Increasing Tertiary Education Students' Willingness o Communicate in an Advanced Academic English Language Class with the Adaptation of Facebook

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Abstract

Most universities around the world provide their students various communication channels in order for students to communicate with their instructors. The same concept applies to the Cyprus University of Technology. Despite the availability of various communication channels, the communication frequency between students and their English language instructors is very limited or in some cases nonexistent as the English language learning process is confined to the classroom. Even though students face various problems related to the language, the vast majority lack willingness to communicate with their English language instructor and to ask for assistance or advice to solve any issues. Such a behavior is counterproductive as today's competitive employment market requires students to be able to communicate in English in a professional and communicative manner. Students' persistent lack of willingness to communicate with their English language instructors outside the classroom also deprives students of the possibility to enhance their language skills, build better relationships with their instructors and use their newly acquired language skills outside the classroom in a different context.

This paper investigates the possibility of increasing the communication frequency and the willingness to communicate outside the classroom between tertiary English language learners and English language instructors by adding the popular social network Facebook as an unofficial university communication tool.

1. Introduction

The Cyprus University of Technology provides its students with various channels of communication in order for them to have the ability to contact their instructors, peers and administrative staff. Some of the communication channels are very traditional. However, with the advancement of technology, various advanced communication tools have proliferated into the academic world and students, academics and administrative staff have started to take advantage of them.

These communication channels can function as an extended classroom where students can take advantage of asking about and collecting information related to the course content. Furthermore, these communication channels can also be used to assist students to build a better understanding of lecturers' intensions, character and to cultivate a better relationship between the two parties.

The Cyprus University of Technology offers its students the following official communication channels: office or department telephone, lecturers' office hours, official University e-mail system and the moodle forum.

Even though these CUT communication channels are introduced to students and instructors are encouraging students to utilize them in order to clear confusions and acquire additional information regarding the course and the assigned coursework, students are very reluctant to utilize any of the numerous official university communication channels to contact their English language instructors. More specifically, the communication frequency between English language instructors and students outside the classroom is anemic and in some cases non- existent. This lack of communication with their English language instructor has negatively impacted our courses, has led to many student-lecturer misunderstandings, which is depicted by poor class performance and eventually leading to difficulties in securing an employment position in the real world. The negative impacts that are caused by the lack of communication have been researched and pointed out by McCroskey (1977) [1] and Pascarella& Terzini (1991) [2].

The reasoning behind the students' decision to avoid communication with their English instructors outside the classroom is not quite clear. Even though extensive research has been done in many parts of the world regarding this issue, I was not able to locate significant research results encapsulating this phenomenon in tertiary educational environments here in Cyprus. The only research that I was able to uncover after an extensive search was Panayides and Walker (2003) [3]

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who also claimed the difficulty in locating any previous research regarding this issue in Cyprus. Based on the lack of such research here in Cyprus, this paper will try to explore the reasons behind the students' lack of willingness to communicate (WTC) outside the classroom in order to create a comprehensive framework of the existing situation. It will also explore the possibility of reversing this behaviour by authorizing students to contact the English language instructors with an unofficial university communication channel, Facebook.

2. Literature review
2.1 Social networks and communication apprehension

Our modern and connected world is permeated by various digital and mobile devices, communication should be made ubiquitously available everywhere. This is also depicted by various researchers that have looked at social media from various angles.

Social networks have been proven by research to be a very effective tool that promotes learning though a collaborative spirit (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, 1995) [4]. Papacharisis and Rubin (2000) [5] illustrated the fact that individuals who shunned personal contact found the internet as a useful and safe communication tool in which to interact with other persons of the community. They further discovered that the utilization of social media increases the WTC. Social networks also occupy a central position in conveying information that contribute to knowledge and social support (Cho, Stefanone& Gay, 2002) [6].

Yen, Yen, Chen, Wang, Chang & Ko (2012) [7] also found that people displayed a lower social anxiety during their online interaction compared to face to face interaction. This is more evident in individuals who suffer high social anxiety.

2.2 Why Facebook

The Facebook phenomenon started in 2004. The main purpose of this social network site was to connect fellow students at Harvard University.

