

## **A Critical Discourse Analysis of Synchronous Facebook Communication: Native and Non-native English Speakers**

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this research was to study language with a focus on online communication between native speakers (NSs) and non-native English speakers (NNSs) in an international study consultancy Facebook group. This communication has proven unique and is important to study for two specific reasons. First, the popularity of social networking sites and their use by second language learners both amongst themselves and with NSs makes it important to investigate. Second, the analysis of these types of conversations is essential to understand how power and identity work in online interaction between NSs and NNSs. The study addressed the questions of what type of discourse are these highly contextualized groups of English speakers using to communicate online and how does the online environment shape NNSs' power relation and identity shifting when interacting with NSs on Facebook. The study findings revealed that there are pedagogical implications in the interactional collaboration between NSs and NNSs in online interaction on Facebook. In the context of second language learning (L2), scaffolding was not only offered by collaborating with peers and interacting with more knowledgeable others, but also by the friendly environment of the social networking sites and the meaning negotiation strategies.

**Key Words:** Computer Mediated Communication, critical discourse analysis, Facebook, identity, native speakers, non-native speakers

**Introduction:**

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is very popular in higher education. Particularly, universities use CMC to launch web conferences and almost all higher education institutions have their own Facebook sites. These sites act as a platform for students, professors and administrative staff to communicate with each other and the larger community as well. Many research articles have been published tackling the recent emergence of Web 2.0 technologies in all aspects of life, but to the best of the researcher's knowledge, little work has been conducted on researching the discursive strategies adopted by Second Language Learners (L2) learners on Facebook and the potential application of CMC such as Facebook in bilingual education.

Yet, the use of social networking sites such as Facebook by English as Second Language (ESL) students might be significant as a pedagogical tool. One of the major concerns of ESL classrooms is that they might lack the collaborative and interactive nature of learning which ESL teachers so desperately seek. This absence, which is essentially a scarcity of authentic language situations, has been a challenge for many ESL classrooms around the world, especially in the Middle East where access to authentic target language is not always available. Thus, in this region and many others around the world, the focus has always been on structure and grammar. ESL classrooms need to utilize more authentic language material to improve students' learning.

Richards and Schmidt (2013), stated that interaction is the way in which language is used. English language learners outside English speaking countries usually find little opportunities to interact with NSs. The decrease in the digital divide and the advancement in Web 2.0 technologies have led to the emergence of new paradigms for teaching ESL. Researchers argue that utilizing social networking sites as a platform for authentic online communication between NSs and NNSs would eliminate much of the anxiety, fear and lack of confidence that ESL learners usually experience when trying to interact in a face to face setting. Furthermore, online forums provide a chance for students to share their thoughts in a social context and comment on one another's to gain knowledge and negotiate meaning (Hashemi & Najafi, 2011). In other words, the power relation between learners and teachers is far more balanced (to the benefit of both teachers and learners) as a result of this implementation.

This study drew from the researcher's experience prior and after 989\*status as an international student in the U.S. The researcher first observed the potential benefits of incorporating this platform when he witnessed Iraqi students communicating synchronously with American academic advisors online to access information on how to study in the U.S. Despite the students' low English proficiency level, they were found to be more willing to communicate and use the target language. U.S specialists who were administering that Facebook page were aware of the NNSs' comprehension level and thus were more interactive and offered flexibility in helping the NNSs communicate affectively and negotiate meaning.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model of analysis was used in analyzing the data. Specifically, Fairclough's approach for description, interpretation and explanation was adopted in this study. Unlike interpretive approaches, CDA appeared to fit more with qualitative designs and one which is highly applicable to the context of an online interaction between NSs and NNSs. According to Fairclough, there are three ways in which language operates as discourse :1) as text; (2) as the social processes of producing and interpreting a text, or the interaction; and 3) as the social conditions for the production and interpretation of the text, or the

social context. Since Fairclough's model focused on the standard form of English (Fairclough 2003), there was a concern about whether this model could accommodate the non-standard English data used in this study. After scanning the literature to see how ESL text could be evaluated using Fairclough's model, a study was found by Kettle (2005) who concluded that ESL text or the text produced by NNSs in interaction with NSs is valid for analysis following Fairclough's (2001) model of CDA. This is also in line with the openness of CDA and its interdisciplinary dialogue referred to by Fairclough (2003).

