



LALICO Journal of Languages, Literature, and Communication

Print ISSN: 2651-6462

www.lalicojournals.com

Volume 3; Issue 3; December 2025, Page No. 60-64.

Social Media Influence on Student-Users' Writing Skills in English

***Togho, D.H.**

Department of English and Communication Arts, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt.

***Corresponding author email:** dumkatogho@gmail.com

Abstract

Although influence of social media on students' academic achievements has been widely investigated, much seem not to have been done on its impact on their writing skills. Some student-users' written English have been negatively influenced. In formal compositions, such students apply some writing patterns, characteristic of social media posts in formal writing situations. This study investigated influence of social media on students' writing skills in few selected senior secondary schools, classes 1&2, in Khana Local Government Area, Rivers State, to determine if the students were negatively influenced, how and why. Social Cultural and Social Cognitive theories of writing were employed. 416 copies of survey were filled out by eligible respondents. 41 of the respondents were randomly selected at the ratio of 1:10, to write a test. Kuder-Richardson Formular 21 was used, with reliability coefficient of 0.5. Their written scripts were compared to snippets from Facebook. A great resemblance between both write-ups was discovered. The students removed the pronoun "I" and replaced it with "am" as it was done in most social media write-ups. The study suggests that students be adequately guided to distinguish between both write-ups. They should acquire, maintain and adhere to English grammar rules in official writing situations. They should be encouraged to use social media for academic purposes. Teachers should always compose grammatically sound statements when writing.

Keywords: Social Media, Student-Users, Influence, Writing, Style

Introduction

This paper investigated the influence social media writing style wields on the writing pattern of students who are constantly exposed to the use of its platforms. Frequent use of social media platforms has exposed a lot of young people to the quick text ideology that brings about abbreviation of words when using the various platforms. In addition to that, there is serious negligence of traditional writing conventions which include proper use of punctuations as well as rule-governed placement of lexical items in structures. These have amounted to the impeding of the formation of correct writing style among users. This misnomer has culminated into unconscious transfer of unofficial writing patterns associated with social media discourse into real life formal writing situations.

Writing

Writing is a very crucial aspect of academic activities. It is the fulcrum around which education revolves. Ngulube (2019, p.139) sees writing as "one of the fundamental skills of an educated person". He explains further that a writer communicates only when his reader understands his message. Also, writing is seen traditionally as a key skill in the acquisition of English because basic knowledge of it enables the writer organize the grammatical structures and vocabulary that convey the intended message in accordance with the rule of the language. The art of writing has been an age-long practice that promotes dissemination of information to even the unseen users. It is a safe medium for spreading messages far abroad. Just as Songxaba and Sincuba (2019) observe that writing is one of the long-time accurate and dependable avenues through which communication which involves expression of someone's feelings and/or thoughts towards another without vocal engagement is made possible. Writing features a kind of communication that allows only members of the literate community to exchange information.

Importance of Writing to Students and its Implication on their Achievements

The art of writing is a skill that must be acquired by every student. Its acquisition and practice ought to be done with utmost assiduity. The need to always ensure precision and clarity in writing is important to every educated person generally and students in particular. This is because it is the most fundamental medium of communication

between teachers and learners. It is through writing that teachers and learners interact regarding learning outcomes. So, a student who fails to communicate his ideas in a rule-governed manner is likely to lose valuable marks. Since every student is expected to guard against sources of failure, wrong writing patterns should top the list. Written communication does not always create room for a face-to-face interaction. So, should there be any gap in communication resulting from unclear written terms, the writer will not always be at arm's length to divulge his message. If it happens, it could lead to misunderstanding and in effect hamper the outcome of a test or examination result. Okoh (1998) observes that a writer may never be available for a contact with his teacher when his examination scripts are being marked because he only provides his written test scripts for assessment and goes his way and so, unclear message could put him at the risk of being misunderstood or misread.

The Effect of Acceptable Writing Style

In order not to fall victim of failure resulting from poor writing habit, every student needs to master the grammar of the written language. This mastery is achievable through proper guide from teachers and instructors, the teachers/instructors must use every available result-oriented pedagogical approach to guide the learners properly. With good guide from every medium of interface with instructors, the learners would master and maintain the rule of sentence formation which gives room for clarity and explicitness. This is a sure way to academic advancement that prepares students for enhanced academic standing.

