

Multimedial ways of learning languages: how online communities promote English learning

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Abstract

Research on the effectiveness of online interaction and the tools available for English learning is a relatively new domain in the current field of linguistics. Various acts from building one's identity, creating a sense of community and getting to a common understanding through negotiation and meaning-making processes, contribute to users developing English skills in several ways in an online landscape. Learning groups in many networking sites demonstrate how English can be learned through an active membership in such a community. Learning methods do not limit to learning new words since learning groups may provide their users with other societal benefits, like identity construction, that further promote language learning. Media sites differ on their interaction styles, which is why an analysis of the activities taking place on such sites is vital to understand online interaction. Three sites, Facebook, Twitter and Discord, are researched in order to compare findings, methods and their effectiveness comprehensively. This thesis will investigate these social networks and how they help users improve their English skills.

Tutkimus englannin kielen oppimiseen verkkoympäristöissä tapahtuvien keskustelujen ja välineiden kautta on suhteellisen uusi tutkimuskenttä lingvistiikassa. Monet aktiviteetit identiteetin, yhteisöllisyyden ja yhteisymmärrykseen saapumisesta neuvottelemisen ja merkitysten luomisen kautta vaikuttavat englannin kielen oppimiseen monella tavalla verkkoympäristössä. Englannin oppimiseen keskittyvät ryhmät verkkosivuilla osoittavat, kuinka englantia voi oppia niiden jäsenyyden yhteydessä. Oppiminen ei rajoitu uusien sanojen oppimiseen, sillä oppimisryhmät voivat tarjota jäsenilleen yhteisöllisiä hyötyjä, kuten identiteetin käsitteellistämistä, jotka edelleen edistävät kielen oppimista. Mediasivustot eroavat vuorovaikutustavoiltaan, minkä vuoksi niissä tapahtuvien toimintojen analysointi on olennaista verkkovuorovaikutusten ymmärtämiseksi. Kolme verkkopalvelua, Facebook, Twitter ja Discord, on valittu tutkittavaksi voidaksemme vertailla tuloksia, menetelmiä ja niiden toimivuutta kattavasti. Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii näitä sosiaalisia verkostoja, ja kuinka ne auttavat parantamaan niiden käyttäjien englannin kielen taitojaan.

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1 Introduction

Technological advancements have made it easier to improve a variety of skills. Current online tools, resources and programs can make learning an engaging and exciting activity. For example, social media allows people to stay in contact with each other, socialize and create understanding of the world. With access to such an extensive amount of information and tools, learners of a foreign language can actively make use of their target language as well as publish their own texts to specific communities (Chan, 2011, p. 12).

English learning, for instance, can be very spontaneous and inconspicuous activity through media. The ability to utilize English has been found to improve through online interactions. Visiting and using English sites is increasingly common and they influence people to subtly learn English by being exposed to it actively. Furthermore, online learning differs from traditional mass media setting, since online language learning is not always supervised by a teacher, but instead occurs across different participants that communicate with each other in different ways (Nielsen, Danielsen & Sørensen, 2002). Additionally, in comparison to a traditional Finnish classroom setting where there are people around the same age and mostly similar ethnical background, online tools provide an alternative way of learning. Internet has immense potential to educate people (Nielsen et al., 2002), and it provides many communication possibilities that encourage cross-cultural exchanges and learning situations. Recent researches have proven that the growth of Internet has changed how information is presented (Lamy & Zoley, 2013, p. 15) as well as how media has always been a part of foreign language education (Chan, 2011, p. 69). Learning a language online can take place instinctively, but there are also many online groups that are dedicated exclusively for this purpose.

While social media can expose their users to English, certain groups in social media can further help their members improve in it. Members can discuss between each other, share pictures and interact in several ways in a foreign language. Not only can these groups be a good way to attract users from different backgrounds under a common cause or interest, but they can also be a great way to connect with other people. While online interaction has many differences to face-to-face meetings, it has many advantages that can make it a more appealing alternative.

As a primary target of analysis, I will be investigating certain online communities and groups in selected services in social media. The reason why this topic is worth studying is because online communication is developing at a rapid rate. It has developed to a point where some may even prefer it as their main way of communication instead of direct meetings with others. Furthermore, the development of communication skills allows other abilities, like language learning, to be a part of that process as well. Online groups, who focus on learning English, are inspected for what situations and tactics L2 learners of English use to become more acquainted with it.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate these online communities, and to provide a comprehensive analysis on how they affect their users' English learning skills. The first part will introduce prior research done for online communication and its capabilities, followed by an explanation of a few essential and theoretical approaches. These approaches and concepts will further help in understanding the dimensions of online communication and whether they could be improved in any way. In order to demonstrate these differences, three services in social media, Facebook, Twitter and Discord, are investigated with regard to the way they function as platforms of learning English. More specifically, I will analyse these sites and their language learning groups based on their intended purpose and their differences from each other. Facebook and Twitter were selected on the basis of their popularity whereas Discord is investigated as a more recent addition as a networking area. The discussion of the differences will provide commentary on learning methods in networking sites and whether they function better in specific settings.

2 Description of research material

This section introduces utilized research material and explains why they were selected. For the purposes of this thesis, three different services in social media are chosen in order to compare my findings between each of them and whether some of them work better than others in the context of English learning. Facebook, Twitter and Discord are commonly referred to as Social Networking Sites (SNSs), which allow their users to communicate with each other in an abundance of ways. In a research by Razak, Saeed and Ahmad (2013), they point out that SNSs allow learners to collaborate in new interactive environments that are mainly based on their personal interests (p. 188). The data collected from the services is primarily based on observations of other users and their interactions in textual and visual means in each group. More specifically, the analysis focuses on presented data in them such as conversations, shared media and questions.

2.1 Facebook

Several online services function as small but effective sources of learning English over time. Video sharing service YouTube, for example, includes a wide range of videos for different purposes as well as comment threads. Comment in a foreign language may present an opportunity to learn its proper use. Out of all possible online communication platforms, Facebook is by far the most popular with over 2.70 billion monthly active users as of June 2020 (Noytes, 2020). It can be used for several purposes such as being a messaging board for companies and online groups, being a general discussion platform and staying up to date by following other publications and celebrities' status updates.