The study used purposeful and convenience "opportunity" sampling. The transcripts of the conversations analyzed were freely available on the U.S embassy Baghdad "studyUSAIraq" Facebook page. Thus the data sets (available here, <https://www.facebook.com/StudyUSAIraq>) were transcripts of a Facebook communication between potential Iraqi graduate students and American academic advisors. The transcripts were taken from a Facebook post on a subject about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Another interesting point to note is that the language used in this transcript is considered a hybrid because it included a blend of standard native and non-standard Englishes (Kettle, 2005).

Besides the introduction, a section on literature review was added in order to address the importance of online communication in second language learning and also to explore related studies. The analysis section was conducted qualitatively and is followed by a finding and discussion and conclusion sections that included a summary of results plus an interpretation of findings.

### **Literature Review:**

There was much written about the effect of synchronous interaction on the teaching and learning of ESL, but studies directed towards investigating pedagogical implications of social media used in ESL environments are rare. The purpose of this literature review was to help fill in this research gap. The researcher tried to address the current empirical conversations, to broaden readers' background knowledge related to this topic, and familiarize them with research methodologies used in other studies. As stated, the study is important as it seems that there is little research conducted on NSs and NNSs' communication to explore the potential use of technology in language learning and also to stimulate sound academic discussion about this topic.

Blattner and Fiori (2009) highlighted the sense of community that technology creates in the language classroom, taking into consideration the trends of connectivity today's learners expect. They compared high and low tech learning and concluded that high tech learning could offer a chance for more effective learning in light of the familiarity L2 learners have with these technologies. These technologies and the level of accessibility to them was promising for the adoption of the learner-centered model of teaching as learners will have greater options in completing their assignments and managing them through high tech tools. High tech also affords more opportunities for students to interact with one another.

In ESL classes, this potential connectivity is more of an opportunity than a risk given the potential for exposure to the target language. According to MacKay (1999), input is an essential factor for learning a second language. Nothing proves this point more than the fact that we keep hearing from teachers and language educators about the negative effect of learners not having opportunities to engage in authentic language situations. Now with the globalized nature of

English being further facilitated by technology, language learners can stay better connected using English. Iraqi students, for instance, who were interested in studying in the U.S were more frequently visiting a study abroad consultancy Facebook page sponsored by the U.S embassy in Baghdad. Students visited this page in order to communicate with American consultants and advisors on a variety of topics related to higher education. Thus we can easily see that Facebook's immense popularity makes it an asset as a pedagogical and technological tool for ESL classes and students.

Interest in social media interactions started with the emergence of Web 2.0 tools which enabled synchronous online communication (Fitzpatrick & Donnelly, 2010). Since then, socialization in the virtual world has become a dominant norm leading to the emergence of gigantic Web 2.0 social media sites such as Facebook. In this study, the researcher argued that the paradigm shift that Facebook and other social networking sites have created would positively extend broadly to education and second language learning in particular. Facebook is one of the most visited social networking sites. According to Facebook news room (<http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>), there were 829 million daily active users on average in June 2014. There were 654 million mobile daily active users on average, 1.32 billion monthly active users, and approximately 81.7% of Facebook daily active users are outside the US and Canada.

Though English is widely spoken all over the world, many learners lack exposure to authentic language situations. CMC appears to provide a solution here given the globalized nature of English. In an empirical study meant to test the interaction hypothesis about second language acquisition, MacKay (1999) stated that active participation in interaction accompanies development in second language learning. According to MacKay, for learners to comprehend, produce and negotiate language, they need to be provided with a pre-modified conversation. More precisely, native speakers need to make their language easier through rephrasing, rewording, slowing down and so on. Interactions via social media seemed to provide an excellent vehicle for this kind of communication.

