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## EXPLORING EFL LEARNERS' ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE PEER WRITING DISCUSSIONS THROUGH A FACEBOOK GROUP

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### ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The aim of the present study is to explore the online participation of nine English as foreign language (EFL) Arab learners in group writing discussions through a Facebook group over the study period of three months and how the EFL learners view the role of the Facebook-facilitated peer review activities in promoting their online participation.
Background	Research has addressed the issue of isolation among distance learning students by integrating various technological tools into online courses. Yet, little is known about the role of Facebook groups in addressing this issue among distance learning learners from the sociocultural theories, and how online participation supports learners' nurturing of social relations still needs to be answered through an empirical analysis of their interactions and reflections on their online learning experience.
Methodology	Being situated in a Facebook group mentored by two instructors, the study was conducted over three months using a case study approach. The data was collected from two sources: (1) learners' comments/interactions on their peer review posts, and (2) their reflections on their experience through online call interviews. The study used a content analysis of learners' interactions and a thematic analysis of the reflections. Moreover, simple descriptive statistics, including the number and percentage of learners' patterns of interactions: on-task, around-task, and off-task were used to determine the intensity of learners' online participation over the study period.
Contribution	The findings contribute to the research at the international level in several ways. It supports the argument that online participation is not merely taking part in activities, but it also involves social relations among learners. The findings also underlie useful pedagogical and technological implications for EFL teachers and lecturers. Facebook groups can be used as interactive platforms for EFL learners in distance courses. In addition, owing to the students' increasing access to Facebook groups, instructors can engage learners

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in useful learning activities that contribute to their language learning, particularly writing. This study raises people's awareness of the usefulness of Facebook groups as interactive platforms for university students in distance courses.

Findings	The findings indicate that the learners engaged in active online participation, which is partly evidenced by their increasing intensity of participation in terms of the on-task, around-task and off-task aspects over the three months. However, learners' online participation is facilitated by the course instructor as he posted comments that reflect his diverse roles in facilitating the online group discussions. The learners also view the positive role of Facebook-facilitated group discussions on collaborative writing in contributing to their online participation, friendships and sense of community.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Since learners' maintenance of active participation in online discussions is a critical issue reported by many previous studies on online learning at the international level, the present study suggests that instructors should play the role as facilitators and mentors of learners' online discussions in order to engage learners in active learning and also enable them to pursue their online discussions.
Recommendations for Researchers	Based on the findings, researchers should focus on how to promote learners' sense of community in distance courses in order to enable them to feel attached to one another and overcome the feelings of isolation. Facebook groups can be used for the purpose of language learning, especially at the university context.
Future Research	Based on the findings, researchers should focus on how to promote learners' sense of community in distance courses in order to enable them to feel attached to one another and overcome the feelings of isolation. Facebook groups can be used for the purpose of language learning, especially at the university context. Future research could maximize the opportunities for online learning using a combination of social networking sites, such as Facebook and other social technological tools in distance courses. Such integration of more than tools will increase learners' online participation in such courses.
Keywords	online participation, group writing discussions, Facebook group, sense of community

## INTRODUCTION

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Researchers have paid much attention to how to promote learners' online participation in various online domains and disciplines. Online participation is founded on Vygotsky's (1980) social learning perspective and the situated learning theory of Lave and Wenger (1991). Based these theories, researchers have argued that online learner participation is a not only a process of active engagement in online discussions or activities, but it also involves different social relations among learners (Ke & Hoadley, 2009; Pratt & Back, 2013; Stacey et al., 2004). In other words, these researchers claim that active online participation is about students' intensity of posting and commenting online and their social connections and relations.

Social interaction is necessary for English as foreign language (EFL) learners (Yen et al., 2015). However, opportunities for social interactions in EFL traditional classroom learning are restricted or almost lacking (Philp et al., 2010). This suggests the need for creating opportunities for learners to in-

teract in English. Today, within the advances in technologies, particularly web 2.0 and Social Networking Sites (SNSs) and their roles in global communication, learners are connected by their shared interests and goals in online learning (Zhu & Baylen, 2005). Learning is not only situated in the classroom context, but it also occurs outside the classroom space (Hrastinski, 2008, 2009). Yet, online learning is challenged by several issues, including students' feeling of isolation (Kebritchi et al., 2017), low interactions and engagement in the course activities (Croxtton, 2014), and increasing dropout among online learners (Tyler-Smith, 2006). Moreover, learners' participation in online courses is challenged by their higher attrition rates (Kahu et al., 2013). Therefore, there has been a call for supporting learners' sense of community in online learning (Correia & Davis, 2008; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Salmon, 2004). Empirical studies have also emphasized the role of learners' social relations, especially sense of community in reducing their feelings of physical separation or isolation (Ke & Carr-Chellman, 2006; LaPointe & Reissetter, 2008; Rovai, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Tu & Corry, 2002). These studies show that by developing sense of community, learners will be able to pursue their distance learning and, therefore, reduce the increasing tendency to drop out from online courses. Learners' online sense of community is nurtured out of learners' online participation (DeLahunty et al., 2014). Sense of community is important for maintaining online learning among learners who are physically distanced and not well acquainted with each other (Kreijns et al., 2003).