As far as learning English is considered, Facebook groups are a bountiful source for finding instances of English used. Groups can be created for specific purposes to engage with a certain topic. They can function as discussion areas where it is possible to publish posts with different purposes in mind. According to Omar, Embi and Yunus (2012), learning through Facebook group works "would be a promising virtual tool and environment to promote interaction in English learning" (p. 67). Engagement and exposure to English is common on Facebook even

without membership to any group, since posts in there are easy and short to read in most cases.

2.2 Twitter

While Facebook is currently considered the most popular choice for connecting with others, Twitter is a close contender in terms of popularity. Twitter is in many ways similar to Facebook as both social networking sites allow users to post status updates. Unlike Facebook, there are less studies on participation in learning communities on Twitter (Xing & Gao, 2018) as well as learning situations in it. As far as English learning is concerned, observations on users who focus on posting English learning related ‘tweets’ will be the main source of data from Twitter.

As for the data collected, users focusing on English learning were selected to be inspected in greater detail. Forming groups is not a typical practice on Twitter in which other users can instinctively join. Being in a community involves following other users, which consequently creates a community of users of them. As such, hashtags are also considered in their relation to finding tweets and discussion around English learning. The observed users were selected for a few reasons: they post on regular intervals and their focus is on learning English. Building connections and a framework of users is important, since members are the primary source for information (Xing, W. & Gao, F., 2018). For this reason, two users and their tweets are inspected in relation to what tactics they use to promote English learning.

2.3 Discord

In comparison to popular services like Facebook and Twitter, Discord could be considered a newcomer in the context of online communities. It was initially founded on May 2015 and it has steadily become more popular since that point. At the end of 2019, it had a total of 250 million users. Despite the fact that Greenberg (2015) defines Discord as “a free messaging platform designed for videogaming communities specialising in text, image, video, voice communication between users via chat channels”, it can be used as a discussion platform for any topic despite the intended demographic being “designed for videogaming communities” (Greenberg, 2015). Unlike Facebook and Twitter, users can create servers for themselves and

their members to use not only as an online chatroom for gaming, but as a general discussion area for members on a server. Webb (2018) states that Discord “has secured a foothold as one of the most popular chat services in the world.” Much like the previous examples, it enables users with different backgrounds to connect with each other based on common interests.

While it is just as possible for users in their own communities to correct each other, it may lack in most cases a sense of legitimacy. The servers are often managed entirely by the communities which leaves some sense of doubt to whether something is correct. There is no guarantee whether there are highly trained English experts available to comment on a certain question, and any discussions on how something should be said in English is up for interpretation. The places in which these interpretations are formed should be considered in relation to whether ideas and conceptions should be taken for granted.

3 Theoretical and methodological framework

This chapter will discuss the prior research on English learning and social networking through social media groups. As a research field, online interactivity is relatively newly developed as it has emerged in conjunction with social media and technological tools in general. In order to demonstrate the medium and its differences more effectively, this section will focus on explaining essential theoretical concepts as well as detailing prior research towards learning English through online communication. The concepts introduced in this chapter will further help in discussing and analysing each site and their features in detail.

3.1 Individuality and the construction of identity

Online communication differs substantially from face-to-face meetings in many ways. Several sites allow users to send comments and use services anonymously. While online meetings with a teacher require students to be clearly identifiable, appearing anonymous or with a fake identity in other groups or meetings is relatively easy. Online personas do not often correspond to what people are, and people can create fake identities for themselves. For this reason, asking users online about their learnings through surveys is not typically a reliable way to gather results, since users may hide their true selves behind pseudonyms (Ziegler, Paulus & Woodside, 2014, p. 2). Anonymous online interactions can then create a sense of safety for users as they do not feel pressured to be involved in conversations with their real selves being visible for others to see. On the other hand, being easily identifiable in an online community may make it easier to get involved and create a sense of community among other members.

Regarding connectivity to other users, online group interactions may assist in learning and developing own sense of likes and personality. A study by Chan (2011) notes that learning should be understood by relationships in social communities where participants learn through mutual engagement (p. 194). Furthermore, being a member of a community may assist with forming an identity outside of online communication. Membership to groups reinforces thoughts about one's likes, dislikes and interests. Learning is a social practice through which learners develop through active participation and construct identities in their

communities (Razak et al., 2013, p. 188). Strongly built identities further help in learning languages since one may feel more inclined to present findings in English in an online community which other users may then feel more willing to solve. For instance, if a user has known others in an online group for a long time, it is easier to ask for help in a certain question or problem since they are more familiar to oneself.

Another method in which individual skills are promoted in group communication is in informal learning. It refers to a type of learning which is difficult to notice and which typically “occurs outside of formal learning environments” (Ziegler et al., 2014, p. 1). Group interactions prove as an ideal example of informal learning since they also involve meaning making within a community through discussions and problem solving. Learning in them takes place “between people rather than within the individual mind” (Ziegler et al., 2014, p. 3). As a result, it is possible to resolve problems in groups more effectively than individually. Computers may also provide additional help in informal learning as some online tools improve grammar through automatic error correction as well as feedback from other users, which Chan (2011) notes how received feedback is greatly affected by available tools (p. 238).

In social media groups, users who have been a member for a long time may develop a positive status of sorts for themselves, which may improve their role in that group. For instance, a long-time member may become in a language learning group an admin, which grants the user certain privileges on a server. These include various things such as the ability to customize the group or server rules and being able to manage other users and their roles. This is the case in Discord servers as mentioned by Greenberg (2019) who discusses about the hierarchy of server members (p. 13). It is not always necessary for users to make these changes actively, but it is good to have this possibility in case of problematic situations, like against users who join only to grief others.

Furthermore, this development in status may affect how capable and reliable a user considers their own skills in certain contexts or in general. Previous studies have shown how collaboration and identifying own attributes promotes autonomy and the capability to work independently. It is also suggested that collaborative decision-making develops learner autonomy (Chan, 2011, p. 161). This is further shown in creation and emergence of engaging content in online forums. In a study by Lamy and Zourou (2013), user-created content can inspire other users to create content themselves and participate in discussions as a task-based

activity without teacher's or other party's direction (p. 63). On the other hand, virtual interactions with teachers and friends have been proven to be effective in comparing language skills and putting them in practice even in informal interactions (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012). The current availability of online resources has changed the attitude of how learner autonomy is considered. In 1980s, the focus was firmly centred on the learner and on how far a learner takes their own language learning (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012). This view has become steadily less relevant especially when online resources can make English learning a daily process. (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012).

