



Lecturers' Assessment of Social Media Influence on the Written English Language Skills of Students of Universities in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

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Abstract

The study focused on lecturers' assessment of social media influence on the written English Language skills of students of universities in Dar es Salaam. The aim was to ascertain the views of lecturers teaching in different universities in Dar es Salaam region of Tanzania, regarding social media influence on the ability of the students to communicate effectively in written English language. The in-depth interview (intensive interview) research method was adopted for the study. Five lecturers were purposively selected from three universities (University of Dar es Salaam, Open University of Tanzania and Bagamoyo University) in the region. The selected lecturers teach languages and linguistics, English studies, media studies, journalism and mass communication in the universities and often examine the students including their written submissions. This implies that a total of 15 lecturers participated in the study. Using the interview guide, interview sessions were held with the respondents at different times and locations. The data collected were presented using the summary technique. This made it possible for the data to be presented in a summary form for the purpose of clarity. It was found that Social media has significantly reduced the students' skills on spelling of words. It was also revealed that social media has negatively affected the sentence construction skills of the students. In line with the findings, it was recommended that when writing in English language on social media, students should avoid the unconventional way of writing on the platforms and ensure all their writings are in compliance with the demands of English Language. This will enable them to write correctly in formal settings like examinations and other serious academic writings. It was also recommended that lecturers should also make it a point of duty to educate the students on the damage social media is making on their writing skills. This may help raise the consciousness of the students in that regard and ultimately make the desired decision to avoid the unconventional/ social media way of writing.

Keywords: Social Media, Lecturers, Students, English Language, Universities.

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 (Sani & Bature, 2014).

It is a fact that technologies have brought a lot of innovations to all spheres of human lives including education. For example, there is the use of computers in class rooms in place of chalkboards, the use of projectors in interactive classrooms, online tutoring and other distant learning programmes. In addition, a large number of students use smart phones as complementary notebooks, get free online books and internet-based learning. And one of such technologies that have redefined the order of things in the society is the social media (Fatimayin, n.d.).

Social media networks such as Facebook support cognition, communication/networking, and cooperation (communities, collaborative work, sharing of user-generated and other content). It is classified as online learning based on the two different approaches to online learning that have emerged: synchronous and asynchronous learning. Synchronous learning is instruction and collaboration in “real time” via the Internet. It involves tools such as live chat, audio and video conferencing, data and application sharing, shared whiteboard, joint viewing of multimedia presentations and online slideshows. Any learning tool that is in real-time, such as Instant messaging, Twitter, and Facebook that allows students and teachers to ask and answer questions immediately, is synchronous. Synchronous learning environments provide real-time interaction, which can be collaborative in nature incorporating e-tivities. Asynchronous e-Learning, on the other hand, refers to learning and teaching that take place simultaneously via an electronic mode (Hamisu & Sadiq, 2021; Salmon, 2013).

The social media platforms are very popular among students because many subscribe to more than one of the platforms. They also spend hours chatting, blogging, posting information and connecting with friends and family. The implication is that they continually use social media language which may undermine their writing skills as a result of daily exposure to informal new ways of writing and language usage which do not correspond to acceptable Standard English language writing techniques. Some features of social media language include constant and consistent use of abbreviations, lack of grammatical rules and others. These easily slip in when students write especially students who are average and below average. Students also stand the

risk of becoming lazy at writing as social media encourages abbreviation of word and sentence (Fatimayin, n.d.).

The overwhelming active involvement of the generation of the 21st-century youths, referred to as digital natives or Generation Z, has various effects on how things used to be done, one of which is writing. Social media have reduced the vast gap between formal and informal contexts of writing to a very thin line. This is because the same medium on social media sites can both be deployed for formal and informal writing. As an expressive language skill, writing provides opportunities to express one's feelings, emotions, opinions, positions, etc. More importantly, apart from the informal benefits of writing as stated above, it is a significant means of assessing knowledge in formal education. Students therefore are obliged to be proficient in writing to reflect their knowledge for proper assessment. Much as social media facilitate writing habit enhancement in youth through mobile devices giving the opportunity of writing-on-the-go, among other benefits, the introduction of social media chat languages seems to have bastardised the writing culture among the younger generation alongside social addiction, distracting them from the core aspect of life, one of which is their academic life (Begaga, 2016; Smith & Caruso, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007 cited in Salaudeen & Lawal, 2019).

