

Exploring the Effects of Microsoft Teams Messaging App on Post Foundation Students' Writing Skills: A Socio-Constructivist Analysis

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Abstract

This paper analyses the effects of interaction via Microsoft Teams private chat on Post Foundation students' writing skills. The current study was conducted at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al Musannah, Oman, during the Spring of the Academic Year 2022-23. Of the sixty students registered for the Technical Writing course, twenty were selected as the purposive sample for this study as they were very active in using the Microsoft Teams private chat messaging app to interact with their teachers and peers. A qualitative approach was adopted to conduct a thematic analysis of the writing samples; hence, the participants were asked to send emails on different topics related to their course and instructed to use MS Teams private chat for interaction with their teacher and peers outside class hours. The thematic analysis of the emails was carried out in terms of formality, grammar, tone, word choice and context using a software package called QDA Miner Lite. The researchers found that students used abbreviations, shortened words, acronyms, slang, and emoticons for interaction through MS Teams private chat. However, they were very cautious in using formal and standard language in writing emails. Informal language and colloquial expressions were not found in their formal emails and academic writing, indicating that they were aware of the context and use of appropriate language. The researchers conclude that extensive social interaction on MS Teams private chat can significantly contribute to learners' communication skills without negatively impacting their academic English. Therefore, this study recommends the judicious integration of social media apps into English language courses to enhance ESL learners' communication skills.

Keywords: communication skills, constructivism, messaging app, social interaction

1. Introduction

The impact of social media on people's lives is phenomenal, as it is evident in all walks of life. Students are the most affected class in every community in this regard. The effects of social media applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have been widely researched worldwide. Faizi, El Afia & Chiheb (2014) believe learners can now take advantage of social media sites to develop their language skills in addition to their primary use for socialization and entertainment. The present study is an addition to the existing reservoir of knowledge where the effect of social messaging apps on students' performance has been explored.

The effect of social media usage on students' academic performance has been extensively investigated across academia since the last decade. It has been reported that most students get distracted from their educational activities due to the excessive use of social networks. Spending too much time on social media can lead to Internet addiction, which could negatively affect other valued activities (Raut & Patil, 2016). At the same time, many educators consider using social media in teaching and learning as the need of the hour. Social media interactions provide opportunities for collaboration and participation, ultimately contributing to language development (Hamadeh et al., 2020; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Pikhart & Botezat, 2021). At the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) Al-Musannah, too, students widely use social messaging apps, especially Microsoft Teams private chat, which facilitates individual and group interaction, and students widely accept it because of its usefulness, perceived ease of use and similar features with popular social networking sites.

The Post-Foundation (PF) students at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences - Al-Musannah are taught specialized courses in the English language where they are expected to chisel up their formal communication skills, particularly in writing. Technical Writing (UNEN1203) is one of the main English language

courses taught at the PF level. An important learning outcome of this course is to develop the ability to send and reply to formal emails. During this course, the students are given opportunities to improve their communication skills, especially by writing formal emails. Theme or topic-wise, these emails range from immediate personal to future job requirements. Besides, the students are encouraged to communicate with their teachers through Microsoft Teams private chat to discuss their study and behavioral issues. The present study explored the effect of MS Teams private chat on students' writing skills. The following questions guided the current research:

- (1) What kind of contributory role do social media interactions in English play in enhancing the communication skills of ESL learners?
- (2) How do social messaging apps affect learners' use of English for academic writing in terms of formality, tone, register and style?

2. Literature Review

Social media platforms provide users with ample opportunities to interact with people across the globe. However, most people use informal language for such discussions. As a result, the extended use of colloquial language on social networking sites gradually becomes their preferred style of communication, and language experts differ in their opinion about how it affects second language acquisition. Dhanya (2016) believes that students use English more freely and effectively when socializing informally, which often contributes to fast learning. Social media offers endless possibilities for digital natives to interact, collaborate and engage in discussions that enhance their learning experience (Mondahl & Razmerita, 2014). Social interactions and private chat significantly contribute to learners' cognitive and linguistic skills (Alharbi, 2023). Language acquisition mainly occurs through social interactions (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Peer interaction during focused activities enhances second language development (Turuk, 2008).