While the possibility to build identity and interest through online interactions can make the medium very appealing, there are some ways in which it is limited. One of which can be the lack of bodily communication in chatrooms. While this can be countered with video calls where users are visible, they are much scarcer and may in some cases harm one's identity to remain incognito.

3.2 Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

Some communication strategies work better in their respective environments. Online communication has many differences in comparison to face-to-face communication, which is demonstrated by the types of activities in an online environment. As an example, online interactions and integration of online peer interaction has become increasingly common in 21st century (Peeters, 2019). Prior research of English learning on Twitter has focused on such things like improving the pronunciation of commonly mispronounced words, which is deemed to be important for error correction (Kartal & Korucu-Kis, 2020).

For the purposes of this thesis, it is essential to specify why online communication is currently considered important. One of the primary approaches on interactions within online landscape is Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which explores language learning situations that are influenced by available online tools. A more specific method in the field, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), is defined by Rovai as "the exchange of information between individuals by way of computer networks" (cited by Omar et al., 2012). In addition, a method which Thomas and Reinders (2010) refer to as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

is “one of the main approaches to language learning and teaching worldwide” (p. 17). Tasks are more precisely defined as activities in which “a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (p. 18). When users are set with tasks in online groups by others, or themselves, to learn something online, it functions as an effective way to follow one’s progression in which tasks are created for.

Online interactions can be classified into two categories: synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (delayed time). Synchronous refers to methods of communication where users communicate in real-time. It includes methods such as instant messaging, chats, and video conferences. In contrast, asynchronous communication does not require users to communicate at the same time (Omar et al., 2012). It allows users to write responses whenever they feel most comfortable with it, and it fits appropriately into writing emails and blog posts. In terms of online chat rooms, the response time is typically what determines the discussion as either synchronous or asynchronous.

As a medium, CALL has developed from resource-focused to be more user-focused over time. More specifically, the introduction of Web 2.0 has changed how we information is perceived online and how we are able to further use it in a variety of activities. It refers to social web as a participatory, “interest-driven activities” (Chik & Breidbach, 2014: 101, cited by Peeters & Ludwig, 2017). In comparison to self-interest-oriented model of Web 1.0, Web 2.0 encourages collaborative way of thinking and sense-making of social concepts. According to Lamy and Zourou (2013), web-based technologies have challenged earlier ways of learning from static sources to learning from social practices (p. 15). This would suggest that interpretations in groups are more valuable than individual constructions.

Some previous studies have focused on passive ways of learning English. One study by Sockett and Toffoli (2012) examines informal ways of learning English. In this context, informal learning refers to learning outside from typical classroom environments. This type of learning often occurs without noticing it, such as when one uses English media and finds meanings to foreign words during their free time. Computers may provide additional help in improving grammar through automatic grammar and error correction as well as feedback from other users, which Chan (2011) notes how received feedback is greatly affected by available tools (p. 238). As different computer tools have developed further and become more accessible, language learning has become easier and more intuitive in the process.

3.3 Discourse analysis

As a method of analysis for language learning in online communities, discourse analysis serves as a flexible method for inspecting interaction in online groups. Discourse analysis explores social contexts and how language is used-based on the situation. Ziegler et al. (2014) define it as a method where social reality is constructed “through text and talk rather than invisible, individual mind” (p. 5). People highlight different ideas to be more relevant than others based on their language choices (Ziegler et al., 2014, p. 6). In other words, discourse analysis explores language use in social contexts based on what elements are central in conversations and what is highlighted from them.

In the context of language and L2 learning, discourse analysis focuses on interaction opportunities. As further ways to analyse how this occurs, Xing and Gao (2018) have researched that online discourse can be deconstructed into three types of social dimensions. The first, cognitive dimension, involves such activities like “questioning, interpreting, elaborating, or relating information to prior knowledge” (Xing & Gao, 2018). Interactive dimension focuses on social interactions, which contribute to understanding each other through communication, during which participants’ perspectives may change. Social dimension primarily focuses on socializing, and it involves “online, discussion based collaborative learning” (Xing & Gao, 2018). The three dimensions allow analysis of social activities and in which categories they belong to. The online groups provide plenty of situations where others attempt to understand language through various collaborative efforts.

As an additional aspect of discourse analysis, finding out meanings behind words and implications is where discourse analysis excels at. Since online learning groups create common understanding through their group’s interactions, informal group learning can be categorized as a group meaning-making process (Ziegler et al., 2014). Word choices and understanding the underlying messages are a part of discourse analysis, and this process allows closer inspection into groups and what meanings users attempt to convey from discussions. The analysed groups will further provide insight into what types of words and sentences users apply to convey their ideas.

4 Analysis

This section will focus on analysing the three selected online groups in the three different online services. After each of the sites and their groups' functions are discussed conclusively, a comparison is done between each of the services in section 5 to measure how well different methods contribute to English learning.

4.1 Facebook

The primary group from which data is gathered is called "Grammar (English) Learning On Facebook". Other groups which were publicly available after searching for English learning groups were simply titled "English learning" and "Learn Spoken English". Joining these groups was easy as the request to join groups was answered to in less than a day. This may indicate how these publicly accessible servers have members in the range of hundreds of thousands.

4.1.1 Learning group overview

The learning group titled "Grammar (English) Learning on Facebook" has a list of rules for people who join for the first time. The rules direct the general tone of discussions and provide as a notice for anyone who might not be sure what purpose the group is for. The rules include such things like "no abuse or bad language", "no unrelated posts allowed" and "personal discussion must be avoided in the comments as much as possible". The outlook from these rules creates a strict and learning focused environment for the group. Another group titled "Learn Spoken English" is created for

While learning is the focus in the group, there are validated users who would post links to more freeform discussion groups. The linked posts ask if a member is interested in a group which is focused more on casual discussions. This is an attempt to create more personal attachment with users, who joined the group in the first place to seek company. As Facebook is known from being a site for social networking, creation and promotion of subgroups occurs when a community can sustain itself (Greenberg, M., 2019, p. 26). Social connections further

benefit learning as social reality can better develop through interactions with other users (Ziegler et al., 2014).

