

**USERS' PERCEPTION ON THE USE OF FACEBOOK AS A MEDIUM OF
LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE
TO WRITING SKILLS**

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ABSTRACT: *This is a descriptive survey that sampled the opinion of 60 regular users of facebook among students of a Federal government College in Lagos, Nigeria. The purpose was to determine the effect of facebook on learners of English; the official language of Federal Republic of Nigeria. Facebook as a social media provides a template for learners to discuss, interact, write, speak and exchange messages. The study focused the possible effect of staying long on facebook and the students' consequent writing interest and fluency. Facebook messages (120 in all) were downloaded and analysed on the basis of language features. The students' sheets **totaling** sixty — written in an examination condition were considered. These sheets were content-analysed to determine to what extent "social speak" as observed in their Facebook messages also occurred in the students' answer sheets. The findings show that there is a gross influence of the emerging social media language on students writing skills. Recommendations were made on how to control students' exposure to social media and the damaging effects such may have on their language learning.*

KEYWORDS: Users' Perception, Facebook, Learning, English Second Language, Writing Skills

INTRODUCTION

Social media provide multiple dimensions for developing creative learning strategies that allow students to connect formal and informal learning settings. Students can find like-minded people and organize informal knowledge exchange for educational purposes (Wodzicki, Schwämmlein & Moskaliuk, 2012). The use of social media applications in teaching and learning has garnered substantial interest among educators (Cain & Policastri, 2011). Web-based social networking platforms such as Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook offer users communication and interaction channels to link with friends, family, and community. Any Facebook user can easily search and view any user's Facebook page through the Facebook network (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007).

Learning English via the Internet is a seamless way to increasing the effectiveness of English learning among students. Students can learn by choosing topics and levels of lessons from a wide variety of activities based on their interests and language proficiency skill levels. For language teachers however, language learning from electronic media on the Internet can also be the utilization of materials and resources available online as a medium to gain knowledge for effective teaching and development of learners. Electronic lessons usually have selective contents, learning activities, exercises, and tests and allow students to revise them at any time. Students will also be encouraged to respond to the contents of the lessons. Also, electronic lessons can link to many other learning resources in their related subjects. This learning

technique provides students with interesting lessons that make study more fun, and thus help to develop the students' knowledge and skills more efficiently (Oracha,2008).

Additionally, Thuwanon (2006) argued that teaching language via the internet can help the learners to understand language in a real socio-cultural context that provides practical and up-to-date information. Moreover, while searching information from the Internet, students will be able to improve their English reading skill; this is consistent with the teaching and learning technique that fosters self-reliant learning, that is, learner independence and lifelong learning. This open-ended learning style can reduce restrictions and make the teaching more flexible and appropriate for a larger group of students. Furthermore, e-learning provides an opportunity for the learners to get to the novel sources of learning that meet their individual needs. This educational approach potentially reduces barriers to accessing a traditionally functional language learning space and thus encourages students to learn at their own pace anywhere and anytime (Jintawee, 2010)

Most current studies in the use of social media for educational purposes seem to focus more on college students and adults. However, many adolescents, and much younger language learners have consciously, or perhaps unconsciously, adopted social media as a very important part of their lifestyles. Some of these curious minds are secondary school students who are a bit bored of the two-dimensional approach with which language is often taught in their secondary school classrooms. And so have metamorphosed to becoming digital learners who can easily connect with peers and common groups on social media across the world to learn, interact, and share interests in new experiences. Blattner & Fiori (2009) indicated that various usages of Facebook can be integrated in foreign language courses. Children could experience authentic language interactions and develop socio-pragmatic awareness (e.g., language use in specific contexts, relationship building...), which are often absent in textbooks. Hitherto, a student on a Facebook group may, for instance, post an idiom and ask other members of the group to discuss its meaning. Another student may ask other students to give feedback on his or her translation, or offer corrections on the grammar used in a certain text.

Facebook interaction can occur among learners in a specific group created by their teacher. Teachers can create private groups for their students to share knowledge within the group, give comments on posts and ask and answer questions (Baran, 2010; Richardson, 2010). Thus, Facebook may be used as an ELT supportive tool.