Although there is a common agreement among most researchers about the importance of promoting online learners' sense of community, there is still a need for further investigation of how online participation supports learners' sense of community through an empirical analysis of features or indicators emerging from their situated interactions as well as their reflections on their online learning experience. Moreover, although SNSs such as Facebook, especially Facebook groups, as additional learning tools or spaces, have proved to foster learners' online participation and social communication and relations (Kurtz, 2014; Liu et al., 2016; Petrovic et al., 2014) and serve as online learning communities (Byington, 2011; Callaghan & Fribbance, 2016; Razak & Saeed, 2014; Whittaker et al., 2014) in various online learning courses; "still, little research has specifically explored the integration of Facebook" in the context of university students (Petrovic et al., 2014 p. 123). Similarly, Facebook as "the most used global social networking website, has not been widely used in tertiary education" (Shih, 2011 p. 380). Moreover, only a few studies have explored the role of Facebook integration in English language learning courses, particularly writing courses (Kabilan et al., 2010; Razak & Saeed, 2014; Saeed et al., 2018; Shih, 2011; Yen et al., 2015). More recent studies have shown that Facebook offers an alternative environment for teaching and learning owing to its various affordances, including easiness, acceptability, and other functions that allow learners to post and share information and comment on each other (Barrot, 2018; Chugh & Ruhi, 2018; Manca & Ranieri, 2016). Facebook also supports collaborative learning (Mahmud & Wong, 2018; Tiruwa et al., 2018) and in particular collaborative writing (Friatin, 2018; Fithriani et al., 2019; Ramadhani, 2018). Despite the role of engaging learners in online discussions in promoting their sense of an online learning community, learners' online participation is challenged by distraction of learners' attention to the task, mass of interactions, unwillingness of some learners to take part in online discussions, as well as the nature of Facebook being more oriented towards socialization rather than learning and the misuse of the language or abuse of information (e.g., Aydin 2012; Kabilan et al., 2010). Moreover, learners may feel unsure about the appropriate direction of their online discussions, especially if they do not receive sufficient feedback or acknowledgement from the instructor (Lu, 2004). This suggests the need for instructors to facilitate learners' participation in online group discussions.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

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This section provides a discussion of the theoretical framework and previous related research on online learning community and its connection to Facebook. Within the constructivist view of learning particularly, Vygotsky's (1980) social learning perspective, "individuals create their own new understandings, based upon the interaction of what they already know and believe, and the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact" (Richardson, 2005, p. 3). This view emphasizes the role

of learners' interactions in promoting their construction of knowledge. In other words, as learners participate in group learning activities, they socially interact with one another (Fung, 2004), construct their cognitive understanding of certain concepts (Lai, 2012), and become reciprocal resources of information for one another the learning process (Greenlaw & DeLoach, 2003). This can be applicable to the context of the present study where the EFL learners worked together as a community in enhancing their writing in English.

From the social learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), a community is a group of people who mutually engage in a shared practice to deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area. So engagement is not merely taking part in shared practices, but it also involves social relations among individuals that contribute to their sense of community (Wenger et al., 2002). This implies that as learners take part in online learning activities, they are supposed to develop social ties and friendships. Over time, members define themselves through collective understanding of their shared goals/purpose (Wenger, 1998). It becomes "their negotiated response to the situation and thus, belongs to them in a profound sense" (Wenger, 1998 p.78).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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### *FACEBOOK AS AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY*

Online tools such as SNSs, including Facebook groups, play an important role in facilitating the development of online learning communities (Guldberg & Mackness, 2009; Wenger, 2001). They assist learners to develop a sense of connectedness that reduces the effect of their physical separation/distance (Kaulback & Bergtholdt, 2008) and promote their sense of community (Williams et al., 2000) as well as close personal relationships among them (B. Anderson, 2004). According to Razak and Saeed (2014), EFL learners' engagement in online revision activities in a Facebook group is conducive to nurturing of their social ties over time. Byington (2011) also argues that online learning communities expose learners to various resources of information and knowledge. Furthermore, learners' images and posts in Facebook groups represent what learners produced as a shared repertoire (Mills, 2011).

Facebook is perceived as an online learning tool that promotes learners' peer-peer interactions and learner-instructor interactions, their active contribution, and involvement in learning (Kurtz, 2014). It also promotes learners' sense of online learning community (Whittaker et al. 2014) since it can address the issue of isolation among distance learning students by engaging them in an online academic or community (Callaghan & Fribbance, 2016). Moreover, Facebook has been integrated as an additional social space in online courses in different courses (Al-Azawei, 2019; Kocdar et al., 2018; Kurtz, 2014; Liu et al., 2016; Petrovic et al., 2014). Results of these studies indicate that learners recognize or perceive the role of Facebook integration into courses in facilitating their online participation and learning experience (Liu et al., 2016) and fostering their social interactions and learning processes (Kurtz, 2014). Facebook also allows learners to share information (Liu et al., 2016; Petrovic et al., 2014), communicate and connect with each other, express their personal feelings Liu et al. (2016), and to exchange peer feedback (Petrovic et al., 2014).

### *FACEBOOK AS AN INTERACTIVE PLATFORM FOR WRITING*

Barrot (2018) reported that most of the studies on Facebook have focused on students' language proficiency and productive skills, specifically writing skills. Since this study focuses on writing through Facebook, this section reviews the literature on the use of Facebook as a platform for EFL learning courses, particularly writing courses and its impact on students' writing skills in English. In the context of ESL/EFL learning, Facebook has been proved to play a role in creating an interactive learning space for ESL/EFL where they can practice writing and improve their writing skills through collaboration and interaction with peers. For instance, Kabilan et al. (2010) found that Facebook serves as an interactive environment for language learning where they can discuss several topics through comment exchanges. Integration of Facebook in a writing course resulted in enhancing

learners' writing skills through instruction and collaborative work (Shih, 2011). Moreover, EFL learners used a Facebook group as a space for engaging in peer writing and peer review activities beyond the classroom (Razak & Saeed, 2014). Moreover, as learners review their writing through Facebook, they engage in peer interactions that lead or trigger successful text revisions that focus on enhancing the content, organization, and language in their texts (Saeed et al., 2018). According to Yen et al. (2015), when interacting in the Facebook group, EFL students could exchange corrections of mistakes in writing and enhance their language learning through using English as the medium of interactions. In a study by Shih (2011), integrating Facebook in peer review of writing is effective as it involves learners in corrections of writing and enhances their interests in learning. The use of Facebook plays a role in promoting learners' online discussions that focus on writing and grammar (Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi, 2012). Similarly, findings indicate that Facebook positively impacts students' writing practices, thus making it as an interactive tool for peer review of writing (Barrot, 2016). Facebook peer review was found to be useful in engaging learners in exchanging feedback and revising their texts (Wichadee, 2013).