4.1.2 Posts

Posts in language learning focused groups on Facebook are frequent, but they are not always necessarily related to English learning. In cases where user posts do not include English problems, they would often include motivational message or a picture with an English word explained in it. Emoticons are often used to give posts personality or make some of the comments stand out.

The most common form of post on groups is a question with multiple answers or a blank slot for a desired word to fit in. Sometimes they are accompanied by a colorful background template for it to appear more visually pleasing.



Figure 1. English question in a Facebook learning group

As seen in figure 1, this layout is the easiest way for users to make their questions visible in a group, since they show at the top of the group if they are new posts. Following these questions, other users can comment to provide an answer or generate discussion. These task-based activities promote knowledge building (Omar et al., 2012), even if the questions could be harder, which would make users seek for answers from other sources. Discussion in many of the question-related posts mainly contain only the answer. Figure 1, however, shows that users can include media in comments and provide additional resources for others to use. In this example, a user provides a link to an English-related learning video titled “Speaking English”. The accompanying text is posted in seemingly promotional means as the text interrogates others to subscribe to the YouTube channel. Users can also react to correct answers with likes and emojis in order to make them more visible from wrong answers. The appearance in the comments does not prefer free discussion, but instead it creates a collective opinion for other users who may want to see the right answer based on the collective opinion.

Grammatical quality varies greatly between posts. While this is in some parts to be expected since most members in the group wish to improve in it, lack of academic proficiency is easily visible. In a post from the discussion-oriented server “Learn Spoken English”, one user has written the following:

Hello for everybody...

Chatting is a good way to improve your language so come to comments to entire in a long conversation about any subject you want to talk about it

The purpose of this user’s message is to create discussion in its comments. The message includes many grammatical errors and is slightly ambiguous on what the user attempts to say. Regardless, a total of 149 users responded to this post within 24 hours. The attempt to start discussion by making the user notice them and initiate a conversation is followed in the following example:

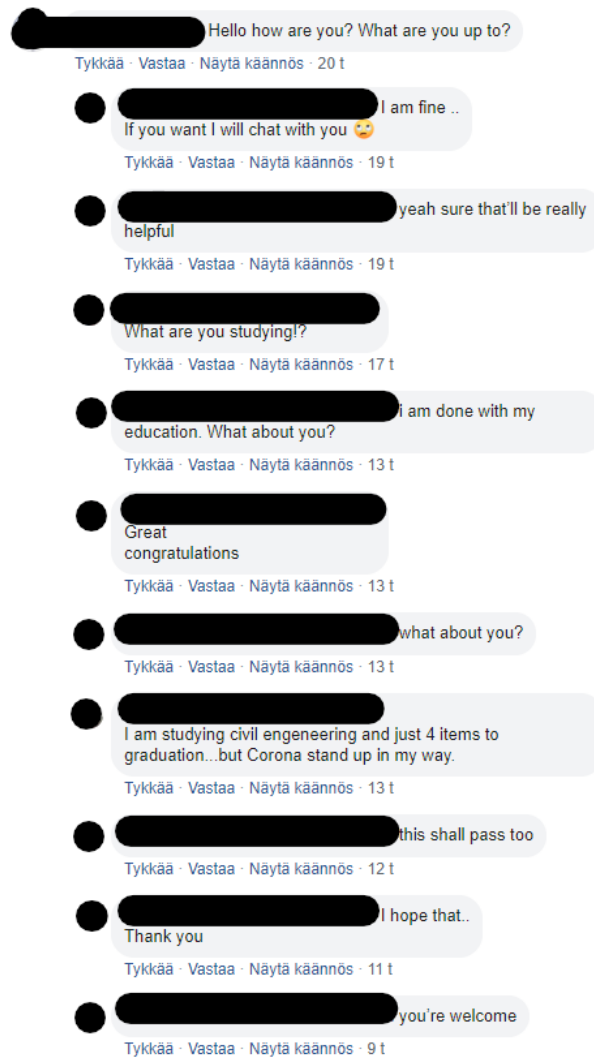


Figure 2. User interaction in a Facebook group.

In this interaction in the comment thread, the interaction starts with the commenter asking a question. This is followed by questions about users' studies which are answered to with short comments. Users do, however, show interest with several questions, which they talk about in short answers as well. The interaction ends with remarks of gratitude at the end about the conversation.

The interaction suggests that conversations in the comments are a common way to practice English in short situations. However, the questions do not amount to much from stating the answer to a presented question. As for the conversations, they are typically short and do not diverge into other fields in most cases. It is possible that users further communicate via Facebook's Messenger app where users may be more motivated to talk about more personal

matters rather than in public comments for others to see. As a discussion platform, comments are somewhat unnatural places for free conversations.

4.1.3 Outlook of the groups

The nature of discussions in the groups seem to be limited to surface level interactions. While users are willing to start discussions and use English in practice, the discussions are not typically lengthy and may conclude abruptly. The reason for this could be due to the asynchronous environment in which users are. They are not forced to respond in real time, which does not make conversations as authentic as face-to-face meetings would be. The lack of gestures and facial expressions especially limits the length in which members are willing to take conversations. Additionally, the ease of answering with a simple 'a' or 'b' answer to a question does not entice users to take part in extensive discussions within the groups.

The second reason is explained by user involvement established by the server itself. While the server has over four hundred thousand members, most of them seem to be inactive or joined on a whim without major personal involvement. This can be seen in the posts as they receive very few comments in relation to how many members there are. Multiple members join the server constantly, and several of them are, based on their names and profiles, from Middle Eastern countries. This begs the question whether learning from a Facebook group should be considered useful. Users do, however, find answers to simple questions, and the visible interaction alongside responses further help users present themselves better through indirect ways such as being affiliated to a group (Zhaoui, Grasmuch & Martin, 2008, quoted by Lamy, 2013). Membership and the ability to see English related posts from the group may provide users with the ability to improve, even if the methods are not very demanding to grasp.

