

# The Impact of a Facebook Group on Social Climate in English Lessons: Insights from University Students

Mgr. Juraj Datko, PhD.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra - Faculty of Education, Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies, Slovakia

## Abstract

Since social climate has an impact on students' performance, establishing and maintaining optimal social relationships is crucial. The author wanted to contribute to positive social climate in his English classes by implementing a Facebook group. The paper studies how incorporating this informal alternative to traditional learning management systems into the foreign language education process influenced students-student and student-teacher social relationships. Our two-semester-long case study research uses interview and diary data from thirty-four undergraduates. The results indicate that the mentioned tool has positive influence on the development of social relationships.

**Keywords:** social climate, Facebook group, English for academic purposes, case study

## 1. Introduction

The motivation to conduct this study stemmed from our own teaching experience with university students who attended the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes. In terms of building a positive social climate, this subject is problematic in three aspects. First, it is an elective course for students from the whole faculty, which means that the classroom is usually inhabited by a mixture of people who are strangers to one another. Second, it is a semester-long course and the ninety-minute classes take place just once a week, so students do not have many opportunities to build closer relationships with their peers or the teacher. Third, students' proficiency in English varies significantly, and this makes peer-cooperation (an important contributor to positive peer relationships and student achievement - Roseth et al., 2008) very difficult. As a consequence of the above, the author was looking for ways how to improve the social climate in contact classes.

The original idea was to use a blended-learning model based on the Moodle platform, but since this tool offers limited opportunities for peer-cooperation and is often viewed by our students as formal, complicated and user-unfriendly, we looked for a different solution. We decided to use a Facebook group for this purpose, because this communication channel brings people together, allows plenty of interaction and cooperation, denotes informality and joy, and belongs to daily routine of most digital natives. However, is it possible that using this tool will contribute to building a positive social climate within the confines of formal education? That is the principal question that is addressed in this paper.

## 2. Literature Review

Learning at school is only possible if students experience positive feelings during the process. Such positive emotional experience depends on various factors. A positive social climate in classes belongs to one of them. The main determiners of social climate in a classroom are student-student (S-S) and student-teacher (S-T) relationships (Fraser, 1986). The nature of the mentioned relations directly affects educational processes. It was demonstrated by many authors (including educators, psychologists, and sociologists) that poor social climate has detrimental effects on learning (e.g. Birch & Ladd, 1998; Sarason, 1999; Pianta et al., 2002; Somersalo et al., 2002; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Ravitch, 2010). With this being said, it is vital that teachers shape a good social climate in their classes.

Let us now focus on research that discusses social networking sites (SNSs) and their impact on the social dimension of the educational process. According to relevant literature, SNSs seem to positively influence S-S and S-T relationships. A qualitative study by Ryan et al. (2011) revealed that Facebook helped the research participants (a set of doctoral students enrolled in a methodology course at a U.S. university) to adapt to their study programme and life in a new cultural environment; and therefore had positive influence on community building and socialisation. McCarthy (2010) concluded that a vast majority of the freshmen enrolled in an

elective course for students of architecture (95%, N=120) felt that integration of Facebook helped them in developing peer relationships. Similar results were presented by Schaffhauser (2009) who studied two teachers' classroom experiences with SNSs (including Facebook) and found that these e-tools aided in demolishing "barriers" between students. Additionally, Berg et al. (2007) noted that Facebook was not only a medium effective for developing better relations between students, but it also positively affected students' relationships with their teachers.

Although the above mentioned studies support the idea that SNSs can help in developing good S-S and S-T relationships and consequently contribute to positive social climate, two potential problems must be taken into consideration.

First, students might not allow learning to interfere with their private life on social networks. To support this claim, we mention a study by Jones et al. (2010) who conducted interviews with a random sample of university students (from four U.S. higher education institutions) and demonstrated that 70% of the participants (N=76) had an account on a SNS, but its use for educational purposes was last on the list. Moreover, the participants tended to separate study matters (unpleasant) from their social life (pleasant) (ibid.). Madge et al. (2009) sampled British college students (N=213), but roughly 10% of them supported Facebook as a teaching tool. Facebook was simply not important for the purposes of formal education (ibid.).