Many researchers came to similar conclusions. According to Ware & Warschauer (2005), the recent advancement in information and communication technology (ICT) has four characteristics that have led to transformation in the practices of literacy: the interactive written communication allowing hypertext, democratizing multimedia creation and allowing mass communication via what they called many-to-many communication. Additionally, Arnold and Paulus (2010) investigated the integration of the social networking site called Ning. They focus on the usability of social networking sites on the management side, highlighting the community aspect and the collaborative nature of social networking as well as its potential in supporting language learning. Their conclusion about the use of Ning and the students' perception of it was significant. However, what was lacking in their analysis was the authenticity of the methodology as the setting was artificial. Content analysis was important to unpack more of the usability of online communication in foreign language learning. This was further supported by Fitzpatrick and Donnelly (2010) who stated that what is interesting about the online communication in cross cultural and diverse linguistic setting is the strikingly cooperative meaning making process involved compared to face-to face communication.

Scanning the literature, it was found that most studies were either strikingly qualitative or quantitative in nature. The interest in this topic came from the fact that learning is dramatically changing as a result of the learner-centered approach trend as well as the quick, recent advancement in information and communication technology and the potential of their utilization in education. According to Rambe (2012), little was being said about the discourse taking place on Facebook. He was interested in addressing a gap in the research related to adopting CDA on Facebook discourse. However, his approach itself lacked the in-depth analysis of the content as he focused on modelling specific pieces of teacher-student interaction under the assumption that it would be adopted by a wider audience. The account Rambe gave to identity was interesting. Rambe (2012) explained about how this kind of Facebook communication could democratize power relations given the technological environment of Facebook and how it appeared learner friendly. This environment could contribute to democratizing the academic relations among teachers and learners and enhancing the collaborative sense for the process of teaching and learning. It is this negotiation of meaning and face-saving atmosphere that we look at as promising in the area of ESL teaching. Fitzpatrick and Donnelly (2010) elaborated on the meaning making process in online interaction between students and teachers. They asserted the gap in methodologies regarding content based analysis which might be one of the reasons behind the paucity of studies targeting meaning making through analyzing online discussion. They defined CMC as a text-based interaction that involves human beings through the medium of computer or mobile device. Tapit et al (2011) attempted to answer the question whether discourse analysis would be a suitable approach to analyze public discourse. Studying public discussion and debate was important to them as it related to social meaning. Their rationale for the adoption of CDA was interesting. It related to how CDA would serve as both a theoretical and methodological framework and to the applicability of unpacking meaning out of belief construction oriented by media and culture coverage.

Fairclough's CDA provided a solid explanation of the context and eliminated the criticism of the interpretative nature of the content based analysis. Fairclough (2013) based his methodology on three dimensions that are interrelated. Fairclough (2013) said:

By critical discourse analysis I mean discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relationships and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power. (p.93).

Despite the fact that Fairclough offered other models for analyzing discourse such as the ten model question which was used to find out the text's formal properties that are supposed to imply the speaker's ideologies and values (see Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power*. Pearson Education.), the three dimensions model seemed more applicable in analyzing social networking communication as this model is highly structured and analytically so comprehensive. Herring (2007) looked at discourse analysis as a methodology for online based discussion by looking at such factors as modality, number of participants, text and discourse types and genre. The meaning making sought in these kinds of CMC was meant to understand the kind of discussion between students and tutors in order to find out about the potential use of technology for

instructional purposes (Fitzpatrick & Donnelly 2010, Herring, 2007). They looked at online communication in terms of pragmatic linguistics which focuses on the social use of language.

Identity shaping and power relations were the major factors which distinguished online communication from face to face communication. Tapia et al (2011) stated that "...Fairclough's multi-level framework for CDA...postulates that macro-level social structures (e.g. power relations) are linked in a dialectical relationship to micro-level social practices, such as speaking or writing".