Real reasons for why users join the group is unclear. Asking them directly is an unreliable practice because they may hide themselves under pseudonyms (Ziegler et al., 2014). Conversations in the group are typically simple to understand despite grammatical shortcomings. Whether the group has actual academically proficient English is unclear as most posts use simple English. The easy access onto the server and its visibility as an English

learning group with hundreds of thousands of members may be what tempts most users to join the conversations. The conversations themselves are limited to simple questions, but they make it easier for users of all skill levels to interact without immediate pressure to improve in it.

4.2 Twitter

The inspected groups on Facebook also have an account on Twitter. For the sake of variety, an English education focused account called “BBC Learning English” is inspected as well as a user called “EnglishStudy!”. Being a part of a community in Twitter is facilitated by different means compared to Facebook. Groups do not exist there, but instead users are able to “follow” other accounts, which allows the user to see the newest posts of other users on their received message feed. While users can create lists of other users, which collect all the followed users on it, it does not allow users to chat between each other as it is possible on Facebook. While assessing tweets made by other people under specific topics, following a specific user directly functions as an efficient method to become a member around specific topics as well as letting user’s followers to see what user’s interests are.

4.2.1 Tweets

The main method of communication, as well as the target of analysis on Twitter is its ‘tweets’ — short messages that are mostly used for sharing news, creating discussion and to build connections. Users can send public tweets that are visible for all of their followers. Much like Facebook’s status posts, tweets can include pictures, links or videos up to six minutes in their length, but the tweet can be up to 280 characters long. The design relies heavily on cell phone text messages which are structurally similar to tweets.

English learning focused users on Twitter post specific types of tweets on a regular basis. The user named “English learning” posts English learning related tweets that include either questions, videos, or links to online learning resources. The posts of the same categories are similar in their presentation style, which makes them stand out as effective options to

promote English learning. In tweets which include questions, the user would typically include a sentence and a list of words for the blank spot. This can be further seen in Figure 3:



Figure 3. "Learn English" user's question tweet.

As can be seen in figure 3, the user includes a question to which followers are able to answer. The answers would most commonly in the comments say the word even though answering the question does the same in the poll. In some cases, users would comment about why they answer in a certain way by, for example, saying if a word is in plural or not. The language used in these posts is easy to understand and short which may lend itself to Twitter's nature as a place for short status posts. Questions like this, however, do not promote the learning of pronunciation as effectively as more focused pronunciation teaching on Twitter (Kartal, 2020) In conjunction with the daily use of Twitter, it is possible to learn few new words quickly with examples such as in figure 3.

4.2.2 Retweets

A common practice of sharing interesting tweets made by other users is to 'retweet' them. They allow users to re-post their own or someone else's tweet so that their own followers can see it in their feed. This provides more visibility for tweets and allows them to stay relevant for longer in discussions. "Learn English" user's tweets are not typically very highly retweeted, but most tweets have at least 1 retweet. Since the user posts new tweets daily, it may be hard for followers to keep up with all of them. They may also consider whether tweets are worth

sharing or if they keep the newly learned English fact for themselves. Most retweets are on polls such as figure 3 is as well as educational videos on English facts. Sharing these videos that have a clear structure and tell what they are about on a face value makes them an appealing to share for others. Tasks such as polls are one way of promoting knowledge in a community of followers (Omar et al., 2012), and sharing them is beneficial to all participants in making English learning an informal process.

4.2.3 Hashtags

The most notable difference compared to Facebook is the use of 'hashtags', which users can search topics of that word with easily. The user 'Learn English' uses in most of their posts the following tags: '#LearnEnglish', 'ESL' (English as a Second Language) and 'EAL' (English as an Additional Language). Users can click them which brings results from other users who have posted their tweets with that specific hashtag. This system makes it easy to search for specific topics, and it also functions as a method of finding new users to follow.

During the research for tweets with the hashtag '#LearnEnglish', the resulting tweets indicate similar tweets from other users as the user 'LearnEnglish' has tweeted such as idiom explanations and useful phrases. Some users have slightly different approaches on how they decide to present their ideas, and visual outlook of tweets plays a great part on whether a user skips the tweet or is interested on a whim to read it through.

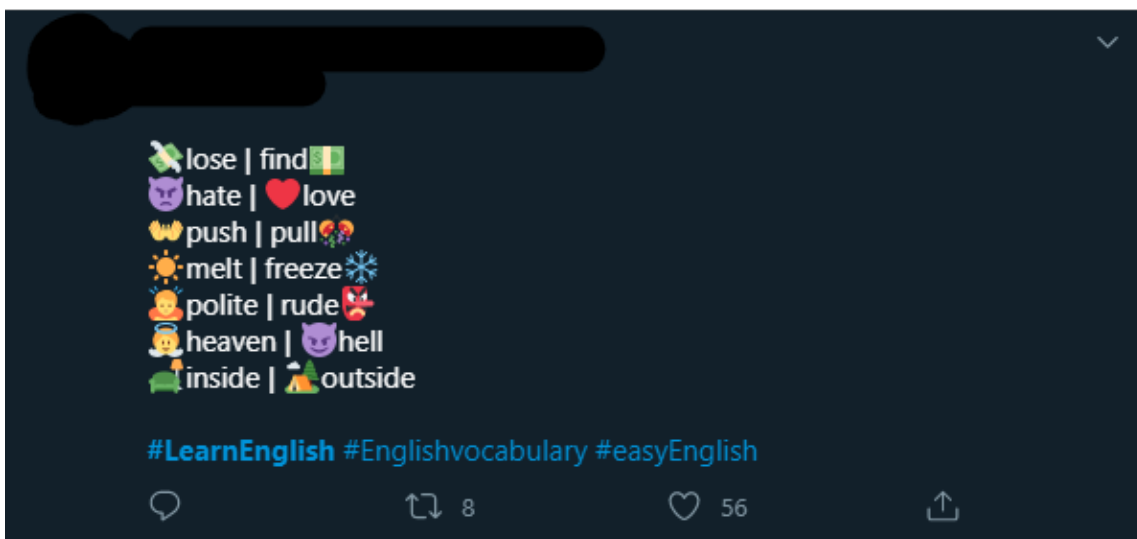


Figure 4. A user showcases opposite words with the use of textual elements.