Students who use Facebook can notice improvement in their writing over an extended period of time (Najafi & Hashemi, 2011). One of the reasons is that posts and comments remain for a while, so learners can see them and compare old posts to new ones. Additionally, Manan, Alias and Pandian (2012) report that Facebook activities increase the level of interaction among learners through providing a safe learning environment, that is, learners at a low proficiency level feel more comfortable and less threatened when they participate in online activities than face-to-face in-class discussions, which are mainly dominated by learners with higher language proficiency. Furthermore, Facebook enables students to collaborate and engage in healthy competition with each other, which, as a result, increases their learning (Harris & Rea, 2009). For example, through engaging in discussions, asking questions, and requesting for feedback and opinions, learners can notice the progress their peers are making and feel motivated to do better.

According to MacIntyre, Burns, and Jessome (2011), willingness to communicate has to do with how likely it is that individuals will get involved in communication with others when there

is no obligation for them to do so. As mentioned, this study looks at willingness to use Facebook. According to MacIntyre (2007), “Intergroup motives stem directly from membership in a particular social group, and interpersonal motives stem from the social roles one plays within the group.” If MacIntyre is right, learners’ motivation to use Facebook can come from their motivation to learn from each other and their perceptions of the individuals as belonging to a group.

Baran (2010) showed that learners believed that interacting with their peers on Facebook motivated them to learn due to the competition that occurs among learners of various language proficiency levels. Additionally, Hayashi (2011) suggested that what makes the students more willing to participate is that they control the information they share and the materials they post, and they decide on the difficulty of the subjects they discuss with others, which helps them avoid embarrassment, thus creating a safe environment.

Statement of the Problem

The explosion of social media, (one of our case study of which is Facebook), in this generation, has completely reshaped all human activities to include communication. Now, about 65% of the world’s population use social media — exchanging feelings, ideas, opinions, and other related matters. Thus, it is believed that the emergence of Facebook and its rapid popularity amongst the younger generation is seriously impacting how students use language presently. As a result of this, researchers in language education have eyebrows raised to the issue of using “social speak” or generally “text talk” in schooling situation. Hence, this study tries to investigate the influence of Facebook on the writing skills of Secondary School students.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer only one question:

Does Facebook have any influence on students’ writing skills?

Significance of the Study

It is expected that the findings of this study would contribute to knowledge about the effect of social media on the teaching and learning of English language in Nigeria. This research could also become a baseline for further studies on social media and universal learning. Also, this study would contribute immensely to improving students’ writing skills, and generally — their proficiency in English language.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study was narrowed down to the influence of Facebook on the writing skills of Senior Secondary School students in Alimoso Local Government, Lagos State, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation theory by George Gerbner is one of the core theories of media effects. The central focus of this theory is that persistent long term exposure to media content has small but measurable effects on the perception of the audience and the more a person is exposed to a message provided by the media, the more likely that person believes that the message is real. In this study, the effect of Facebook on students’ linguistic expressions is being measured with proportion to its usage.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design was adopted in this study to get the natural quantitative information that is required for this research from the represented population. A simple random sampling technique was used and sixty (60) SS2 students (30 males and 30 females) from Federal Government College, Ijanikin, and King's College, Yaba, Lagos who were Facebook users were studied. The main tools used for the collection of data included questionnaire, sampled social media messages generated by students, and essays (in sheets) produced by the students. The students were required to forward their two most recent Facebook messages they had sent to friends — indicating the date and time the messages were sent. This was required to measure the frequency of the use of social media by students. The Facebook messages (120 in total) were downloaded and analysed on the basis of language features. The students' sheets **totaling** sixty — written in an examination condition were considered. These sheets were content-analysed to determine to what extent “social speak” as observed in their Facebook messages also occurred in the students' answer sheets.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis of data collected and discussion of major findings. It presents the analysis of social speak linguistic features — both in Facebook messaging and how they reflect in students' work as seen in their answer sheets. Also, we are equally provided a co-relational analysis of the rate of students' use of language in Facebook messaging and the use of this language (social speak) in examination.

Co-relational Analysis of the use of the Internet (Facebook) and usage of Social Speak in students' writing

This study sought to show the frequency of Facebook usage and how it affects students' expression. This was to determine the rate at which the students use Facebook. Table 1 below provides the findings on this aspect of the study.

Table 1: Frequency of social media usage

Frequency of Facebook usage	Number	Percentage (%)
Many times a day	38	63.3
Daily	14	23.3
Others	6	10
Not used	2	3.3
Total	60	100

The findings of this study indicate that majority of the students (over 63%) used social media many times a day. 14 students — making 23.3% used it daily, while 10% of the population used social media once or twice either weekly or monthly. The least in the group forming 3.3% claimed to not use Facebook at all.