Taking together the findings of the above cited studies, it is evident that SNSs, including Facebook, have the potential of functioning as online learning communities, especially within the online presence of e-moderators or instructors who can facilitate learners' online participation. Moreover, there is still a need for further investigation of learners' online participation from the level of intensity or how many comments they post online over a period of time. This is because intensity of participation indicates the degree to which learners are active in taking part in online learning activities. Moreover, online participation needs to be explored at the social level or from the way learners relate to one another, how they identify themselves, and what they do when engaged in online learning. However, this analysis focusing on learners' relations as situated in their online interactions as well as reflections on their online learning experience requires tracing learners' interactions in the online learning activities in terms of whether they become active participants and feel attached to one another over time. It also requires adopting a qualitative approach that deeply captures learners' interactions or discussions online (Fung, 2004). Another research gap is that most of the above studies on Facebook in writing focused on the effectiveness of Facebook and learners' perception of it as a tool for writing through pre-and post-tests and questionnaires. Only a few studies have looked at learners' interactions in peer writing/peer review through Facebook (Razak & Saeed, 2014; Saeed et al., 2018; Yen et al., 2018).

In a recent study on the effect of Facebook groups in peer writing, Altunkaya and Topuzkanamis (2018) found that the experimental group of students using the Facebook group performed better in writing and displayed more positive attitudes towards peer writing than the control group. Yet, Facebook-based peer writing did not significantly affect learners' writing self-efficacy and writing anxiety. In another study (Fithriani et al., 2019), Facebook was found to be effective in peer writing for it plays a role in promoting students' confidence, increasing their participation in writing activities, and improving their writing through feedback exchange. According to Ramadhani (2018), the application of Facebook in writing played a role in facilitating learners' writing process, especially through the commenting feature. Facebook also plays a role in fostering learners' motivation in peer writing and rendering peer writing an enjoyable experience for learners (Friatin, 2018). Also, these studies have supported the role of Facebook groups as interactive environments for collaborative learning and writing, most of these studies have reported findings obtained from students' perception while ignoring learners' interactions in Facebook groups. Moreover, no single study has focused on how teachers can facilitate learners' interactions in Facebook groups. Therefore, the next section provides a review of the literature on how teachers contribute to learners' online discussions.

### ***TEACHER'S ROLES IN LEARNERS' ONLINE DISCUSSIONS***

Online learning discussions have been reported to be effective for students' critical thinking and deep engagement with learning tasks. Yet, students are often challenged by misunderstanding, uncertainty

about directions of their online discussions, overwhelming numbers of comments or messages to reads and their reduced motivation to take part in online discussions over time (Rovai, 2007). Therefore, research emphasized the role of instructors/teachers in facilitating online discussions for learners. They have also raised important questions: "how can teachers make sure that what goes on in the digital environments meets the intended educational goal of the activity unless they go online themselves?, and how could they best support their students' efforts?" (Asterhan & Schwarz, 2010, p. 260). There are several studies that have partially answered these questions by investigating the roles of teachers/instructors in online learning discussions. To do so, some of these studies have looked at the patterns of teacher's/instructor's comments on students' discussions. According to Maor (2003), although findings on this topic seem contradicting, one common thing is that teacher should act as a facilitator of online learning discussions rather controlling the discussions. In a study by Berge (1995), teacher's role in online discussions varies from pedagogical to social and even technical. Moreover, T. Anderson et al. (2001) reported that such patterns of comments used overlap and vary from identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses, encouraging or reinforcing contributions, setting a climate for discuss, assessing the efficacy of the process, and promoting discussions.

In another study (Park et al., 2015), the findings show that teachers varied their roles from managing the discussions, switching topics, providing information, and seeking clarifications to commenting on social aspects and opening and closing discussions. In a recent study (Alghasab et al., 2019), the researchers reported various functions of instructor's comments on students' collaborative writing discussions via Wiki, including setting collaborative ground, guiding learners through the steps of writing, giving praises on students' contributions, giving feedback, promoting contributions, acting as an editor, adopting the role of monitor, and suggesting resources. This study also suggests that the type of role assumed by teachers affects the way learners interact in online discussions. The above issues and gaps in earlier research suggest the need to use a content analysis of learners' online posts and comments in peer review through Facebook as this will contribute to better understand the patterns of interactions among learners and the role of instructors in promoting learners' interactions in online group discussions.

Therefore, this motivated us to explore nine English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' online participation in collaborative writing discussions via a Facebook group over a period of three months. We assume that interactive online learning (learning that involves learners in interactions) results in an increasing intensity of learners' online participation (increasing the number of commentary exchanges) over time as well as their sense of online learning community (Razak & Saeed, 2014). Specifically, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the kinds of comments exchanged by the EFL learners in the online group writing discussions through a Facebook group over the period of the study?
- (2) How does the teacher/instructor facilitate learners' online participation in the peer writing discussions through the Facebook group over the study period?
- (3) In what ways do the EFL learners view the role of the Facebook-facilitated peer writing activities in promoting their online participation over the study period?

## **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

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A qualitative case study approach was used to frame the current study. The purpose was to better describe and understand learners' development of an online learning community based on their interactions and reflections on their experience in participating in online collaborative review of writing in a Facebook group and beyond the college class-room context over a period of three months. Then, the researchers quantified the qualitatively identified interaction commenting patterns and text revisions for measuring their intensity of participation over the three sessions.

### *THE FACEBOOK GROUP AND PARTICIPANTS*

A Facebook group was created by two university instructors for the purpose of enhancing EFL Arab learners' learning experience and participation in an online undergraduate writing course through interactions, communication, and valuable daily activities in writing (Figure 1). We selected the Facebook group as the research tool integrated into the online writing course though the course comprises other electronic tools. The reasons behind our selection of this SNS are the easiness for the instructors to post and mentor the group activities by tracking learners' interaction in the activities and the effectiveness of Facebook groups as online learning environments/communities where learners are able to post learning activities, comment on activities, discuss various learning topics, notify one another of new posts, and even react to such posts (Aaen & Dalsgaard, 2016; Deng & Tavares, 2013; Lantz-Andersson, 2013; Pimmer et al., 2012; Razak & Saeed, 2014). They can also access such groups using their mobile phones. Facebook, like any other technological tool, is not without any disadvantages or limitations such as distraction of learners' focus on their learning activities especially in groups where the mass of interactions is high and with a large number of participants being more oriented towards socialization rather than learning and the misuse of the language or abuse of information as reported in some previous studies (e.g., Aydin, 2012; Kabilan et al., 2010). However, in this study, the online peer review activities were mentored by the two instructors and the learners were instructed on avoidance of such abuse of the language or misuse of it, especially in their revisions of writing.