In Figure 4, a user has posted a tweet which includes different words and their antonyms. In addition, the words are accompanied by emojis which correspond to the word they are included with. This is likely done for users who know one word but not the other. As a result, use of identifiable images helps in understanding messages in social media better. At the end, there are also tags to help identify what the post is about. '#LearnEnglish' indicates that the post is about learning the language, '#Englishvocabulary' specifies the area of focus whereas '#easyEnglish' further evaluates the level of English used in the post. By using a specific hashtag, users are able to select their preferences and further help themselves identify with their level of proficiency in English.

4.3 Discord

The Discord server called 'English' was selected as an appropriate source for research data. During my research, there is a total of 37 574 members on the server. While active members there are closer to 7000s, users' activity provides plenty of data to analyse on how English learning is promoted within the system. Much like previous sites, I have compiled transcribed dialogue between different users, which will demonstrate typical conversations and what sort of English-related topics users talk about. The provided examples will attempt to give an idea of how an English learning problem is discussed and possibly solved in the server. Discussions about English-related questions are the main focus as well as Discord's language learning promoting tools.

4.3.1 Roles

In order to keep track easier of other users in Discord, they can be assigned to different roles. Discord allows admins and moderators to customise servers by creating new channels and setting users to different roles. Roles allow users to distinguish themselves, and it is done to differentiate native English speakers and learners of different levels from each other. The roles can give users privileges over others like how an 'administrator' is able to add new features on the server whereas a 'moderator' manages the content in the server and is responsible for kicking possible harassing users from the server. This is necessary to maintain

the level of discussions and the functionality of the different features in the server. Most of the users on this server, however, are assigned to roles that correspond to their current English skills between beginner, intermediate and advanced. The list for different roles can be seen in the following figure:

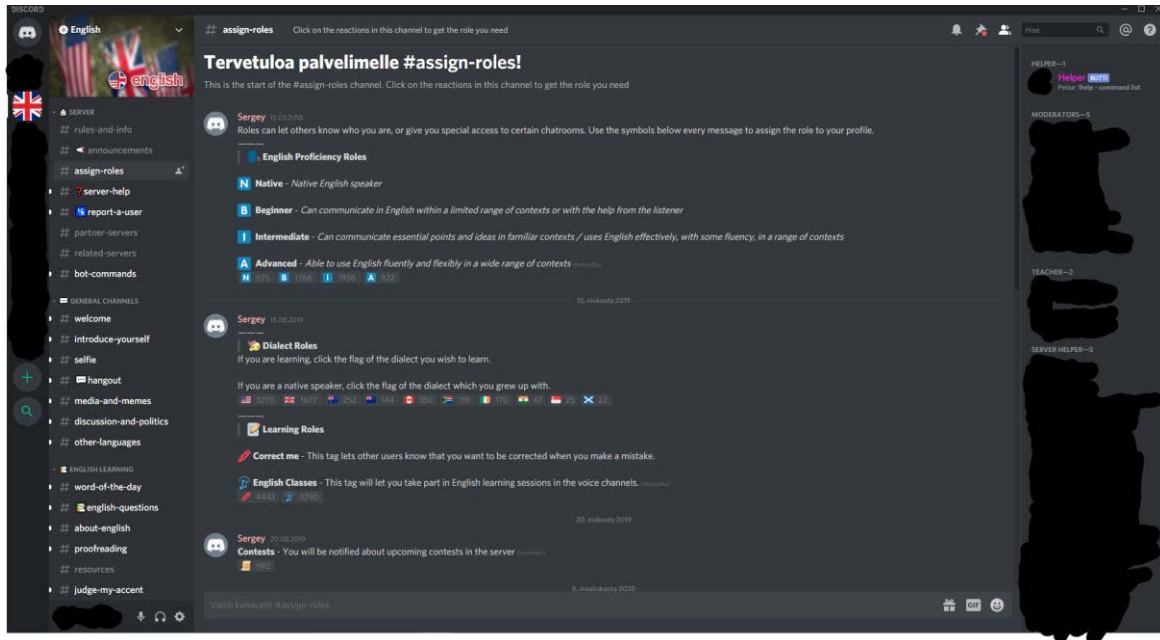
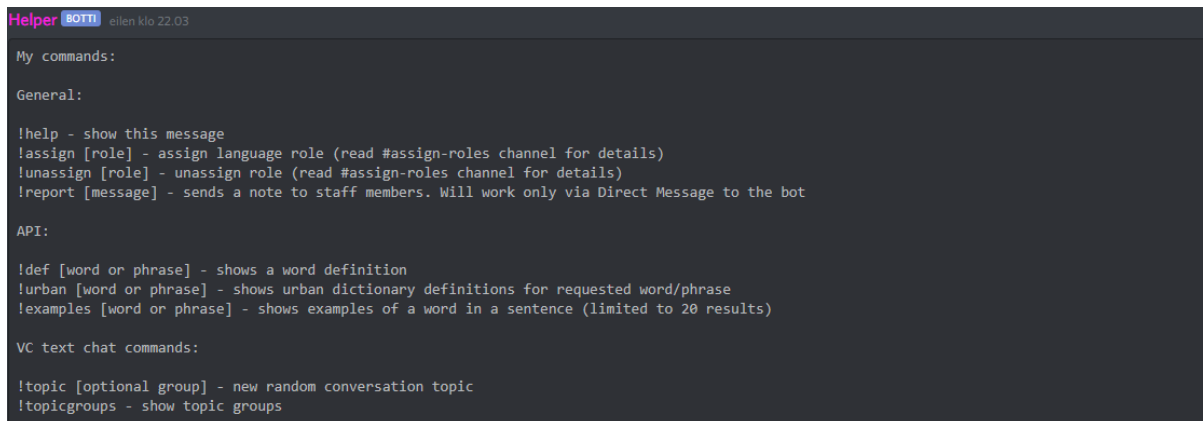


Figure 5: An example of the layout of Discord on the English learning server including different levels of English learner users are.