Kettle (2005) discussed the identity of English language learners especially, those who already have their identities framed within a sociocultural background and are studying in a new environment as international students. She used the notion of agency and defined it as a "form of discursive practice and is reflexive". This related to the process of adaptation that international students undergo when they study abroad with English being their second language. This reflexivity is in line with Fairclough's CDA in the call for unpacking the opaque relationship of powers. According to Fairclough (2001), this sense of agency as social practice is clearly part of what CDA is trying to convey. This can be seen in the use of Facebook communication by international students such as Iraqi students in the case of the US embassy Facebook page and how they behaved as agents communicating with a dominant audience, that of the native English interlocutors. Kettle (2005) also provided a clear account on the process of meaning negotiation in the communication taking place between NSs and NNSs. Kettle interviewed her international student using English and she was aware of the status of his English as a second language. Some of the practices that she used to maintain the communication were "keeping the face", "topics initiation and questions initiation". Polant et al (2013) also asserted the importance of L2 engagement in synchronous communication where the sense of anonymity gave learners more power to control the language input, ability for meaning negotiation and more comfort for a peer feedback discussion. This identity shaping and shifting were important themes that addresses in this study.

It might be argued that cultural differences lead to miscommunication, especially when it comes to communication between NSs and NNSs. This of course applies to those who have different cultural backgrounds from that of the West as in the case of the Middle Eastern students studying in the U.S. This power distance is, according to Paulus, et.al (2005), a category of culture. This cultural component could, however, provide insight into teamwork involving both American and international team-members. Paulus et.al referred to power distance as situations where less powerful members accept the unequal distribution of power in a given community. In collaboration, however, the cultural dimension of power distance results in the voices of both American and international students being heard. In the case of a CMC as in the case of Facebook, NNSs represented the less powerful groups and their very acceptance that they were less powerful, language-wise, provided more potential for effective language learning. This acceptance of the lack of balance in power was positive when it comes to L2 learning.

### **Data Collection and Analysis:**

A qualitative research methodology was followed in analyzing the data for this study. The data set were transcripts of online communication on Facebook between potential Iraqi graduate students and American educational specialists. The data was available on Facebook

page called StudayUSAIraq page and can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/StudyUSAIraq>. The transcripts were taken from one of StudyUSAIraq faecbook's posts on a subject related to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS). The language used in this transcript was considered hybrid because it included native and non-native speakers of English. According to Kettle (2005), this text is called hybrid because it compromised a blending of both standard and nonstandard forms of English. For the sake of analysis, a focus was made on themes as they emerged from the data. This study is qualitative in nature and the analysis centered on the discursive practices involved in this online communication and what it might tell us about the research questions mentioned.

### **Analysis:**

The analysis focused on the readily available data set taken from one post of the StudyUSAIraq Facebook page. The turns were numbered for easy reference. Themes are not listed chronologically in the analysis as they were analyzed as they emerged from the data. Then, examples from different turns provided and grouped in the themes related to them. So, for the sake of analysis, the researcher started by coding themes, and applying the CDA three dimensions analysis: text, interpretation and explanation. The analysis started with a text description followed by interpretation and explanations as per the model of analysis selected which is Fairclough's three dimension analysis. In the following analysis the word "learners" means those turns produced by the NNS participants. The "administrators" referred to the native speakers of English in the interaction and who were the initiators of those talk and were the administrators of the Study USAIraq Facebook page.

### **Themes Coding and Analysis:**

**Trigger and motivation:** This theme was found at the opening of the post started by the administrators of the Facebook page. The purpose was to help the participants come and join the online discussion. Though the administrator was one person, the statement started with the pronoun "we" to emphasize the institutional nature of this Facebook page. The subject presented was new to the participants who were mostly from a socialist country that has little experience in online education. The second line of the initiation trigger was an expansion of the topics giving more information on what "MOOCS" are and what to expect. The key words here were "popularity" and "youth". The emphasis on these words was intended to encourage the learners who were mostly young and were looking to advance their education by joining and getting more information from their interaction with NSs in this Facebook group. Another kind of trigger produced by the learners was at the end of the discussion in turn numbers (29-33) where the participants typed in the profile name of some of their friends who were not present at the time of discussion. Tagging names on the comment spaces means that Facebook will send a notification to those people to check the discussion post. This tagging meant that the discussion appealed to those participants and they wanted to have come and join the discussion in. Lastly, this was also a collaborative environment which displayed giving and receiving feedback.

