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Utilizing a Facebook Closed Group for EFL E-Learning Environment: Students' Views

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Abstract

This study was conducted out of the researcher's teaching reflection while teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) online class during the pandemic of COVID-19, a time when face-to-face courses had to be converted to online classes. Her choice of educational tool for her EFL e-learning environment utilized a Facebook closed group. Her experiences in utilizing a Facebook closed group for her EFL e-learning environment and the students' views were the main topics of this study. Eighteen EFL freshmen participants were selected in this study. The researcher used data from a questionnaire with some closed and open-ended questions. The findings indicated that the students found the Facebook closed group a comfortable, practical, and useful e-learning environment. The students' familiarity with the interface helped them to immediately focus on the class activities instead of learning how to use the tool. Most students viewed the Facebook closed group as positive for class interactions, creative work, opinions, and express feelings. A few dislike voices were related to the display quality of Facebook, the asynchronous and silent communication on Facebook. Accordingly, utilizing a Facebook closed group might be worth considering for learners who have not been adequately prepared with the technology for joining an online class.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication, EFL e-learning environment, Facebook closed group, social media.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted under the circumstances when all classes had to be conducted online due to the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic when people had to have social and physical distancing. During this time, activities on campuses were going virtual. In response to the emergency remote teaching issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, Reinhardt (2020) suggested using familiar, simple technological tools accessible for everyone, such as social media for foreign and second language instructions. Reinhardt's argument seems relevant to Indonesia's huge social media users (see Kemp, 2020) and a situation where there is little time for preparing the students' and teachers' technological and digital literacies. McIsaac et al. (1999), in their investigation on the students' views on computer-mediated communication at the University of Arizona, expressed their concern that "students could miss out on course information due to their lack of technology skills unless they had prior training" (p. 122).

Considering the researcher's students' backgrounds who came from rural and urban areas in Indonesia who presumably have different technological and digital literacy, she had to select a tool for online classes accessible to them. Learning from statistics that showed a vast population of Facebook users in Indonesia (*Leading countries based on Facebook audience size as of April 2020 (in millions)*, 2020), she chose to use a Facebook closed group to teach her online Critical Reading (CR) class. She wondered if the students considered the learning tool to be appropriate for their e-learning environment. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the students' views on using a Facebook closed group for their English as a foreign language (EFL) e-learning environment.

Previous studies on the use of Facebook for educational purposes have been numerous. However, they mostly investigated its use as an outside class activity or a voluntary activity (see Jin, 2015; Kabilan et al., 2010; Kasuma & Tan, 2019; Rodliyah, 2016; Rubrico & Hashim, 2014). Some others were in teaching writing contexts (see Bani-Hani et al., 2014; Fithriani et al., 2019; Miftah, 2016; Putri, 2018; Rodliyah, 2016; Sakkir & Dollah, 2019), and grammar (see Sumakul, 2012). Meanwhile, Abusa'aleek (2015) and Salih and Elsaid (2018) investigated the participants' perceptions and attitudes of using Facebook as an EFL e-learning environment.

However, these previous studies mentioned earlier were either voluntary learning where face-to-face learning coexisted or in learning contexts other than reading. None of them specifically discussed the learners' views of the use of Facebook as a formal e-learning environment for an online reading class. So, this current study on utilizing Facebook for facilitating a pure online reading class was still experimental. Therefore, for evaluation purposes, the researcher conducted this study to find out whether the use of a Facebook closed group was responded positively as an appropriate EFL e-learning environment in critical reading class. The study was to answer this research question:

- What were the views of critical reading class students on using a Facebook closed group to facilitate their e-learning environment?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a brief literature review of the researcher's rationale for choosing social media, particularly Facebook, as a computer-mediated communication tool in the Critical Reading (CR) class. This section also provides a literature review of some previous studies on CMC or specifically Facebook for EFL learning.

2.1 Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-Mediated Communication or CMC is defined by Mann and Stewart (2000) as “the direct use of computers in text-based communication processes” (p. 2). Warschauer (2001) completed CMC's definition as “online communication that refers to reading, writing, and communication via networked computers” (p. 207). Warschauer explained further that CMC could happen synchronously or in real-time and, asynchronously, when people communicate in a delayed manner. Along with the development of CMC tools, interactions via computers are not only in the reading and writing modes but also in the speaking mode (Özdener & Satar, 2014).