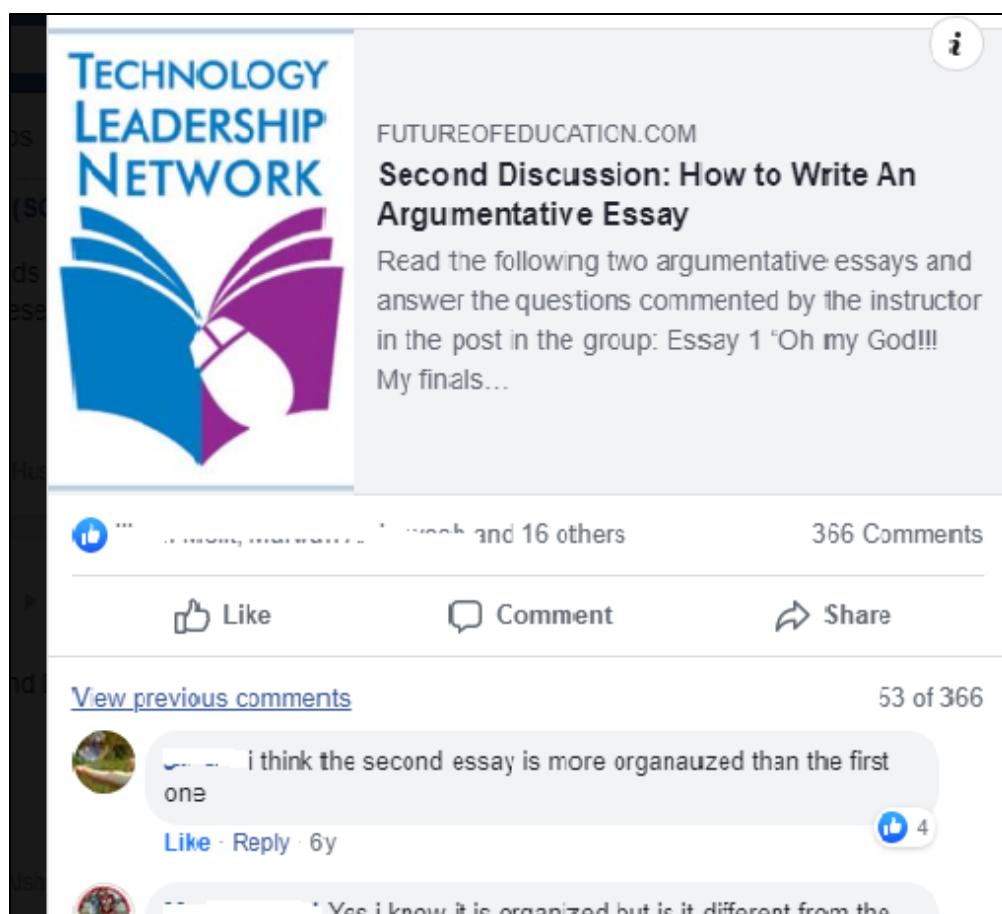


Figure 1. A Screenshot of Learners' Facebook Discussion

The study was carried out among nine EFL university learners who were joining a distance writing course as part of their undergraduate English program at university. With this small number of participants (Rovai, 2002a), it is possible to avoid any critical mass that hinders learners' good interactions and becomes less challenging for the instructor to monitor and facilitate learners' online participation. The learners were selected as a case study since they were joining this distance undergraduate course. Moreover, the instructors of the course were acting as mentors who facilitated the online participation. Due to the gender segregation at the university in the context of the current study, the students participating in this study were all females.

### *PEER WRITING THROUGH FACEBOOK*

The study focused on peer writing activities among the participants through the Facebook group over three months. The aim of carrying out these virtual peer writing activities was to help the EFL learners to learn from each other or support each other through online interactions. Online interactions function as the mechanism through which learners discuss their written tasks and improve their writing. However, no grades or scores were given to the students for the peer writing activities since these activities were carried out beyond the regular writing classes as extra activities for learners to better practice writing at their comfort zone.

Table 1 presents the timeline of the study procedure which was initiated by a creating the Facebook group by the instructors and inviting the learners to join it. This was followed by discussing the learners' needs in writing, dividing the nine learners into three groups (each group would write its own argumentative essay later), selecting topics for their three essays, writing the first drafts of the three essays, reviewing the three essays as one group, and ending with the nine learners having online interviews on their online learning experience. The learners were also informed that their online participation in the peer review activities in the Facebook group would be used for research purposes and the information would be confidential in our announcing of the group discussions. Although the activities include pre-writing and writing, the findings reported in the present study are exclusive to the peer review activities starting from the 2nd week to the 11th week.

**Table 1. Timeline of the study procedure**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Period</b>
Creating the Facebook Group and inviting the learners	1st Week
Discussion on Learners' Needs in Writing	1st Week
Selecting Topics for their Essays	1st Week
Pre-Writing and Writing the Essays	1st Week
Essay Peer Review Session 1	2nd Week-4th Week
Essay Peer Review Session 2	5th Week-7th Week
Essay Peer Review Session 3	8th Week to 10th Week
Finalizing the last three versions of essays	11th Week
Online Call Interviews	12th Week

### *DATA COLLECTION*

The current study used three types of data: (1) learners' comments on the posts/discussions of the Facebook groups (also known as interactions on posts by Callaghan and Fribbance (2016), (2) instructor's comments in the online group discussions, and (3) learners' responses to the interviews as reflections on their online learning experience. The learners' interactions on the asynchronous peer review discussions/posts in the Facebook group (the posts were initiated by one of the three writers of each essay) were collected from the start of the activities, organized, and stored in Microsoft Word files. Moreover, the changes or text revisions made by the learners to the essays following each group discussion were also highlighted and stored in Microsoft Word files. For the online voice call interviews, the learners were interviewed individually through online chats using the Facebook messenger.