Language acquisition takes place mainly through interactions in the target language. Social media platforms offer extensive materials on various topics that facilitate various forms of verbal and nonverbal interactions, which can accelerate language learning (Sykes, 2019). Namaziandost & Nasri (2019) believe social media interactions can broaden learners' perspectives of global culture and enhance communicative competence. According to Akinola (2015), students who use digital platforms communicate freely as the level of anxiety is low. However, without being guided by any pedagogical principles, these interactions can have far-reaching consequences on language learning styles, values and outlook and the nature of language itself. Veetil, Binu & Karthikeyan, (2021) think using abbreviations, acronyms, slang, contracted forms and emojis for social media communication could lead to a language shift.

Social networks are now valuable for second language acquisition; therefore, teachers should consider using the relevant ones in the classroom (Nguyen, 2021). Research findings on technology-integrated language instruction indicate that the use of technological aids significantly contributes to the development of language skills (Haigh, 2010; Levy, 2009). According to Kurniawan (2019), social media plays a significant role in ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition, reducing their overdependence on teachers and textbooks. Sivagnanam and Yunus (2020), who conducted a case study on the effect of social media on vocabulary acquisition, found that although students greatly benefit from social media interactions, there were also challenges of incorrect spelling and informal abbreviations in writing.

Discourses in digital contexts can enhance language acquisition and accelerate learning. Abbas Gulzar & Hussain (2019) who investigated the effect of social networks on language learning, found that students enjoyed using social media platforms as they were entertaining and informative. Modern communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams Private Chat enhance second-language acquisition through their distinct features of interaction and collaboration, the two crucial aspects of communication, without any restrictions on time and place (Binu, 2022). Ease of use, better communication, and opportunities for learning from home are reasons why students prefer MS Teams as a learning platform (Jose & Jose, 2021).

3. Method

A qualitative method was adapted for the current study using QDA Miner Lite, a popular research software package commonly used for analyzing textual data. The study involved 20 students at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences Al-Musannah (UTAS-A), Oman, enrolled in the Technical Writing (UNEN1203) course in the Spring semester of the Academic Year 2022-23. Using formal language for communication is one of the expected learning outcomes of this course. The students are taught the mechanics of writing to send and reply to formal emails in Unit 1 of the coursebook. These emails are related to their personal-cum-university and prospective job-related topics. The sample data selected for the analysis are the

formal emails written by students and the record of communication between the teacher and students via MS Teams private chat.

The data consisted of 20 student emails written on different topics given in the coursebook. Twenty students were selected for the study based on their performance in Quiz 1, conducted in the fourth week of the semester. There were around 40 other students whose writings were not selected for this study as their performance in the quiz was not to the standard. The following themes were identified and analyzed using QDA Miner Lite software: level of formality, grammar, tone, word choice, context and audience.

4. Findings

The key findings of the thematic analysis of the emails and chat records are as follows:

Level of Formality: The researchers compared the level of formality in students' emails and chat records, looking for specific language choices, such as contractions, slang, abbreviations, and emoticons. It was found that most students used formal discourse following all the email conventions. The register and style matched the task, indicating learners' awareness of standard expressions introduced in the class. Here is an example of the level of formality:

"Dear Sir,
I hope this email finds you well!
I would like to ask you for a favor.
Could you please provide me with the syllabus for the mid-semester examination?"

The sample above is an example of a polite expression in formal emails. However, very few students maintained a level of formality in their communication with their teacher on MS Teams private chat. Only 7 of the 20 participants sounded formal in their language. Others used quite a few informal chunks in their language. Although they were trained to use formal language in their chats, some students seemed to fall short of the appropriate vocabulary to describe their feelings when asked to explain things. Here is an example of neutrality (i.e., both formal and informal language and shortened forms of words used by a student in his chat with his teacher):

"Hi Sir!
How r u?
Could I get my percentage of absence in class??"

