Viability of Social Network Sites as Access to English Language Interactive Learning: Assessment of 'English Language Clinic Forum' on *Facebook*

Adenike Akinjobi
Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
nikjob@yahoo.com; aa.akinjobi@ui.edu.ng

Abstract

Though there are negative reactions to students' membership of social network sites, they have been observed to be significant means of self-motivated learning. 'English Language Clinic Forum', a virtual interactive education page, essentially designed with the aim of aiding non-native users to approximate to Standard British English (SBE), was created on Facebook to test this claim. 'Questionnaires were administered on two hundred and forty members of the group after nine months of inception to assess whether or not the interactive page is making an impact on members' use of English. The results revealed that 85 percent claimed that interaction on the page enables proficiency in the use of the English, 76 percent agreed that posts by members are educative, 92 percent approved that the page captures the interactive and practical use of English while 59 percent claimed that it has the potential to assist members in approximating to SBE. The results also showed that members' knowledge of English vocabulary (70 percent), writing (77 percent), grammar (93 percent), spelling (83 percent), reading (79 percent) and pronunciation (51 percent) improved after joining the forum. The administrative method of allowing exhaustive discussion of threads, reaching conclusions on posts, posting conclusions periodically, and allowing members to correct one another's posts and comments, were found effective. This study found social network sites as a potential interactive learning access and recommends their use by English language teachers as complements to the physical classroom activities to enable extensive and effective knowledge transmission as well as self-motivated learning.

Key words: Viability, social network, interactive learning, English Language clinic Forum, Standard British English

1.0   Background to the Study

There are now several online virtual learning sites aimed at improving learners, since technological advancements have allowed educators the opportunity to bring the international world to the student body (Dillenbourg & Schneider, 1995; Gould and Unger, 2010; Donald, 2010; Gardner, 2010, Kressler, 2012; Eakins, 2012). However, social network sites were described as 'frivolous time-wasting distractions from schoolwork' (Gardner, 2010:2). In recent times however, social network sites have been considered possible accesses to social integration and self-motivated learning. Of these sites, *Facebook* has been assessed as the most 'instantly and universally popular' because:

> the social networking site is heavily utilised in business, politics
> music and more. It is especially popular among teenagers and
> college students (Gardner, 2010: 2).

Therefore, as a practical test of the feasibility of e-learning on social network sites, especially for second language learners and users, the 'English Language Clinic Forum' was created on 18th November, 2011 as a group on *Facebook*. It is essentially designed to meet with the problems associated with communication in the English language, in the colloquial as well as the technical sense of it. The virtual interactive learning forum is aimed at making members learn by interaction, with the end goal of assisting them to approximate to Standard British English. The intervention covers the basic aspects of language, such as grammar, spelling, lexis, writing and pronunciation. Group members are managed by strict formal rules that prohibit 'cyber-language' and personal abbreviations. Members are also encouraged to be formal and courteous in addressing other members, especially with the freedom rule which permits members to correct anyone's post, including the administrator's. Posts and comments are discussed extensively before conclusions are reached, with posts closed with comments from experts in the various English linguistic areas.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the viability of social network sites as access to the interactive learning of the English language. English Language Clinic forum was created as a model for testing this interactive learning with the goal of enabling members to approximate to standard use of English, though they might not attain native speaker proficiency. Issues such as members' awareness of the objectives and rules governing the forum, members' entrance and sustained impression, interactive activities at the forum, self-

evaluation of gains, especially in relation to English language communication skills, constitute the concern of this study. This is to obtain an objective assessment of the forum in terms of its contribution to the improvement of the use of English, especially by second language and foreign language users of English. The study assumes that the results will prompt teachers of English to explore the social network sites as complements to the physical classroom activities.

1.2   Significance of the Study
Present technological developments have improved teaching and learning, and internet resources have been a tremendous part of the contribution. This study therefore will expose teachers and students of English, as well as other users, to the prospects of improving the learning and use of English through virtual complementary sources. This has implication for greater proficiency and international intelligibility as well as bridging the gap between Standard English and other varieties.