Each interview session lasted around 20 minutes. The questions for reflection were administered to them by the researcher via the Facebook messenger chat (see the Appendix).

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

Since the literature indicates that learners' online participation is concerned with the content of learners' interactions/comments, a qualitative content analysis of the data was initiated earlier during the data collection. The first level of analysis focused on the learners' comments in terms of the foci: on-task, around-task, and off-task based on a previous study on online asynchronous interactions in group writing (Saeed & Ghazali, 2017). While the first category refers to comments focusing on the written texts, the second category consists of those comments focusing on the procedure of revising itself, and the third category comprises comments focusing on aspects irrelevant to the task and the procedure (socio-emotional aspects of online learning) (See the samples provided in the result section). The unit of analysis of learners' comments used in this study was the individual idea or theme expressed by the learners. Moreover, the text revisions made by the students to their first drafts of essays were coded in terms of the aspects of writing they were intending to improve: content, organization, language, and spelling and punctuation. The patterns of comments under these three categories of learners' interactions also were quantified in order to measure the intensity of the learners' participation at the group's and individual's levels over the three sessions of peer writing discussions. In measuring each individual's intensity of online participation, each learner's comments were calculated. Table 2 presents the number of comments and text revisions posted by each individual learner over the three sessions of the current study.

**Table 2. Learners' intensity of online participation over the three sessions.**

<b>Learner/ Session</b>	<b>Session 1</b>	<b>Session 2</b>	<b>Session 3</b>
S1	57	63	72
S2	55	67	68
S3	54	55	63
S4	35	50	52
S5	38	41	47
S6	37	45	45
S7	32	50	73
S8	26	34	42
S9	20	20	39
Total	354	435	501

For the teacher's role in facilitating the online peer discussions, we analyzed his comments over the three sessions based on the literature review, including these two studies: T. Anderson et al. (2001) and Alghasab et al. (2019) since these two studies provided various taxonomies that serve as codes for coding instructor's comments on learners' online group discussions in collaborative writing activities. The patterns were somehow similar with different labels in these studies (e.g., explanatory feedback in Anderson et al. 2001, while it is known as formative feedback in Alghasab et al's (2019) study. Using these studies, the instructor's online comments, and most of the patterns provided in these studies are presented in the findings. Furthermore, the patterns of teacher's comments were counted over the three sessions.

In order to answer the third research question, the second level of our qualitative analysis primarily focused on finding out or identifying indicators of the group's learning as a socially situated learning based on the above literature review. For this purpose, we focused our analysis on learners' situated interactions and their reflections on their online learning experience in the Facebook-facilitated peer review of writing over the three months. For their reflections, the online interviews were listened to

several times by one of the researchers and transferred into transcripts. The transcripts were again read by the two independent coders and a thematic analysis was performed.

The data was coded by one of the researchers and another independent researcher in the area of online learning. They had several discussions of the categories of interactions and themes emerging from the data. They also compared their notes on the data and reached agreements about their analysis. At first, they reached a rate of 79% agreement, however, after discussions, the agreement reached 82%.

## FINDINGS

The findings are presented in three main sections according to the three research questions.

### *PATTERNS OF LEARNERS' INTERACTIONAL COMMENTS IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS*

The results obtained from the quantified patterns of learners' comments and text revisions show that the EFL learners' intensity of participation in these online peer review activities increased over the three sessions/three months. This is evidenced by the increasing number and percentage of the on-task, around-task, and off-task comments as well as their text revisions of the essays (Table 3).

**Table 3. Learners' patterns of interactional comments over the three sessions**

Session	On-Task	Around-Task	Off-Task
Session 1	354	57	62
Session 2	435	58	64
Session 3	501	83	178
Total	1290	198	304

First, the EFL learners' on-task comments increased from n=354 comments in the first session to n=435 comments in the second session and even reached to n=501 comments in the third session. The on-task-comments are indicative of learners' focus on the academic aspects of their writing, specifically on their review of writing as illustrated by the following example of comments extracted from the online discussions:

S7 Reading the topic twice requires a Question: how do SNSs change communication? Is it for the good or for the worse?

S9 why should we use question?

S8 To have that as a question gives the reader curiosity and make more interesting so I do agree with u.

S1 Really a great suggestion but what do u mean? Do u have to ask that question in the introduction?

S2 what do u mean? u mean to ask a question in the introduction that serves as the thesis statement?

S4 Yes of course raising a question there is a wow strategy but can u show how it will look like?

S7 I mean it is possible to ask such question in the introduction in order to have that same quest in the minds of readers and make them reflect as well.

Moreover, the learners' involvement on the around-task and off-task interactions increased over the three sessions though the increase in the numbers of these two patterns of comments was not higher than that of the on-task comments. The around-task comments increased from n=57 comments in

the first session to n=58 and 83 comments in the second and third sessions, respectively. The around-task category of learners' commentary exchanges focus on the procedure of revising the task itself (e.g., organizing the task and dividing it among them) as shown in the following example:

S2 Hey u know? Since I am already here, I'll try to come up with some more supporting details for our essay. Sounds good?

S1 Here it is >>>>> , It has been argued that some people misuse these sites in an inappropriate way!

The off-task commentary exchanges, also referring to learners' social interactions that focus on establishing a social context among learners, increased from n=62 comments in the first session to n=64 and 178 comments in the second and third sessions, respectively. While the on-task and around-task commentary exchanges are the learning group dynamics by which learners attended to the contents of the tasks and the procedure of reviewing their essays, respectively, the off-task comments concern aspects and matters irrelevant to the task (e.g., social relations or friendships, affective interactions such as showing respect). As shown in the following example, the off-task comments represent instances in which the EFL learners were interacting and discussing personal matters:

S2 Hi all ♥

S7 oh thank u dear, thanks :) :)

S8 me I am here ^\_\_\_\_\_^ can't you see my wide smile.