Social media belongs to CMC. It was formulated by Reinhardt (2019) as “any application or technology through which users participate in, create, and share media resources and practices with other users by means of digital networking” (p. 3). Social media features include a user account, bio page, friends or followers, groups, hashtags, activity feed, notifications, user-setting arrangement, response systems like button and comment section, review, rating, and voting systems (Nations, 2021). Social media users in Indonesia in January 2020 were 160 million people (Kemp, 2020).

Facebook is one kind of social media. Facebook provides a public Facebook group and a closed Facebook group. A Facebook closed group is created when a group of people wants to communicate more efficiently, but other people who are not invited to the group cannot see the activities (Moreau, 2021). In the CR online class of the present study, communication among the students and between the students and the teacher happened in the Facebook closed group. Communication in this virtual classroom was mainly through exchanges of written texts and visual images mediated by using the Facebook closed group's interface. Within this context, the Facebook closed group functioned as a CMC tool. As a CMC tool, Facebook provides synchronous and asynchronous communication in reading and writing modes, and the later development of Facebook features also enables users to have live video.

2.2 Facebook for Teaching and Learning

The use of Facebook closed group, as a CMC tool in the online CR class was based on the idea that the main class activity would be discussions and problem-based activities. Several researchers noted the benefits of discussions facilitated by CMC to support critical thinking and active learning. The study of Schallert et al. (2003) indicated that CMC could help create a supportive learning environment for thought expressions in online discussions and online written discussions enable more interactive and deeper learning. They concluded that “the very reality of the classroom is dependent on the words exchanged among learners and teachers” (p. 104). The study of Althaus (1997), in the same way, indicated that students participating in

discussions on CMC learned more and got higher grades because they tended to have higher-order thinking skills. CMC's synchronous and asynchronous chat texts could function like a thinking processor that enabled the students to collaborate before reaching a solution (Ajabshir, 2019). In addition, Kim (2000) argued that CMC could enhance more active participation of the learners and a more democratic expression of ideas. Peer responses during a discussion on Facebook were also useful for critical thinking and revising writing drafts among EFL students in Kalimantan (Miftah, 2016) and junior high school students in Surakarta (Putri, 2018). Besides discussion, Ding (2016) suggested problem-based activities done asynchronously in a CMC classroom to improve EFL students' critical thinking skills. Similar benefits of problem-based activities in a CMC classroom were also reported in the study of Bashith and Amin (2017).

However, to do activities in the Facebook closed group, such as discussion and problem-based activities, the students need prior knowledge. In the present study, to prepare the students with prior knowledge, instead of lectures, the students had to study the materials ahead of time before class using the principle of a flipped-classroom approach. A flipped classroom approach, according to Alsowat (2016), is "a pedagogical model where traditional lecture and homework elements of a course are reversed" (p. 108). According to Yulian (2021), a flipped classroom model prepares students with various knowledge before coming to activities in class. Materials given before class are not necessarily videos or online materials, but they could also be papers and hard copies (Alsowat, 2016). Yulian (2021) found that implementing a flipped-classroom approach to a critical reading class that combined face-to-face and online learning effectively improved critical thinking ability for critical reading. Findings from the studies above seemed to support the use of a Facebook closed group, as a CMC to facilitate the online CR class, which Setiamunadi (2019) described on 'The Critical Reading Course Pack' required the students to "apply critical, logical, systematic thinking when reading texts ..." (p. 2).

As a popular tool, Facebook has been used in various academic settings. Data released on September 18, 2019, showed that Facebook was listed as the 15th rank among 100 high-rank applications used for tertiary education (Hart, 2019). Some schools use Facebook to support school administration, such as an announcement board (Rubrico & Hashim, 2014). The friendly interface of Facebook also enables students and the teacher to socialize, which is an important activity in an online class, particularly when face-to-face meetings are absent (Espinosa, 2015).

2.3. Previous Related Studies

Studies on the EFL students' perceptions and attitudes on the use of Facebook, which were similar to this current study focus, were conducted by Abusa'aleek (2015), and Salih and Elsaid (2018); both were conducted at higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. The first study involved 65 participants, while the second study involved 30 participants. Both studies indicated positive responses of the participants as they grew in their learning motivation and became more independent and student-centered in their learning.

The use of Facebook, which was used as incidental learning in EFL teaching, such as the study of Kabilan et al. (2010), reported that the participants, who consisted of 300 university students in Malaysia, improved their vocabulary, confidence,

motivation, and favorable view in learning English. Rodliyah's (2016) study conducted in West Java with fifteen voluntary students who posted their journal entries on Facebook showed a positive view of the activity. It improved their vocabulary and grammar in writing.

