (Hamano-Bunce, 2010). Although the use of social media in online learning environments remains a focus in the literature, there is little attention given to its application in formal academic classroom contexts.

Social-network based CMC in language learning can provide a foundation for situated learning and create opportunities for collaboration through either asynchronous or synchronous communicative events (Toetenel, 2013). As a result, learners' dynamic, and not necessarily temporally limited, contributions to these spaces and subsequent meaningful interaction with peers can be the processes through which new knowledge can be negotiated and produced (Nami & Marandi, 2013). The notion of social networks as learning spaces which allow learners to define their own identities and make their own learning choices is suggested by Kessler and Bikowski (2010). However, there is limited research to suggest that these affordances can be exploited using task-based approaches in a classroom setting. The ability to effectively put a conversation on hold in order to continue it at another time is something not easily available in traditional classrooms. Related specifically to the use of online discussion, several studies outline the advantages of using social networks to facilitate students' interaction and the peer feedback process (Black, 2005; Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Wichadee, 2013). Black (2005) argues that a social network promotes both reflection and critical thinking while Blattner and Fiori's (2009) study used Facebook to develop aspects of pragmatic competence in an intercultural setting.

Learner motivation and the use of social networks

The use of social media, and technology in general, in language learning has been discussed in terms of its affective benefits and ability to generate learner interest in language production. This effect is related to research in the field of learner motivation whereby personalisation, relevance and meaning are seen as key strategies for promoting notions of intrinsic motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Trajtemberg and Yiakoumetti (2011) found that the visibility of the learners' work also motivates learners to produce and improve their language, since the permanent display of their work on a social network means that their language is available to view at any time and, potentially, by anyone. The democratic leadership style afforded by the use of a social network, i.e., every participant's voice has equal weight, can also foster trust, good interpersonal relations and a

cohesive learner group as the teacher can adopt an autonomy-supportive communicative style by involving students in some of the decision-making processes that shape their learning (Dörnyei, 2007).

Skills development and teaching

Task-based learning & teaching (TBLT) and the use of social media in the classroom

The literature suggests a strong correlation between task-based learning and teaching and the use of social media and technology in the language learning curriculum (Doughty & Long, 2003; Kebble, 2012; Thomas & Reinders, 2010). Within this, Meskill and Quah (2012) argue that task design, curriculum considerations and teacher guidance need to be addressed in order to ensure that the benefits of using social technologies in the classroom are not limited to socio-affective factors. In applying TBLT to the use of social media in the classroom, the tasks students are asked to complete should be purposeful, communicative and serve a pedagogical purpose (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Nunan (2004, p. 4) suggests that tasks need to be able to "stand-alone" as communicative acts in order to have sufficient meaning for language acquisition to occur.

The value of TBLT has been noted in relation to coursebook-based syllabi where a weekly task can offer the opportunity for creativity in the classroom (Kebble, 2012). While definitions vary as to how much a task should focus on form, it is important to note the centrality of meaning construction (Nunan, 2004), learner autonomy and authenticity (Ellis 2003) in the literature as these issues are also raised in discussions surrounding the use of social media and technology in ELT (Patel, 2015; Reid, 2011; Wang, Wu, & Gung, 2013; Wichadee, 2013). Furthermore, TBLT is seen as a means to exploit multimodal opportunities in the classroom so that both productive and receptive skills are developed along with a range of cognitive processes (González-Lloret, 2015). With respect to CALL, the central premise of TBLT, that tasks are authentic, learner centred and challenging, still applies with the added requirement that learners' digital literacy skills also be engaged (Thomas, 2012). Other theorists see the relationship between TBLT and CALL as one based on the

principles of sociocultural theory and the need to engage learners in collaborative tasks that allow for shared construction of meaning through the carrying out and completion of such tasks (Doughty & Long, 2003; Hamano-Bunce, 2010; Peterson, 2010; Stahl *et al.*, 2006).

Writing online

Regarding learners' written accuracy and range, a number of studies suggest a strong correlation between attention to form and linguistic range and the use of online forums and social media. For example, Warschauer (1996) suggests that the greater planning time and slower pace of writing, compared to speaking, allows for more complex and accurate language production while still maintaining a communicative focus. The public nature (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Nami & Marandi, 2013; Sengupta, 2001) and the permanence of the online space are also strong motivators for learners to pay close attention to the accuracy and form of their written message. Citing Swain's (2000) notion of the collaborative dialogue, Sengupta (2001) suggests that this attention to linguistic form in written CMC enhances students' linguistic knowledge through attention to writing conventions and results in more conversant language choices and use. Research also suggests that the synchronous nature of online threaded communication may offer metacognitive benefits (Downes, 2004; Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000) as learners apply planning and revision strategies.

Reading and CALL

Integrating elements of an extensive reading program into TBLT approaches to CALL and social media can promote learner autonomy and critical thinking. Extensive reading, according to Day (2002), involves a freedom of choice so that learners can read material that is of interest and of a suitable challenge. The enjoyment of the reading process, as Nuttall and Alderson (2005) point out, is closely related to the speed and comprehension of the texts in question, which are all important considerations when learners have to choose from the vast amount of texts online. The value of learners writing during reading is documented in a number of studies (Park, Zheng,

Lawrence, & Warschauer, 2012) and the promotion of critical thinking skills has been highlighted as one of the main advantages of such an approach (Tierney & Shannahan, 1991).