Table 2: Co-relation between Frequency of Facebook Messaging and Use of Social Speak in Essay

Frequency of social media usage	Frequency of social speak in students' writing (sheet)	Percentage (%)
Many times a day	91	66.4
Daily	37	27
Others	9	6.6
Not used	0	0
Total	137	100

Data in Table 2 above indicated that the more students use Facebook, the more they tend to use “social speak” in their essays. Text talk was used 91 times in the essays produced by students who used Facebook many times a day — constituting 66.4%. As against 27%, 6.6%, and 0%. For students who used the service daily, others, and those who did not use it at all, respectively.

Findings of the study therefore suggest that students' constant use of Facebook with social speak as their communicative habit seriously hampers students' writing skills. These findings also go in line with Seo (2004) who opined that the negative influence of Internet is only on excessive users and not on all users.

Analysis of Social Speak's linguistic features in Facebook messaging and in students' sheets

Findings indicate that the same linguistic features of Facebook language (social speak) observed in the 120 Facebook messages collected from students appeared in these students' essays. Table 3 below, shows the linguistic features of social speak: contractions (short forms), alphanumeric homophony, misused punctuation, lack of inter-word space, onomatopoeic expressions, code mixing, and misused punctuation.

Table 3: Patterns of occurrence of features of social speak in students' formal writing

Features Occurrence	<u>In Facebook messages</u>		<u>In answer sheets</u>	
	Frequency (%)	Occurrence	Frequency (%)	Occurrence
Contractions	91	28.7	101	37.5
Alphanumeric homophony	78	24.6	83	30.9
Misused punctuation	69	21.7	61	22.7
Lack of inter-word space	44	13.9	11	4.1
Onomatopoeic expression	20	6.3	02	0.7
Code mixing	15	4.7	11	4.1
Total	317	100	269	100

As shown in table 3 above, almost all the features of social speak considered for the purpose of this study were found in both the students' Facebook messages and essays. The three most dominant features of social speak as observed in this study include: contractions, alphanumeric homophony, and misused punctuation. Contractions represent the most dominant social media linguistic feature constituting 28.7% in social media messages and 37.5% in students' essays.

It is often used for the purpose of brevity. A situation of contraction is said to have occurred when the Facebook users create a compressed version of the word(s) he intends using (Rafi, 2010). Examples gathered from our sample include ‘skul’ for ‘school’; ‘ur’ for ‘your’; ‘bcos’ for ‘because’; ‘ve’ for ‘have’, ‘u’ for ‘you’; ‘xpress’ for ‘express’, among others. These examples and others appeared both in the social media messages and the students’ answer sheets. The second dominant feature of **social speak** as observed in both the messages and the students’ answer scripts is alphanumeric homophony, representing 24.6% of such features in social media messages and 30.9% in students’ essays. Alphanumeric homophonies have to do with the more or less arbitrary blending of letters and numbers to represent word, phrases or clauses, (Odey 2014). In such situations, the users sometimes substitute the word, phrase or sentence with phonetically similar letters or numbers that sound almost the same as the substituted word or phrase, Odey (2014). Example drawn from our sample include ‘2day’ for ‘today’; ‘b4’ for ‘before’; ‘w8’ for ‘wait’; ‘there4’ for ‘therefore’, ‘gr8fu’ for ‘grateful’ and so on. The third most dominant feature of the social media language observed is abuse of punctuation. It constituted 21.7% of such features in social media messages and 22.7% in students’ essays. Punctuation ‘errors’ basically included violation of grammatical rules at the level of punctuation. Our sample indicated ‘errors’ such as omission of punctuation markers and arbitrary use of these markers (for instance, comma at the place of full stop or vice versa) to form fragmented sentences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the data analysed, it can be concluded that the exposure of senior secondary students to social media is quite high such that this has negative effects on their writing skills and general linguistic performance. Hence, based on the major findings of the study, it is therefore recommended that:

- (a) Students should reduce their exposure to Facebook and pay more attention to their writing skills.
- (b) The examination bodies such as WAEC and NECO should motivate the use of Standard English in examination situation.
- (c) It is important to recommend that social media should be used more carefully by students when needed and not at all leisure time
- (d) Students should be encouraged to write more essays to enable teachers discover and correct their errors.

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