Other studies deliberately incorporated Facebook activities into an EFL course. For example, in a university in Malaysia, Rubrico and Hashim (2014) found that the students viewed Facebook as effective for interaction, collaboration, scaffolding ideas, and learning autonomy during their pre-service learning. The interactive feature of Facebook utilized by Jin (2015) in his intercultural research with 20 North American English native students and 32 Korean students who studied EFL showed that Facebook facilitated their intercultural practice and improved their intercultural competence.

In EFL writing, low proficiency writing students at a private university in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, considered the visualization of the materials on Facebook helped them build ideas (Sakkir & Dollah, 2019). Another study in Medan, Indonesia, showed students' improved participation and writing skills (Fithriani et al., 2019). The students' responses on Facebook helped build vocabulary among Jordanian EFL students (Bani-Hani et al., 2014) and real-life situation grammar skills (Sumakul, 2012).

Apart from the positive views of the use of Facebook in learning, there were negative views such as intercultural communication problems (Al-Hammody, 2014), not confident in the writing ability (Rodliyah, 2016), disliking the asynchronous feedback as compared to face-to-face-classroom communication (Bani-Hani et al., 2014), and distractions on Facebook (Bani-Hani et al., 2014; Churcher et al., 2014). Meanwhile, Espinosa (2015) considered that the multimedia nature of Facebook might be entertaining but not engaging intellectually.

Based on the literature review discussed above, the researcher was reassured that understanding the learners' views on the use of Facebook was important. These studies helped her to understand both the positive and negative views that learners could have when making activities on Facebook which were useful for determining the data collection instrument for this study. Particularly, the studies of Kabilan et al. (2010) and Bani-Hani et al. (2014) inspired the researcher to conduct this study to find out her students' views on using the Facebook closed group as their e-learning environment.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

The research design for this study was exploratory. An exploratory research design is used in situations where little knowledge is known about an issue and research problems are in a preliminary level of investigation (Saunders et al., 2007). Exploratory research is not an end in itself, but it needs further research to provide conclusive evidence (Zikmund, 2003). Given the popularity of Facebook, and yet there is little research on the students' views on its use in the EFL e-learning environment, particularly in a Critical Reading class, this exploratory study was intended to provide insights and directions for further investigations.

3.2 Participants

The research participants of this study were eighteen freshmen at the English Language Education Program of a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. They comprised seven male and eleven female students aged 18-20 who took a Critical Reading (CR) course. The sample size was determined by the number of students joining the CR class. Although the number was small, they comprised students from different parts of Indonesia whose voices might represent the respondents' different digital literacy and internet network accessibility.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

The instruments to collect the data were questionnaires that consisted of two sections. The first section was an open-ended questionnaire to collect data on the students' places of origin. The second section was their views on utilizing a Facebook closed group as the e-learning environment for their CR class. This section comprised eleven items of a closed-ended questionnaire with a four-point scale option: 'dislike very much', 'dislike', 'like', and 'like very much'. Each item was followed by a request to give explanations or reasons for choosing the option provided. The items in this questionnaire were adapted from the previous studies conducted by Kabilan et al. (2010) and Bani-Hani et al. (2014). The data collection activity was done by the end of the semester, a week before the CR online class finished. The questionnaires were available on a learning management system, and the students had to submit the completed questionnaires a week later. The use of the Facebook closed group in the CR online class that the students had to view was described in the following paragraphs.

Prior to this research, after creating a Facebook closed group, the researcher invited the 18 students of the CR class to join the group. They all had a Facebook account before. The scheduled activities on the Facebook group were twice a week, two hours per meeting. The course outline, syllabus, and major class materials were on a learning management system. The materials were published weekly, a week before the class activities on Facebook, and students had to prepare the materials before class. The major activities in the Facebook closed group were presented in the subsequent sections below.

3.3.1 Socializing and expressing feelings

At the beginning of the class, the researcher posted a greeting on her wall on the CR Facebook closed group. She and her students then would greet one another, asking for their well-being. Socializing could continue on the Facebook closed group by mentioning names during questions and answers and using 'like', 'emojis', or 'GIFs' to appreciate peer responses. At the end of the class, she usually wrote some motivating words using colors and designs on the Facebook wall. See Figure 1.