2.0   Review of Literature
This review of literature discusses the basic topics that are essential to the research and the contributions they make as well as the perspective of present research as an addition to the body of literature.

2.1   English as a World and Internet Language
Gupta (1997) claims that sociolinguists such as Moag have grouped countries into three categories according to the dominant pattern of English use within them: *English as a native language* (mothertongue speakers such as Britons, Americans, Australians); *English as a second language* (non-native users who learn English after their mothertongue, use it in schools and as an official language such as India, Singapore, Ghana, Philippines); *English as a foreign language* (non-native speakers who mostly learnt it at school and hardly ever use it outside the English lesson context such as France, Japan, Thailand). Considering these, the importance of English as a world language can no longer be contested because of the aids of statistical facts on the spread of English all over the globe (Gupta, 1997; Crystal, 2003). Mydan (2007) claims that English rides on the crest of globalisation and technology to dominate the world like no language has and that 'some linguists are now saying it may never be dethroned as the king of languages'. English has been identified as the language spoken by the greatest number of non-native speakers estimated at 250 million to 350 million non-native speakers (*Ethnologue* ,2005; Vistawide, 2012)

Many factors such as colonisation and others have been listed as responsible for this development but paramount among these, especially in recent times, is the function of English as the language of cyberspace. Internet world statistics have revealed that traditionally, English has been the 'lingua franca' of the internet.

Figure 1

Top Ten Languages in the Internet 2010 – in millions of users
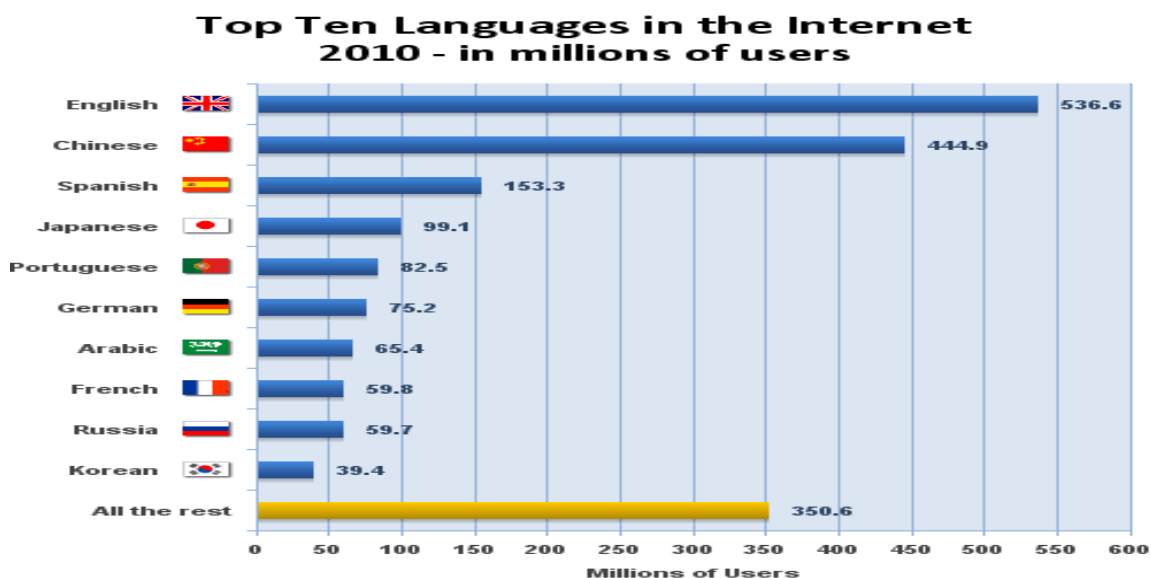
Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm
Estimated Internet users are 1,966,514,816 on June 30, 2010
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Present recognition of the world Englishes (Kachru, 1986; Jenkins, 2003, Crystal, 2007) makes the advancement of the methods by which English is learned very important because no matter how 'variant' a variety of a language is, it must maintain intelligibility with the mother language, else, it becomes a totally different

language. This study of the viability of a social network site's interactive learning page, recorgnises the need to advance the method of teaching/learning English through the exploitation of technology, especially by second and foreign language learners and users.