PURPOSE

The broad scope of technology and social networking in the classroom informed the focus of this action research project as there was a lack of specific research addressing the value for students studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP) of delivering task based learning using social media. Specifically, the project sought to answer the following questions:

1. What value is there in instructing students explicitly (i.e., through scaffolded presentation of frames to use in microblogs) on issues of pragmatic acceptability in online text-based interactions in the classroom?
2. Can students' online written communicative fluency and complexity be improved through the explicit teaching of microblog writing frames?
3. What value do students see in engaging in microblogging activities on Facebook in the classroom?

METHOD

Burns (2010) suggests that action research does not necessarily need to follow a fixed sequence of events thus, while the following method suggests a traditional iterative approach to action research, the actual approach taken here was more 'interwoven', as much of the planning occurred on an ongoing basis and in reaction to the changing needs of the students. Nevertheless, the project did occur over three distinct cycles with the planning and interventions in each cycle informed by observation and reflection.

Each cycle was comprised of a five-week EAP teaching term with a different group of students in each cycle. One hour (out of the 20 contact hours) per week was dedicated to the microblogging tasks which are explained in detail below. The tasks that were designed for the intervention were carried out in the classroom using laptops supplied by the institution, however learners could also use their own

devices and were permitted to complete unfinished tasks for homework. Analyses and reflection were conducted at the end of each cycle in order to inform the proceeding cycles. Approval was sought from the institution's ethics committee and was granted once the students' informed consent was assured. The tasks were not specifically assessed by the assessment measures of the course, however, many of the tasks included specific language features that students were required to demonstrate an understanding of in their formally assessed written assessment tasks and end of course tests.

The following description of the method used is intended to demonstrate the iterative nature of the action research project as each cycle informed the proceeding one.

Setup

Table 1 outlines the class level, number and task type for each cycle.

TABLE 1
Task overview

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Topic focus	Any	Any	Environment
Level	Pre-intermediate (CEFR B1/ IELTS 4-5)	Intermediate (CEFR B2/ IELTS 5-6)	Pre-intermediate (CEFR B1/ IELTS 4-5)
Number of read & report tasks (microblog)	2	4	3
Type of interaction tasks	Comment	Comment, question & reply	Comment, question & reply

The choice of the social networking platform, Facebook, as the online space was informed by several factors. Firstly, as the majority of the learners in the study were from China, it was a good opportunity to use a social networking platform which is not only popular in the country they plan to spend a significant amount of time in (i.e., Australia) but also throughout the English-speaking world. A further consideration was that the tasks were all carried out in closed

Facebook groups, meaning they could only be viewed by the group members. Each microblog task, the specific characteristics of which are explained below, included a link to an original article from the media.

Data collection

The action research project involved three cycles, and data were collected using four different sources, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Data collection overview

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Facebook posts	✓	✓	✓
Classroom observation	✓	✓	✓
Survey		✓	✓
Interview		✓	✓

Meskill and Quah (2012) suggest that for studies involving the analyses of data from social media sources to determine pedagogical outcomes the predominant, and most convenient, source is the written transcript of Facebook posts between learners. Interviews and surveys were used to investigate whether there were any affective benefits to the intervention.

Quantitative

The quantitative data resulted from analysis of the students' Facebook posts, drawing on Swain and Lapkin's (1995) notion of language-related episodes (LREs). Only language-oriented contributions to the group page were analysed, which meant paratextual features of the social network, such as 'Likes' and emoji, were ignored. In order to measure syntactic complexity, inspiration was drawn from Foster, Tonkyn, and Wigglesworth's (2000) analysis of speech unit (AS-unit) and the use of LREs. Thus, the measure of

complexity of an individual LRE was the number of distinct sentences in a single post divided by the number of clauses (regardless of subordination). In order to measure whether students were following the writing frame, the number of clauses was added to the final score if the post contained the language features from the writing frame.

Measure of complexity = (number of sentences / number of clauses) + (number of clauses if frame was followed accurately)

For example (taken from student writing):

I was born in Tangshan which is a north city near Beijing. I love traveling if I have time. I'm going to start my master in next year.

3 (number of sentences) / 5 (number of clauses) + 5 (number of clauses because frame/instructions followed) = 5.6 (Measure of complexity)

Fluency scores were calculated according to the number of posts per student per week. For example, if a student posted their initial 'microblog' and commented on two other posts their fluency score for that thread would be 3.

Qualitative

To determine the affective benefits of the task and address research question 3, a short (five minute) one-on-one interview was conducted at the end of Cycles 2 and 3 with individual students where they were asked "What do you think of the Facebook writing tasks?". Their answers were recorded verbatim.

As a result of reflection on the data from Cycle 1, an anonymous survey was introduced in Cycles 2 and 3 using an online survey. Students were asked to respond to two multiple choice questions and one open-ended question about the in-class activities. These were:

- How confident do you feel writing in English on Facebook in class? (Very, A little, Not very)
- How much do you enjoy using Facebook in class? (A lot, A little, Not at all)

- What do you think about the issues in the media tasks on Facebook? (open ended)

Observation

In all three cycles, informal classroom observation was conducted while the students completed the 'read and report' tasks on laptops or their own devices. The teacher noted the level of interest in the activity and the amount of non-computer mediated communication.

Cycle 1

Table 3 provides demographic information about the students.

TABLE 3
Class profile: Cycle 1

Class level	Number of students	Own language	University pathway
Pre-intermediate	16	15 Mandarin 1 Arabic	15 undergraduate/diploma 1 postgraduate

The Facebook group was set up and a request to join was then approved by the teacher before access to the group was possible.