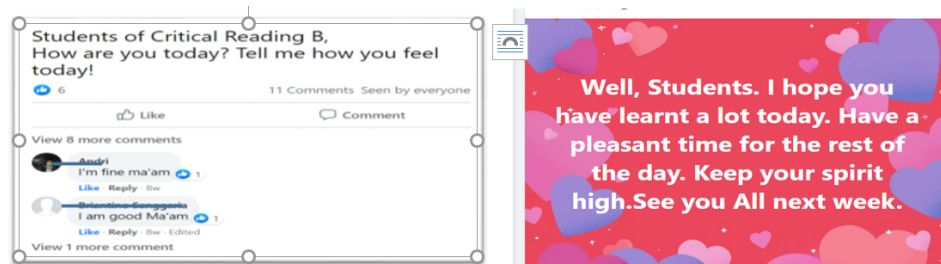


Figure 1. Greetings and closing as parts of socializing functions.

3.3.2 Discussion forum

The learning process on a Facebook group was facilitated by discussions in the leave a comment section. All comments or opinions were automatically recorded and used to check the students' attendance and participation during discussions. Group discussions could also be done. The researcher created different walls for different groups for their group discussion forums, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Different walls for group discussion forums.

Discussions were not always led by materials or questions from the researcher (i.e., the teacher). However, the students could use their walls to post materials taken from real-life situations, such as newspaper captions for class discussion, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. An example of a student's post for class discussion.

3.3.3 Problem-based activities

Activities on Facebook can be synchronous and asynchronous. One problem-based activity that the researcher gave was done asynchronously through a survey.

With Facebook, the students could do an online survey among their Facebook friends. To know their international Facebook friends' nationalities, she used a feature on Facebook, 'Create a Poll', as demonstrated in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Create a poll.

Facebook could also accommodate the students' creative work, which combined texts and visual images. Figure 5 shows one of the students' works on their survey report about her international friend's problems in his student life.



Figure 5. A student's work.

3.3.4 Lecture

One of the learning processes missing in an online class through Facebook was giving a direct oral response when dealing with a complex idea. Fortunately, Facebook has developed a new feature, 'Live Video' (the red symbol in Figure 6), which the researcher used to lecture or explain difficult materials whenever necessary. The lecture was automatically recorded and could be watched as many times as the students needed. Another feature on Facebook is 'Create Rooms' (the purple symbol in Figure

6), which is similar to a video conference. The researcher (i.e., the teacher) could create a room and invite all members of the group to join the meeting.

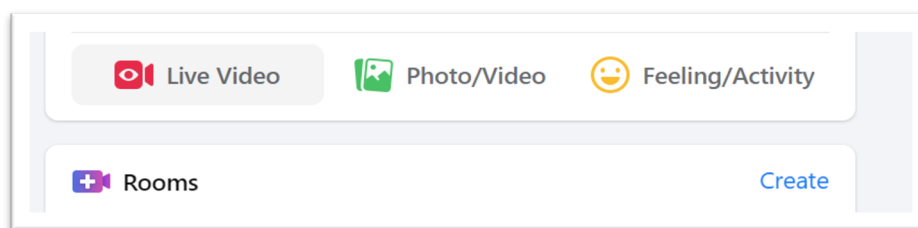


Figure 6. Symbols of ‘Live Video’ and ‘Create Rooms’ on Facebook.

3.4 Data Analysis

The closed-ended questionnaire items were analyzed based on frequency and percentage. The students’ explanation of their choice of the options provided in each number was used for giving details of the findings. To analyze the explanation, the researcher compiled the explanation of each item in a spread excel sheet and then categorized them based on similarities in themes. Some excerpts of the explanation in the questionnaire were presented to support the findings.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Students’ Demographic Data

The first part of the questionnaire gave data about the students’ places of origin in Indonesia. Out of eighteen students in the class, ten students, or 56%, came from Central Java, five students, or 29%, from Borneo. The other three students (15%) came from West Java, Maluku Island, and Madura Island. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the students involved in this study.

Table 1. Students’ places of origin.

Students’ places of origin	Percentage
Central Java	56%
Borneo	29%
West Java	5%
Maluku Island	5%
Madura Island	5%

4.2 Questionnaire

The second part of the questionnaire was about the CR students’ views on using the Facebook closed group for their e-learning environment. There were 11 items on the questionnaire. Each item was followed by an explanation or reasons for choosing the option provided. An empty column was also available on the very left of the questionnaire for each item; this is for the students to write out their extended comments on each item so that they could further intricate their views. The findings of the percentages of each item in the questionnaire are presented in Table 2.

Consequently, the findings of all items in the questionnaire are discussed in the following sub-sections.

Table 2. The students' views on the use of Facebook closed group for CR e-learning environment.