2.2.   Social Network Sites and Learning

A social networking site is a web-based site which facilitates the creation of social networks or social relations among people who share common interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections. *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Google plus* are a few examples of social network sites. Launched in 2004, Facebook became the largest social network site in the world in 2009 (Rosenbush, 2005). As of June 2012, *Facebook* has over 955 million active users, more than half of them using *Facebook* on a mobile device (Sengupta, 2012). As with other social network sites, *Facebook* has additional features that enable the creation of groups that share common interests or affiliations and hold discussions in forums.

Social network services have been found to provide new opportunities for enriching existing curriculum through creative, authentic and/or flexible, non-linear learning experiences (Mason, Robin, Rennie and Frank, 2008; Buzzetto-More, 2010).According to Doering, Beach and O'Brien (2007), a future English curriculum needs to recognize a major shift in how adolescents (as well as adults) are communicating with each other. They explain that responding to the popularity of social networking services among many students, teachers are increasingly using social networks to supplement teaching and learning in traditional classroom environments. Because many students are already using a wide range of social networking sites, teachers have begun to familiarize themselves with this trend in order to leverage student interest in relation to curriculum content. These include creating chat-room forums and groups to extend classroom discussion, posting assignments, tests and quizzes as well as assisting with homework outside the classroom setting.

 Despite the negative impression the social network services have portrayed as distracting such that they are banned in certain schools (Baracks, 2009; Gardner, 2012), some have argued in favour of their prospects for interactive learning, proposing that the most effective learning system will be hybrids, using conventional settings with a mixture of some virtual features as well as inculcating a fine blend of social learning with academic learning (Walkden and Sharp; 2000; Yan Yu, Vogel, Kwok, 2011). It has also been discovered that students who would not normally participate in class are more apt to partake through social network services and that networking allows participants the opportunity for just-in-time learning and higher levels of engagement (Luo, Tian; Gao, Fei, 2012).

Some experimental studies have revealed the potentials of social network sites for facilitating learning. Yan Yu, Vogel, Kwok (2011) employs the social integration theory in developing a conceptual model to explain how college students' online social networking (i.e., using *Facebook*) influences their social and academic social integration, and learning outcomes. Several rounds of focus group discussions were conducted to explore college students' current online social networking experience and their attitude toward using Facebook for education. Their findings indicate that students' online social networking is straightforwardly influential to their social learning, while its influence on the academic learning might be realised through a gradual and longitudinal process.

Eakin (2012) also carried out a quasi-experimental study making a French 3 class use SKYPE, a web-based video communication tool, to communicate with native French speakers. After three weeks of communication with the host family, the subjects were asked to complete a short survey that elicited the levels of student involvement, participation, and collaboration. They claim the students, who constituted the subjects for the study, responded positively, expressing feelings of more involvement and interest in the SKYPE lessons compared with non- *SKYPE* lessons.

Present study is using a *Facebook* page, English Language Clinic Forum, to assess the potential of social network sites as access to interactive learning as a complement to physical classroom activities, especially for non-native English users.

3.0   Methodology

A questionnaire was administered on two hundred and forty (240) members of the forum which constituted the sample for this research. The questionnaire consisted of Sections A,B,C,D,E and F. Section A consists of demographic questions covering occupation, qualification, age, gender and where the subjects live. Section B covers the time and process of joining the forum as well as the entrance and sustained impression. It also contains a set of Yes/No questions on active/inactive membership and familiarisation with the rules and objectives of the forum. Section C, D, E and F employ a 1-4 interval scale which ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree on the general issues arising from the forum. Such included the assessment of the interactive learning activities at the forum, and whether or not there was an improvement of their basic language skills.