The server provides explanations of roles on a channel titled ‘assign-roles’ where beginners have limited range of contexts in English whereas advanced are “able to use English fluently and flexibly in a wide range of contexts” (fig. 5). New users can click the corresponding symbol below the message which explains what different levels of English proficiency user is closest to. When roles are identifiable, users can interact easier as they are set with expectations of each other’s language capabilities. The implementation of these different roles is vital in communicative situations since users are free to join through a link freely. Without the role marker, it would be difficult for users to easily keep track of how well one speaks English and adjust their way of speaking in text.

In addition to actual users, Discord can integrate “bots” for specific purposes. Bots can be installed on Discord servers, and they can provide servers with new ways of interaction such as new emojis, gifs, bots that play music and other such things. This server has a bot titled ‘Helper’, and its role is to provide other users with helpful commands. These commands are

specified in the discussion channel 'bot-commands', and the commands can perform various things. Typing a command makes the bot do the specified action such as how writing '!def [word or phrase]' shows a word or description on the written word between brackets whereas '!examples [word or phrase]' shows examples of the written word in a sentence. There is also a dedicated channel called 'word-of-the-day' where the bot sends detailed descriptions of rare English words.

A screenshot of a Discord chat window. The window title is 'Helper BOTI ellen klo 22.03'. The chat content is as follows:

```
My commands:

General:

!help - show this message
!assign [role] - assign language role (read #assign-roles channel for details)
!unassign [role] - unassign role (read #assign-roles channel for details)
!report [message] - sends a note to staff members. Will work only via Direct Message to the bot

API:

!def [word or phrase] - shows a word definition
!urban [word or phrase] - shows urban dictionary definitions for requested word/phrase
!examples [word or phrase] - shows examples of a word in a sentence (limited to 20 results)

VC text chat commands:

!topic [optional group] - new random conversation topic
!topicgroups - show topic groups
```

Figure 6. Bot commands on Discord English learning server.

Bot commands are to be considered as an additional resource and a tool for English learning in this server. Users make use of them whenever they need to, and they contribute to improvements in the studied language (Socket & Toffoli, 2012, p. 145). While it would be possible to search for meanings of words from other online sources, the access to these features within the server speeds up the learning process significantly. Additionally, when users actively utilise bot commands, it creates an impression that users want to find out meanings efficiently without external help. It signals that the server can handle an abundance of English problems even if the users may not always know everything.

4.3.2 Channels

Discord allows channel moderators to create channels that function as discussion sections for specific topics. The channels on the server help managing discussions so that all of the information is not cluttered on a single channel. Some of them are not created for discussions around English questions, but instead for showing rules, announcements, bot commands and for overall help in using the server. The structuring in this server is extensive, but it is

necessary for a community with as many users as in this example. When English questions are kept to specific channels, they leave room for other channels to build identity, English skills and sense of community in an alternative way as seen from channels like 'hangout' and 'media-and-memes' (Fig. 5). These channels prove how development of an online identity and peer interaction motivates one to learn more effectively within an online community (Greenberg, 2019, p. 26).

When there are channels for not just learning English through questions but also from more discussion-oriented conversations, it contributes to the importance of an established online community and relations in them. Furthermore, when a user is a member for lengthier periods of time, this feeling of community and attachment to other users may further develop and lead to English learning becoming a regularly repeating activity. Not only do other active users start to recognize each other, but they also demonstrate that they are there for a reason instead of joining the server and leaving it on a whim.

Channels and their topics are set in Discord server's layout to their separate sections. Channels that are under the category 'English learning' include activities that range from typical questions to word-of-the-day to proofreading. Learning topics are divided to keep conversations logical and within the boundaries of their respective channels, but free discussion, debates and negotiation comes naturally as part of their processes. Activities and new messages are highlighted in channels, which gives other users a notification when someone asks a question or posts a message in general on a specific channel. This combined effort, in addition to active userbase, makes communication on a server a synchronous activity between users instead of solely asynchronous. (Omar et al., 2012). As a result, fast responses to English questions and flexible interaction makes the process appealing and it can interest users to stay as a member when discussions in channels are relevant to presented issues. English students' discussions in Muhonen and Räsänen's research (2020) claims that Finnish students of English often bond through other topics and discourses that relate to language learning. This is evident in Discord as well by the wide variety of servers and their functions. While the users on Discord server do not necessarily have academic qualities nor are all users on the server equally skilled, users are able to participate in discussion with everyone and as a result, learn to use English better.

4.3.3 English discussions

All of the channels in Discord promote English learning, but some of them are more efficient in this endeavour. Discussions on the channel 'english-questions' are about different questions users have regarding anything about English. The questions can be answered in short answers, but sometimes they may extend to lengthy discussions. One example in the provided discussion shows a relatively simple discussion about a word in English, to which two other users provide help and comments.

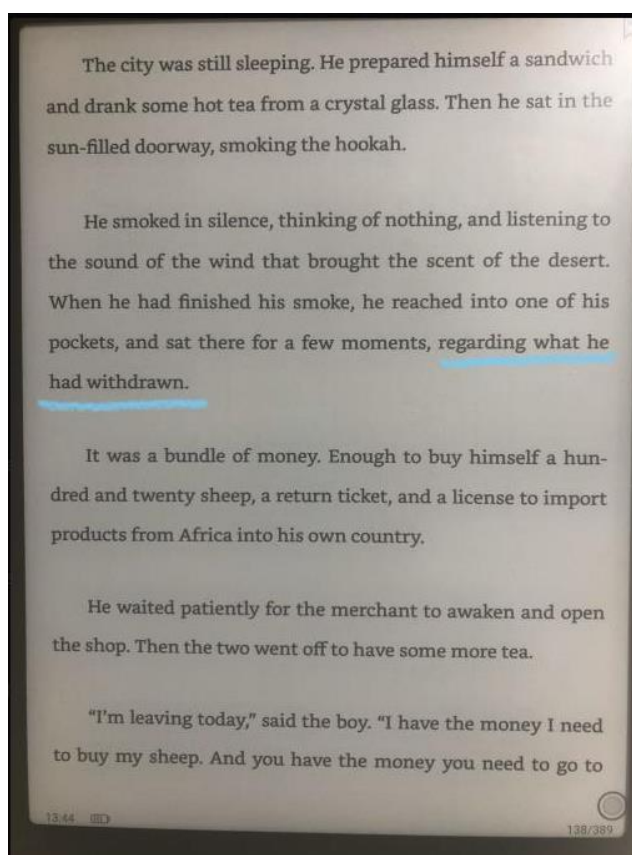


Figure 7. A discussed example on Discord server.