No	Items on the Questionnaire	Scales			
		Dislike very much	Dislike	Like	Like very much
1	Facebook closed group for CR e-learning environment.	0%	1 student (5.55%)	13 students (72.22%)	4 students (22.22%)
2	User Interface of the Facebook closed group.	0%	3 students (16.66%)	13 students (72.22%)	2 students (11.11%)
3	Comfort and easiness in using the Facebook group.	0%	1 student (5.55%)	9 students (50%)	8 students (44.44%)
4	The atmosphere created on the Facebook group.	0%	6 students (33.33%)	11 students (61.11%)	1 student (5.55%)
5	Using 'like', 'emojis' and 'GIF'.	0%	0%	10 students (55.55%)	8 students (44.44%)
6	Using 'create a poll'.	0%	0%	10 students (55.55%)	8 students (44.44%)
7	'Live video' on the Facebook group.	0%	5 students (27.77%)	7 students (38.88%)	6 students (33.33%)
8	'Interactions with friends' on the Facebook group.	0%	3 students (16.66%)	13 students (72.22%)	2 students (11.11%)
9	'Interactions with the teacher' on the Facebook group.	1 student (5.55%)	2 students (11.11%)	9 students (50%)	6 students (33.33%)
10	'Expressing my opinions' on the Facebook group.	0%	1 student (5.55%)	13 students (72.22%)	4 students (22.22%)
11	'Posting creative assignments' on the Facebook group.	0%	1 student (5.55%)	13 students (72.22%)	4 students (22.22%)

4.2.1 Item 1: Using Facebook group for CR online class

Out of 18 students, 13 students (72.22%) chose 'like', four students (22.22%) chose 'like very much', and one student (5.55%) chose 'dislike'. Among those who chose 'like' and 'like very much', the reasons were mostly related to the idea that using Facebook was simple and comfortable. One student wrote, "Facebook can give students the opportunity to directly comment on someone's post and comment". Another student commented, "...it saves internet quota...". One student who chose 'dislike' did not give any reason.

4.2.2 Item 2: The user interface of the Facebook group

In response to this item, 13 students (72.22%) chose 'like', two students (11.11%) chose 'like very much', and three students (16.66%) chose 'dislike'. Those who liked and liked very much described the Facebook interface as "interesting", "attractive", and "familiar". One student who disliked criticized the interface by writing, "The display in the FB group is not in order, so it is random and sometimes (the student) has difficulty finding the latest posts". Another student wrote that Facebook was not effective, and she preferred other applications without specifying what applications, while the third one wrote, "The display quality was low and sometimes interrupted".

4.2.3 Item 3: *Comfort and easiness of using Facebook group*

The students' responses to this statement were all positive except for one student who chose 'dislike'. The students liked or liked Facebook very much because they mostly have used Facebook for a long time and have already been familiar with the features so that they did not need to learn how to use it. For example, one student wrote, "I have used Facebook since elementary school so that I am very familiar with it". One student who chose 'Dislike' mentioned that using Facebook was easy but not comfortable because Facebook does not have a 'dark mode'.

4.2.4 Item 4: *The atmosphere created on the Facebook group*

Eleven out of eighteen students (61.11 %) 'liked' and one student (5.55%) 'liked very' much the atmosphere created on the Facebook group. They used the words "pleasant", "comfortable", and "happy" in describing the atmosphere of the class on the Facebook group. Those who chose 'dislike' compared the Facebook group class atmosphere with the offline class. She wrote, "...not a really good atmosphere; I prefer an offline classroom". Another student wrote, "...silent and too focused on the material; no one makes jokes when we need something entertaining for a moment".

4.2.5 Item 5: *Using 'like', 'emojis', and 'GIF'*

All of the students enjoyed using the features 'like', 'emojis', and 'GIF' for expressing their feelings. Ten students (55.55%) chose 'like,' and eight students (44.44%) chose 'liked very much'. Most students commented that those features helped them express their feelings to show appreciation to their friends' posts and to know their friends' feelings towards the others' posts or comments. One student reported, "It is easier to express what we feel using 'like' or 'emojis'". The students also felt these features made the class more interesting and expressive. One student mentioned, "It makes the class more fun and enjoyable". Another student also commented similarly by saying, "There are many interesting and funny emojis and GIFs; I can know who likes and dislikes my posts".

4.2.6 Item 6: *Using 'create a poll'*

Similar to the previous findings in Item 5, all students also favored the activity of 'create a poll'. Ten students (55.55%) chose the option 'like', and eight students (44.44%) chose 'liked very much'. This feature was used to break the class into groups, pair students, or have a quick survey. Students commented on this feature as "unique", "interesting", and "fun". One student reported, "It is a nice filler activity while studying online".