The copies of the questionnaire were collated on return, based on the responses of the respondents. The items were entered in numbers and converted to simple percentages; the higher percentage taken as norm. Columns

and pie charts were constructed on the results from core issues relating to the study, using Microsoft office Excel 2007.

4.0   Data Analysis

The results from the data are presented in the following section.

4.1. Demographic Data

Table 1

Occupation	Student 81%			Worker 19%		
Qualification	JSS-	SSS 11%	Undergrad 59%	Grad 29%		Ph.D 1%
Age	13-15 -		16-25 56%	25-40 34%	40-50 8%	51- 2%
Gender	Male 62%			Female 38%		
Location in Nigeria	North 6%		South/West 78%	South/East 13%		Others 3%

 Constituting a majority, 81 percent of the subjects for the study were students while 19 percent were workers. Majority of the subjects were undergraduates (59 percent), 29 percent were graduates, 11 percent Senior Secondary School students while one percent were PhDs. Majority, constituting 56 percent, were aged between 16 and 25 years, 34 percent between 25 and 40 years old, eight percent between 40 and 50 and a negligible 2 percent above 51. The males constituted the majority at 62 percent and the females at 38 percent. Most of the members are from the South-west (78 percent) while for South East there is 13 percent, North six percent and other parts of the country, three percent.

4.2   General Responses

Table 2

When members joined the forum	7-9 months ago 22%	4-6 months ago 26%		Less than 4 months ago 52%	
How members joined the forum	Administrator 12%	Friend 27%	Colleague at school 13%	Colleague at work 5%	Sent a request 46%
Entry impression	Impressed 88%		Not impressed 8%	Indifferent 4%	
Sustained impression	Discouraged -		Interested 98%	Remained indifferent 2%	

Most of the members (52 percent) joined the forum less than four months ago, 26 percent, 4 to 6 months ago while 22 percent joined at its inception 7 to 9 months ago. Most of them joined by sending requests(46 percent), 27 percent were added by friends, 13 percent by colleagues at school, 12 percent by the administrator while five percent were added by colleagues at work. At joining the forum, 88 percent were impressed, eight percent not impressed, while four percent were indifferent. However, 98 percent sustained their interest while two percent who claimed they were not active members, remained indifferent.

Table 3

QUESTIONS	YES	NO
Are you an active member of the ELC forum?	64%	36%
Do you know the objective of the forum?	94%	6%
Are you familiar with the rules guiding discussions at the forum?	94%	6%
Did you read the rules as soon as you became a member?	49%	51%

Sixty four percent of the subjects claimed they were active members of the forum while 36 percent claimed they were inactive. Majority (94 percent) know the objectives and are familiar with the rules guiding discussions at the forum. Forty-nine percent (49 percent) did not read the rules as soon as they became members while 51 percent did.

Table 4

STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD
There is a lot to benefit from the ELC forum.	89%	26%	-	-
More people should be informed about the ELC forum.	89%	26%	-	-
The discussions on the threads are not too technical and difficult to understand.	65%	31%	4%	-

Majority of the subjects (89 and 26 percent, respectively) strongly agreed and agreed that there is a lot to benefit from the forum and that more people should be informed about it. Majority strongly agreed and agreed (65 and 31 percent, respectively) that the discussions on the thread were not too technical and difficult to understand.

Table 5

| STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD
The ELC forum has made my membership on Facebook more rewarding because it has enabled me socialise and learn at the same time.	78%	18%	4%	-
My opinion is that members post at the ELC forum to improve their general use of English, not strictly as English linguists.	78%	5%	13%	4%
I find the discussion threads very interesting.	42%	58%	-	-
I find the conclusions that are posted periodically very useful.	44%	56%	-	-
I have invited a lot of friends.	27%	25%	26%	22%
My friends find the forum very useful and tell me so.	51%	37%	2%	10%