In looking solely at a tertiary environment, where students and faculty are using or considering using social media to communicate and interact with present and previous students in class and out of class, Wakefield (2012) [8] found that 85% of faculty have accounts on Facebook. However, this does not mean that faculty enjoy befriending or using Facebook to befriend undergrads. Furthermore, only 32% befriend their undergraduate students. Wakefield (2012) illuminates the fact that we, the lectures, want to communicate with our students. However, in order to get through to your audience you should use the communication tool that your audience is inclined to use. As a result, we have to adapt to the new communication reality. The second most popular thing for young to do people after texting is posting and checking Facebook, where 61% check Facebook daily (Thompson, 2014) [9].

3. Context and Research methods

The research was conducted in a CUT tertiary Advanced English course (ENG 130). 11 students signed up fo this class, 8 female and 3 male students, but only 10 elected to participate in the research.

The following research tools were used to collect data. Semi-structered interviews, class observations and obesrvation of the off and online communcation tools.

4. Research questions

This research will explore and uncover information to try and answer the following research questions.
1. What causes students' lack of willingness to communicate with their English language instructors outside the classroom?
2. Can social media network Facebook improve willingness to communicate with English language instructors outside the classroom?
3. Will Facebook increase the communication frequency and lead to better student instructor relations?

5. Results and Conclusion
5.1 Results

The following results were found:

Research question 1: *What causes students' lack of willingness to communicate with their English language lecturers outside the classroom?*

The semi structured interviews revealed that 8 out of 10 students displayed a lack of willingness to communicate. Looking at the responses and analyzing them, I identified compelling evidence that students believe that they do not have to or do not feel comfortable contacting instructors after class.

However, this behaviour of WTC intensifies when it is applied to English language instructors where students do not see the need and do not have the readiness to contact the English language instructor

Research question 2:

Can the social media network Facebook improve willingness to communicate with their English Language lecturer outside the classroom?

Students perceived Facebook as a positive addition as a communication channel. The following reasons that Facebook could improve Student- Instructor communication outside the classroom were mentioned:

- easy access
- always connected
- instant alerts
- friendly environment
- use it every day
- very popular
- mobile accessibility

    Student response and online observation by the researcher indicates a positive inclination towards using this tool as an official communication tool to increase communication frequency.

Research Question 3: *Will Facebook increase communication frequency and lead to better student lecturer relations?*

9 out of 10 participants believed that by using Facebook as a communication tool, it would improve the S-L relations. Students also cited satisfaction of lecturers' availability and comfortability in using Facebook in order to contact the lecturer. Furthermore, by observing Facebook's communication tool, I noticed that various students, even though they did not know me, were not afraid to contact me in order to ask question regarding various events and for information about elective courses. Students would search my name in Facebook in order to initiate contact instead of using the university e-mail.

These actions encouraged me to believe that Facebook has the capability to propel S-L communication and change the existing communication drought.

My field notes also revealed that students increased their participation during class. Students worked in groups and did not hesitate to collaborate and assist other students.

This new approach created not only a better communication and learning environment, but it simoultaniously improved the S-L relations.

5.2 Conclusion

The research set out to uncover possibilities of how to increase students' willingness to communicate with their instructor after class. I discovered that good S-I relationships in the classroom does not necessarily translate to an increase of WTC as some research suggests. However, the addition of a widely popular and well established social network, Facebook, seemed to motivate students to increase the contact frequency after class. My research showed that WTC increased on a weekly basis with the usage of Facebook. Students enjoyed the fact that they had immediate and effective access to their instructor compared to the existing communication tools. However, this S-I immediacy through Facebook raises some ethical questions regarding an instructor befriending his or her students. Students cannot expect that an instructor should be available on a 24 hour basis even though he or she might be on Facebook. Such expectations seem unrealistic and should not be expected. Therefore, rules and regulation on when and how to use Facebook must be negotiated with students in order to avoid misunderstandings and confrontation which will inhibit communication and could lead to WTC decrease.

In order to successfully implement Facebook as a S-I communication tool, additional research is needed to identify negative variables and establish a trustworthy operational framework on how to use Facebook as a communication tool for promoting WTC in and out of class.

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