When writing is done with diligent explicitness, it fosters the carriage of messages that allow effective communication of concepts. Knowing fully well that every good composition is expected to convey the writer's exact intention(s), there is need for total adherence to the principles of writing. To accomplish this, a writer must follow the acceptable patterns strictly. Just as Eko (2005) has earlier observed, the very number one rule of grammar is that the writer thinks before writing. Then, he should also examine everything he writes carefully. While doing this, he should bear in mind the fact that written works could reach destinations the author may not be able to reach, even all through his lifetime. So, to communicate seamlessly and effectively, suitable acceptable rule-governed writing style should be maintained after being mastered. Anything less, as Okoh (1998) observes becomes unacceptable because of its capability of blurring intended messages.

Social Media Use and Youths' Writing Activities

Emmanuel, et al. (2019) identify social media to be the different forms of internet enabled communication platforms that give users access to creating networks and connectives for sharing information which involve messages, with a lot of contents. It is an interactive communication channel for engagement with one another. It is highly employed in these modern days to share ideas and experiences of common interests. In recent times, some scholars have observed that this younger generation utilize these platforms even more than adults. Mowafy (2018) observes that interacting with these technological devices is one of the prevalent hobbies enjoyed by adolescents, and up-coming adults. He claims further that a lot of Nigerian children spend more time on internet-connected social media platforms than those in other regions of the world. Similarly, Adedeji et al. (2021) report that a good number of teenagers access the internet daily. This grants them exposure to writing styles adopted on the various platforms. Expressing similar opinion, Genmill & Peterson (2006), referenced in Rodney (2015), McCarthy and McCarthy (2014) as well as Onuoha and Saheed (2011) among others have reported earlier that there is constant prevalence of social media use among young people. Because of this constant involvement in social media use by young people, who may not have been properly grounded in the acquisition of the grammatical rules of English, some of the users are negatively influenced. It is observed with utmost dismay that far earlier on, Ekah (2007), referenced in Fatimayin, (2018), pointed out that the casual language associated with texting on social media is gradually but steadily finding its way into the official text of students. Today, more young people are gaining access to the use of social media platforms than ever before. This, in essence, raises the concern that their exposure to the writing pattern could pose more challenges to their ability to write well than before. This is as a result of the effect of constant free-hand writing associated with the media spaces which could accustom the users and hamper their ability to write correctly if they are not well equipped with the grammatical norms of standard English so as to differentiate and maintain the globally acceptable writing ethics of English.

While efforts to combat the problem of poor mastery of English grammar rules have not been very successful because of a lot of factors, including the non-indigenous nature of the language, in recent years, the issue of writing on social media has created more loopholes for its users. The various social media platforms' writing pattern basically violate many of the rules of writing because it promotes users' disregard to the conventions of grammar of written English traditionally. Ojetunde and Otedola (2019) therefore, identify this writing style adopted by social media users as a deviation because they observe that it does not follow the grammatical rules of standard written English and yet spreads among users because of the users' passion for constant internet writing involvement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Cultural theory of writing and the Social Cognitive theory of writing.

The Social Cultural Theory of Writing

The Social Cultural theory of writing arose from Vygosky's theory of Development. Lev Vygosky (1896-1934) was a Soviet psychologist whose works influenced educational development in the 1920s and 1930s. His ideas about social interaction, language and cognitive development laid the foundation for understanding how learning, even how to acquire writing skills was acquired. In his "Mind in Society" (published posthumously in 1978), his ideas on collaborative learning and how social environment influence writing development was discussed. The theory states that "children learn about the world around them from more knowledgeable others or those with the best expertise of the subject area". This theory has been linked to the emphasis on language with the opinion that writing extends beyond the classroom and current setting to encompass linguistic comprehension and technological effects. It then emphasizes the importance of social interaction among individuals (Hodges, 2017). Accordingly, children learn from more educated adults. The Facebook community is replete with such assumed 'knowledgeable people' with whom these Students become friends. So, as these students keep interacting with the adults' messages on a regular basis, they learn not only the contents but also the style. Therefore, they sometimes, unconsciously pick up on writing patterns they observe and keep using same. With constant practice of such application, the social media pattern manifest in their write-ups such that it becomes obvious that technology has influenced such users' writing ability.