Seventy eight and 18 percent of the subjects (constituting 96 percent) had positive responses to the issue of how rewarding the English language clinic has made their use of *facebook* since it enables them to socialise and learn at the same time. Only a negligible four percent claimed it had not. Seventy eight and five percent of the respondents supported the opinion that members post at the forum to improve their use of English, not strictly as English linguists, while a negligible 13 percent and four percent disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement. Forty-two percent and 58 percent, constituting 100 percent of the respondents, supported the statement that the discussion threads are interesting while 44 percent and 56 percent, also constituting 100 percent, found the conclusions posted periodically very useful. Twenty seven percent and 25 percent positive responses (constituting 52 percent) strongly agreed and agreed that they invited a lot of friends while 26 percent and 22 percent (constituting 48 percent) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the claim. A remarkable 88 percent claimed their friends found the forum useful while a negligible two percent and 10 percent (constituting 12 percent) disagreed with the statement.

4.3.   Analysis of Core Responses

Table 6

| STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD
The forum enables proficiency in the general use of English.	85%	15%	-	-
The answers provided by members are quite educative.	76%	24%	-	-
The forum adequately captures the interactive and practical use of English.	92%	5%	3%	-
This page has exposed me to the fact that I can approximate standard use of English though I may not be perfect.	59%	41%	-	-

Figure 2
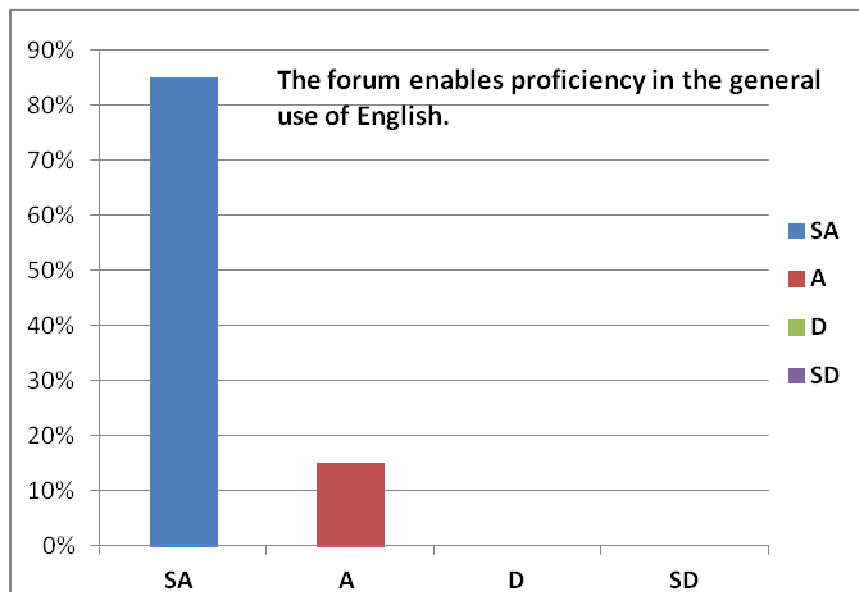
Eighty five percent and 15 percent, constituting 100% of the subjects strongly agreed and agreed that the English language Clinic Forum enables proficiency in the general use of English while none disagreed or strongly disagreed with the claim.

