
A Pragmatic Analysis of Efl Learners' Social Media Interaction

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A B S T R A C T

As a new and emerging venue of interaction, social media provide an ample opportunity for EFL learners to practice their English mastery and to enhance their socio-pragmatic awareness. However, even though some social media attempt to accommodate and mimic offline communications through their features, there are still technological and platform affordance and constraints that limit what users can do to get their message across. This situation makes a pragmatic analysis of online communication using offline measure a naïve endeavor. To confirm this notion, this paper borrows concepts from relevance theory pertaining to L1 and L2 pragmatics to reveal the patterns of online communication of 43 EFL learners in their social media interaction. The results show that there is a different pattern between online and offline interaction where they share a non-prototypical model of communication, the process of context and meaning construction, as well as their attempt to compensate for what the platform is lacking in accommodating their communication need.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media as one of the internet-mediated communication platforms in the last decade calls for another promising research tradition in pragmatics. They are not only a place where 'real world' communication is replicated (Giles, Stommel, Paulus, Lester, and Reed., 2015) but also the place where, despite their mother tongue differences, users interact and communicate seamlessly. They come from different cultural backgrounds with their values and systems that in turn create a new mesh of culture altogether, diminishing the status of English as no longer the exclusive domain of native speakers (Lantz and Anderson, 2017) but a global online lingua franca. This fact alone is an interesting pragmatic analysis pivotal point since, adhering to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that culture and language are two sides of the same coin, one gets to analyze language use and its constructed meaning in a venue that is perpetually expanding and continuously changing where the culture itself is not yet stabilized.

In the setting of L2 learning, studies have been conducted by scholars mainly concerning the attempt to harness the benefit of internet-mediated communication to improve students' competence and performance using the target language. Among others are Harting (2017), Lantz-Anderson (2017), Marti and Fernandez (2016), Reindhardt and Ryu (2014), Blatner and Fiori (2011) who advocate the use of social media to improve L2 learner's socio-pragmatic awareness in their communication in the target language. In addition to that, they conclude that the ubiquity of social media and their benefit could be harnessed to increase L2 learner's sensitivity to language use and context that is beyond mere lexical and grammatical knowledge. Eslam (2013) and Georgakopoulou (2011) both focus on the pattern of L2 learner's pragmatic choice in their email correspondence that reflects their attempt at

negotiating their position and constructing their identity in the interactional dyad. Tudini (2012) focuses on the structure of native and non-native speakers talk in a form-focused speaking practice in an online chatroom. The result shows that the pattern of the conversation resembles the offline interaction's IRF sequence with much face-threatening feedback that otherwise would not be given in other casual non-online settings.

The findings of those studies contribute a lot to the domain of L2 instruction considering the fact that L2 learner's socio-pragmatic awareness remains as one of the critical challenges in the field. Unlike native speakers who are born in the L2 environment and thus have acquired the linguistic repertoire since childhood, in most cases, L2 learners are still using the mental set of L1 when communicating in L2. Using social media in the instructional process is expected to overcome the scarcity of authentic material problem, to provide learners with a venue to practice and hone-in not only their L2 linguistic and lexical mastery but also their sensitivity to the social appropriateness of the language use. In turn, they could master the use of any speech act strategy transcending mere knowledge about the L2.

When it comes to pragmatic analysis, however, those studies subscribe to the belief that online pragmatics is no different than the offline one since they abide by the same principle. Interlocutors engage in a meaning construction process through social activity by applying strategies to interpret what is meant by the utterance, by what is said and what is not (Devitt and Henley 2003). This belief makes the analysis quite straightforward and simplistic. On the other hands, as the main scope of pragmatics is in the contextualization of text, every meaning is bound in its context, and that makes internet-mediated communication with its diverse platforms different from its non-mediated counterpart. Hence, presuming the findings of offline communication studies to online cases should be avoided for there are several cultural and technological aspects involved that otherwise are not available in the offline world and vice versa (Meredith 2017; Greiffenhagen and Watson 2005; and Giles et al. 2015). Failure to acknowledge this fact will make the analysis becomes rather judgmental – categorizing and ascribing utterance in right-and-wrong fashion, without seeing the big picture of the setting and contextual differences.

