

## The Impact of Social Networks on ESL Undergraduate Students' Writing in Nigeria

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### Abstract

It is a well-known fact that social networking is becoming more and more common among the people of different backgrounds world over. Like their other counterparts across the globe, Nigerian youths especially students in tertiary or higher institutions of learning are seriously engaged in communicating with each other both at local and global levels through these social networks. They are involved in chatting, conveying comments, remarks or feedback on a particular issue at a given social medium such as Face book, twitter and 2go. This paper examines the negative impact of using such social networks to the Nigerian ESL students writing in academic setting. The primary aim of this paper is to show the extent to which these social networks affect their writing behavior. A textual analysis is used to examine the data of this study which is obtained from three most pervasive and commonly used social networks: Face book, 2 go and twitter. The results indicate that students' writing is hampered by serious writing impediments occurring mainly at three important and crucial writing aspects: lexis, punctuation and grammar.

**Keywords:** Social network; Facebook; 2go; Twitter; ESL; Writing descriptive model

### Introduction

One of the most vital and complex skills of language is writing and that the power of literacy is determined through writing. It also provides a vital means of communication being a primary medium of literature. In recent years, the role of language as potent means of effective communication has received considerable attention from scholars in different disciplines for instance, pragmatics, health sciences, linguistics and communication studies. It is apparent that most second and foreign learners of English acquire it under formal instruction, where classroom is the primary environment in which second language learners have the opportunity to use the target language, this kind of language that students use in classrooms during lessons has a significant influence on their language learning development. More often than not, they use the target language for quite a variety of different purposes in a classroom while interacting with the instructor as well as other students. The recent development in the era of information technology, has witnessed pervasive spring of social networks which enable students with free access to easy interaction with peers through chatting and email messages.

### Scope and Delimitations

In order to make the study more manageable, the following are the delimitations and scope set for the study:

- This study is specifically aimed at highlighting the impact of social networks on how they influence ESL in Nigerian universities.
- Since the study involves corpus of students' writing, only issues that are related to writing via the social networks are covered in the analysis.

- For this study, any text other than the ones mentioned such as 2go, Face book and are not considered for the analysis.
- Taking into account the qualitative nature of the study and the sampling size, the textual analysis is incorporated in the analysis.
- The study gives more priority to the use of lexis, grammar and punctuation non- in the analysis and discussions of findings.

### Descriptive Models of Writing

Descriptive model is used to provide theoretical background to the study where it accounts for the nature of writing production. The theory describes what writing is, how it is used and subsequently developed. The model of writing comprises knowledge telling and knowledge transforming. For this reason, a descriptive theory of writing is suitable for describing the nature of writing because it accounts for how writing is performed and evaluated in different circumstances. It also explains the reason why some people write better than others in similar contexts performing similar topics. Similarly, the theory also offers explanation on how students develop writing abilities in different ways and varying conditions. In addition, the theory helps instructors to teach better and respond responsibly. Using this theory three aspects of writing have been used to describe the impact of social networks in ESL students' writing: wrong abbreviations, wrong punctuation and grammar.

In an attempt to provide explanation on writing activity, two recent attempts have been identified by Haas and Hayes [5], Grabe [6], Grabe and Kaplan [7]. These studies attempted to combine issues raised to support writing by merging together contextual influences, cognitive knowledge and process of writing creation. Thus Haas and Hayes [5] accounts for motivational factors, context factors and reading processes. The link between these factors provide an increased writing abilities

The Grabe and Kaplan [7] emerged from applied linguistic approach thereby giving linguistic considerations to explain the communicative competence as related to writing skills. It incorporates writing processes which begin in memory where the relevant knowledge generates the necessary information for writing. Subsequently, the writing is then produced and forms a part of the context for future reference.

Despite a considerable amount of literature that has been published on the impact of computers on language learning especially writing, yet no research has focused on the uses of computers in developing ESL students' writing maturity in developing countries like Nigeria where computers are now gaining grounds. Therefore this paper aims at filling this gap in literature by examining the uses of computers in developing students writing maturity in classroom setting. Moreover, the existing studies have failed to adequately provide a theoretical background on the nature of writing, how it is composed and produced. Hence, the paper provides additional theoretical insight on the nature of writing.