Second, SNSs can decrease teachers' credibility. This problem was introduced by Mazer et al. (2007). Their research participants (a small-scale sample of American university students) perceived teachers who practised little self-disclosure on Facebook as less credible than those who cared about the disclosed private information (ibid.).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Aims**

The aim of the paper is to analyse how the participants perceive the Facebook group in terms of its impact on S-S and S-T relationships. We strive to answer the following question: What do students' perceptions and opinions reveal about the impact of the Facebook group on social climate in the English classroom?

A qualitative case study (based on semi-structured interviews and student journals) was applied to shed more light on this problem. We used the mentioned approach, because it is widely used in researching computer-assisted language learning (Beatty, 2010).

#### **3.2 Research Participants**

Undergraduate students from a public university (N=34) participated in this research project. The sample included teacher trainees (N<sub>1</sub>=22) and students of the "Occupational Safety and Health" study programme (N<sub>2</sub>=12). They were labelled either with "a" (cohort 1 - summer 2016/2017) or with "b" (cohort 2 - winter 2017/2018). The students attended the "English for Academic Purposes" (EAP) seminar and agreed to participate in the Facebook group. They gave consent for their information to be used for research purposes.

Seventeen students were randomly selected from both cohorts for the pre-/post-interviews. The duration of the interviews ranged between 17'46" and 50'30". They were audio-recorded and transcribed by the author of the project. All research participants (N=34) kept journals and submitted them once a week during an eight-week period. The students recorded 606 diary entries in total.

### 3.3 The Facebook Group

The EAP Facebook group was designed to substitute traditional learning management systems (in terms of access to course info, study materials, and homework) and to promote peer-cooperation and interaction beyond the contact classes (via discussions, questions, and comments). It is also worth mentioning that the author used his private Facebook profile (with an informal nickname) to administer the group and made only his profile photography, education, and marital status visible to the participants.

The design of our Facebook group respected the teaching principles mentioned by Petlák (1997); and therefore, it allowed the students to:

- a.) approach the target language learning consciously and actively;
- b.) acquire the target language knowledge on the basis of sensory (and multi-sensory) perception;
- c.) use the target language in an environment that respects their diverse language proficiency and learning styles;
- d.) access the study material as much as desired in order to recall the target language knowledge;
- e.) approach the target language learning in a logical and systematic way.

While constructing the “virtual English classroom” on Facebook, we followed these steps:

1. Create a group using the group tool.
2. Make it private after all the students have joined.
3. Establish a set of general rules in the group before the Facebook-supported instruction begins.
4. Post discussion topics, homework assignments, extra activities, and other content (such as videos or external links) that support peer-cooperation.
5. Make sure that students respond to the postings and are provided with feedback.
6. Shut down the group when the course ends.

### 3.4 Research Methods

#### 3.4.1 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews represent the primary source of data. This data collection tool was used to gain insight into students' perceptions and opinions related to S-S and S-T relationships. In order to make the data more reliable and valid, the interviews were conducted in two phases, namely after students' first experience with the Facebook group (pre-interview) and at the end of the semester (post-interview). We asked the students how the Facebook group influences social relationships and how they perceive the social climate in the classroom.

Student journals present the secondary source of data. In this case, secondary means supplemental and subordinated to the interviews. We used them to increase reliability and

validity of the interviews by looking for similarities and inconsistencies in the data. The participants were asked to record everything that was related to the impact of the Facebook group on S-S and S-T relationships.

### **3.4.2 Data Analysis**

Since our case study is exploratory, we used inductive coding in the first phase of the analytic process. We identified relevant responses in the interview transcripts and arranged them in three broader categories (“Positive Impact on Developing S-S Relationships”, “No Impact on Developing S-S relationships”, and “Positive Impact on Developing S-T Relationships”). The responses within these categories were labelled with preliminary codes. Since coding is a dynamic process (Benaquisto, 2008), the initial code labels were further refined and reconceptualised, resulting in the creation of the final coding system (summarized in Tab. 1).