Step 1: Set up Facebook group and introductions

Initially, the students were asked to write a three-sentence introduction about themselves for homework.

Frame:
Comment on this post and write three sentences about yourself, one about your past, one about now (the present) and one about your future.

Example:
Student 3: *I was born in Tangshan which is a north city near Beijing. I love traveling if I have time. I'm going to start my master in next year.*

Step 2: Read and report activity

In Week 2, the class was instructed to visit the landing pages of several news media organisations and choose an article to report on. They then wrote their microblog. A simple frame was provided and the use of grammatical metalanguage was intended to reinforce syllabus based language presentations.

Frame:
> Find an article that interests you and post a link and a comment about it in the Facebook group under my post. Use the following: I think this article is interesting because (clause)

Example:
> **Student 4:** *I think Sarah Begbie's life is interesting because she is working hard to earn money and have a wonderful life. Even no tip*

Step 3: Read, report & comment

In Week 3, there were three tasks. The first task was to read and comment on the microblogs posted in the previous week's exercise, and no frame was provided. The second and third tasks were to read the news sites again and report on an environmental news article using a frame which included an acknowledging statement as presented in the syllabus.

Frame:
> (Author name) writes about (issue). I think (issue) is important because (clause).

Example:
> **Student 9:** *Graham Readfearn writes about the great barrier reef got polluted from farming and anywhere ,i think environment pollute is a bad and important effect for great barrier reef because environment pollute also effect all world. let go to peotect environment, give fish and reef a wonderful home.*

Step 4: Read, report & comment

The students had two tasks to complete in the final week. First, they commented on their peers' microblogs from the previous week using a framed response. This activity reinforced the recently reviewed language of cause and effect in the syllabus:

Frame:
     I (agree/disagree). I think (opinion). (offer solution).

Example:
     Student 3: *Yes I think we should do something for protecting the environment , I hope that our children or grandchildren can also appreciate those beautiful place .*

The second task was linked to a speaking assessment task in which groups of students pitched a fictitious product that addressed an environmental concern. They needed to link an environmental issue to their product using the language of causation.

Frame:
     (Author/Organisation) is concerned with (issue). Our product, (product name), will help (issue) by (effect).

Example:
     Group 3: *The Nature Conservancy is concerned with excessive deforestation. Our product, iii (milk), will help the TNC to plant more trees. If people buy a bottle of milk from our company, we will pay the TNC one dollar to plant the tree.*

Reflections on Cycle 1

Most of the students were active users of the social network 'WeChat', a China-based social media app, but had never used Facebook. It was therefore necessary to make sure that all students knew how to create a Facebook profile and navigate both the desktop and mobile versions as they were very different to the messenger-like application with which they were familiar. It was clear that more writing tasks were required to provide sufficient data for analysis. Also, it was apparent that data from classroom observation and the

analysis of student posts provided insufficient justification for any meaningful conclusions. A survey, therefore, was introduced in Cycle 2 to measure student confidence and enjoyment of the task. Finally, the frames needed to more effectively scaffold the students' responses by providing more explicit reference to language presented in the syllabus. Also, more demonstration, instruction and concept checking would ensure students were better supported in task setup.

Cycle 2

This cycle included 18 students, whose details are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Class profile: Cycle 2

Class level	Number of students	Own language	University pathway:
Intermediate	18	15 Mandarin 1 Arabic 1 Brazil 1 Vietnam	17 undergraduate/diploma 1 post-graduate

Group setup used a link distributed on the class WeChat account. The closed group was also searchable on Facebook. Some learner training was required due to students' lack of familiarity with the platform: this provided unanticipated opportunities for student collaboration and mentoring,

Step 1: Set up closed Facebook group and Introductions

The use of Facebook worked well alongside one of the core topics of the intermediate level syllabus: social networks and the growing power of Facebook. For the initial task, the students were asked to post a comment under the teacher's model introduction with three sentences about themselves. This was intended as a diagnostic activity to gauge both their digital literacy and command of informal English and, as such, the data from this exercise are not analysed here.

Step 2: Read & Report

The set-up of the first microblogging task included a brief discussion regarding what constitutes an 'issue'. To address concerns regarding task setup raised in the first cycle, the task was also demonstrated explicitly whereby the teacher posted an exemplar microblog live while thinking aloud. To ensure the students received sufficient support, the instructions and frame were included as images in the comment thread as well as projected on the whiteboard for the duration of the activity.

Frame:
(Author) (Date) (reporting verb, i.e. writes, argues etc...) (issue). I (opinion word, i.e. think, feel, believe etc...). (opinion) because (reason)

Example:
Student 7: *Craig Mathieson (2016) writes about the film Pete's Dragon. I find this Disney movie is attractive because it reflects the value of friendship by using animatronics and warmly welcoming digital effects. I am interested in this technique and it is what I want to learn as well.*

Step 3: Read, Comment & Report

Week 2 had two tasks for the students to complete. First, they were asked to review their peers' microblogs from the previous week and write structured comments in response, which involved the use of politeness strategies from the coursebook.

Frame:
(Discourse marker – see page 34), + (agree/disagree). (Ask a question using politeness strategies from pages 73 – 74)

Example:
Student 3: *Absolutely,it's a scary news and I agree with you.It also worried me because if I take a 20-year-old bus without a fire suppression system who can provide my security?*

The second task was to post another microblog using the same frame from the week 1 thread.