## Methodology

It should be noted that the data collected in making this note is accrued largely from Facebook, twitter, 2go, WhatsApp and Blackberry messenger. Because, these are the commonly used Social Medias that can be accessed even with an ordinary Chinese or Java phones which are very cheap and at the affordability of the common people. Therefore, 70% of the data is sourced directly from the comments of various people on their friends' posts or newspapers' posts on Facebook and twitter networks. The rest of the data is

collected from in between the WhatsApp, 2go and Blackberry messenger.

Meanwhile, a close examination into the educational backgrounds of the commentators has shown that more than 85% of them have reached their tertiary educational level. And 65% out of the 85% mentioned above are undergraduate students (most of whom within the range of 18 to 35 years of age) from Collages of Education, Polytechnics and Universities. Naturally, there are more tendencies for such people to feel buoyant and bold enough to speak or write something that will confuse others in order to show how educated they are. The rules of grammar to their perception, is only applicable within the academic circle and to the academic writings. Coincidentally, the Social Networks provide the arena for such type of people to freely write without fear of being guilty of violating the rules of writing in as much as they are able to confuse or impress their peers. That is why illegitimate forms of abbreviations and deliberately use of wrong grammar are more common and prevalent among them. The secondary school students are not exempted out of this. Even though, they do not have the aptitude to manipulate the language as they wish, they are largely bound to imitate such writing behavior from others. In fact, they are active members of the social networks who formed the remaining 15%. Wrong punctuations and wrong grammatical expression is commonly made by them. Generally, the act of violating the rules of writing affects almost all the people using the Social Networks though, the aforesaid groups of people are more vulnerable to engage in such act. However, the postgraduates often distinguish themselves by showing some level of professionalism in trying to get their messages across, but they are not completely innocent based on the observation made on the sources of the data collected (Table 1).

Words abbreviations	Wrong punctuation	Wrong grammar
1Gud,2 am, 3hw, 4am, 5@, 6fyn, 78tnks, 9d, 10u,11b, 12ur,13 r14,hp, 1516pls, 17dat 18lkn, 19pix, 20prys, 21rmb, 22bliv, 23nt, 24wen,25 wit, 26ths, 37nw, 284, 292, 30wedn,31 rly,32dre, 33hist, 34evn, 35succss, 36ol, 37studnt,38wia, 39shld, 40wat, 4142frst, 43sb, 44statd, 45fyt,46 ppl, 47cmbck, 48chnng, 49lyf, 50urslf, 51wold,52 hol, 53lrv,54hrt, 55bcoz	Jumuat Mubarak, sorry u guyz, indomie.so chill..., ,so..where..., ar u tied, Thank you for the establishment of this development for the benefit of jibiya, youth I reallyappreciated for your,Dis's an EXODUS.....Da move of God... PEOPLE.....G.E.J.must GO.....!!!!@ u 419.	The Katsina State govt is goin 2 sold UMYUK 2 Dangote Hw u Hw u doin Sorry u guyzav not had from me since, I was kind of busy Do u blivdat 75% of our divorce cases today is rooted to.. Hop u ok Now all of them they are concentrated on exam youth I really appreciated for your... Finally! Out fxamhol If nt 4 dis ASUU strike I'm nw a graduate Is only you north knows how rule They waitn 4 d tym of politics 2 com 2 stat rliznmony

Table 1: Some data with words abbreviations, wrong punctuation and wrong grammar

While, these comments and posts are taken as samples from the aforementioned social networks, it is out of the commentators' knowledge that their posts and comments could serve as input in compiling this note. That is why the anonymity of these people is maintained, only to show the extent to which the social networks affect their writing behavior. However, it is observed that the major aim for everyone is to get his message across as quick as possible, notwithstanding whether the rules of grammar are maintained or violated.

