Abstract: Online social networks have captured the attention of educators and policy-makers as an alternative tool for language teaching and learning. “Facebook groups” is a feature that is available on the social networking site Facebook (FB). This feature allows for an unlimited number of members to participate, communicate and interact via post and chat style for a specific purpose. This study examines the students’ perceptions on the use of Facebook groups in teaching ESL writing. The students’ perceptions were measured through a questionnaire comprising 10 close-ended items. The respondents were 43 students in TESL, in the Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Respondents were also required to participate in a Facebook group called “Write Out Load” which was created by the researchers. The findings indicated that Facebook groups can be effective in teaching ESL writing. The results showed that the students can learn new vocabularies from reading the comments of others in the group, and the spell-check feature helps reduce their spelling errors. The findings may help ESL educators in incorporating ICT into their teaching repertoire.

Key-Words: Facebook Groups, ICT, Writing, Learning, Perception, Social Network

1 Introduction
With the rapid development in information and communication technologies (ICTs), various changes have been made in terms of the methods in the teaching and learning process [1]. Currently, social networks are used by millions of users, most of whom are students and adolescents, for a variety of purposes but with a heavy emphasis on social needs. Social networks are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system [2]. Some of the examples of social networking sites are MySpace, Friendster and Facebook (FB). Although Facebook started out in early 2004 as a Harvard-only social networking site [2], Facebook is currently the leading social networking site with more than 400 million users in March 2010, and growing to more than 500 million active users as of March 2011 [3]. Interestingly, 70% of Facebook users are from outside of the US. Indonesia has the highest number of Facebook users in Asia, numbering 18.9 million, while Malaysia follows in the fifth rank with 5.1 million users [4]. According to Facebook statistics, its users spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook. The Facebook phenomenon is happening all over the world. In America, 42% of teens of ages 12-17 communicate via Facebook, replacing landline phones and email [5]. Undeniably, the young generation now is spending more and more time online, and on Facebook. The question is, with the growing amount of time the youth is spending on social networking sites like Facebook, how should educators consider these to be of value for educational purposes? Truly, in this era of technological advancement, ICT and the Internet, teachers have an invaluable well of resources from which to draw from. Unfortunately, these sources’ potential as a tool for learning in the classroom has not been fully tapped into by ESL educators. The researchers, therefore, have chosen to investigate students’ perception on the
The use of Facebook groups in teaching ESL writing.

The focus of this study was limited to the use of Facebook groups only. Studies that deal with other social networking sites such as Twitter, MySpace and Tumblr were excluded. This decision was made because Facebook is currently the most popular online social networking site among students [6]. ‘Facebook groups’ is a feature that is available on the social networking site Facebook. This feature allows for an unlimited number of members to participate, communicate and interact via post and chat style for a specific purpose. For this study, a Facebook group was created specifically for the purpose of providing students with a space where they were in control of the content and the direction of their learning, as well as providing more opportunities for students to write. The teacher merely acts as a facilitator for the group. Facebook groups also allow for almost immediate feedback and fun interaction that the researchers hope will motivate students in improving their writing. The researchers hypothesize that Facebook groups will benefit the students in the brainstorming stage of the writing process the most. However, the researchers are also open to investigate how Facebook groups might impact other aspects of writing and motivation as a whole. In order to facilitate the investigation regarding the effectiveness of FB groups in teaching and improving writing, the researchers formulated the following research questions:

1. How does FB group help students in their writing process?
2. What are some of the challenges teachers might face in integrating FB group into the teaching of writing?
3. How does FB group influence the affective domain of the students in terms of writing?

2 Literature Review

In this age of modern technology and ICTs, online social networks have captured the attention of educators and policy-makers as an alternative tool for language teaching and learning. Bartlett-Bragg defined social networks as a “range of applications that augments group interactions and shared spaces for collaboration, social connections, and aggregates information exchanges in a web-based environment” [1] [7]. While Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have integrated a wide range of technical features, they basically consist of a ‘profile’ and a list of ‘Friends’ who are also users of the system [2]. The user has complete control over the content of his or her profile, and in some SNSs, its visibility to other users as well. Besides the ‘profile’ and ‘Friends’ list, these SNSs offer ‘commenting’ and ‘private messaging’ features, photo-sharing and video-sharing capabilities too. However, between different SNSs, different visibility and access options are provided. Currently, the most popular of these SNSs is Facebook. FB is essentially a personalized profile of which users have complete control over its content. A user’s profile can be viewed by other users in the same ‘network’ by default, unless the profile owner specifies otherwise. Users are able to share photos, comment on friends’ walls, send messages, chat, create and join groups within this online community. Of educational interest is the fact that this means that users are continuously involved in the sharing of information, interacting and communicating with other users, collaboration and the sharing of ideas and opinions via posts and status updates. Hence, the researchers believe that FB possesses huge potential as an educational tool due to these features offered [8].