S5 ok, have a Great Day all!

S4 that's so kind of u.. Thank u :).

S9 plz don't say thanks we are one family.

S6 welcome! it is my pleasure :))

S1 don't worry your facebook family is always with you.

### ***INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE IN FACILITATING LEARNERS' ONLINE PARTICIPATION***

The findings obtained from the content analysis of instructor's written comments indicate that the instructor diversified the way he constructed such comments. As illustrated in Table 4, the instructor's comments functioned as setting collaborative or group grounds for the EFL learners to engage in online group discussions in writing and guiding students through the process of writing by instructing them on the various steps that they should follow starting from planning their writing to revising it. The instructors also had to act as a feedback provider when students failed to give accurate feedback on certain issues in their writing and also posted questions that caught learners' attention to some issues in writing, sought clarifications of comments exchanged by them, and even checked their certainty about issues or ideas.

Other comments posted by the course instructor served as invitations of individual students' contributions to the group discussions and jointly written essays by calling their names or Facebook ids, praising students for good points and ideas and revisions they posted, and directing individual learners to certain comments posted by peers to reply to such comments. The instructor also acted as a monitor as he thought comments could show to students that he was closely observing and following their online group discussions and activities. In situations when disagreements arose among students, the instructor posted comments that sought learners' attempts to reach consensus. Since group discussions consist of comments that are posted by different individual learners, sometimes comments could have focused on different aspects of writing if they had not been guided by the instructor. So, the instructor kept commenting on focusing the discussions on certain aspects of writing. Finally, providing comments functioning as mini instruction on a certain issue/aspect of writing was required in order to allow learners to better understand it (e.g., giving instruction on a grammar rule related to their essay writing).

**Table 4. Instructor's roles in facilitating learners' online participation**

Patterns/functions	Sample comments
Setting collaborative/ climate grounds	Evening all here, this is our first revision of the argumentative essay written by Group 3. I would like all to work together on commenting it discussing it and revising it well.
Guiding students through writing steps	So start thinking of your topic and think of ideas, post them in the form of points, discuss them and come out with an outline of your essay that later will develop into your first draft.
Providing feedback	It lacks a clear stand of the writer and one more thing>>>> what about connecting the first sentence 2 the 2nd by YR?
Questioning	Great But do you agree that Conceptualizing post- secondary education in relation to life-long successful achievements should rather have multi-dimensional perspectives>>>>> is the thesis statement?
Inviting individual's contribution	Hi ZN can u correct if any mistakes in these new added ideas and details?
Praising	I liked IF's comment since she knew where to connect the core sentences that present the argument.
Directing learners' attention to peer's comments	Hi SA, LT and RE comment on ZS.
Acting as a monitor	This essay is planned to be revised in today's discussion. Please work hard to finish it and come up with the final draft.
Seeking to reach consensus	Hi all do u agree with RE about the supporting sentences?
Focusing the discussions	Hi all now that you have identified a few problems concerning the content and ideas of the essay, could you please try to look at the organization and coherence and discuss it?
Giving instruction	Yup agree with you LT but as told u remember that there are supporting sentences to support the main idea or topic sentence of a paragraph and there r sentences which are specific details of these supporting ideas.

From the results of the quantitative analysis of instructor's contributions to learners' online discussions, Table 5 shows that questioning was the highest or most frequently used pattern of instructor's comment over the three sessions (121), followed by providing feedback (95), praising (80), directing learners' attention to peer's comments (45), focusing the discussions (44), seeking to reach consensus (42), and inviting individual learners' contributions (38), while giving instruction, guiding students through writing steps, acting as a monitor and setting collaborative/climate grounds scored the lowest numbers of occurrence/frequency in the online discussions (26, 24, 23, & 16). Moreover, in each the pattern of function of instructor's comment varies across the three sessions.

**Table 5. Number/frequency of instructor's roles in online discussions**

Patterns/functions	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Total
Setting collaborative/climate grounds	6	4	6	16
Guiding students through writing steps	6	8	10	24
Providing feedback	44	31	20	95
Questioning	38	41	42	121
Inviting individual's contribution	21	10	7	38
Praising	35	22	23	80
Directing learners' attention to peer's comments	27	11	7	45
Acting as a monitor	15	5	3	23

Patterns/functions	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Total
Seeking to reach consensus	28	11	3	42
Focusing the discussions	29	11	4	44
Giving instruction	13	6	7	26
Total	262	160	132	554

### ***LEARNERS' VIEWS ON THE ROLE OF FACEBOOK-FACILITATED PEER WRITING ACTIVITIES IN PROMOTING ONLINE PARTICIPATION***

Based on our analysis of the various types of data, we could identify several themes that illustrate the role of the Facebook group in promoting learners' online participation in the peer review activities, which are discussed in details as follows:

First, the Facebook group promotes the EFL learners' collective understanding of the same or almost shared aims/goals: enhancing their writing skill in English in the Facebook group:

“I joined the group, having in my mind one purpose: learning from peers and the Facebook group helped us to feel such similar aims” (S7).

“We are all joining the Facebook group with one goal: to enhance our English skills, particularly writing” (S2).

Having such shared goals and practices in mind, the learners had their own ways and tools doing their shared practices and, thus, achieving their goals. Based on our analysis of the learners' online peer review activities, we could identify reciprocal exchanges of information and feedback as the main way to achieve their goals. In this regard, the online discussions reveal the learners' reciprocal exchanges of comments carrying information, ideas, and suggestions on their writing as well as text revisions. The following extract of comments shows how S5 and S2 were trying to reciprocally assist each other by seeking and providing suggestions to fix problems or issues in their writing:

S2 Sorry the correct sentence to express an obligation in the past would be ““When I was a little girl, I (wasn't allowed to) talk to strange men as my mom ordered me.””.

S5 Thanks.

S5 hi dear I think it's better to use the PASSIVE form here (serious actions and attempts have to be taken) because one can notice that the doers of the action (subject) are not so clear as they're several and one can't identify all of them (unknown) .