Step 4: Read, Comment, Report & Respond

For Week 3, there were three tasks. Task 1 required students to comment on their peers' posts from Week 2. Task 2 was a more linguistically challenging task which aimed to exploit more of the language from the syllabus.

Frame:
> In (his/her) (evaluative adjective) article, (Author) (Date) (reporting verb, e.g. writes about, argues that, reports on, etc…) (issue – noun phrase/noun clause). I (think that, feel that, etc…) (opinion) because (reason).

Example interaction:
> **Student 4:** *In his blog,' Longer hours,worse job :Are Asian turning into working machines?'Jonathan Holslag(2016),writes about in many countries of Asia,people can't have a good condition in their companies.They always working for a long time and couldn't earn enough money to maintain a comfortable life.It's a general problem in Asia.*

> **Student 15:** *I totally agree with you, it is a terrible phenomenon in Asia, they are not machine. Would you mind telling me the government should do what policy to their citizens?*

Task 3 involved the students responding to the questions from their peers.

Frame:
> Thank you, (Facebook name). (Answer)

Example:
> **Student 4:** *Thank you,Student 15.I think the government should innovate the labour law to protect the citizens.*

Step 5: Read, Comment, Report & Comment

In the last session in Week 4, the students were asked to complete four tasks. The first two tasks were the same as the previous week; a relative clause in the frame for Task 2 was added to support the syllabus.

Frame:
In (his/her) (evaluative adjective) article, (Author) (Date) (reporting verb, e.g. writes about, argues that, reports on, etc…) (issue – noun phrase with relative clause). I (think that, feel that, etc…) (opinion) because (reason).

Examples:
Student 2: *In their useful article, National Geographic Staff (2016) write abou hurricanes which shows our about how does hurricanes form and grow and why are hurricanes dangerous. I feel that these information is very useful and exciting because I have some knowledge about the nature.*

Student 9: *Hey Student 2 could you please tell me what is the hurricanes? It is like a typhoon?*

Student 2: *hi Student 9, As a science-majored student, I can answer your question responsibly. Hurricane is same as Typhoon. Hurricane is Atlantic typhoon, and typhoon is Pacific hurricane.*

Tasks 3 (answer questions from other students) and Task 4 (ask questions of other students) were intended to extend the opportunity for the stronger students to comment and respond to each other as much as possible.

Reflections on Cycle 2

The higher level of the group, and syllabus, in Cycle 2 allowed me to increase the complexity of the frames. I also felt that this group of students was more capable of completing a greater task load. However, the final week's task was not undertaken as the students did not have an opportunity to interact with their peers' work as the following week was an assessment week. The increased attention to task set-up and demonstration was effective in supporting the

students in their online language production efforts. Also, the increased attention to detail in the frames seemed to be assisting the students as they were producing more of the target language from the frames.

Cycle 3

Table 5 outlines the characteristics of the class profile in Cycle 3.

TABLE 5

Class profile: Cycle 3

Class level	Number of students	Own languages	University pathway:
Pre-intermediate	18	15 Mandarin 1 Arabic 2 Vietnam	17 undergraduate/diploma 1 post-graduate

A link, a QR code and instructions on how to find the group were used to guide students to join the closed Facebook group. As this was a pre-intermediate class and the topic was not a focus of the syllabus, it was necessary to discuss privacy issues and the use of personal information online beforehand.

Step 1: Set up closed Facebook group and Introductions

For the introduction task, time was spent on set-up with a scaffolded speaking task including a live demonstration using a data projector. Using their own devices, the class posted comments under the model with three sentences about their past, present and future. As with Cycles 1 and 2, they commented on each other's posts by asking follow-up questions. Unlike Cycle 2, this was not only intended as a diagnostic assessment of both their digital literacy and command of informal English but also as a source of data for this research.

Instructions:
    Write three sentences about yourself: one about your past; one about your present and one about your future.

Example:

Student 2: *Hi, everyone.I first came to Australia last year. I love playing hockey and I was a team player in my secondary school. I also love swimming and playing football.*

Step 2: Read & Report

The first microblogging task was set up identically to Cycle 2. While many students were able to post during the allocated class time (60 minutes), some were not and completed it outside of class.

Frame:

In the article '(article headline)'(author surname)(year of publication)(reporting verb, e.g. reports that, writes about, discusses)(Issue). He/she (reporting verb) (main point 1). According to (author name) (main point 2). I think (opinion or recommendation).

Example:

Student 4: *In his article' what really happened to the mammoth and other ice giants' Niki Rust,(2016) reports that there was global extinction of large animals with some causes, such as climate changes and hunting and diseases.I think it is very sad, government should take some laws to protect animals and environment.*

Step 3: Comment, read & report

For Week 2 the students were required to complete two tasks. Firstly, they had to read and comment on their classmates' microblogs from the Week 1 thread:

Frame:

I (agree/disagree). That's (adjective). (Question)

Example:

Student 4: *I agree with your idea, that's convenient. Do you think it can come true earlier?*

Their second task was to post a new microblog to the thread. As many students had difficulty with the complexity of the frame in the

previous week (perhaps owing to the level of the class) it was simplified:

Frame:
> In (his/her) article '(article headline)'(Author) reports that (clause about environmental issue). I think that (clause about your opinion).