Users (U) discuss what the word 'withdraw' (fig. 7) means in a following discussion thread. The brackets indicate the time of day from one time zone when the users respond with their comments:

U1 [07.47]: Could you explain what this means? This "withdraw" thing. I can't get it where it came from.

U2 [07.48]: withdraw can mean to pull something out. He pulled something out of his pocket and sat there for a few moments because he needed time to realize what he just pulled out

@U1

U1 [07.50]: Oh thank you! I just thought that word meant only about cancelling sth. Have a great day (heart emoji)

U2 [07.51]: You as well!

U3 [07.53]: Or ya can withdraw cash lol

The sentence to which the users refer to is “regarding what he had withdrawn” (fig. 7). In this example, U1 asks a question in the channel ‘english-questions’ to which U2 replies and explains one definition for it. This is accompanied by an example of a sentence which explains the situation and why the word is used in that context. After the explanation, U2 makes sure U1 notices the message by typing ‘@U1’, which notifies U1 by highlighting the message in the discussion for them. After this message, U1 thanks U2 and explains their confusion to him. After friendly remarks, U3 joins the conversation and brings up additional meaning for the word. The conversation not only resolves a question and makes the user understand the meaning of the word “withdraw”, but it concludes with friendly remarks and additional information. In addition, the responses were within a minute away from each other which suggests users being willing to help others actively on the server.

Another example in the group talks about one’s issues in word’s proper form and how it should be written properly:

U1[12:40]: What does "I had been reading a book" and "I have been reading a book" describe, respectively?

U2 [12:40] : had is past tense

U2 [12:41]: have is present

U2 [12:41]: thats about as far as i know

U1 [12:42]: But does "I had been reading a book" mean that I read something a long time ago?

U2 [12:42]: no

U2 [12:42]: just means you read a book

U3 [12:42]: had been reading means you had been reading before a certain moment in the past

U2 [12:43]: Depends on context

U2 [12:43]: generally no

U1 [12:43]: ohh

U2 [12:43]: as there still is not time frame

U2 [12:43]: usually you add like I had read this book x time ago

U1 [12:43]: Ok, I get it

U4 [12:44]: @ (user 1), "I had been reading this book" means that you were reading that book at some point in the past, but are no longer reading that book. "I have been reading this book" means that you were reading that book in the past, but are still reading it (you haven't stopped reading it).

U4 [12:44]: For example

U4 [12:44]: "I had been reading when you called."

U1 [12:45]: That makes it clear, ty.

The discussion takes 5 minutes in total, but users go over several things during that time. U1 asks whether they need to write 'had' or 'have' in a sentence to which U2 responds with tense definitions. Time for initial response is quick, and participants already have material and ground rules to work with. U1 then asks for clarification with an example sentence, to which U2 confirms how the sentence should be properly formed. U3 explains a definition for the word 'had' in order to further clarify the meaning of an essential word. After U2 has commented on this, U1 indicates his understanding with saying "ohh" and after another U2's

example with “Ok, I get it”. The conversation could have ended here, but U4 explains the meaning of both words with even more detail. The conversation concludes by U1 claiming his current understanding and by thanking other users for providing insightful commentary.

5 Discussion

The collected data from users, communities and groups provides one outlook to a broad userbase. The inspected groups in this thesis do not represent all other language learning groups, servers, and what types of conversations transpire in other groups. As a generalization of the genre, Vandergriff (2016) reflects on how L2 learning communities engage with other members of the community to build better relationships in online communities. She claims that “L2 users often express and acknowledge opinions, negotiate and contest community norms, ensure mutual understanding with coparticipants, build rapport by amusing others, and connect with peers in support networks, among other things” (p. 161). The findings in section 4 further highlight how online interaction is strengthened by common understanding between other members. Interactions in Discord prove how meaning-making process is a common activity in online groups. This is even more vital when such conversational elements like smiling and sarcasm may be risky and they may be conveyed differently than intended (Vandegriff, 2016, p. 161).

As for how prior research is divided between the three chosen online services, Facebook seems to have most documentation in terms of online communication. This may be expected since Facebook is by far the most recognized platform for online communication and staying in contact. Twitter and Discord could be expanded upon in the future as their usage increases. Despite this fact, Discord has proven to be a competitive platform for online discussion and interactions despite its comparatively small history of documentation. The ability of Discord servers to keep members engaged in conversation based on its toolkit may be an area left undiscovered as a potential future platform for creating social bonds and improving English learning.

The users for each of these groups join the communities without necessarily having academic background. While many join the groups because they want to establish social relationships with other users, they do not need to prove their English skills to join groups and servers. The real reasons why the people join them is difficult to measure conclusively, but the moderators typically keep the groups under control from harmful users. The discussions greatly make that status of a common cause stronger, and long-time members are able to create a sense of connection between others.

Since this thesis mainly investigated text-based learning situations, voice conversations could provide interesting insight in future studies. Text can limit user's expressivity especially if a user has a specific English dialect or accent, for instance. Voice chats, as well as online video calls, allow users to express themselves almost similarly as in face-to-face meetings. It would be interesting to explore how behaviour differs between digital and physical environments further based on the findings from this thesis.

6 Conclusion

Learning methods in online workspaces and communities provide insight to different methods in which they contribute to English learning. They vary significantly depending on communities within and outside boundaries of social networks. It is notable that a user's ability to identify with new aspects is greatly influenced by social activities, interactions and which groups users belong to. The analysed sites in social media and their groups may not be academically viable or demanding ways to learn English, but they prove to be influential sources of learning English in small amounts. Finally, group engagement and their involvement in online interaction is a benefit to becoming more motivated to learning not only English, but for anything which involves community engagement. As information technology has developed and made online communication possible with other ways than simple text-based interactions, membership to online groups is a valid option for aspiring language learners.

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