Based on classroom observations, it has been argued that social media language is infiltrating students' formal writing exercises and impacting it negatively. This supports Selwyn's (2009) assertion that Facebook use must be seen as identity politics of being a student rather than enhancing students' engagement with formal studies. During classroom interaction with students, one finds that most of the students write using incorrect spelling, grammar and punctuation marks. Many use abbreviations profusely, while others have formed the habit of using text speak. This affects the structure of sentences used as well as their spellings. This in turn does not augur well for students' vocabulary acquisition. To compound the problem, some students do struggle with grammar, concord, meaning and comprehension (Fatimayin, n.d.).

Statement of the Problem

As previously asserted, social media provides the platforms for social engagements including interactions between and among people. It is an avenue that accommodates informal writings and such kind of writing tends to be very predominantly adopted on the platforms by users including students of different universities. Words are abbreviated or shortened in such manner that may sometimes be extremely difficult to make meaning out of them.

It has been contended that the frequent use of this informal kind of writing on the social media tends to significantly affect the formal writing competence or skills of students in universities. This includes students in Universities in Dar es Salaam whose language of instruction is the English language. Though attempts have been made by researchers to investigate this area of research, studies adopting qualitative approach with focus on students in Universities in Dar es Salaam are scant, hence the need for this study. This study, therefore, dealt with the assessment of social media influence on the English language writing skills of students in Universities in Dar es Salaam.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to ascertain the assessment of lecturers on the influence of social media on the English Language writing skills among students of Universities in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Find out the social media influence on the spelling of words among students of universities in Dar es Salaam.
2. Ascertain the level of influence of social media on sentence construction among students of universities in Dar es Salaam.

Research Questions

In line with the objectives of the study, the researcher sought to address the following research questions

1. What is the extent of social media influence on the spelling of words among students of universities in Dar es Salaam?
2. What is the level of influence of social media on sentence construction among students in universities in Dar es Salaam?

Literature Review

The negative effects of social media use among students have become a source of worry. It appears that social media is yet to impact positively among many youths in terms of their intellectual and mental capacities. The impacts of social media can be noticed among youths in the areas of football, distortion of social ethos and morals, internet frauds, pornography, and other cybercrimes. However, in the educational context many youths in tertiary institutions rely on the accessibility of information on social media specifically and the websites in general, in order to provide answers or solve some of their learning tasks as well as private social problems. This means that the social media use focus less on learning and information seeking for academic purposes (Oyebode, 2018 cited in Ibrahim, Furfuri, Muhammad and Nasirudeen, 2021).

Acronyms used by teens on social media to include: OOTD - Outfit of the day; KOTD Kicks of the day -- Typically refers to sneakers; HMU - Hit me up -- Usually asking for someone's Snap chat username, a phone number to text or for a direct message; Smash – I would have sex with you -- A girl might post a provocative picture and a boy might write "smash."; Cook session - When one or several teens gang up on another kid on social media; TBH - To be honest -- A teen might post a picture of himself or herself and ask for a TBH, usually looking for positive responses; TBR - To be rude -- While TBH often leads to positive responses, TBR is usually followed by a negative response; OOMF - One of my followers -- A secretive way to talk about one of their followers without saying their name, such as "OOMF was so hot today."; BAE - Baby -- affectionate term for someone's girlfriend, boyfriend etc.; WCW - Woman Crush Wednesday -- A girl will post a picture of another girl she thinks is pretty, while guys will post pictures of girls they think are hot; MCM - Man Crush Monday -- Similar to Woman Crush Wednesday, but featuring pictures of men; BMS - Broke my scale -- A way to say they like the