Example:
> **Student 13:** *In Alexandra E. Petri's article"More Snow Leopards Poached, Even as Bold Plan Fights Decline"' I think it is very good situation that realized that hunting snow leopards , in few years ago , snow leopards maybe disappeared in the natural because of the hunting, and now the government make the place became protection area. We can see now they are live in the safe place .The local people make them as idolatry,   they think they are brave and beautiful. But the other thing we must konw there still a lot of endangered animals in the world. We must find them and protect them, to make the earth more beautiful. ,rather than kill them for money. We must do something*

Step 4: Comment, reply & read and report

In the third week of the five-week term, the students were asked to complete three tasks. Firstly, as in the previous week, they were required to comment and post on their peers' work from Week 2. Specific reference was made to a language focus from the syllabus: formal question forms using modals and set expressions.

Frame (simplified):
> React: That's (interesting/so sad/amazing etc…).

> Question: Could you (base verb); Would you mind (verb +ing); I'm not sure about (noun phrase). Could you (base verb)

Example of student response:
> **Student 5:** *I agree with your idea.That is very terrible. What can we do for those Snow Leopard Poached?*

The second task was to reply to any questions from their peers.

Frame:

> Thank you for your question, (Facebook user name). You're asking about (issue). I think that (noun clause).

Example of student response:

> **Student 13:** *Thank you Student 5 We should never buy any things that made from Snow Leopards*

The third task was to post another microblog about their environmental issue. Similarly, specific reference to the language focus from the syllabus (cause and effect) was used to integrate the task with the curriculum:

Frame:

> In (his/her) article '(article headline)'(Author)((Year/Date)) reports that (clause about environmental issue). I think that (environmental issue - effect) (cause and effect language - see handout from yesterday) (cause of environmental problem).

Example of student response:

> **Student 2:** *In her article 'Can Birth Control Save Our Wild Horses?' Virginia Morell (OCTOBER 31) reports that the number of wild horses decreased due to the birth of horses decrease. I think that the decrease in number of wild horses was caused by human destruction of the environment. I hope the birth control is effective and save the wild horses.*

Step 5: Review and complete comment & reply tasks

In response to reflections from Cycle 2, the final session focussed on reviewing and completing the communicative tasks from the previous weeks. Some analysis of language issues arising from previous weeks' posts was discussed and the students were shown the 'Edit' function on the Facebook thread page so they could make changes to previous comments and posts. No data were collected on whether this function was used.

RESULTS

Cycle 1: Pre-intermediate

Table 6 shows the quantitative results from Cycle 1 in terms of the syntactic complexity of the students' Facebook posts.

TABLE 6

Cycle 1 Quantitative results (average across all participating students)

	Number of Sentences	Number of Clauses	Complexity Measure (# of sentences/# clauses + number of clauses)	Number of Posts
Week 1	3	3.86	1.29	1.14
Week 2	1.5	2.58	3.75	2
Week 3	2.1	4.1	5.97	2.23

The students' microblogs increased in complexity from Week 1 to Week 4. The average number of clauses relative to the number of sentences rose dramatically in Week 3, indicating a greater application of multi-clausal syntax, but this increase was not closely mirrored in the complexity measure as this language was not as indicated in the writing frame.

I also made the following observations:

- the students were focussed and engaged while reading the online texts and writing their posts and comments;
- when less technically competent students encountered problems, other more confident students assisted them;
- the majority of students spent significant amounts of the allocated time reformulating and planning their posts, although it was also clear that there was great individual variance in the amount of effort from each student.

Cycle 2: Intermediate

Table 7 shows the quantitative results from Cycle 1 in terms of the syntactic complexity of the students' Facebook posts.

TABLE 7

Cycle 2 Quantitative results (average across all participating students)

	Number of Sentences	Number of Clauses	Complexity Measure (# of sentences/# clauses + number of clauses)	Number of Posts
Week 1	3	4.88	5.16	2.12
Week 2	2.76	5.06	3.12	5.35
Week 3	2.88	6.06	6.32	4.2
Week 4	3.27	6.53	7.49	1.67

As the data in Table 7 show, the complexity measure increased across the four activities and, while the average number of sentences remained about the same, the number of clauses per post increased substantially. Related to this was an increase in the complexity measure due to the students following the frames by including the requisite language from the syllabus. The average number of comments per student decreased from the second week to the final week's task.

Table 8 shows the results of the anonymous survey deployed in the middle of the course (Week 3). 15 students left positive responses in the open-ended survey (see Appendix A1). In the interviews, almost all students reported a positive impression of the activity with several commenting on the perceived innovative nature of the activity. In the interviews, three students noted that the task allowed them to "communicate with others" (Student 4, Student 10, Student 17) and one mentioned that it was good to "comment on others" (Student 14) (see Appendix A2 for all responses).

TABLE 8

Cycle 2 Anonymous survey responses MCQ (n=17)

Question	Not at all	A little	A lot
How much do you enjoy using Facebook in class?	3	3	11
How confident do you feel writing in English on Facebook in class?	2	3	12

In addition, my own observations led me to note the following points:

- all students were observed participating and deeply engaged in the activity;
- there was little verbal communication during the activity;
- the students continued the activity into a scheduled break in order to complete their posts.

Cycle 3: Pre-intermediate

The quantitative outcomes of Cycle 3 can be seen in Table 9.