With this understanding as the point of departure, this study examines EFL learners' interaction in social media by considering the built-in differences between online and offline settings. The focus is in seeking the pattern and structure of the interaction and in the issue of how, despite violating some cooperative principles which become the hallmark of offline communication pragmatic analysis, students' social endeavor mediated by the internet might still be pragmatically meaningful. The following research questions are formulated as the pointer for the discussion:

1. How are the patterns of students' online interaction different from their offline counterpart?
2. How do students overcome the unavailability of context during online interaction?
3. How do students compensate for the lack of extra-linguistic cues that otherwise aid offline communication on their social media interaction?

2. METHOD

The current in-depth study uses naturally occurring data from the online interaction of 43 ESP students learning English as a foreign language. The interaction is in the form of Instagram posting and comments during a one-week period as a part of an assignment. The postings are grouped using a specific and agreed-upon hashtag to make it easy for collection

purpose. The data is not transcribed but is screen-captured to keep the form intact since the layout and interface serve as an essential factor in the analysis. Students' consent to use the data and to display their Instagram handlers for this study is already acquired.

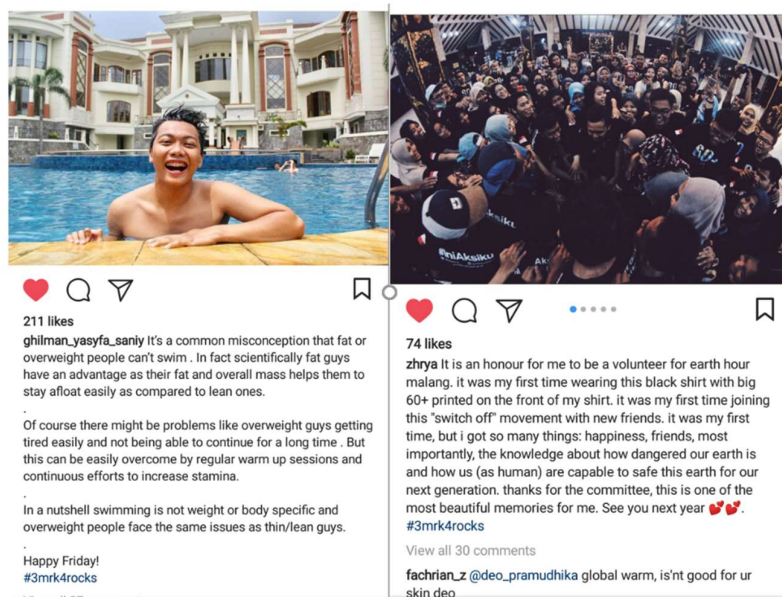
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data collection, we find that students' online interaction is different from the traditional offline communication schema in term of the pattern of form and structure including language use, their context construction, and their attempt at compensating for the lack of resources during the communication process.

1. Form and Structure

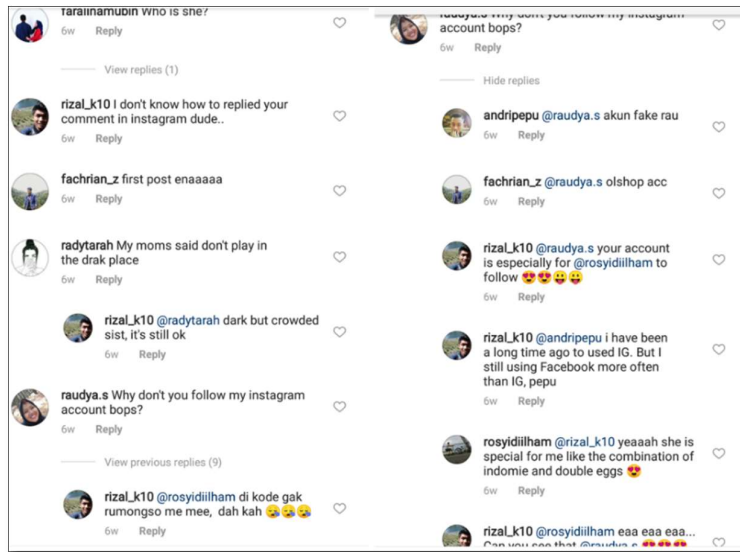
In traditional offline communication, there is a prototypical schema regarding the language use and/or the sequential structure. From the data collection, there is a distinctive evidence that the pattern is violated. The first is concerning the use of language. Despite the grammatical mistake and interlanguage errors littering the data pool that indicate students' level of proficiency such as in Figure 1., the captions are written with the offline linguistic repertoires of written English as taught in EFL classroom. Students try to abide to the specific guiding rules including punctuation, capitalization, and main and subordinate clause in sentence construction rules. The captions seem to be written with an extra caution that might be due to their self-consciousness that the posting is subject to assignment grading.