way someone looks; RDH - Rate date hate -- As in "rate me, would you date me, do you hate me?" A typical response might be "rate 10 date yes hate no" or "10/y/n."; IDK - I don't know; RN – Rightnow; KIK - Another social media app, Kik, that they want to communicate; FML - F***my life; AF - As f*** -- A teen might tweet "mad af" or "you seem chill af."; LMAO Laughing my ass off; S/O or SO - Shout out; ILYSM - I like you so much or I love you so much; CWD - Comment when done -- Similar to TBH, urging others to comment on their photo of whatever they're posting; LOL - Laugh out loud(Wallace, 2015 cited in Salaudeen and Lawal, 2019).

Fatimayin(n.d.) did a study entitled “Impact of Social Media Language on Secondary School Students’ Written English”. The study examined the prevalence of misspelt words, use of slangs, abbreviations and looked at social media in relation to its impact on students’ written English. The data consist mainly of 224 text speak samples taken from FB, sms and WhatsApp as well as expressions and spellings taken from 40 secondary school students’ essay writing. These were analysed using frequency counts and percentages. Finding indicated that social media language is gradually and steadily encroaching students’ writing. Based on this, the paper recommended among others that teachers, who have not been doing so, should identify and correct students’ errors immediately. Students should also be given drills in spelling, use of grammar and punctuation (Fatimayin, n.d.).

In a research carried out in Ghana by Addei and Kokroko (2020) entitled “The Effect of Social Media use on the Written English of University Students: The case of University of Mines and Technology (UMaT)”, it was revealed that all the 112 final year students used for the study are social media users with majority of them being on various social media platforms for between six and ten years. It also established that the type of English used by social media users is different from the one used in formal writing. The study further established that even though majority of the students are able to write formal English without any interference of social media English, there are some whose writing have been influenced by the use of social media. A good number of students are not able to differentiate social media writing from formal writing. Some of them transfer the “shorthand” that they use on social into their formal writing while others are not able to write meaningful sentences due to the disjointed writing they do on social media. The study also revealed that students’ use of social media has a negative impact on their grammar and spelling (Addei and Kokroko, 2020).

Hamisu and Sadiq (2021) did a study on the “Effects of Social Media on the Written English Skills of Senior Secondary School Students in Nigeria. The study was about the social media and its efficacy on the written English performance of selected senior secondary school students. The study specifically used Facebook and selected one hundred and eighty (180) students from Government Secondary Schools; Bomo Government Secondary School, Basawa and Government Girls’ Secondary School, Samaru, as the experimental group, and one hundred and eighty (180) students from Government Secondary School, Jama’a, Government Secondary School, Kwangila, Government Secondary School, Sakadadi, and Demonstration Secondary School, Samaru as the control group. A t-test was used for the test with the aim of identifying the differences between the performance of students exposed to Facebook, and those that were not. The investigation involved pre-test, test I, test II, test III and a final test. One research question

and one hypothesis were generated, tested and answered. The result of the study revealed significant differences between the written English mean performance score of the experimental and control group. The study proved that the use of this social media platform can lead to greater writing achievement among students (Hamisu & Sadiq, 2021).

Ghouali and Benmoussat (2019) Entitled “Investigating the effect of Social Media on EFL Students’ Written Production: Case of Third-Year EFL Students at Tlemcen University, Algeria.” The study investigated the impact of social media, as being one aspect of eassessment tools, on EFL students’ written production. It tried to highlight the nature of this impact, enquired about the reasons behind their writing difficulties, and explored whether these errors were caused by social media or not. This research work relied on a case study that consisted of 31 third-year undergraduates and 22 English teachers at the department of English at Tlemcen University, Algeria. The data were gathered through the use of two questionnaires administered to both learners and instructors plus two writing tasks, one assigned on social media and the other in the classroom. Data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively through error analysis. After identifying the different errors produced by the students, the findings revealed that a relationship existed between learners’ use of social media and their writing issues. Their intensive use of social media led to a significant decrease in the writing level of the learners who have developed a new form of writing that includes linguistic habits which reflect the informalities often found on a social media environment, and do not necessarily follow the norms and rigours of the English language. They have become unable to distinguish between the formal and informal context to the point that certain linguistic aspects have become fossilized (Ghouali and Benmoussat, 2019).