TABLE 9

Cycle 3 Quantitative results (average across all participating students)

	Number of Sentences	Number of Clauses	Complexity Measure (# of sentences/# clauses + number of clauses)	Number of Posts
Week 1	3.69	3.88	2.12	6.19
Week 2	3.56	5.88	3.96	2.81
Week 3	2.31	4.77	5.69	1.93

The third cycle was similar to Cycle 1 as both classes were of a pre-intermediate level and the number of comment threads

(excluding those relating to the introduction diagnostic task) was limited to three. The data show the complexity measure increasing from slightly over two in the first week's activity to just under six in the final week's activity. However, the average number of posts per student decreased from six in the first week's thread to two in the final week's thread. Table 10 shows the results of the anonymous survey deployed in the middle of the course (Week 3).

TABLE 10

Cycle 3 Anonymous survey responses MCQ (n=16)

Question	Not at all	A little	A lot/Very
How much do you enjoy using Facebook in class?	1	4	11
How confident do you feel writing in English on Facebook in class?	1	2	13

There were 12 positive responses to the open-ended question with one clearly negative. Two responses were ambiguous or off-topic (see Appendix A3). In the interviews (see Appendix A4), the majority of the class felt positive about the tasks. Three students commented on the fact that they had never used Facebook to learn English before. Common themes were that the exercise helped their writing ability, their motivation to read and that it was enjoyable. One student expressed concern that she did not feel the exercise sufficiently helped her to prepare for the end of term exam. In addition, I observed that:

- The class was highly engaged in the activity during the time allocated.
- There was no evidence of distraction or boredom, such as use of mobile phones or browsing non-task related websites.
- Students were reluctant to end the activity at the required time when the laptops had to be returned.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine what value there is for EAP students in integrating task-based social media approaches when developing reading and writing skills. The project took place over 15 weeks with three separate groups of students. The following discussion addresses the key themes of the project and answers the questions posed at the beginning of the paper with reference to the data collected over the three action research cycles.

Pragmatic awareness

A number of studies have highlighted the need for explicit pragmatic instruction in CMC approaches (Alcón Soler & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Rose & Kasper 2001). Noting the value of using commenting in social media to encourage learners and to promote learner self-expression, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015) highlights how the consequences of pragmatic failure can be grievous for learners if their interlocutors find them impolite or status-incongruent. These consequences are particularly important for learners aiming to utilise their English skills for professional or academic purposes, as such pragmatic failure may have a much greater impact on their future prospects than those learners who are not attempting further study or work in an English language setting. In this study, the students were able to meet the increasingly complex pragmatic requirements of the task, such as the use of 'Thank you' in response to questions and the integration of modality into their follow-up questions, with minimal in-task guidance from the teacher. The integration of grammatical structures that were presented during all three cycles into the online writing tasks was successful with the number of students using the target structures increasing in all three cycles as shown by the increasing complexity measure. Whether this effect extended beyond the scope of this study to have a positive impact on the learners' overall pragmatic competence was beyond the scope of this project, but would be interesting to investigate further.

Roever and Al-Gahtani (2015) note that greater pragmatic competency and range are generally associated with increases in proficiency so that the higher the level of the learner, the greater use

of complex expressions and modality to make and respond to requests. The results of this study suggest that in the context of social media and CALL, tasks and activities designed to develop pragmatic awareness need to take into account the level of the learner in order to be successful. In Cycles 1 and 3, the pre-intermediate class was less able to use modality to express politeness in their requests and responses while in Cycle 2, this was more common and, anecdotally, the teacher observed that this also extended into spoken interactions in the classroom, as per the intent of the syllabus. Both levels were able to integrate politeness strategies such as thanking interlocutors for their questions into their online discourse.

Choice of platform

I noted that the sustained use of Facebook affords a range of informal learning opportunities, such as sustained exposure to English language news sources and educational pages, and these, while not the focus of this study, were also exploited throughout the course. As noted in the literature on digital literacy (Dudeney, Hockly, Farr, & Murray, 2016), the ability to use a social network is a skill whereas the ability to utilise such a network for personal and professional development is a literacy and, as such, worthy of development in the context of ELT. Secondly, Facebook's ease of use and reliability was greater than any other social networking tool or learning management system (LMS), the researcher had encountered. Righini (2015) notes that the ease of use of Facebook plays an important role in maintaining motivation as students can focus on the language requirements and communicative nature of tasks rather than their technical requirements. Certainly, the data from the interviews and surveys suggest that the students enjoyed using the platform and did not report any dissatisfaction or technical difficulties.

While arguments exist that Facebook is not appropriate for the ELT classroom due to privacy concerns (Lafford, 2009), this should be seen as an opportunity to develop learners' awareness of such matters when using the internet by offering mitigation strategies, such as engaging in discussion surrounding issues of privacy and appropriate online conduct. This notion correlates with the concept

of digital literacy as "the ability of people to know how to operate these [digital] technologies, and to use them safely, wisely and productively" (Dudeney *et al.*, 2016, p. 115). Furthermore, in the future I intend to pursue research into whether the improvements in pragmatic awareness and complexity of written language could be extended to other, perhaps less user-friendly, platforms such as an institutional LMS.

Improving fluency and complexity in online written interactions

From the data collected in the three cycles it would appear that students can improve the complexity of their online written interactions if provided with sufficient scaffolding through detailed language frames, modelling and demonstration. It is important to note, however, that these improvements seemed to be closely linked to task set-up with the data from Cycle 1 indicating that when there was less focus on specific target structures, the students were less likely to integrate language from the syllabus into their reporting posts (indicated by only slight increases in the complexity measure). The data from Cycles 2 and 3 show a significant increase in the average complexity measure during the cycles despite, or perhaps because of, the increasing complexity in the language frames and the number of tasks per teaching session.