Figure 1



The subsequent comments following the posts, however, are messier and in a less orderly manner but have an organic sense to them as seen in Figure 2. This instance represents most students' interactions in the data collection, confirming the notion that social media language is more of an *oralised* written genre (Yus 2018). Even though text-based, it is not really a written genre with its more complex, lexically dense, and information-rich nature (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996; Cook 2006; Wendy & Zhang 2014).

Figure 2



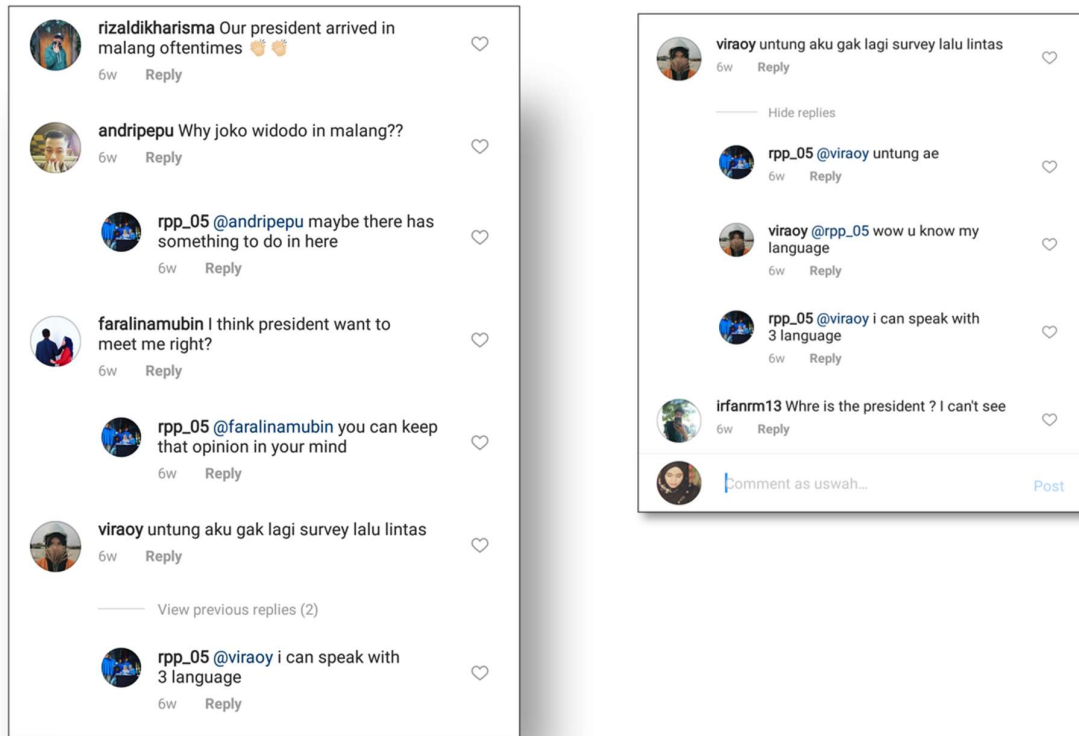
In addition to that, despite the language resemblance to a spoken genre, the interaction structure defies the prototypical model of offline communication with its adjacency pair as the primary building block of conversation (Meredith 2017). In a prototypical model, utterances are produced sequentially one after another in a temporal manner in which the current sequence demonstrates interlocutor’s understanding of the prior one. The utterances that belong in the same discourse are clustered in a linear sequence. In the end, this building block creates coherence and helps establish an understanding between interlocutors (Berglund 2009). Consequently, when the adjacency pair is disrupted, it could lead to a miscommunication between interlocutors. From the data, however, disruption toward the prototypical adjacency pair happens constantly as seen in Figure 3. Rosydiilham, rizal_k10, and raudya.s are in a seemingly three-way communication. When both rizal_k10 and raudya.s are responding to Rosydiilham’s remark, raudya.s’ response comes after rizal_k10’s. Her remark “*but I like ‘mie setan’ and ‘udang rambutan’*” are responses toward the reference of ‘*combination of indomie and double eggs*’ in rosydiilham’s comment, and not to rizal_k10’s that comes right before hers. Even though her comment comes after his, she does not mean to respond to it, not until her subsequent comment.