Omoera, Aiwuyo, Edemode and Anyanwu (2018) did a study on the “Impact of Social Media on the English Language Writing Abilities of Undergraduates in Ekpoma, Nigeria”. The article examined the impact of social media on the writing abilities of Nigerian youths in English, which is the language of mass communication in Nigeria. Deploying cultivation theory of the media, this study used quantitative and qualitative methods to unpack the Nigerian youths’ opinions on the impact of the use of social media on their writing abilities, using undergraduates in Ekpoma, Nigeria as a study case. To do this, data was collected through the use of 110 copies of a survey questionnaire administered to selected students. Additional information was garnered from focused group discussions (FGDs) with students and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with some tertiary institutions’ lecturers as well as the researchers’ direct observation of the issue under investigation. The study discovered that a majority of the youths adopt a certain option/brand of English which cannot be located within the matrix of Standard English (SE) or even popular Nigerian English variant which is called Pidgin English (PE). Consequently, expressions such as ‘u’ for ‘you’, ‘gr8t’ for ‘great’, ‘ur/urs’ for ‘your/yours’, among other deviational patterns, have crept into their writing consciousness in classes and examinations, which make a lot of ‘sense’ in informal settings among the youths, but smacks of sub-literacy in formal writing situations under which they are being trained. This development can have serious implications for effective and efficient writing among Nigerian youths, especially in formal situations (Omoera, Aiwuyo, Edemode & Anyanwu 2018).

A quantitative study on the perceived impact of social media networks on Bahraini Users' English Language learning was done by Diana Al Jahromi in 2020. The study aims at measuring how the English language learning process of non-native Bahrainis has been affected by the use of social media. To explore such effects, a quantitative methodological measure was used in the form of an online questionnaire administered to a random sample of L2 Bahrainis. Responses from 330 respondents from different age groups and gender types were analysed using measures of central tendency and other statistical measures such as t-tests and ANOVA using SPSS. Findings have revealed that the utilization of social media has been perceived to have positively impacted interlocutors' lexical variation, writing style, reading skills, and communication skills. These findings were subjective to variables related to gender, age, and the multimodality of particular social media facets (Jahromi, 2020).

A study by Salaudeen and Lawal (2019) focused on the influence of social media on formal writing skills of mass communication students in a private university in southwestern Nigeria. Using a multilevel sampling technique involving purposive, stratification and total population sampling, 143 answer scripts of a first-year writing course in the Department of Mass Communication were examined through content analysis. The study found that in the case of mass communication students, social media do not have such overwhelming adverse influence as associated with it on the writing competence of undergraduate students. Among all types of social media chat language, graphemes rank highest in use among the study population. Many other factors, including writing training, interplay with social media to cause the poor writing competence among university undergraduates (Salaudeen and Lawal, 2019).

Muftah (2022) did a study on "Impact of social media on learning English language during the COVID-19 pandemic." The study investigated the extent of the impact of the various social media platforms on learning English language during the COVID-19 pandemic from the students' point of view. The study was conducted at the undergraduate level for English language learners. The sample comprised 166 undergraduate students at Najran University. A survey questionnaire was administered to find out the impact of various social media platforms and social networking sites on learning English language in the academic year of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to highlight possible suggestions for improving future virtual language learning. The findings of the study contributed to the area of online learning of English language during the COVID-19 pandemic. Final results confirmed that the utilization of social media has been significantly perceived to have positively impacted learning English language in terms of writing style, reading skills, listening and lexical variation, communication skills and grammar usage (Muftah, 2022).