S2 Thank you for your comment on my revision.

Another way is diverse but collective contributions to the final essays. Our analysis of the EFL learners' comments and text revisions demonstrate how individual learners contribute to diverse aspects of their writing (e.g., how each individual learner comments on a diverse problem or aspect of writing). Yet, these diverse views and text revisions are seen as complimentary contributions to the final products of the group (essays). The following comments reflect the learners' diverse problems/issues in writing identified in one essay (e.g., irrelevance of ideas S7, insufficiency of ideas for the argument S2, and lacking coherence S4), yet, collective in the sense that they as one group contributed to revising various aspects of the essay:

Diversity of ideas

S1 In fact; I see it not an argument against / Idea 3: could be better introduced by a sentence.

S2 They are not so sufficient to explain more how SNs affect the one family's members in real life communication!

S4 I think that's the problem as there is no coherence in the ideas between Facebook groups and community of learning.

S1 good dear that we commented on different points!!! :)))

S2 yes this is better than mentioning the same points .Great! :)

The qualitative analysis of the learners' reflections on their online learning experience support the above finding on how their diverse ideas and suggestions as well as text revisions contribute to the entire group's writing or constitute what is called collective learning:

"I tried this with my peers and everyone has his/her own different point of views depending on their background and beliefs" (S9).

"It gives a chance to write with different people and see it from different perspectives" (S1).

"I mean I may need to practice grammar while others need how to write an introduction to a topic for example. All our needs are somehow being satisfied through the process of collective revision practices" (S8).

"I like when others read our work, and give their views, especially when they see the topic from another side, which we didn't notice. So, it's an effective way for evaluating our efforts" (S4).

How the learners engage in online peer review practices is inclusive of the tools used for executing and coordinating these shared practices. Facebook as a technological tool plays an important role in facilitating the learners' execution of the task of peer review through the commenting and replying functions as well as the notification facility by which they can mention the name of the peer they comment on. Based on their reflections, the EFL learners perceived the Facebook group as an effective learning environment where their interactions and discussions are coordinated and where they can reply to each other's comment, share information, discuss it, and easily communicate as an online learning community:

"We shouldn't forget that Facebook helps a lot to have a room to respond to different opinions and ensure a purposeful interaction. "We also get the chance to interact after the final answer is posted, we also get the chance to ask for further explanations" (S9).

"Yes, first, the Facebook itself has this effect and in a community where one can find it easier to interact and be a part of a team" (S2).

"Plus, not just exchanging, but discussing it, which is more interesting" (S1).

"One major thing apart from learning the language is the flexibility in social communication in the Facebook group" (S7).

Some EFL learners' reflections also underlined the perceived role of English as a means of interactions and communication in facilitating their online peer review discussions and enabling them to read others' comments and to articulate their ideas easily:

"It is good to work in a group (collective work and collaboration) where all use only English for interactions. We are using the English language to express our ideas and thoughts by reading and commenting" (S4).

Another important theme emerging from the EFL learners' reflections on their online participation in the Facebook group is the learners' perceived role of online participation in making them feel as active or autonomous learners and promoting their responsibility or commitment to the group work:

"It also makes me feel like I'm having a role, as a learner, in this learning process not only a negative consumer" (S2).

"I learnt the responsibility towards the group writing" (S8).

"I feel like I have a commitment for friends and I have to show up, participate until the end of the activity" (S9).

Another important contribution of Facebook-facilitated peer review activities to their online participation is that engaging in such learning activities fostered their friendships. This is also evidenced by

the above increase intensity of learners' off-task comments over time because such comments are oriented towards friendship and affective interactions:

“Collaboration in the Facebook group helped us to strengthen our friendships and build strong relations as we got different kind of help from each other” (S3).

“Now we know each other better I think and this may not have been possible if we had not had this opportunity to review our writing in the Facebook group” (S8).

## DISCUSSION

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The purpose of this study was to explore EFL learners' online participation in group writing discussions as implicated through their interactional comments through a Facebook group and the role of the course instructor in facilitating their online participation and their views on the Facebook-based group discussions. Specifically, the study aimed to answer three research questions. Regarding the first research question on the types of comments exchanged by the EFL learners in the online group writing discussions through the Facebook group, the findings indicate that the learners engaged in active online participation by exchanging comments on-task, around-task, and off-task. They actively engaged in commenting on the task (e.g., negotiation, questioning, suggestions, clarification, explanation, and elaboration), which assisted them to better understand their essays and contribute to text revisions, and around the task, which helped them to regulate and organize their discussions. As they exchanged off-task comments, they focused on social and emotional aspects, such as socialization, friendships, and communication on personal matters. Moreover, through interactions, learners exchange support, which is the most important element in online discussions explained from Vygotsky's (1980) social learning perspective (Richardson, 2005). It is only through interactions that learners can support each other in accomplishing their tasks (Fung, 2004). In online discussions, learners reciprocally exchange information which helps them to better understand the task (Lai, 2012).

This finding supports the evidence online participation includes learners' interactions on the learning task and their social interactions (Hrastinski, 2008, 2009) that involve engagement in social relations among learners (Hrastinski, 2009; Ke & Hoadley, 2009; Pratt & Back, 2013; Stacey et al., 2004). Another implication of this finding is that, while Facebook is a social network that has been most often associated with communication and socialization, it can be an interactive learning environment, especially when learners engage in tasks in a closed (not public) Facebook group that is specifically designed or created for allowing learners to interact and discuss their tasks beyond the classroom. In this regard, like many other studies (Kabilan et al. 2010; Razak & Saeed, 2014; Shih, 2011; Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi, 2012; Yen et al., 2015), Facebook supports learners' participation in group discussions on writing as learners can comment on the discussion post, comment on a specific comment by peers using the reply function/feature, and exchange feedback and revise their essays. Moreover, Facebook allows learners to receive and exchange comments with instructor (Kurtz, 2014; Saeed et al., 2018).