In the second phase, we opted for deductive coding, because the role of the diaries was complementary to the pre-/post-interviews. In other words, we processed the diaries by seeking out ideas, phrases, actions, or connections related to the interview coding framework to obtain supporting evidence. However, some codes remained interview-exclusive.

## **4. Results**

The results are based solely on students’ subjective data. The collected data set is divided according to three different categories and further differentiated by five codes (see Tab. 1).

### **4.1 Positive Impact on Developing S-S Relationships**

Fourteen research participants (cohort 1: 5; cohort 2: 9) claimed that the EAP Facebook group positively influenced S-S relationships. We identified three different codes in their data. Statements related to these codes appeared thirty-one times (18x in the pre-/post-interviews and 13x in the diaries).

#### **4.1.1 The Facebook Group Assisted in Socialisation and Community Building**

Student 5b replied in the first interview that “it has strengthened the group”. According to the post-interview, “it was kind of a socialising thing”. Student 8b admitted in the postinterview that “[...] at the end of the semester [he] felt as a member of the group”. He added that “[...] the Facebook group has strengthened the community”. Students 10a and 18b believed that the study group assisted in demolishing barriers between students. Student 10a stated in the pre-interview that in one of the contact lessons, she worked in pair with a student she did not know, and they “did not cooperate at all”. However, “thanks to the pair homework on Facebook, [they] started to work and communicate together in the seminars”. Similarly, student 18b claimed in the interviews that thanks to the group, it was easier for her to attend seminars (preinterview) and contact unknown people from the group (post-interview). She added that “socialisation was faster thanks to the group”, and “you could see that people talk, smile, and care”.

#### **4.1.2 The Facebook Group Assisted in Developing Deeper Peer Relationships**

Students 2a, 7a, 6b, 7b, 11b, and 20b highlighted that the Facebook group had helped them to develop closer relationships with other students. Student 7a “made new friends also thanks to the study group”. She mentioned the same example in both interviews. They were classmates with student 18a, “but [they] only greeted each other”. She continued: “[...] as we are members



of the Facebook group, she also asked me “How are you?” or things like that. [...] we communicate a lot more than before”. Furthermore, “developing this relation would be more difficult without the group”. She also noted in her diary that “the group has helped to bring people together”, and they “started to help each other in the lessons”. Student 2a made new friendships too, although she knew “everyone in the group”, as she said in the pre-interview. In the post-interview, however, she claimed that the Facebook group has strengthened her friendship with students 10a and 18a. In the second interview, student 20b said: “We know each other better thanks to the group. Now, we meet at school and chat. I think it has helped in developing friendly relationships”. He recorded in the diary that the Facebook group “aided in strengthening social relationships between students”. Students 6b and 11b agreed in the diaries that cooperative tasks in the study group helped them to learn more about their classmates, whereas student 7b mentioned that the Facebook group helped “bind the students together”.

Students 13a, 18a, and 14b initially did not notice any improvement in the social climate, but since they expressed an opposite attitude in the post-interviews and diaries, we included them here. Student 13a admitted that “it was totally different, friendlier at the end”, whereas “it has definitely changed thanks to the group”. She also noted in her diary that she “became acquainted with new people”. As students communicated about study problems or pair work, student 18a felt that the group was helpful for developing peer relationships. She also mentioned that she had known students 2a and 7a before the course, but they “started to talk or write private messages thanks to the study group. [...] The group definitely brought [them] together”. According to her diary, “students started to help one another”. Student 14b replied that the students “were more collective thanks to the Facebook group”. She also “learned more about [her] classmates thanks to the cooperative tasks”.

#### **4.1.3 The Facebook Group Contributed to Positive Atmosphere in the Classroom**

Student 9b noted in his diary: “It is less stressful to attend the classes, because we all are members of the Facebook group”. He highlighted in the post-interview that “the group helped to create a friendlier and more relaxed atmosphere in the seminars”.