Sani and Bature (2014) carried out a study on "The Impact of Social Networks on ESL Undergraduate Students' Writing in Nigeria." This research explored 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 (Sani and Bature, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The Technological Determinism theory was used to explain the study. It was propounded by Marshal McLuhan in 1962. The theory is of the assumption that media technology shapes how individuals in a particular society think, feel and act. It also focuses on how the society operates as it moves from one era of technological to another

The theory is saying that new inventions in the field of technology impacts of how members of the society operates or carry out their activities. And this impact cuts across all aspects of the society such as journalism, education, entertainment, security, governance, and many others. A look at the society would show that members of the society are now deploying technological inventions in their activities thereby confirming the assumptions of this theory.

This theory is relevant to this study because social media as a technological invention is utilized by students for various purposes including academic purpose. And as a result of the students' utilisation of the platforms, they tend to be influenced to transfer social media writing format to their academic writings which negatively impacts on the quality of what they write.

Methodology

The in-depth interview (intensive interview) research method was adopted for the study. The essence of choosing this particular research method was to provide the opportunity for the respondents to freely respond without unnecessary restrictions as could be seen with the questionnaire. Three universities in Dar es Salaam were selected for the study on the basis of availability of English language and other related writing programmes in the universities. The universities were University of Dar es Salaam, Open University of Tanzania and Bagamoyo University. Five lecturers were purposively selected from each of the three selected universities, making a total of fifteen lecturers. The lecturers teach linguistics, languages, English studies, media studies, journalism and mass communication in the selected universities and often examine the written submissions of their students. This implies that a total of 15 lecturers participated in the study. Using the interview guide, interview sessions were held with the respondents at different times and locations. The data collected were presented using the summary technique. This made it possible for the data to be presented in a summary form for the purpose of clarity.

Research question one: What is the extent of social media influence on the spelling of words among students of universities in Dar es Salaam?

This research question was aimed at ascertaining the extent at which social media has affected the students' spelling skill. The selected 15 lecturers gave their responses based on their experiences with students' tests, assignments as well as examinations' scripts. All the 15 respondents stated that social media has significantly affected the spelling skills of the students. They said many of the submissions of the students are riddled with several spelling errors. The

respondents stated that the students incorrectly spell words as used in the social media. For example, thank you is incorrectly spelt “tank u”, love is wrongly spelt “luv”, later is misspelt “lata” will for “wil”.

In line with the above finding, Sani and Bature, (2014).in a related study found that 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’ (Sani and Bature, 2014).

Research question two: What is the level of influence of social media on sentence construction among students in universities in Dar es Salaam?

This particular research question focused on ascertaining how social media has affected the competence of the students in writing correct sentences. The respondents were unanimous that the social media has seriously affected the ability of the students to write good sentences. They stated that the social media effect on the students’ word spelling skill also manifest in their sentence construction skill. Examples as stated by the respondents were, “d xzamhold in dat class”, “Syntax av gr8 importance into language”, “New media av come 2 stay”.

In a related study, Sani and Bature, (2014) found that 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, 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 realy 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 wait n 4 d tym of politics 2 com 2 stat rliznmony.

Summary of findings

The study revealed that;

1. Social media has significantly reduced the students' skills on spelling of words
2. Social media has negatively affected the sentence construction skills of the students.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concludes that social media have significant influence on students' English language writing skills and as such impacts on their academic submissions such as tests, assignments as well as examinations. This poses a serious threat to effective communication in English language by the students. This definitely calls for worry considering the fact that English language is the language of instruction in various universities in the country.

Recommendations

In line with the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. When writing in English language on social media, students should avoid the unconventional way of writing on the platforms and ensure all their writings are in compliance with the demands of English Language. This will enable them to write correctly in formal settings like examinations and other serious academic writings.
2. Lecturers should also make it a point of duty to educate the students on the damage social media is making on their writing skills. This may help raise the consciousness of the students in that regard and ultimately make the desired decision of avoid the unconventional / social media way of writing.
3. Further students in this field of research should go beyond the Dar es Salaam and explore other regions to establish the level of influence on students in such locations.

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