The measure of fluency did not always increase from week to week with the average number of posts increasing during Cycle 1 but decreasing during Cycles 2 and 3. On reflection, it would appear that there may be more valid measures of fluency, such as number of words written or time taken to compose responses, than the average number of posts per student in a comment thread. It was interesting to note that when the students were given an unstructured 'Introduce yourself, read, comment and reply' task in Week 1 (Cycles 2 and 3) they were able to produce a large number of informal and syntactically simple posts. This may or may not indicate a relationship between fluency and complexity in online written interactions but could be explored in future research.

Affective response and student participation

In all three cycles, the students were highly engaged with the activity. The students in Cycle 2 reported that they enjoyed using Facebook to engage with their peers and discuss the news. They reported feeling more confident and that the tasks improved their written English and their ability to communicate with their peers. In Cycle 3, the students were similarly enthusiastic about its use and that it motivated them to read. In all three cycles, it was observed (anecdotally) that students who were less likely to engage in oral activities, such as group discussions or volunteering an answer, tended to interact more on the threads than they would during classroom activities. This correlates with other research in the field (Wang *et al.*, 2013) which suggests that shy students may be more likely to participate and ask questions in online written tasks.

The notion of 'peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) suggests that even if learners are not necessarily contributing to a space through active participation they may still be learning by witnessing what their peers are engaged in. The use of online spaces to engage learners can allow for a silent manner of contribution (Kessler & Bikowski, 2010). This contribution is an important element of language learning through social media as learners can benefit from exposure to their peers' and instructor's language asynchronously and on their own terms; a form of participation which is not always available in the classroom (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sleeman, 2015) as evidence of face-to-face language production is often ephemeral and hard to review at a later date. Certainly, from the responses in the interviews it was clear that the students felt they were interacting with one another in the online space regardless of their own personal contributions to the weekly threads. Comments such as: "*reading what others are interested in*", "*the class more active, more friends have the same interest with me [sic]*" show the students' attitudes towards the online space. Closely related to the importance of community building in classroom based social networking is Jones and Youngs' (2006) research which suggests that the facilitation of online socialisation can develop and maintain student interest in a course and its content.

Role of the teacher

The use of social networks in the classroom offers opportunities to alter the traditional roles of both student and teacher in the language learning classroom. Watson (2012) argues the power of social networks derives from their ability to promote socially aware and technology inclusive pedagogy. An online social space can allow the teacher to become more of a facilitator of meaningful interaction and communication rather than director or instructor (Park *et al*., 2012). Hampel and Stickler (2015) argue that student perception of the teacher's role in the online learning environment can be more that of mediator rather than instructor. Righini (2015) develops this idea to argue that teachers can then assume the role of more capable peers. The use of Facebook has been shown to not only assist learners to achieve better overall grades, higher engagement and greater satisfaction with the university learning experience but also that faculty staff were able to assume more active and participatory roles using the tool (Wang *et al*., 2013). In this action research, the teacher's use of Facebook supported other classroom activities and provided another way to communicate course content in addition to the course book, email and the institution's LMS. The result was that students' language learning was supported across a range of media.

Reading or writing?

While traditional approaches to extensive reading argue that reading be done on its own without need for further tasks (Day *et al*., 1998), the task-based approach taken in this study was based on integrating writing skills. Nevertheless, significant elements of an extensive reading (ER) approach remained, with students, for example, choosing what they wanted to read, engaging in sustained periods of silent reading and focussing on an overall understanding of the texts rather than an in-depth understanding of the content. As this project was classroom based, little attention was given to the affective elements of ER programs in that students were not encouraged to read English news media outside the classroom. However, a number of students commented in the interviews that they now read the news in English more frequently as a result of the activities.

CONCLUSION

By applying the data-driven and reflective principles of action research to the context of academic English in online interactions, it was found that there was value both for skills development and for reinforcement of curriculum content in explicitly instructing students in online conventions regarding the formality of their written English in academic interactions. The explicit use of writing frames was shown to increase the syntactic complexity of students' writing; it is, however, problematic to determine whether fluency can also be increased due to issues with the validity of the measure used. Students responded positively to the use of the social networking application, Facebook, as the medium in which to conduct reading and writing tasks and commented favourably on the interactivity of the activities.

It would appear, therefore, that there is a great deal of value to be found in integrating social media platforms into EAP programs. Students not only see the value of such an approach, they are also motivated to engage with course content in a collaborative online space.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY & INTERVIEW DATA

A1: Cycle 2 open-ended anonymous survey responses

What do you think about the issues in the media tasks on Facebook? (students' writing)		
great	pretty good way to enhance level of english	None
useful	It can't more better!	Useful
No	Good	No
ii is good	(｡ì＿í｡)	pretty cool
good !	very interesting and innovative	Very interesting
It is good for our writing.		