Figure 1



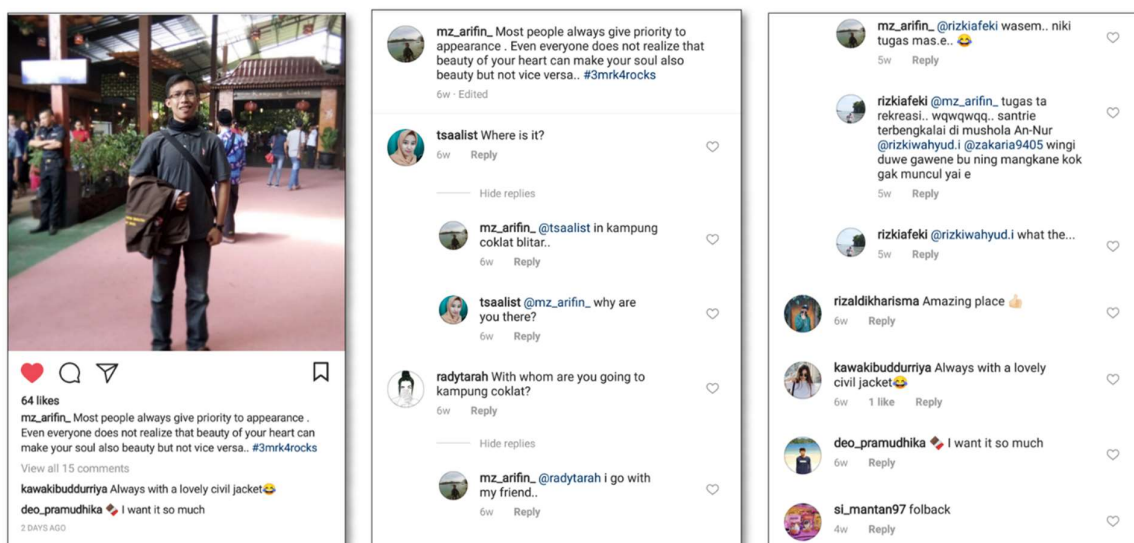
This constant disruption is not a deliberate attempt to break the communication sequence but purely because of the technological constraint. Even though interlocutors write their response concurrently, their comments are still displayed one after another. To mitigate the risk of misunderstanding, the interface designed by Instagram groups child comments together and indented them from the root/parent comment as shown in Figure 4. In addition to that, Instagram also uses a name-tagging system to help indicating which utterance is responding to which comment. This way, there is still adjacency pair at work even though the sequence is no longer temporal/linear like in offline communication transcription.

Figure 2



Looking into this further, adjacency pair disruption also leads to the shifting of monolog (the caption) to dialogue between the poster and the commenter that could also lead to a polylogue when other students (users) join in the comment section. As seen in Figure 1. the monologues (captions) are written by ghilman_yasifa_sany and zhrya in the single addresser mode. They are similar to a newspaper article or blog post where the author writes a content which intended meaning and inference are their own to make. In Figure 5, this mode is challenged. When mz_arifin made the posting, he had his own intended meaning in mind about the relevance of the caption and the photo. When other users eventually join in the conversation by choosing to take a cue from the picture instead of the caption nor the combination of both, they create a discourse that is different from the poster's. In this shift from monologue to dialogue, the burden of meaning-making is no longer in the hand of the original poster (mz_arifin), but in the commenters. It also blurs the distinction of author/speaker to reader/hearer when the poster decides to indulge the commenters by responding to their message instead of redirecting it back to his own.

Figure 5



In offline communication, interactants usually share the same context that makes the occasional disjunction in their speech act as no hindrance to achieving the intended implicature. In online communication, however, context is not available unless it is being stated explicitly. Instead of context, interaction in social media is mostly cue-based that could take form as either status update, tweet, snap, or caption depending on the platform. From Figure 5, for example, the cue is in the form of the picture posted by *mz_arifin_* with his caption that is constative in nature. The commenters can take on the prompt and begin to pick a point to discuss, and that is where the direction of the interaction goes. The exchange occurs as the corresponding interaction consists of some disjunction between the caption and the comments, or the audiences' speech acts on their comments.