4.2.7 Item 7: *'Live Video' on the Facebook group*

The teacher used the 'Live Video' feature on the Facebook group in the class understudy to lecture or explain a difficult lesson. The students' views on this item were 73% positive. Thirteen students of eighteen chose either 'like' or 'like very much' on this item. While five students, or 27%, chose 'dislike'. Their reasons for liking this

idea were that they could watch the video again, and it did not consume many internet quotas. On the other hand, students who disliked the idea reported that 'Live Video' on the Facebook group was not clear, and one of them preferred video conferencing.

4.2.8 Item 8: 'Interactions with friends' on the Facebook group

The students in this class found interactions with friends on the Facebook group practical and effective. Fifteen out of eighteen students (83.33%) had cumulative 'like' and 'like very much' when answering this item in the questionnaire. One of the students commented, "It's easy to do interactions with friends on the Facebook group; I just need to mention her or his name". However, they also reported their concerns to their passive friends when they wrote, "Sometimes they are not responding". One other student commented, "Facebook group already provides a good facility for interactions but sometimes I think they interact because it is a must, not desire".

4.2.9 Item 9: 'Interactions with the teacher' on the Facebook group

Students' views on 'the interaction with the teacher' on the Facebook group indicated 83% had a positive experience. They thought interactions with the teacher were effective and pleasant. The following are some of their comments: "...direct reply can improve students' confidence because they know that the teacher will still correct mistakes". Another student wrote, "I had better interaction with the teacher". A student also described, "When using Facebook, I can easily follow the updates of the materials from the lecturer". Nevertheless, two students also reported that communication with the teacher through WhatsApp was better than through Facebook. They wrote, "It's more practical to use WhatsApp", and "...we mostly use WhatsApp or emails". One student who chose 'disliked very much' unfortunately did not give any explanation. Another student, although he thought interaction with the teacher was okay ('like'), said that sometimes he felt shy to ask more about the material on the Facebook group.

4.2.10 Item 10: 'Expressing my opinions' on the Facebook group

The students' responses to this statement were all positive except one student who chose 'dislike'. Those whose views were positive thought that expressing their opinions was easy because they could just post them on Facebook and they liked it because they could learn from others' opinions. One student remarked, "I can express what is in my mind to the comment section without any interruption. If in (offline) class, the students might speak one by one". Another student explained, "When I want to share my opinions, I can easily give comments or make a new post on the Facebook group's wall". However, one student who answered 'dislike' on this item thought her posts were visible to other Facebook users outside the group. On the contrary, in a Facebook closed group, only group members could see the group's activities.

4.2.11 Item 11: Facebook group for 'posting creative assignments'

The students' views on Item 11 were also mostly positive. Only one student chose 'dislike'. She disliked the idea because she thought other tools could

accommodate creative assignments better. Simultaneously, most students who ‘liked very much’ or ‘liked’ using the Facebook group for posting creative assignments reported that it was easy and convenient. One student commented, “It is interesting to look and read”. Another student explained that ‘posting creative assignments on the Facebook group’ was good because anyone could see and give their opinions on the comment column that was already available. On the other hand, one student mentioned that ‘posting on Facebook group’ lacked privacy, although this student answered ‘like’ on this item in the questionnaire.

5. DISCUSSION

Considering the students’ various places of origin, resulting in their different digital literacy levels, using an already familiar tool such as Facebook could help reduce their anxiety. The synchronous and asynchronous communication mode of Facebook also offered benefits to students from more remote areas such as those from Borneo and Maluku Island due to the frequent poor internet network and or a power outage. When these students faced internet or electricity problems, they could still catch up with the class activity asynchronously throughout the day. Moreover, since all class discussion threads were recorded in the comment section, the students would not miss any information or updates even when they entered the discussion later or earlier whenever they found the best internet connection.

The students’ views on the Facebook closed group as a tool for their e-learning environment were complimentary. The students found Facebook very familiar and easy to use so that they felt comfortable using it for their e-learning environment. The students also found the features like ‘create a poll’, ‘like’, ‘emojis’, and ‘GIF’ attractive, fun, and enjoyable. Expressing feelings using these features could compensate for the gestures and facial expressions that students usually have in offline classrooms. These findings were in line with the study of [Kabilan et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Rodliyah \(2016\)](#), whose participants had complimentary views on their EFL learning on Facebook.