The Social Cognitive Theory of Writing; Albert Bandura (1925-2021) was a Canadian-American psychologist. He developed this idea called Social Learning Theory (SLT) in the 1960s and in 1986, it was transformed into the Social Cognitive Theory. The stance of the theory is that learning takes place in a social setting. It also claims that children learn by watching models in action and that instructors are role models while writing is modeling (Hodges, 2017). Data from the respondents to this study have shown that some of the students are interacting with the social media much frequently. As a result, some of them have learned and utilized some of the writing patterns employed commonly on social media in their personal write-ups and have become obsessed with same to the point of unconsciously applying them to their professional works. This act has impacted on their behaviour and has manifested in their written test scripts.

Secondly, the instructor serves as a role model for learners. A role model is someone that an individual looks up to, as a trail blazer. Writing is also identified as a model. Therefore, these students tend to model their written English after the writing patterns they are exposed to on the platforms, believing same to be correct since they emanate from people they could look up to as being knowledgeable.

Methodology

The researcher collected the data for this study from secondary school's students of Birabii Memorial Grammar School, (B.M.G.S.) Bori, Community Secondary School, (C.S.S.) Kaani and Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa Comprehensive Secondary School, Bori (the senior section). In course of this investigation, a total of 416 respondents who are actively involved in social media interaction, from the above-mentioned schools were investigated.

Each of the respondents was asked to fill a survey, using questionnaire given to them face to face by the researcher. This was followed by a written test by 41 of the respondents, chosen at random on a scale of one to ten (1:10) from the 416 respondents. Students not exposed to social media use were also subjected to similar written test. Both sets of writing were compared and analyzed. Some social media posts downloaded from Facebook, particularly the Nigerian Teachers' Group titled, Teacher Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) and other platforms were analyzed and compared to the student-users' write-ups.

Using the Kuder-Richardson Formular 21, the instrument's dependability was measured, with K equaling the number of items on the instrument, M equaling the mean score of items, and SD equaling the standard deviation. The reliability coefficient obtained was 0.53, indicating that the instrument employed was relatively dependable for this work. After that, the descriptive statistics were used to examine the replies to the questionnaires. The students' written screenplays were also reviewed and reports made. Copies of scripts were discovered to be influenced heavily by the work's social media writing style.

Findings

The investigation revealed that the written English of students that use social media very frequently was negatively influenced. Their exposure to some Facebook user's write-ups coupled with their frequent practice of such writing styles led them to copying the incorrect use of the BE VERB, "am" which many Facebook users incorrectly use as the subject of a sentence on social media platforms as the subject of their own sentences. By so

doing, they omitted the first-person pronoun, 'I,' which should feature at the subjective slot before the verb, 'am' which was supposed to be at the predicate slot.

The researcher discovered that there is a lot of overlap between how adults on social media use this verb and how student-users apply it in formal writing situations after comparing the student-users' written scripts with excerpts from Facebook posts. This comparison of the excerpts from social media and the student-users' written test scripts revealed that: Many social media users began their posts with the right use of the first-person pronoun, 'I,' followed by the BE VERB, 'am,' but still went ahead to start subsequent sentences with 'am' within the same post; students did the same. Some of them (social media users) began a statement with the BE VERB, incorrectly capitalizing the letter 'a' in 'am' so that the sentence's subject becomes 'Am'; students did the same. It was observed that "am" was incorrectly used two or even three times in one article, even if it is correctly used by some social media users; some students do the same.

Out of the 31 Facebook posts that the researcher pinned and extracted within the short time that this investigation was on, the posts and comments from the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) members recorded the highest occurrence of this incorrect usage. This testimony is not a very palatable one regarding teachers' written English. Teachers remain role models for students. So, teachers should set good examples for students to follow. Frequent involvement in social media use also diverted students' attention away from learning some basic writing abilities. Essay writing was a challenge for the students and because of the distraction associated with social media use, the student-users were unable to use it to maximize any academic benefit.

Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher has examined the influence of social media writing style on student-users' written English. She has concluded that the students are so very actively involved in social media use. Because of their frequent involvement, social media jargon has badly impacted their writing style. The findings demonstrated that instead of starting their sentence with the pronoun "I", they incorrectly duplicated the social media pattern of using the primary auxiliary verb "am" at the subjective slot. As a result, they capitalize the letter "a." Some of them, like some social media users, seem to be so inconsistent that they use it interchangeably with "I am," bringing in both "I am," and "am" within the body of the same article.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

1. Students be adequately guided to distinguish between both write-ups.
2. They should acquire, maintain and adhere to English grammar rules in official writing situations.
3. They should be encouraged to use social media for academic purposes.
4. Teachers should always compose grammatically sound statements, even on social media platforms and they should always keep to the principles of sentence structures in order not to mislead those who look up to them.

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