Figure 3
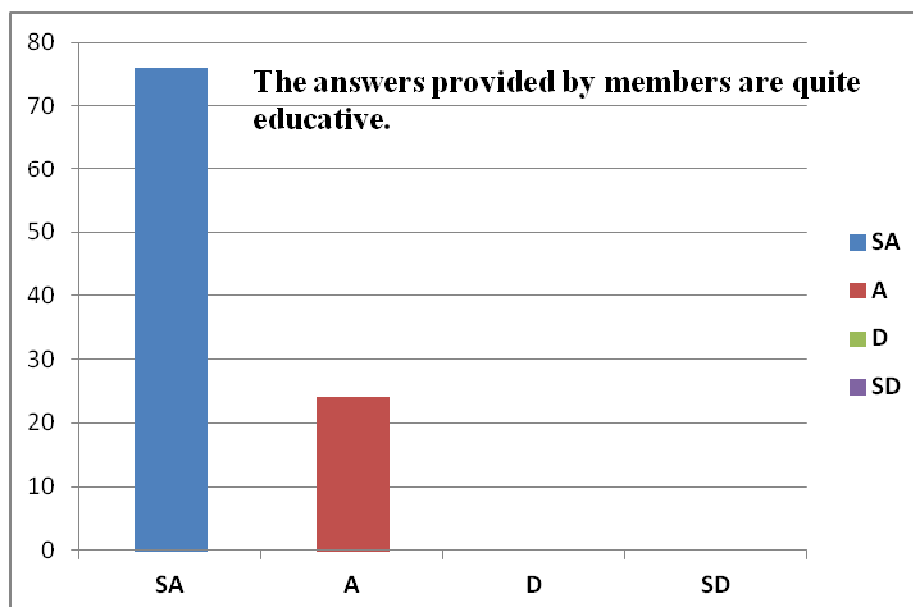
The answers provided by members were strongly agreed and agreed upon (76 and 24 percent, respectively) as educative by all subjects while none disagreed or strongly disagreed with the claim.

Figure 4

The forum adequately captures the interactive and practical use of English
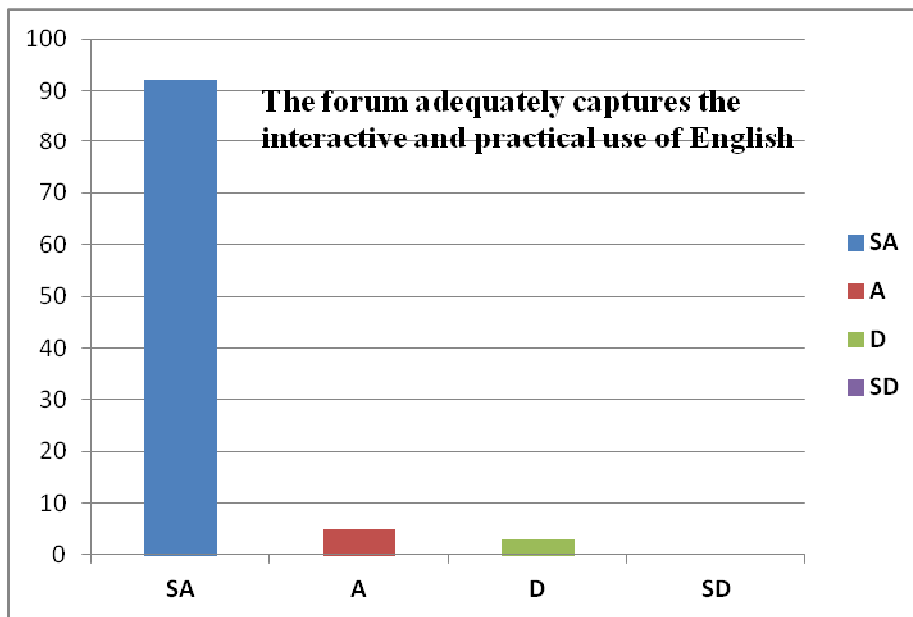
Ninety two and 13 percent, constituting 100 percent of the subjects, strongly agreed and agreed that the forum captures the interactive and practical use of English while none disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Figure 5