The students’ comfort and pleasant feeling with the use of Facebook supported [Reinhardt’s \(2020\)](#) idea for considering using familiar, everyday tools to respond to the distant learning mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the educators’ concerns in administering distance learning is the possibility of students being left behind because they were not previously trained for the technology needed in joining an online class ([McIsaac et al., 1999](#)). When this class was conducted online, there was not much opportunity to provide the necessary technological training to the students whose digital literacy might not be adequate. The use of a Facebook closed group seemed to be able to provide a reasonable solution to the situation. In joining the online CR class, being familiar and effortless in using the technological tool was paramount. In this online CR class, the students did not listen to lectures, as the lectures were rarely given, but they had to post opinions, join a discussion, reply to or ask questions, and post or submit multimedia works. Since the students did not need to think about how to use the tool to do those tasks, they could concentrate on the content matter of the class activities. The students did not seem to have difficulties in using the features on Facebook to do so

A few students chose 'dislike' in some of the items related to the Facebook interface because they mostly disliked the display quality on Facebook, the asynchronous communication on Facebook, and preference over an offline classroom. This dislike voice was similar to those in the study of [Bani-Hani et al. \(2014\)](#). However, in terms of the number of students who had this voice, the number was only a minority, while in the study of [Bani-Hani et al. \(2014\)](#) half of the students voiced this view. This finding difference might be due to the different contexts and times of the study. This current study was conducted amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced students to have no alternative than an online classroom. Meanwhile, the study of [Bani-Hani et al. \(2014\)](#) was in a context where an online classroom using Facebook was an alternative to a face-to-face classroom.

The students' views on the class activities facilitated by the Facebook closed group were also mostly positive. They liked the interactions with their friends and with the teacher which they considered easy and effective. The instant messaging on the Facebook group helped them feel secure because they would feel they were not alone. In the study of [McIsaac et al. \(1999\)](#), they found that not enough instant feedback could make students feel isolated. Especially the teacher's comments and answers were important. Although most students liked the Facebook group interactions, they also felt some concerns over their friends who were not responsive. [Rodliyah \(2016\)](#) in her study noticed that the students' insufficient writing ability might hinder them from posting their ideas. This situation seemed to be true in this current study as well. One student wrote that he was too shy to ask more on the Facebook closed group. It is assumed that this happened because sometimes he did not want other students to know what he asked. This situation might be the reason why two students commented that communication with the teacher via WhatsApp or emails was more practical (than via Facebook).

Another essential function of an e-learning environment tool is the facility for thought expressions and creative work. The findings indicated that the students had positive views towards the use of the Facebook closed group for accommodating these needs. One student commented that he could express his opinions without interruption on the Facebook group compared to an offline class when the students had to speak in turn. They also said that the open posts enabled the class to see and learn from each other's posts. This finding was similar to the finding of [Bani-Hani et al. \(2014\)](#), whose participants admitted that their friends' posts gave them English exposure, and of the study of [Rodliyah \(2016\)](#) in which one student admitted to learning from his friends' sentences on the posts, which he considered amazing and beyond the lessons in the textbook.

Most students supported the teacher's using the 'Live Video' feature for lecturing or explaining difficult lessons. They liked it because they could watch the video repeatedly, and it did not consume too much internet quota, maybe as it was compared to zoom-based lecturing. A few students who disliked this reported low video quality, and video conferencing was preferable. This finding implied that 'Live Video' on Facebook for lecturing, functionally, was acceptable, although video-quality wise was not supreme.

The students who had "dislike" voices on the use of Facebook closed group were just a few, yet their views are worth considering. The following ideas are some practical recommendations to deal with the weaknesses of a Facebook closed group for an e-learning environment. One of the "dislike" voices was the unorganized display

of posts on Facebook which made it difficult to locate the newest post. To deal with this problem, the teacher could use a new page with a different color when having a new entry or a new topic. The absence of 'dark mode' which became the concern of one student could be remedied by lowering the brightness setting of the device being used and by wearing blue glasses to reduce eyestrain. Some students felt that they missed jokes, humor, "noise" and other speaking dynamics of a conventional offline classroom in the e-learning environment, however good it was. To reduce the rigidity of written communication on Facebook, and help to create a lively communication which usually involves paralanguage, emojis, GIFs, a spoken language style with expressions such as "uh-huh, hmm, well" and other interjections can be used. 'Live video' on Facebook that some students considered unclear may be replaced by posting a recorded video produced using specially designed software for making teaching and learning videos. The student's voice who liked video conferencing may be helped by using the 'Create Room' feature on Facebook. To encourage students who were not active in giving responses, a direct question by mentioning their names could be used. The students who were shy to communicate on Facebook, similar to [Rodliyah's \(2016\)](#) idea, might be students whose writing was not good enough. In the present study, as the teacher of the class, the researcher coped with that issue and encouraged more expressions on Facebook by avoiding correcting their grammar, wrong choice of words or punctuation, and spelling directly. Instead, in replying, she would indirectly suggest a correction on their mistakes. For example, one student wrote, "She has many ... in every place which are she visited." In her response, she wrote, "Did she have ... in every country she visited?" By writing this, she implicitly corrected her tense consistency, word choice, and sentence structure.