Most students used formal language as instructed in the class when they sent email to their teachers. On the other hand, they used a combination of formal and informal language forms while chatting on MS Teams. It can be inferred from their use of language in emails and chats that they are formal and polite, but the same formality was not found when interacting with other students on MS Teams Private Chat. For instance, they hardly used emojis when communicating with their teachers except for responding to feedback.

Grammar: The researchers analyzed the grammar and syntax of the chat records and emails. While looking for differences in sentence structure, punctuation, and capitalization, contrasting mistakes in their emails and chats were found. For example, they rarely made grammatical errors in emails but had punctuation and grammatical mistakes in chats, indicating that students are more cautious when writing formal emails, whereas their priority in chatting with the teacher is just to convey the message. Here are a few examples from their emails and chats:

Table 1. Differences in language use for formal email and personal chat

Email	Chat
(1) This is to inform you that I faced some technical issues while posting the assignment online. That is why I cannot submit my work on time.	(1) how much grade did I get in presentation
(2) I am sorry to say that I do not agree with publishing the result of Quiz 1 on MS Teams, where other students can view my score. Sir, please, do not post it next time. It is embarrassing to me.	(2) Inshallah I am ready for the quiz in march 21, 2023
	(3) Check it now please..... is it possible!!

Tone: The researchers compared the tone of the chat records and emails of the selected students. While looking for differences in the use of positive or negative language, the level of politeness, and the overall emotional tone, it

was found that students tend to use a politer style in emails. Here is an example of the use of a highly polite and emotionally balanced tone:

"I apologize for my absence from the last lecture on Thursday due to some emergency at home. God willing, I will attend the next class on Sunday."

In contrast, in chat, their tone is direct and less polite, as given below:

"Sorry Mr! I can't do the presentation today. I'm sick ...

Will do it Wednesday? Fine??"

Students are careful about using polite expressions and appropriate tone when writing emails. On the other hand, they adopt a pragmatic approach for chatting with their teacher.

Word choice: The researchers analyzed the specific words and phrases in the students' emails and chat records. The differences in vocabulary, register, style and use of jargon or technical language were carefully analyzed.

Table 2. Language samples taken from formal email and chat history

Email	MS Teams Private Chat
(1) Thank you for your attention to these matters. We are eager to work collaboratively and deliver an exciting presentation that meets your expectations.	(1) Sorry, 2day I'll miss ur class. Something v. urgent. Apologies...
(2) For collaboration, I propose that our group meets before the presentation to discuss and consolidate our contributions. It would be greatly appreciated if you could suggest a suitable time and location for this meeting.	(2) I'm disappointed, my marks r very low!! ☐☐ (3) Insha Allah will do it better next time. (4) Got ur email. Thanks!!!☐☐☐ (5) Can I do it again? ☐

As seen in Table 2, students use formal language to communicate their messages through email. However, they use contractions, colloquial expressions and emojis when they chat with teachers, which can be considered the direct influence of social media.

Context and Audience: The researchers also considered the context and audience of the communication, looking for differences in the purpose of the communication, the relationship between the sender and recipient, and the time constraint or urgency of the communication. Since there were different scenarios about their personal-cum university and prospective job-related contexts used in the emails that students wrote, it was interestingly evident that they paid careful attention to using formal language. Most of them used appropriate language considering the purpose of writing and their relationship with the recipient. For instance, if they were to write in the context of the formal environment of the university, they were more formal than their writing in scenarios outside the university for personal communication. Here is an extract from a formal email sent to the course tutor:

"I am writing this email to inform you that I have received the result of the mid-semester exams you posted on the E-learning platform."

It is evident that when students communicate with teachers, they tend to be more formal and polite in tone and careful in language use than in other situations where they must write emails to recipients who are not directly linked with them. They sound more urgent and direct in their emails when communicating with people they do not know, which could be attributed to the influence of social media. At the same time, when it comes to the communication between the teacher and students on MS Teams private chat, they use natural and less formal tones and informal language. They do not care about accuracy in grammar and spelling, as their priority is to convey the message.