A2: Cycle 2 1:1 interview responses

Prompt: Hi, tell me what you thought about the Facebook activity that we did every week.	
Student	**Verbatim response & any comments/observations (*italics*) from the teacher**
Student 9	Not bad, I think I love to print what I see in the paper but I can 't share it. I don't like reading on the computer or the phone because it hurts my eyes. Liked learning about the news. Teacher's voice: He didn't see the point of using formal language in the activities. (Informal is short and saves time)
Student 3	Facebook easy to use. Helps me to practice my reading and writing, helps to write some sentence.
Student 4	I think it's a very good activity. Teacher's voice: She liked that she could communicate with all other classmates and learn something from them. She mentioned she had limited contact with all classmates but this activity allowed her to communicate with all of them.
Student 1	Good for lazy students because it forces us to read more. Didn't like wechat use as it wasn't controlled enough. On tech use: It's pretty 'fresh' for me, new and interesting.
Student 11	It's cool, a very important , media between people and people – we can show our everything, happiness.
Student 15	Useful, we can practice our reading ability and paraphrase ability. I think maybe we can know about our classmates quickly.
Student 12	I liked it because I can read some news and practice reading and writing. I think it's very good for improving my English .
Student 13	Mostly watch videos. Feels so-so about it. Don't like to read news

	because news doesn't interest me.
Student 17	Interesting, new and never used in China. The first time I've used an online social network to practice my English. And it can help us to communicate with each other.
Student 2	The class more active, more friends have the same interest with me. It can help me improve my wriint g and reading skill
Student 17	I like it, a very new way to do a class activity. More connected with young people than just a book and write a summary – that kind of thing.
Student 14	Interesting because I can comment on others news and this will improvement can never be tried in China. *Why not?* because Facebook is forbidden. *Other programs?* But we will use Chinese.
Student 16	I think it's funny but I don't really know how to use it because I don't use Facebook usually or Wechat. Now, I can do that.
Student 10	I think it's useful to learn more adjective words that are not very common. It's a good way to communicate each other in, out class and build a good friendship.
Student 6	I don't have any idea about that. It's interesting I've never before do that. It can make we improve our what is the article say, main point when we are reading.
Student 8	It is interesting, because it's a new way for our interaction and it can not only explain our vocabulary but also improve our way of writing online. It is beneficial to our essay.

A3: Cycle 3 open-ended anonymous survey responses

Question: What do you think about the issues in the media tasks on Facebook? (open ended response – presented here as posted by the students)		
Its very intersting	I think we should protect the environment.	i think it's very good
interesting	It's great .Notonly improve English ,but also make class funny	I think they are useful for my class.
good for reading	I don't think so thati is a good way to learn English	This is amazing way to let us learning English and we enjoy it very much.
I think is good	i think it can improve my english	i think it is nice. because this is my first time to use facebook.and aslo some questions at here.but i will try my best to finish my work.
It's good	what i have to upload next week on the *** website	I think it's interesting because i have not ever taken part in this kind of class.

A4: Cycle 3 1:1 interview responses

Prompt: What did you think about the Facebook exercise 'Issues in the environment'?	
Student	**Verbatim response & any comments/observations (*italics*) from the teacher**
Student 1	I like it. I think Facebook's reportage helps me know our world's environment problems in degree. I think it's good practice for students can talk to each other and discuss this problem and get other people's idea, it's good for our mind.
Student 2	Yeah, I think it's interesting. That's all. It didn't connect the class. *Why not?* I think they choose their closer friends to talk too.
Student 3	Great. *Why?* Because I can read articles and make friends. I think it's very interesting not boring and can help me learn English quickly.
Student 4	Good. Because i haven't used this way in Chinese class and interesting this. *What do you mean?* Chinese class is not activity just listen to teachers and remember the knowledgeable. Don't allow student to use their brain.
Student 5	It's good but a lot of vocabulary is so hard. *Did you like talking to other people on the class?* Sometime I talk to Wechat.
Student 6	I think that is fantastic, really good. I really enjoy your class. To deep think I enjoy it.
Student 7	I like that. *Why?* Because the environment is very familiar with me, that is my qualification. In the Facebook we could present display our idea.
Student 8	I think Facebook is interesting and if your often write something in English in Facebook you can improve your writing and grammar. I also think in Facebook we talk something with my friends or my teacher in English. Writing something but you can also remember something.
Student 9	I never saw this style before so I think it's very helpful for us coz it can make the people very interested in your class so it's very helpful. *Did you like commenting on other people?* Yeah yeah, because it helps us to use Facebook to connect to other people so we can use English everyday.
Student 10	I think it's useful because if we do more exercise about writing we will improve our writing skill. And, er, more important I think is read more passage by English and we can learn how to write down the right sentence. *Passage?* Read story book in library.
Student 11	I think um, useful. Because improve my English. In China I don't have a Facebook and I have a Wechat. Also I like use Facebook *Why?* because I can see most information can be don't see in China.
Student 12	Quite interesting *why?* because in Hong Kong it's not usually to use Facebook in teaching. So it's a new thing for me.
Student 13	I like teaching style coz it makes me more funnier than the normal class. Maybe in normal class we feel sleepy but when we do it we think it have more energy to learn, yeah.
Student 14	Sometimes I think the Facebook is useful to practise English but in class in my opinion we can spend more time on the coursebook not just

	Facebook *why?* because I think the contents of the test we need to do more practice on the coursebook maybe grammar and vocabulary we need to do more practise for the test.
Student 15	I think OK, but sometimes I don't use it *why not?* because in China don't use this. I think this is good for the writing. I think it's OK.
Student 16	I like it sometimes it's about nature and I like nature. I know the supermoon and I write on the Facebook on it. Then three days ago my friends talk about it and I know it. I'm always happy that some people can ask me about this news, it makes me look smart.