**Exploration:** Most of the learners' turns can be categorized as exploration since main aim of this discussion was to provide more information to the learners about MOOCs. Since exploration meant asking questions, it was apparent that the interrogative forms of "Wh-questions" and the "yes-no questions" were extensively used by the learners as it can be seen in turns numbers (2) and (4):

(2): “Hello how we can join these courses and whether a certificate of participation will be awarded at the end of the course”

(4): “Is there any requirements to take the courses? And I hope you can advice me with the best course for me, I'm a high school graduated and I have a Toefl test degree which is 580, and is there any other courses or scholarships that I can apply to? Thank you”

Some question forms were given formed using a statement or an indirect question as in turn number (2). This kind of question was common in the Iraqi dialect (the learners' first language) and this is why learners used this form spontaneously as a result of their native language transfer. Though this structure was also available in English and is usually said with a rising tone and question mark at the end of the sentence, the learners used it extensively and did not use a question mark, instead following the Iraqi form which indicates their low English grammar level. The exploration also ranged between general inquires and social interest inquires. After the learners got introduced to MOOCs, its popularity and availability, their interest was made clear from their questions on specific MOOCs courses relevant to their fields of study. This was apparent in the turns (4, 6, 11, 21, and 23):

(4): “Is there any requirements to take the courses? And I hope you can advice me with the best course for me, I'm a high school graduated and I have a Toefl test degree which is 580, and is there any other courses or scholarships that I can apply to? Thank you”

(6):” Is there any course for Optoelectronics engineering?”

(11):” Is there for business management??”

(21): “And is there for pharmacist??”

(23): “Is there any course for industrial engineering?”

**Identity and Power Relations:** The identity theme was apparent throughout the discussion. Primarily, the learners' identities were ESL users who were seeking information on U.S education. This was apparent from the structure of their questioning turns and the rather low English level they had. The administrators' identity, on the other hand, was that of experts, which was made clear by their answering turns and offering more information. We see that the administrators were those who hit reply for almost all the questions to offer additional information and tracked the learners feedback. The identity balance between the two types of participants was reflected in the responsibilities of each participant and also in the way turns were introduced. The content of the turns was also a sign of the power relations.

**Meaning negotiation:** This theme was of course dominant in this kind of hybrid text with ESL text produced by the learners using low level of English. We found that learners checked comprehension by asking for confirmation as in the turns (8, 9):

(8): “Also free”

(9): “Is it free??”

Here again the learners used the indirect form of question or the statement question such as “Also free [?]” and again the learners forgot to put the question mark. This was due to the fast ongoing nature of the conversation and also transferring of the learners’ native language which usually uses these interrogative forms instead of the direct *wh-questions* and yes-no questions. This was also related to the power relation among the participants. The administrators and learners were from two different cultures which also utilized two different economic systems, namely capitalist and socialist. Meaning negotiating to check whether MOOCs are free or not was used by the learners as it might seem uncommon to see free higher education in capitalist America where the administrators were from. The negotiated meaning here was not only because there were experts on one side and information seekers on the other side, it is also because the learners’ low comprehension and interpretation of English. As a result, they make repeated indirect questions to ensure complete comprehension. The other kind of meaning negotiation we can see are the learners’ questions about whether these MOOCs course are recognized and accredited or not as in the turn (2, 10, and 14):

(2): *“Hello how we can join these courses and whether a certificate of participation will be awarded at the end of the course”*

(10): *“does those courses and the certificate clears the way to apply for a degree in the US universities”*

(14): *“Is there credit for MOOCs?”*

In a socialist society like the one where the learners are from, online learning hasn’t yet caught on and lots of issues surrounded it. The use of the quick direct question in turn (14) was to make sure this point is clear so that further discussion can start. We also see that the administrators’ response to this question delayed after several other turns as this might seem like less of a core question asked by people from a capitalist culture. The administrators likely needed time to figure out the meaning.