2. Text and Context Co-creation

In the early days, internet-mediated communication occurred in a text-only format. The context then was not as rich as the face-to-face or phone call communication. To draw meaning, interlocutors relied mostly on the semantic content of the message. Nowadays, even though most of the main features and biggest allure of social media for users are on the leniency of feedback that, in a sense, gives freedom to users from imposition and offers degrees of (a)nonymity, some platforms have developed and rapidly evolved by incorporating different modes of interaction (i.e. video message/call, picture, audio). In a way, that enables users to have almost synchronous interaction, resembling face to face communication, and adds richness to context (Yus 2018). Along with that development and the more varied and accessible social media platforms, meaning is no longer exclusively inferred from the content only, but also from the platform chosen. The same utterance being posted in different social media, for example, will render completely different inferences. One part because of technological affordance of each platform and another part the brand image of said media.

Technological affordance is what users can do with technology at their disposal including the user interface, usability design, and feature of the social media application. The pragmatic implication of this is the pattern of user's behavior toward the platform which automatically indicates her/his intention. The example is in the way that certain platform uses pictures as visual cues (Instagram), uses character limitation that makes users should dance their way to get their meaning across within the character allowance (Twitter), and uses different call-to-action feature design such as swiping (Tinder, Whatsapp's status feature, and Instagram's Story feature). Swiping right or left in Tinder indicates user's romantic interest toward the other user in the profile as the addressee, whereas in Whatsapp's Status and Instagram Story indicates user's disinterest in the topic being posted that they would rather skip it by swiping instead of tapping the tab.

The brand image factor refers to the fact that social media application is actually a corporate product developed to target a specific market, niche or mass ones. Consequently, different kind of people will choose different social media platforms based on the product that is specifically designed to cater to their persona/profile. In its early days, for example, Instagram used to be a platform for photography loving hipsters to showcase their photos, Facebook used to be favored by college students, but the current Z generation consider it to be outdated and too mainstream already, Tinder is for people looking for sexual and romantic connection, and more. The implication of this is the meaning constructed by the same writing will have completely different implicature if posted on different platforms. Also, users from the same platform share the same understanding of the implicature inferred by said post.

Regarding the text, according to the Gricean cooperative principle, meaningful communication is achieved when interlocutors provide not only orderly and true but also informative and relevant contribution through language use. In online interaction, there are many cases where an utterance does not even have objective content, and the exchange is no longer substantive. As seen from students' online interaction data, there are many instances where the content of the message has null intrinsic value. When students engage in this kind of interaction, their purpose is not to convey meaning but only to make others aware that they co-present within the group or network (Miller 2008). They need to be acknowledged in the interaction even with the least amount of contribution such as giving 'heart' to an Instagram post (see Figure 6) as the equivalence of liking a Facebook post or favoriting a twit, or merely utter meaningless exclamation such as performative *wkwkwkw* indicating a laughing action.

Figure 6

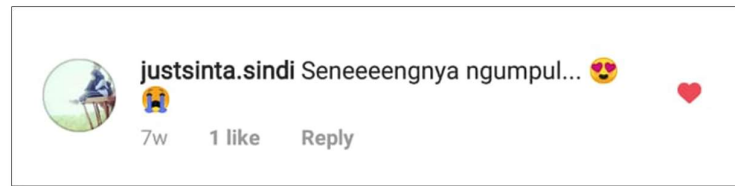


Figure 7



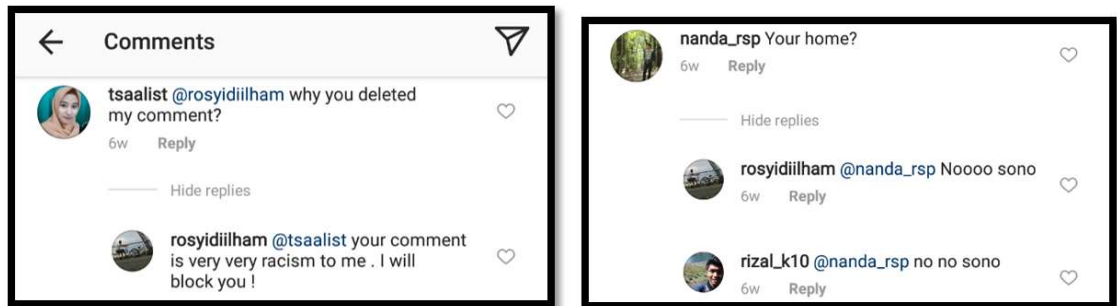
This situation makes the traditional way of analysis from purely informative point of view moot. Instead of on the content formulated, the non-propositional effect caused by the exchanges itself compensates for the lack of its relevance.