Potential to aid the approximation of
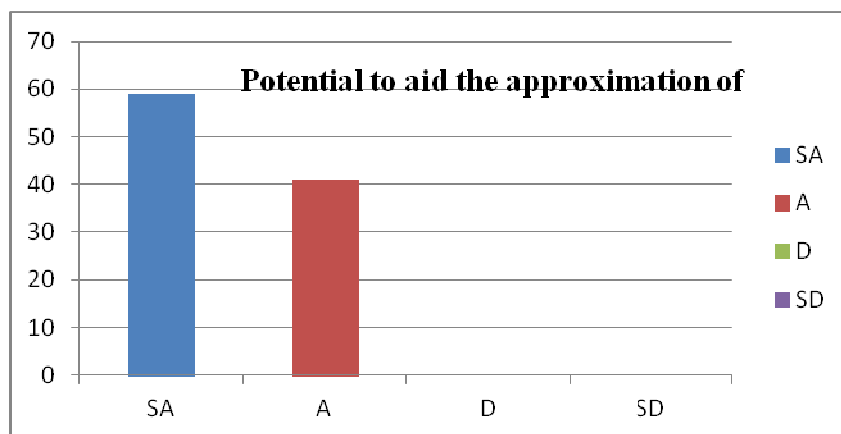
All the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that the English Language Clinic Forum has the potential to aid members' approximation of Standard English though they might not attain the native speakers' level of proficiency.

4.4.   Aspects of the English Language

Table 7

STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD
The ELC forum has helped my writing skills.	13%	64%	13%	10%
The forum has improved my grammar.	33%	60%	7%	-
The forum has improved my vocabulary.	42%	28%	16%	14%
The forum has influenced my reading skill in a way.	25%	54%	21%	-
The forum has influenced my pronunciation skill in a way.	27%	24%	16%	23%

The subjects' responses to the specific questions on aspects of the English language reveal the following:
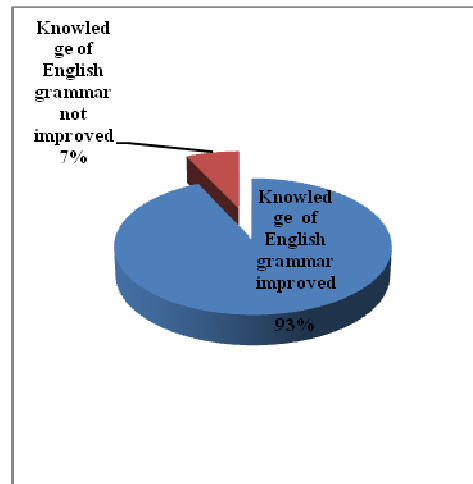
Figure 6
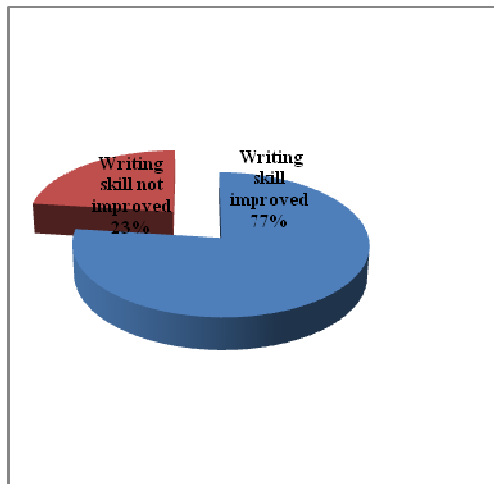
Figure 7

