



Post, Comment, Read, Help, Like: The Facebook Group in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

While social media are nothing new anymore in the foreign language classroom, their integration into existing classroom structures as a supplement to more traditional in-class activities still often constitutes a challenge to both teacher and student. This paper will take a look at the possibilities that the Facebook group function has to offer for the foreign language classroom. The author will share his experiences with using Facebook in German courses at a university in Taiwan to illustrate how social media can be used to practice foreign language skills and broaden the scope of foreign language contact, while engaging in meaningful conversation with others. In the case at hand, students with varying levels of experience with German were registered as members of a Facebook group which had been created for the specific purpose of enhancing the learning experience. In order to achieve close integration with the in-class syllabus, guidelines and basic rules for interaction in the group were established and students were asked to document their group activities and submit them for evaluation on a regular basis. The paper will discuss both benefits and challenges encountered while using Facebook as a social teaching and learning tool.

1. Facebook in educational settings

With e-learning tools in the form of applications on mobile devices and desktop computers more and more gaining popularity among foreign language learners, educators in institutionalized language instruction are increasingly facing the challenge

(...) to incorporate useful and versatile e-tools that will enhance the quality of their classrooms, guide learners to utilizing various e-tools for academic purposes, create a dynamic learning environment, and promote critical thinking, authentic second language (L2) learning opportunities and deeper connections with the culture of the native L2 speakers [1].

Facebook groups have been used in a wide variety of settings and for various educational purposes. In their extensive literature review, Kandroudi and Bratitsis [2] find that three categories of Facebook usage can be distinguished in educational settings:

1. social use, i.e. communication, interaction or creation of new friendships among students and teachers,
2. academic use, i.e. Facebook serving as a supporting learning platform for students and teachers, and
3. other uses, like announcements, information sharing, and organizational issues.
- 4.

The potential for collaborative learning is probably one of the aspects covered most widely in the literature [3-5], and it is this potential in particular which makes Facebook a good choice for the foreign language classroom with its specific needs relating to language, culture, interpersonal relations, and skills of various kinds. There are four areas corresponding to these needs, where Facebook has been shown to have the potential to support the teaching and learning of foreign languages:

1. target language awareness,
2. cross-cultural awareness,
3. instructor-learner relations, and
4. instructors' professional development [6].

However, as with any classroom tool, Facebook can only be used beneficially and become a true asset rather than a burden if it fits into the overall framework of a given classroom setting.



2. A Facebook group for German

The following discussion is based on the situation at a university in central Taiwan, where students of all departments can take German as a second foreign language in the form of year-long German I, II, and III courses covering the A1 and A2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)[7]. Classes consist of three hours of instruction per week, with class sizes varying between 15 and 50 students. The textbooks used are Studio 21 (A1) and Studio d (A2) [8, 9].

The most obvious reason for using Facebook instead of simply setting up a discussion forum in the school's e-learning platform was the ubiquity of Facebook in our students' social life. With so many students constantly online, liking, chatting, posting and commenting whenever there is an opportunity, why not use their enthusiasm for Facebook for the German classroom? A closed Facebook group offered a safe environment for a meaningful exchange in the target language; through it German could become a natural part of student life in a society where for most people foreign languages other than English, Japanese and Korean do not play a role at all. Facebook allowed participants to share authentic material in the form of text, music, pictures and video contents. Its visual aspect appealed to students and facilitated language learning and instruction processes. New words and concepts easily became clear with a corresponding picture. Then, there was the opportunity of making new friends and creating networks among group members. Students planning a summer trip to Germany could use Facebook to ask for help from more experienced travelers about visa requirements, budget accommodation, best tourist sites, transport options or local food.

The Facebook group for German was established as a closed group in 2011 by a student of the author. Currently it has a membership of 459, including current and former students and the author. At the time of writing this article four classes are using the Facebook group as part of the curriculum activities. Originally, the group was set up as an open platform for students to share anything related to the study of German. Posts and comments could be made in German, English, or Chinese, and all group members were able to add new members to the group. Student work on Facebook was not included in the semester grades. The instructor posted learning tips, homework reminders, and internet links, made announcements about upcoming events, explained course contents, conducted surveys, and provided extra class materials to download, while students shared internet links they found helpful or interesting, practiced new German vocabulary, asked questions, and commented on posts by others.