### **4.2 No Impact on Developing S-S Relationships**

Two students (cohort 1: 1; cohort 2: 1) did not perceive any improvement in peer relationships that could be assigned to the EAP Facebook group. Their attitude has not changed during the course of the instruction. We recognised responses related to this category three times in the interviews.

#### **4.2.1 Peer Relationships Developed in Contact Classes**

Student 10b connected the development of S-S relationships with the weekly seminars. According to the first interview, “the group had no visible impact on student relationships”. The same opinion was expressed in his second interview too. Student 14a agreed by saying: “Maybe it helped a little, but I think that we have developed relationships mostly in the seminars” (post-interview).

### 4.3 Positive Impact on Developing S-T Relationships

One participant (from cohort 2) mentioned this twice in the interviews. The improved relationship with the teacher was connected with a sense of partnership that was enabled by the Facebook group.

#### 4.3.1 The Facebook Group Made the Teacher a Partner

Student 8b said in the pre-interview: “I think that [the Facebook group] improves the relationship between us [students] and you [the teacher]”. In the post-interview he further explained that “[...] when I think of e-mails, there is this superiority, but in the Facebook group, it is more about equality. I mean, when we interact, you are still the teacher with authority, but at the same time you are an equal member of the group”.

Tab. 1: The Impact of the Facebook Group on S-S and S-T relationships

Category	Code	Times occurred + source
I.) Positive Impact on Developing S-S Relationships	a.) The Facebook Group Assisted in Socialisation and Community Building	31x (I: 18x; D: 13x)
	b.) The Facebook Group Assisted in Developing Deeper Peer Relationships	
	c.) The Facebook Group Contributed to Positive Atmosphere in the Classroom	
II.) No Impact on Developing S-S Relationships	a.) Peer Relationships Developed in Contact Classes	3x (I: 3x)
III.) Positive Impact on Developing S-T Relationships	a.) The Facebook Group Made the Teacher a Partner	2x (I: 2x)

*Legend:*

- I.) Positive Impact on Developing S-S Relationships - a wider category used to cover related data;
- a.) The Facebook Group Assisted in Community Building - a more precise code used to further differentiate data within a category; 31x (I: 18x; D: 13x) - the codes from this category were recognized thirty-one times in the data (18x in the interviews and 13x in the diaries)

## 5. Conclusion

The positive impacts of Facebook on developing social relationships mentioned in the theory were replicated in our case study. Similarly to Ryan et al. (2011), four students (1 from cohort 1 and 3 from cohort 2) felt that the Facebook group contributed to socialisation and community building. Schaffhauser (2009) and McCarthy (2010) linked Facebook with assistance in developing closer peer relationships. In our case study, ten research participants (4 from cohort 1 and 6 from cohort 2) pointed to this aspect. Furthermore, there is limited indication in their data that cooperative tasks assigned in the Facebook group aided in this process and that the group had positive impact on social climate in the classroom. Congruently with Berg et al. (2007), one student (from cohort 2) also claimed that the Facebook group positively influenced the student-teacher relationship. He perceived the teacher as a partner due to the way they interacted in the Facebook group, whereas his data imply that the teacher’s authority remained intact. We can only guess whether his perception of the relationship would be different if the

teacher disclosed other private information (apart from profile photography, education, and marital status) or used a formal nickname (instead of “Giorgio”). Although there is no evidence in our data, we agree with Mazer et al. (2007) and advise teachers to care about their privacy, since little self-disclosure on Facebook can negatively affect their credibility.

Two students (1 from cohort 1 and 1 from cohort 2), on the other hand, did not notice any significant impact of the Facebook group on developing peer relationships. They believed that social relations developed in the seminars.

Our findings suggest that Facebook groups positively impact S-S and S-T relationships and consequently contribute to building a positive social climate in the classroom. We recommend using this platform in higher education, especially for such educational settings in which students do not know one another (e.g. freshmen classes or courses for students of various study programmes), have very limited time to socialise (e.g. classes that take place once a week), or cannot effectively cooperate (e.g. multi-level language classes).

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