3. Compensatory Multimodality

The last fundamental aspect differentiating online from offline communication is regarding the extra-linguistic elements involved. Unlike offline interaction which is much aided with non-verbal cues such as tone, voice volume, facial expression, and gesture, the absence of direct physical contact in social media gives interactants only minimum resource to get the right intended inference. To compensate for such deficit, interactants come up with several strategies mediated by application allowance such as punctuation marks. Since the early days of internet-mediated communication that relied heavily on text, users always found their way with this resource. For example, the use of triple dots '...' to indicate a temporal pause, exclamative mark and double interrogative to emphasize the intensity of the user's emotion. The use of an exclamative mark is associated with commands, protests, and other speech acts that can be considered forceful or emphatic (Dressner and Herring, 2010). Refer to Figure 7., for example, where adeleptr expresses her compliment in *'that's cool, bro!'* and Figure 8. where rosydiilham expresses his anger that is intensified by the mark. Another compensation attempt for the deficit of non-verbal cues is through repetition of letters as seen in Figure 8. or a strategic use of

capitalization. The use of all capital letters in an utterance has been widely accepted as a universal code of yelling, as it indicates the volume of the interactants voice. Proper netiquette warns internet users against using this strategy in their interaction.

Figure 8. the use of exclamative mark and repetition



Other than punctuation mark and repetition of letters or word, the most common feature in social media interaction to compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues is emoticons. Emoticon – emotion icon – at the onset of its development, mimics facial expression such as smiley and it has received equally great attention as other non-textual communication elements. When interlocutors use an emoticon, they provide additional social cues about themselves (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2008). This iconic function of emoticon accentuates the tone of the message and conveys interlocutor’s emotion. The use of emoticon also indicates the social intent as it strengthens or lessens the utterance’s illocutionary force and minimalizes the ambiguity of the message, all is due to the lack of extra-linguistic cues that are available in face to face communication (Ganster, Eimler, & Kramer, 2012). See Figure 9 below:

Figure 9



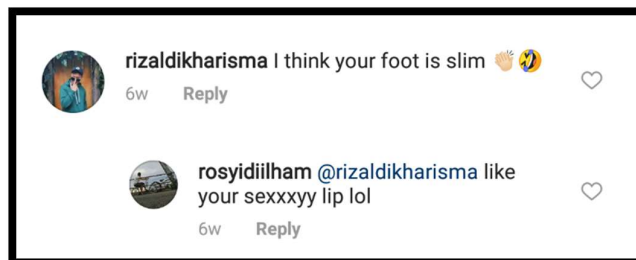
In this figure, the emoticon is used as an indicator that rizal_k10 is teasing and not serious about the locution of his utterance as a response to rosydiilham's remark. Since the joke has a romantic nuance, the emoticon used is that with a heart symbol in it. Other than to help to convey user's intention by what he/she types, the propositional attitude underlying the utterance as shown in Figure 9 above, there are still other functions of an emoticon. The first is to boost the intensity of the propositional attitude more than the typed locution as in Figure 10 below:

Figure 10



In this example, the emoticons used by rizaldikharisma denote his affection toward citraaamd which intensifies his utterance that has already been coded verbally. As a response to that, citraaamd prohibits him from doing it, but by adding the emoticon, she does not seem to be serious about it. In such a case, the function of the emoticon is to downgrade the utterance illocutionary force that otherwise will be too face-threatening to rizaldikharisma. This is where emoticon plays a role of mitigating effect. Other than that, in many cases emoticon also serves to contradict the explicit utterance content that commonly occurs in a joke. See the example in Figure 11 below:

Figure 11



In this exchange, rizaldikharisma is trying to ridicule rosydiilham – that signifies the distance or closeness of the interlocutors – since the addressee’s foot is not slim. The emoticon helps by indicating the jocular tone of his utterance.

4. CONCLUSION

In this study, we observe and explore the pattern of EFL students’ interaction on social media where they apply communicative strategies and inferential steps similar to when they are engaged in face to face communication offline. We have elaborated some additional factors to take into account of three critical differences between offline and online communication in term of their nature, their context (or lack thereof) and meaning construction, and the use of multimodality as a compensation for what social media is lacking. The study confirms the notion that due to technical affordance and constraint, pragmatic analysis of interaction on different social venues demands adjustment and rethinking of the hypotheses formulation, methodologies setting, and conclusions drawing.

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