In order to streamline and give structure to the group activities, student participation became an integral part of the grading matrix starting with the 2013 academic year, and students were required to put up at least one post related to a specific topic decided by the instructor every two weeks and comment on at least two posts by other students. Posts and comments had to be made in German, and twice per semester a documentation of these activities in the group had to be submitted for grading in the form of a MS-Word file based on a template provided by the instructor.

In order to enhance collaboration and exchange between the different groups, starting with the 2014 academic year, more advanced students were asked to comment on beginners' posts. Thus, German III students now try their best to help German II students, while German II students help German I students. This means that about 80% of the students currently enrolled in the participating courses are able to benefit from the help of their peers. For the more advanced students of German III, who make up the remaining 20%, the instructor provides comments, corrections and suggestions on a regular basis. By helping lower level students, the more advanced groups also have the opportunity to review class contents and deepen their understanding of the vocabulary and grammar structures they already encountered before.

3. Topics

The main idea behind the decision of setting up basic requirements for the Facebook group was to help students develop their language skills by giving them clearly defined tasks, focusing on specific topics, vocabulary or syntactic structures related to the contents currently taught in class. At the same time these requirements were meant to facilitate assessment of students' online activities. The topics to be addressed by the students were generally announced at the beginning of each two-week period and usually followed the textbook progression of the respective course levels [8, 9]. Table 1 shows some examples of the topics chosen for the first semester.



Week	German I	German II	German III
1-2	● <i>ich (I)</i>	● <i>Freunde (friends)</i>	● <i>Mein Hauptfach (My major)</i>
3-4	● <i>Kaffee oder Tee (Coffee or tea)</i>	● <i>Sehenswürdigkeiten in Taiwan (Tourist sites in Taiwan)</i>	● <i>Tipps zum Deutschlernen (Tips for learning German)</i>
5-6	● <i>Im Café (In a café)</i>	● <i>Sehenswürdigkeiten in Berlin (Tourist sites in Berlin)</i>	● <i>Mehrsprachigkeit oder Englisch für alle? (Multilingualism or English for all?)</i>
7-8	● <i>In der Tasche (In the bag)</i>	● <i>Urlaub + Perfekt (Vacation, using the "perfekt" tense)</i>	● <i>Was macht Ihnen keinen/viel/am meisten Spaß? (What do you enjoy doing?)</i>
9	EXAMS	EXAMS	EXAMS
10-11	● <i>Städte und Sprachen (Cities and languages)</i>	● <i>Schokolade + Perfekt (Chocolate, using the "perfekt" tense)</i>	● <i>Ich freue mich, dass ..., denn ... (I am glad that ..., because ...)</i>
12-13	● <i>TV-Serien (TV series)</i>	● <i>Lebensmittel einkaufen in Taichung (Buying groceries in Taichung)</i>	● <i>Was mich an Taichung stört und was ich gut finde (Things that annoy me about Taichung and things I like)</i>
14-15	● <i>Studentenleben (Student life)</i>	● <i>Was braucht man für Ihr Lieblingsrezept (What do you need for your favorite recipe?)</i>	● <i>Vermutungen über die Zukunft - Was glauben Sie und warum? (Conjectures about the future - What do you think and why?)</i>
16-17	● <i>Wohnen in Taichung (Living in Taichung)</i>	● <i>Frühstück - Was essen Sie oft/gerne/nicht so gerne/nie? (Breakfast - likes and dislikes)</i>	● <i>"sollen" - Das hört man in taiwanischen Familien (The modal verb "sollen" - what Taiwanese families expect of their children)</i>
18	EXAMS	EXAMS	EXAMS

Table 1: 1st semester topics

To help students get a clearer understanding of what was expected of them, topic announcements were usually accompanied by one or two examples of possible posts.