Based on the results and discussion above, a reflective note could be made such as the following. The positive evaluation of the CR students on the use of Facebook closed group for their EFL e-learning environment was first of all due to its being simple and familiar. However, the e-learning environment design should also be conducive to learning. First, since in the CR class on Facebook, a discussion was the main and most important class activity, free expressions of thoughts, critical ideas, arguments, and negotiations had to be encouraged. Similar to the finding of [Ajabshir's \(2019\)](#) study, this intense discussion was the time when the students' critical thinking dispositions were trained. Moreover, as in the Facebook closed group, everybody had an equal opportunity to express ideas without being asked first and without turn-taking, this discussion forum could help create student-centered and democratic learning. The study of [Kim \(2000\)](#) supported the participatory and democratic nature of discussions on CMC. However, to ensure this happened, the teacher had to make certain the students were prepared with the class discussion materials. The use of flipped classroom approach, which was proven effective in developing critical thinking skills for critical reading ([Yulian, 2021](#)), could condition the students to be prepared before class to work well. Moreover, the teacher should model the discussion. For example, the teacher had to avoid a yes/no question, as it did not evoke thought elaboration. The teacher also had to dignify the students by referring them by name or respecting their ideas by giving a "like" or letting them "pass" on a question and allowing them to come back later asynchronously. This discussion climate might affect the students' enjoyment in doing the discussion on the Facebook closed group.

Second, the features of Facebook had to be maximally utilized. For example, the teacher could use 'Create a poll' for a fun ice-breaking activity. Group discussions

could be facilitated by creating different walls on Facebook for different groups. Learning materials and tasks had to be creatively multimedia designs. Creative work in the CR online class was mostly related to their asynchronous activities. One of the activities that employed the creative use of Facebook was the problem-based activity. This kind of activity developed critical thinking skills (Bashith & Amin, 2017; Ding, 2016). For example, one problem-based activity given in the online CR class was to survey their international friends' student life problems which the students did asynchronously on Facebook. With Facebook, the students did the online survey among their Facebook friends and sought information for completing their tasks by communicating with their international friends on Facebook. Then, they posted the results of their work also on Facebook (see Figure 5). Thus, with one tool only—Facebook, the students could complete their task from the process until the product. Third, besides an excellent tool and activity, another key factor for winning the students' hearts was maintaining a good rapport. In this online CR class on Facebook, greetings, socializing, and respecting one another were encouraged and practiced.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a Facebook closed group could be used as an alternative tool for an e-learning environment. Its familiarity among users in Indonesia and its user-friendly characteristic could help students concentrate on the lessons instead of technology. Besides comfort, a Facebook closed group also functioned well for the classroom activities. The students' need to interact with their friends and the teacher could be well accommodated. As a means for socializing, expressing ideas, and doing creative work, a Facebook closed group seemed to be adequately satisfying. The students' unhappy expressions were mostly related to the quality level of the interface display and the intense level of the individual student's activeness. Live video on Facebook was acceptable for lecturing, except for two students who expected a better video quality and a video conferencing type of lecturing. Using a professionally recorded video of a lecture and the 'Create Rooms' feature on Facebook, which enables live interactions, may provide a solution to accommodate this need. The benefit of using Facebook over other social media applications is that Facebook has a closed group feature that protects privacy and may be more appropriate for specific classes or for students and teachers who are not comfortable having their class activities exposed to other Facebook users outside the group. Although the students mostly responded positively to the use of Facebook closed group for their EFL e-learning environment, the design of the e-learning environment had to be conducive for CR online learning.

The weakness of this study was the small population. Therefore, a similar study can also be conducted on a bigger population to provide more comprehensive findings. Research on frequently used social media such as Instagram is also recommended. Furthermore, since communication on social media applications is mostly written exchanges, it may be useful to investigate whether students should have a standard of writing ability to join such a classroom effectively. In other words, it is worth researching whether social media applications can also be effective e-learning environments for elementary EFL learners or students whose writing ability is still very low.

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