## Analysis

Going by the above table comprising the raw data, the major linguistic problems that manifest in the student's writing while communicating with peers via the social networks are classified as: lexis, wrong grammar and punctuation

Under the lexis which comprises the words, the students are fond of using unconventional abbreviations such as 'gud' to refer to 'good'. The students also use numbers that have similar sounds as abbreviations to represent such words for example '2' for 'to' and '4' for 'for' or '4give' in place of 'forgive'. The word thank is also abbreviated as tnks. In terms

of article, the definite article 'the' is abbreviated as 'd'; while the second person pronoun both singular and plural that is 'you' is abbreviated with a letter u while its possessive form that is 'yours' is abbreviated as 'ur'. One of the forms of the verb to be and auxiliary 'are' is abbreviated with a letter 'r'. Similarly, the word hope is abbreviated as 'hp', while in the polite manner, 'please' is used as 'pls'. In the same vein, remember is abbreviated as 'rmb', and believe as 'bliv' and 'when' an adverbial as 'wen'. Not which is used as negative is abbreviated as 'nt'. The word with which is a part of conjunction category is also abbreviated as 'wit' or 'wid' in some instances.

In fact these abbreviations are so unconventional that go contrary to the conventions of writing especially in formal or academic setting. Students are so accustomed to using this way of writing for their communication with peers and other audience using the social networks. The implication is that students do distort their writing thereby making it unclear, vague and unrecognizable especially to the audience who are unfamiliar to this negative development or trend.

Given the frequent wrong use of punctuation, the students deviate from the expected or agreed way of making use of punctuation marks to make writing clear. The most prominent are inappropriate use of capital letters. Students use upper case or capital letters to indicate or show emphasis. For instance, the utterance GEJ – (an acronym referring to the current President of Nigeria Goodluck Ebele Jonathan) must GO – the writer expresses his desire for the resignation or impeachment of the President using the word GO in upper case. Students also misuse commas or full stops or even mess up the whole writing by not indicating the marks appropriately which seriously affects the meaning and the whole communication process.

The students also make use of wrong grammatical sentences in their use of social networks to communicate. This wrong grammar manifests even in their formal or academic writings. Very common examples of such ungrammatical sentences found in their writing, which are as a result of wrong grammatical use for as short codes in the social networks, these are:

The Katsina State govt is goin 2 sold UMYUK 2 Dangote;

Hw u;

Hw u doin;

Sorry u guyzav not had from me since, I was kind of busy;

Do u blivdat 75% of our divorce cases today is rooted to..;

Hop u ok;

Now all of them they are concentrated on exam;

youth I really appreciated for your...;

Finally! Out fxamhol;

If nt 4 dis ASUU strike I'm nw a graduate;

Is only you north knows how rule;

They waitn 4 d tym of politics 2 com 2 stat rllznmony;

Recommendations

In view of these negative developments brought about by communicating through social networks it is ideal and pertinent to make the following recommendations:

Teachers or instructors of ESL and other stake holders such as curriculum developers should encourage and empower extensive reading which will enhance reading culture and provide conventional writing mechanics to enable students assimilate the standard ways of writing;

Instructors and trainers of ESL should provide more exercises in writing in ESL classrooms which will facilitate standard writing conventions in a more natural atmosphere that allows them to articulate their thoughts and express their feelings freely;

Students, especially at the intermediate and lower levels, are to be discouraged from unnecessary browsing of internet and other social network. They should be guided to the educating forums rather than wasting their ample time doing something less significant to their educational progress or development.

Interestingly, this study highlights the negative impact of unguided use of social networks in the writing of ESL students especially in Nigerian context. The emergence of these social networks and the internet has strongly contributed to the decline of the reading culture which is highly crucial to the ESL learners who largely depend on the formal way of getting their linguistic input as a prime way of learning or acquiring the target language. Extensive reading can only thrive in the environment where students imbibe the habit of reading culture through reading standard books to master properly both linguistic performance and competence necessary for learning a language. These social networks have become major preoccupation to most students who solely resort to browsing and in most cases entertainment having no time to reading good books that will enable them assimilate and manipulate the language fluently and appropriately.

## Suggestion for further research

This study suggests that there should be further research to be conducted to test the rate at which these writing problems manifest in the students' writing, especially using experimental research method, to determine the effect of these social networks on the areas outlined in this study so as to have empirical evidence on how these social networks impact ESL writings.

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