

Facebook as a tool for enhancing students' argumentative writing

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Argumentative writing is one of the most difficult written genres in higher education for both English as a second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) learners. These learners often face difficulties using complex syntactic forms and appropriate elements of argumentation (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2014). Hence, there is an imperative need to explore the use of effective strategies to improve ESL/EFL students' argumentative writing ability at the tertiary level.

Corrective feedback, referred to as utterances that indicate to a learner that their output is erroneous in some way (Nassaji & Kartchava, 2017), may be a particularly effective method of giving individual and specific guidance for the improvement of argumentation.

In ESL teaching, many recent studies have investigated the viability of Facebook as an educational tool (Wasoh, 2014; Sheperd, 2015). Several features of Facebook that enable peer feedback, collaborative learning, information exchange, and resource sharing can be used for teaching purposes. For example, students can provide feedback on each other's work using the *comment* feature, or even record information they consider relevant using the *notes* feature, which functions as a notebook (Barrot, 2016).

This paper reports on a study that investigated the use of a closed Facebook group for ESL argumentative writing. Specifically, the study aimed to (a) explore difficulties that ESL students experience when writing argumentative essays in a closed Facebook group; (b) examine corrective feedback techniques used by students when correcting their peers' argumentative essays; (c) investigate how students integrate received peer corrective feedback while revising their texts in a closed Facebook group; and (d) uncover students' perceptions concerning the use of Facebook in argumentative writing.



Who participated in the research

Twelve francophone students (seven female, five male) registered and participated in a written communication and textual revision class as part of a TESL university program in Quebec.

What the participants did on Facebook

The participants produced three argumentative essays in a closed Facebook group. For each essay, the learners produced one draft before receiving peer feedback and one afterwards. The writing and feedback activities were completed as part of the routine classroom activities following the steps described below:

- Students received 3 hours of training on peer corrective feedback (PCF). Training consisted of a teacher's presentation of PCF on both linguistic errors and content, followed by students practicing how to provide PCF using rubrics from the teacher.
- The teacher proposed a controversial topic to be discussed in the closed Facebook group. The proposed topics were euthanasia, marriage in the millennial era, and the death penalty.
- Students participated in each topic discussion at least three times, using 80–100 words per comment to make their own claims, including evidence and assumptions regarding the topic (See [Figure 1](#)).
- Students wrote an argumentative essay on the discussed topic and posted it in the closed Facebook group. The essays consisted of an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Students provided corrective feedback to one of their peers' argumentative essays. The teacher determined who provided feedback to whom. Content feedback was provided (see [Figure 2](#)) according to the following criteria:
 - Accuracy: The content is trustworthy, exact, and undistorted.
 - Relevance: The content is pertinent and current.
 - Representativeness: The content is true to context.
 - Adequacy: The content is plentiful and specific.
- Students provided corrective feedback on linguistic errors in their peers' drafts according to the types of errors proposed by Guénette and Lyster (2013) and posted to the group in an attached file (see [Figure 3](#)).
- Students revised their argumentative essays to incorporate the peer feedback they had received.
- Students published their final version of the argumentative essay in the closed Facebook group.
- Once the course had finished and grades had been submitted, the students were contacted by the researcher and invited to participate in the research project. Students who were interested in participating could do so by allowing the researcher to use their written productions in the closed Facebook group as data and participate in a semi-structured interview. All students agreed to let the researcher use their written productions, and six accepted the invitation to be interviewed.
- The video recorded interviews were conducted by a research assistant and took place in the students' language of preference (English or French).

What the findings showed

Findings revealed that, the most common errors in the three argumentative essays were grammar, followed by lexical errors. In addition, the most common error type was sentence structure in all three essays, followed by verb form and word form in Essay 1 and punctuation in Essays 2 and 3.

As for the different peer feedback techniques used by English L2 students in writing argumentative essays in a closed Facebook group, results showed that, overall, students used more direct correction in Essay 1, more indirect error identification in Essay 2, and both direct correction and indirect feedback in Essay 3. Since both direct and indirect written CF may be used to improve the overall accuracy of rewritten texts, and there is no consensus in research concerning which is more effective (Nassaji, 2016), the observed variety of peer feedback techniques is suggested to be positive.

In terms of corrective peer feedback on content, students provided pertinent positive and negative feedback on relevance, adequacy, and accuracy. In representativeness, however, both positive and negative feedback was found to be non-pertinent. This suggests that students had difficulty judging if the evidence provided in their peers' essays accurately portrayed the object of study in an undistorted and non-selective manner.

As for how English L2 students integrated received peer feedback when revising their texts in a closed Facebook group, findings showed that in all three essays, students were able to correct their English errors by successfully incorporating the received peer feedback.

Concerning student perceptions towards the use of Facebook for argumentative writing, all the interviewed students considered the main advantages of using Facebook for argumentative writing to be that it was accessible, fast, convenient, and easy to use. Likewise, all interviewees reported that the received corrective feedback from their peers helped them improve their use of English. One student mentioned that both providing and receiving peer feedback was a learning experience:

I would say I learned as much by giving comments as by receiving them, since by seeing others' mistakes, I could understand and tell myself I should watch this or that, reflect on whether or not my argument was supporting my main idea or my thesis. (Student A)

Furthermore, students highlighted that feedback helped them notice their own mistakes:

It helped for the English, since there were some mistakes that I didn't detect myself, for example. There were even some things I didn't know I



learned because of the feedback. Someone was giving me feedback, and then, I was correcting. (Student B)

Finally, all six students qualified their experiences using Facebook in argumentative writing as positive and motivating. The reasons for these positive perceptions were related to the advantages mentioned earlier:

It was a really positive experience for me since Facebook is a very accessible media. It was also positive since even in other people's essays, we could find mistakes and get feedback on them and that would help us, even if we weren't the one who wrote the essay. (Student C)

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

In summary, the present study suggests that L2 learners experience difficulties using appropriate grammar structures and providing accurate evidence to demonstrate the validity of their claims when writing argumentative essays. Findings reveal that students provided a variety of direct and indirect feedback to their peers, and in general, they were able to incorporate this feedback (both corrective and content) into their revisions. This suggests that peer feedback is an effective strategy to improve ESL students' argumentative writing. Results also show that students perceived the closed Facebook group as accessible, convenient, and easy to use, both for providing and receiving peer feedback.

These findings are pedagogically significant since they highlight the benefits of using a closed Facebook group in argumentative writing and reveal that students are able to both provide feedback and incorporate it into their writing using this platform.

Nevertheless, there are some considerations that teachers should contemplate before incorporating Facebook mediated corrective peer feedback in their practice. Despite all the interviewed participants in this study focusing on Facebook's advantages, this platform may also present certain limitations as a learning environment. Some students might feel that a social network is not an appropriate space for formal academic learning because of the blurring of the social and educational domains (Van Doorn & Eklund, 2013); students might also fear cyber bullying (Rimour & Arie, 2018). This could prevent students from having a positive approach to the task and constructing a collaborative relationship with the partner, which would hinder the effectiveness of PCF in L2 learning. Therefore, teachers must ensure the safety and security of the environment, providing clear guidelines to circumvent these or any other potential difficulties related to the use of Facebook.



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