Students are engaged in a good deal of writing even in this era of ICT – in blogs, Twitter, text messages and, of course, FB. Strangely, students considered these types of informal writing as “communication” and not likened to the “writing” tasks that are given in schools [9]. This shows that students are still unable to see the connection between the writing learned in the classroom and the meaningful communicative use outside of the classroom. Yancey then proposes the use of FB in helping students make that link in order to make them better writers [9]. The researcher then also believes that FB, and specifically FB groups, has the potential to improve students’ writing skills by being the link between academic “writing” and outside “communication”, providing learners with an authentic and personalized context in which to aid their writing. ‘FB groups’ provides ample opportunities for students to practice and improve their writing skills. Studies show that students feel obliged to respond to their peers’ comments or opinions posted, thus are actively “posting” and “commenting” on the application. They take every opportunity to practice their writing skills. Students also discover new sentence or writing structures by reading the comments and posts from their peers [8].
These show that writing skills is very much emphasized on in FB group participation and thus has a high potential of enhancing and improving students’ writing skills.

3 Method
This study was carried out in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in January 2011. A quantitative and qualitative (mixed method) survey study exploring the students’ perceptions on the effectiveness of FB groups for teaching and improving writing would be beneficial in identifying the fundamental issues that are of concern to the students using FB and FB groups for learning. For this purpose, 43 Year 3 students from the Faculty of Education, UKM who are completing their Bachelor’s degree in Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) were selected as the participants to this survey. The respondents were added in a FB group created for this research called ‘Write Out Loud’. They were required to participate and be involved in the tasks prepared by the researchers including summary writing and brainstorming. Participants were also encouraged to take part in contributing ideas and giving opinions actively. All this was done to create a conducive learning environment, and thus, enable participants to experience how FB groups can be used to improve writing skills, particularly in a Malaysian ESL context. In the final stage, they were each required to respond to a 10-item questionnaire distributed after one month of participation in the FB group created.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part one solicited demographic information of the students while part two solicited whether or not each participant has a FB account, how often they log on to FB, whether or not they are familiar with FB groups and if they were part of any other FB groups other than the one created for the purpose of this study. Part three comprised 10 open-ended items with a 4-level Likert Scale of ‘Strongly Disagree’, ‘Disagree’, ‘Agree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’. For the analysis of the demographic data, frequency and percentages were used; whereas for the description of other items, mean scores, frequency and percentages were employed to describe the students’ views on FB groups as a means for teaching and improving writing.

4 Findings and Discussion
The findings are presented in five sections. First, the demographic data are presented, which is then followed by the respondents’ usage of FB and FB groups. In the next three sections, the results are categorized according to three themes, namely, writing process, challenges and the affective domain.

4.1 Demographic Data
There are 26 female (60%) and 17 male (40%) respondents who participated in the FB group and responded to the questionnaire. All the respondents are in the age group of 21-28 years. The gender figures are almost representative of the ratio of the general population of university students in the TESL programme of UKM. In terms of their language proficiency, all respondents’ MUET band are 4 and above. Bands 4, 5 and 6 constitute ‘Competent User’, ‘Good User’ and ‘Very Good User’ respectively. Therefore, all respondents have good command of the English Language, with 36 (83.7%) of them in Band 4, 4 (9.3%) in Band 5 while another 3 (7.0%) in Band 6.

4.2 Usage of Facebook and Facebook Groups
The first item asked has confirmed that each respondent has a FB account. 31 out of 43 (72%) respondents log on to FB very frequently with the selection of options ‘2-3 hours a day’ and ‘more than 3 hours a day’ whereas only 12 out of 43 (28%) selected the options of ‘one or twice a week’ and ‘less than an hour daily’ which showed that they log on to FB infrequently. All 43 of them are familiar with FB groups and are involved in more than one FB group other than ‘Write Out Loud’. This data is useful to give researchers an idea that all respondents are familiar with FB groups, which means that they are familiar with the features in FB groups, have spent some time either reading posts or dropping comments there, and are aware of the different ways of sharing on FB groups like posting a photo, sharing links to websites and posting documents. When the experience of the respondents are taken into account, the data collected based on their perspectives can be valid because they are responding based on the past experience of using FB groups.
4.3 Facebook Groups and Writing

Items 1-5 in part three of the questionnaire are posed to find out the respondents’ perceptions of FB groups in improving writing. The findings are grouped into two large categories: Cumulative Disagree to represent the cumulative data percentage of respondents’ selection of ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Disagree’ and the other Cumulative Agree to represent the cumulative data percentage of ‘Agree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’ as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Students’ perceptions of FB groups in improving writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cumulative Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Cumulative Agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Brainstorming helps organize thoughts before writing</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learning new vocabulary from comments</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>81.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reduce spelling error through spell-check feature</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>88.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Getting a better idea before writing</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>95.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Easier to complete essays after participation</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 1, it is inferred that more than 80% of respondents generally agree to the statements which lead to the point that the FB group does help in their writing process. The data in this table also gives answers to the first research question on how FB group helps students in their writing process. It is now shown that FB groups help in the brainstorming process, in organizing their thoughts before the actual writing, learning new vocabulary from reading comments of others in the group, reducing spelling errors via the spell-check feature, helping to get a better idea before writing from the ideas or opinions posted by friends, and students finding it easier to complete their essays after participating in the FB group discussion. The highest cumulative percentage is 95.3% who agree to the statement ‘Ideas or opinions posted by my peers on FB group help me in getting a better idea before writing’. This shows the importance of the flow of ideas and opinions by all members in the group discussion on FB.