For the second research question on the instructor's contributions to the online group discussions, it is also interesting that content analysis of instructor's comments reveals the actual roles assumed by him in online group discussions. The findings of the present study demonstrate the role of teacher/instructors in facilitating and even promoting learners' participation through their comments serving different purposes varying from creating a collaborative ground to guiding them through the process, inviting their contributions, focusing the discussions on certain issues in writing to providing feedback, and instructing them on certain topics and points relevant to their written essays. This finding supports findings of earlier studies on the role of instructors'/teachers' comments on students' online discussions in various learning courses, including writing (Alghasab et al., 2019; T. Anderson et al., 2001).

Regarding the third research question about how students view their online peer writing through the Facebook group, the findings of this study indicate the learners came to a point of time when they

could define what they were doing and how they were doing it. This finding was obtained from students' reflection on their work as a group of learners. Therefore, the Community of Practice (CoP) framework was suitable to investigate their online practices from the community perspective. As an online learning community, the learners took part in these online writing discussions with a shared purpose, used English for interactions, engaged in diversity of ideas and contributions to the essays, and developed close friendships over time. Discussing this finding from the CoP perspective (Wenger, 1998), online learning involves social aspects, such as relationships and sense of community (Wenger et al., 2002). In addition, this finding suggests that Facebook itself through features of commenting and replying and group designs plays a role in contributing to learners' development of sense of community (Razak & Saeed, 2014) and social relationships (B Anderson, 2004).

The findings of the current study have technological implications for instructors. In other words, Facebook groups are interactive learning environments (Mills, 2011; Razak & Saeed, 2014), which could be due to the convenient and facilitative features of Facebook groups such as commenting, replying to comments and notifications of one another. These features help learners to feel comfortable in interacting and communicating with each other (Petrovic et al., 2014) and coordinate the flow of their online interactions. The easiness and comfort in using technologies as platforms are important for evolving an online learning community (Wenger et al., 2009). Yet, the tool used is not sufficient to promote learners' discussions with having instructors who facilitate their discussions and promote their interactions in online discussions. Therefore, we argue that whether this online tool can be more advantageous than disadvantageous or vice versa depends on (1) the purpose and nature of learning activities conducted (part of face-to-face or distance learning courses), (2) the online presence of instructors, (3) the size/number of participants, and (4) other factors related to learners themselves (e.g., willingness to participate in the online activities via Facebook). This is not to claim that such tools can be good for engaging a large number of learners in online group learning activities, especially within the possibility of mass and distraction of the high volume of interactions. However, within small number of participants and constant mentoring of learners as a good instructional strategy, Facebook groups can serve the purpose of meaningful and interactive learning. We should also acknowledge that Facebook encourages socialization among learners, which might distract their focus on their learning. However, in our study, the learners' off-task comments, underlying their socialization, could be an indication of their friendship promotion over time, which is important for learners who are physically distanced.

## CONCLUSION

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To conclude, the present study aimed to answer three main research questions centering on the types of comments exchanged by learners in the online peer writing discussions through a Facebook group, instructor's contributions to the online discussions, and learners' views of their engagement in the online peer writing discussions. Concerning the first research question, the findings indicate that through online interactions students can exchange on-task comments. These comments serve as a space for learners to focus on the task of writing by question-response exchanges, suggestions, idea-sharing, and even clarifying intentions. As they interact online, however, learners need to comment around the task; in other words, they exchange comments that help them to organize the process of peer writing and revising. In addition, online interactions involve learners' off-task comments – comments that illustrate learners' focus on matters irrelevant to the task. Although these comments do not show direct contributions to the task itself, they serve learners' social relationships or ties and bonds. These are important for nurturing an online learning community where learners are connected through friendships and social ties that in turn enable them to feel committed to their online learning and pursue it beyond the classroom. However, this may not happen as assumed unless instructors play very important roles as mentors or facilitators of learners' online group discussions. The current study adds to previous research by revealing the various ways in which the instructor contributed to the pursuit of online discussions through comments functioning as building a collaborative ground, guiding students through the process, inviting learners' contributions to the online



group discussions, focusing the discussions on certain issues in writing, and offering feedback and instructing them on certain topics and points related to their tasks. The result of this is learners' positive experience in online group discussions.

## IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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The findings of the current study underlie several implications for theory, pedagogy, and research on online participation. While the findings highlighted the value of investigating EFL learners' online participation from the sociocultural perspective, these findings imply that Facebook groups can be effective learning environments where distance learning learners engage and participate in useful learning activities. Learners' sense of community can partly minimize their feeling of separation and foster their pursuit of online participation. As argued by Callaghan and Fribbance (2016), Facebook-facilitated discussions are illustrative of important components of Wenger's community of learning, including shared goals, shared practices, tools, and means for interactions and communication and sense of community. Although there are several limitations in this study, such as the small number of participants, the length of the study period, and the fact that the effect of online participation on learners' writing was not considered in this study, this study stands as the first study which delves into exploring online participation in peer review activities from a theoretical ground that combines both the sociocultural and situated learning perspectives. In addition, this study identified the roles of the course instructor in facilitating online group discussions. Yet, it did not address how each role has contributed or promoted learners' online interactions. Therefore, this can be a very interesting research topic for future studies since it will enable us to better understand how learners' online interaction is affected by the roles of instructors. In conclusion, future research should further investigate the potential of Facebook groups in sustaining online learning communities among a large sample of EFL university learners and over a longer period of time.

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## APPENDIX: QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

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- (1) These activities were extra activities in your university online writing course, so why did you continue participating since you are not graded for them?
- (2) Do you think that these writing activities reflect your similar things that you share in common with your friends? What are these similar things? Explain.
- (3) What do you think of the interactions in these peer review activities in relation to your learning as a group? Explain and give examples please.
- (4) In what do you see the process of sharing ideas and information in these online activities contributes to your learning and feeling of yourself as a group?
- (5) You have participated in these activities with distanced peers. So how do you feel about them now after the activities?
- (6) In what ways do you think that these activities have helped you to develop such connections or attachment to your peers?
- (7) Any other things that you may liked or disliked about the use of Facebook groups for peer review activities?

## BIOGRAPHY

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