**Content Discussion and Topics Expansion:** Here participants asked more questions to expand the topics and discuss the content in greater detail. The administrators started the conversation by setting the tone with a response to a basic question about what MOOCs are and how to make use of them. Then we found that learners asked more questions about whether the MOOCs are accredited or not, as in the turn (2) *“Hello how we can join these courses and whether a certificate of participation will be awarded at the end of the course”*. This question asked about the certificate of completion and about finding specific courses related to the learners’ background as in the turns (6 and 11) and also about the structure of these courses:

(6): *“Is there any course for Optoelectronics engineering?”*

(11): *“Is there for business management ??”*

**Error Correction:** Despite the many spelling and grammatical errors in the learners’ turns, we saw no direct error correction from the administrators was initiated. This was in part due to the fact that even with the errors, the turns were understood mainly from the context. It was also due to the polite nature of the administrators’ language. However we saw some indirect correction related to the use of the vocabulary. In the turn pairs (4 and 5), we saw that the

administrators repeated the learner's question using Standard English ("correct words"); they used the word "prerequisite" to replace the learners' word choice of "requirement". Here's the exchange:

(4): *"Is there any requirements to take the courses ? And I hope you can advice me with the best course for me, I'm a high school graduated and I have a Toefl test degree which is 580, and is there any other courses or scholarships that I can apply to? Thank you"*

(5): *"Some advanced courses may need prerequisites, but most of the other courses do not. Just search for the course that matches your interest, get yourself enrolled and with this level of English, you will be doing great. Also, stay tuned because we will be posting about the best MOOCs out there and how we can help students navigate their way through them."*

In the turn pair (14) and (15), the administrators replaced the noun form of "credit" used by the learners with the correct verb form "credited":

(14): "Is there credit for MOOCs?"

(15): "There are only six MOOCs that are credited so far. Read this link for more information <https://www.coursera.org/signature/college-credit-guidebook>"

This was a great tool where collaboration by both the administrators and the learners regarding the meaning provides double benefits: both gain mutual understanding without feeling embarrassed, and learners gain authentic use of language which otherwise wasn't possible.

### Discussion:

This study investigated the use of discourse in online communication between NSs and NNSs interacting in English on a Facebook page. Learners used this forum to find out more information regarding their future study in America, but their English level was also clearly displayed. Despite the low English level that most students had, which was apparent from the formal analysis of their turns, we saw that they had the motivation and confidence to communicate in English with the NS advisors who were the administrators of that Facebook page. Generally, the results showed that both learners and administrators were aware of each other's needs (in terms of language), and they used several strategies to ensure mutual understanding. Specifically, the administrators negotiated meaning and extended and answered turns to ensure learners understood the discussion. The learners used successive questions, Web 2.0 tools that Facebook offered, and cooperation among themselves as strategies to understand the administrators' turns. This synchronous communication seems to have effective pedagogical implications for ESL classrooms. Online communication could be an effective supplemental tool for ESL classes as it eliminates many of the issues reported in face to face interactions (such as anxiety and the effect of power relations between learners and teachers). The different power relations usually seen in ESL classes due to the students' realization of their low English level frustrates students and prevents them from taking the initiative to engage in classroom discussions. Other students' presumptions, especially in multi-cultural ESL classrooms where educational systems encourage less classroom engagement and participation, make it even harder for students to interact in classrooms using their target language. The results in this Facebook

communication showed that power relations and identity realization did not overwhelm the overall communication. As synchronous communication, this interaction had dual benefits. First the learners practiced their English in an authentic situation that would have been unavailable otherwise. As a result, they learned new vocabulary and socialized with others. Additionally, students felt motivated and willing to learn more as a result of their interaction on this page, and they also believed that the page is a place where they could give and receive feedback from others.

### Conclusion:

The results showed that young learners with an intermediate English level were highly motivated to improve their English in digitally-mediated environments. Unlike monolingual online communication seen on social networking sites, this hybrid language communication appeared to have an impact on educational practices and affected the ways students engage with language and culture. This was very promising considering today's globally networked learning environments. Furthermore, these international interactions may play a significant role in enhancing English language learning and helping students to achieve proficiency goals, and learners may also benefit from better intercultural understandings and digital literacy skills.

### About the Author:

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