The researchers acknowledge the fact that a teacher’s role as facilitator in the group discussion is vital because if the ideas and opinions are not monitored closely in terms of their relevance to the topic discussed, it could very much affect the idea that students will have before the actual writing. It is also an advantage to teachers when they use FB groups because from the second highest cumulative percentage of 88.3% who agree and strongly agree, their spelling errors have reduced through the spell check feature in FB. When students are unsure of the spelling of a word, if they were to type it in the comment space, red lines would appear if the spelling is incorrect. From this feature, they could easily ‘right-click’ on the word to see the suggested spelling of words by the spell-check feature. This is something which ‘paper and pen’ writing lacks and if students were to encounter problems with the right spelling, it would be tedious for them to look them up in the dictionary too.

4.4 Challenges of Using Facebook Groups for Writing

Researchers have constructed item 6 and item 7 as the prediction of the challenges that respondents might face when they participate in FB groups for discussion on writing. First is whether or not the respondents will really read through the articles or materials before they share them on the FB group. Secondly, whether or not they tend to be distracted by other features on FB while on the FB group. Table 2 illustrates the cumulative percentage for those who disagree and agree to the statement.
Table 2. Students’ perceptions of challenges of using Facebook groups for writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cumulative Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Cumulative Agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Will read materials before sharing them</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Distracted by other features of Facebook</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>83.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contrary to what the researchers have predicted, 90.7% of the respondents stated that they will read the articles and materials they found before sharing them on FB group. This is a very positive response and could strengthen the reason why FB groups should be incorporated by teachers in the teaching of writing in language classrooms. It is no longer a challenge predicted by researchers that most students might not read the materials before sharing them with their peers via FB groups. When students read before sharing, this could help the teacher in the monitoring process too because students will take charge of their own learning and be responsible for the materials or resources they share on the group. They will also share materials which they think are relevant to the context of the topic when they take time to read through what they are about to share with the group.

4.5 Facebook Groups and Affective Domain

The last three close-ended items of the questionnaire seek answers to the third research question, to see how FB group influences the affective domain of the students in terms of writing. Item 8 investigates whether or not respondents feel comfortable posting their ideas or opinions on FB group. Item 9 seeks answers to whether the ‘like’ feature on FB would make respondents feel encouraged, when friends ‘like’ their comments. The last item is to see their preference, whether they prefer discussing on FB group or the classroom. Table 3 shows the data:

Table 3. Students’ perceptions of FB group effects on their affective domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cumulative Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Cumulative Agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Feel comfortable posting ideas or opinions</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Feel encouraged when friends ‘like’ my comments</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Prefer discussing on FB group instead of classroom</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The cumulative percentages of respondents agreeing to items 8 and 9 are significantly higher as compared to item 10. In item 8, 90.7% of them agree that they feel comfortable posting ideas and opinions on FB group and 97.7% actually feel encouraged when friends ‘like’ their comments. The students’ positive views and responses regarding FB groups influencing the respondents affective domain can be explained by the fact that students can really take their more disciplined and manage their time on FB group and other features according to their priority.
time to think about what they want to comment on the
given topic, do it in the comfort of their own space,
and the special ‘like’ feature which could further
encourage respondents to comment more and feel
appreciated by the group through their comments.
However, in terms of preference, only 53.5% agree
that they prefer discussing issues or topics on FB
group instead of in a classroom. This gives insights to
all that despite all the other features of how FB groups
can help in improving writing, and the affective
influences like those of items 8 and 9, just slightly
over half of the respondents actually prefer having
discussions on FB group. 46.5% of them prefer
discussing in the actual classroom. This could be due
to the asynchronous comments or feedback which
slowed down the discussion as compared to the
synchronous process in the classroom where the
teacher can give her feedback directly and anyone else
could just add on whatever they have in mind.

5 Conclusion
From the perceptions of 43 students in this research,
FB group does help in their writing, especially in the
brainstorming process before the actual writing. Their
responses have also showed that most respondents
agree that they learn new vocabulary from reading the
comments of others in the group, and the spell-check
feature helps reduce their spelling errors. In addition,
the ideas or opinions by peers help them in getting a
better idea for writing and they also find it easier to
complete their essays after participating in the FB
group discussion. The main challenge that teachers
need to take note of is the distractions by other
features of FB such as FB chat, games, and other
applications. It is also discovered that despite the
positive affective influences FB groups have on the
respondents, many still prefer the actual classroom
discussion instead of that in the FB group. It is likely
that though students like to learn independently, a
teacher or a facilitator is still required to guide and
direct the learning, especially over a virtual discussion
space where students are left to their own devices. It is
recommended that further researches could focus
more on the challenges of integrating FB groups for
teaching and improving writing, and look into the
perception of teachers as well. Experimental studies
regarding this research topic could also be done to see
how the affective influences of FB and FB groups help
in improving students’ writing skills.

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