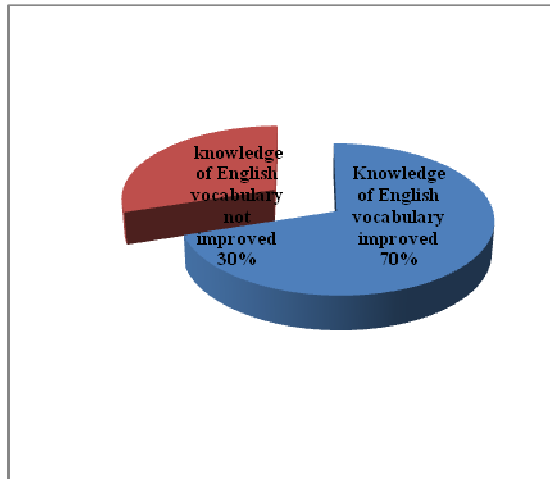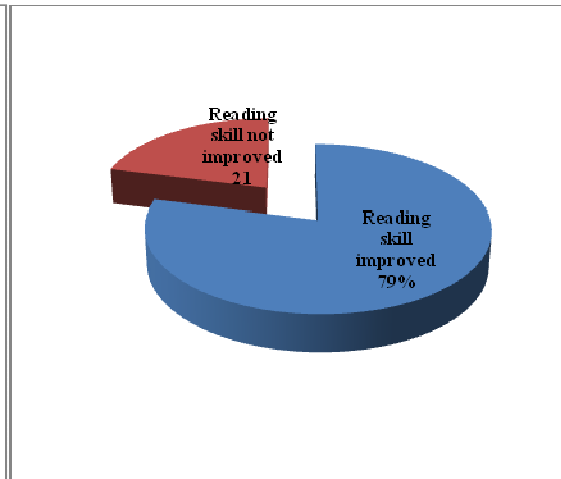**Figure 8**   **Figure 9**
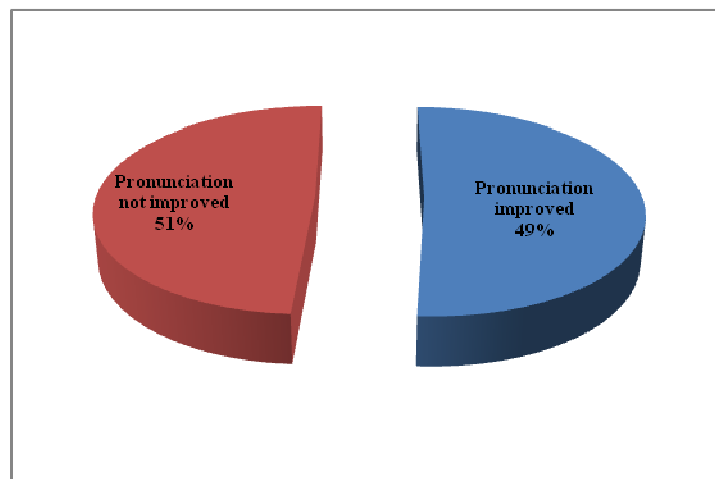

Figure 10

Majority of the respondents claimed their knowledge of English vocabulary (70 percent), writing (77 percent), grammar (93 percent), reading (79 percent) and pronunciation (51 percent) improved after joining the interactive forum. However, the difference between those who strongly agreed and agreed, and those who disagreed and strongly disagreed is marginal for pronunciation because pronunciation is given the least attention in the forum, being more of a practical aspect than the others. The only intervention on this aspect is the provision on hints to good pronunciation rather than the provision of physical pratice drills.

5.   Findings

This study on the viability of the 'English Language Clinic Forum' on *Facebook* as access to interactive learning of the English Language found out that majority of the members are students which makes the social network platform ideal for recommendation to teachers to exploit. It was discovered that members were impressed when they joined the forum and their interest were sustained months after. The findings also reveal that interaction on the page enables proficiency in the use of the English. Posts by members have been found to be educative as well as capturing the interactive and practical use of English. It has also been discovered to have the potential to assist members in approximating standard use of English.

On specific aspects of the English Language, it was discovered that the interactive learning forum assists adequately with the improvement of members' knowledge of English vocabulary, writing, grammar, reading and pronunciation. The administrative method of allowing exhaustive discussion of threads, reaching conclusions on posts, posting conclusions periodically, as well as allowing members to correct one another's posts and comments, were found effective.

6.   Conclusion

This study confirms the findings of previous researches (Yan Yu, Vogel, Kwok, 2011; Eadin, 2012) that social network sites are potential means of social and academic learning. It is therefore recommended that social network sites be explored by English language teachers as complements to the physical classroom activities to enable extensive and effective knowledge transmission as well as self-motivated learning, especially in this age when virtual interaction is fast becoming more realistic than physical, and majority of the students have 'escaped' to the social network sites. If the page is made open, we will be extending this service to others aside the students as a means of offering free tuition to assist in expanding the world frontier of knowledge and in consequence, "we will change the world."

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