	Reference Sample
German I Week 14-15	<i>Ich studiere Mathematik an der Tunghai Universität in Taichung. Ich habe 22 Stunden Unterricht pro Woche. Das ist nicht wenig. Ich muss viel lesen und viele Hausaufgaben machen. Abends arbeite ich gern in der Bibliothek. Da ist es ruhig und ich kann dort auch meine E-Mails lesen. Ich finde, Mathematik macht Spaß.</i>
German I Week 16-17	<i>Ich wohne im Studentenwohnheim. Wir sind vier Studenten/Studentinnen in unserem Zimmer. Das Zimmer ist 16 qm groß. Ich finde das Zimmer sehr klein, aber meine Mitbewohner/Mitbewohnerinnen sind sehr nett. Unser Wohnheim ist schon sehr alt, und es liegt sehr ruhig. Hier kann man auch gut arbeiten.</i>
German II Week 14-15	<i>Ich esse am liebsten Bratkartoffeln mit Spinat und Spiegelei. Für das Rezept braucht man 500 Gramm Kartoffeln, Wasser, 250 Gramm Spinat, zwei Eier, etwas Salz, Wasser, Pfeffer und Muskatnuss.</i>
German II Week 16-17	<i>Zum Frühstück esse ich gern "salzige" Sojamilchsuppe mit Zwiebeln, Koriander und frittiertem Gebäck. Dazu esse ich oft mit Fleisch gefüllte Teigbällchen oder einen Eierpfannkuchen. Manchmal esse ich auch Toast mit Ei, Schinken und Käse. Samstags hole ich mir oft Onigiri. Das sind gewürzte Reiskugeln mit Gemüse oder Fleisch. Bei mir um die Ecke gibt es einen Stand. Das ist sehr praktisch.</i>
German III Week 14-15	<i>Ich glaube, dass wir in 20 Jahren keine Universitäten und auch keine Bücher mehr brauchen, denn dann lernen und lesen wir alle nur noch online.</i>
German III Week 16-17	<i>Die Kinder in Taiwan müssen auf ihre Eltern hören. Die Eltern sagen oft, dass die Kinder ihre Zimmer aufräumen sollen. Die Kinder sollen das Essen aufessen, sie sollen leise sein und nicht so lange fernsehen, denn die Eltern sagen, dass das nicht gut für die Augen ist.</i>

Table 2: Reference samples for weeks 14-17

4. Current challenges and outlook

For all the linguistic, cultural, and interpersonal benefits of using Facebook's group function in the foreign language classroom, there are also challenges that will need to be addressed in the future. A very limited number of students fully realize the potential of the group by regular participation in group conversations, and some seem to only make a few brief cameo appearances towards the end of deadlines so as to fulfill the basic requirements. What can we do to make students become active members of the group, and how can we keep them involved over the semester beyond the mere scope of the assignment? How can we identify inactive students early on and remind them of the task at hand before it is too late? As mentioned above, not all posts are free from error. What is the best way to deal with grammar and word usage mistakes without negatively affecting student confidence and motivation?

While experience shows that it is helpful to bring up and discuss these issues in class, the syllabus does not always leave enough time to do so, and apart from the student documentation handed in twice per semester, it is almost impossible for the instructor to keep track of each individual student's performance in the Facebook group. There is certainly no standard solution for meeting these challenges, and whatever measures we take, they will have to be geared to the specific needs of the given context. For the scenario described in this text, it might be helpful to hire a part-time assistant, a German speaker, to monitor student activities, contact inactive students, check for mistakes and take remedial action in a way suitable to the needs of the participants. To avoid late submissions of posts and comments and keep students consistently involved over the semester, eight instead of two deadlines could be set up for students to hand in their written documentation, and students could be given extra points for additional posts and comments.

It is hoped that in the future the scope of benefits for the German classroom can be extended. Thus, there are currently plans to strengthen the learning by teaching aspect of the group, to develop mutually beneficial collaboration opportunities between students and teachers in training, and to organize special events with guest members sharing their expertise in fields of interest to the students, like German music, food, and traveling. These measures, it is expected, will contribute to making the Facebook group for German an even more rewarding experience for both teachers and students.

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