5. Discussion

The above thematic analysis clearly shows that it is hard to overlook the influence of social media on students when it comes to writing formal emails and exchanging private chat messages via MS Teams. As evident in the samples analyzed, the level of formality varies in student emails and chats, indicating that the students displayed a higher level of formality and context awareness in their formal emails compared to their chat interactions. Emails generally adhered to standard email etiquette and conventions, demonstrating an understanding of appropriate formalities and professional tone. In contrast, the chat conversations were characterized by a more casual and informal language style.

The analysis reveals that the students' chat interactions exhibited grammatical and lexical errors more frequently than in formal emails. The presence of errors suggests a need for further investigation into the students' language proficiency and effective strategies for language learning and improvement. However, the students cared about the context and audience of the communication they were indulged in. The study found that Omani students tend to be formal with their teachers to the optimum when they send emails and chat on MS Teams, which shows their innate politeness to a great extent.

The findings of the study align with the socio-interactional theory of Vygotsky, which posits that social interactions and collaborative activities play a crucial role in cognitive development and language learning. Interactional moves, such as confirmation requests for clarification and comprehension checks are crucial to second language acquisition (Pica, 1987; Jones, 2002; Nair & Binu, 2015). Collaboration on wiki that allow users to add or edit content can contribute to second language development (Wang, 2014). The potential of Microsoft Teams private chat, such as its ubiquity, ease of use, and ability to facilitate real-time communication, can enhance communicative competence and improve writing skills.

Social messaging apps offer the convenience of time and place as learners can engage in conversations and language activities using their smartphones or other mobile devices. Also, learners can incorporate language learning into their daily routines and use leisure time to interact with their teacher or peers, which leads to language construction. There is an indispensable link between construction and second language acquisition (John, 2018; Kalina & Powell, 2009; Simina & Hamel, 2005). Although social messaging apps cannot substitute for comprehensive language instruction or face-to-face interactions, they can be considered additional tools that support and enhance language learning experiences.

Messaging apps facilitate peer-assisted learning, as learners can receive instant responses from their conversation partners. Learners can share resources, ask questions, and receive support from peers at similar proficiency levels. Moreover, the timely feedback and correction provided through messaging apps can enhance learners' language accuracy and help them refine their language production skills.

MS Teams private chat facilitates instant communication regardless of geographical barriers. Hence, learners can engage in conversations, exchange messages, and participate in group discussions, which provide opportunities to practice and improve their language skills. The informal nature of messaging apps can create a relaxed and supportive environment for learners to experiment with the target language and take risks without the pressure of face-to-face communication. Finally, authentic language use in messaging apps can contribute to developing fluency, pragmatics, and overall communicative competence. Thus, the systematic use of messaging apps to enhance communication and writing skills in English language learners needs to be promoted, provided the learners are directed to use the target language for communication and their interactions are properly monitored to offer necessary corrections and feedback.

6. Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of this study is the limited sample size and duration. The study sample only consisted of emails and chat histories of 20 students. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings to a larger population. Future research should involve a more extensive and diverse sample to enhance the external validity of the study. Also, this study did not delve into the specific contextual factors that might influence the students' communication styles. Factors such as individual language backgrounds, educational backgrounds, and cultural differences might shape their communication patterns. Further research should explore these contextual factors to understand the observed phenomena better.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of MS Teams messaging app on academic writing skills, analyzing the differences in formality, contextual awareness, and linguistic accuracy between Omani university students' formal emails and MS Teams private chat records. The findings dispel the notion that social messaging apps will negatively affect learners' academic English. Instead, it can greatly contribute to communicative competence, offering a range of benefits for second language development, including increased communication opportunities, authentic language use, instant feedback, peer support, and convenience. Investigating the effectiveness of specific language learning applications or platforms can provide insights into how technology can facilitate language acquisition and improve communication skills. A judicious integration of messaging apps into language learning activities can create dynamic and interactive language learning environments that foster engagement, motivation, and language proficiency.

8. Recommendations

Given the potential use of social messaging apps in developing communication skills in English, future research could explore the role of communication technology in language learning and teaching. Future studies can incorporate language proficiency assessments to determine the students' overall proficiency levels in English, which can provide valuable insights into the impact of language proficiency on the observed differences in communication styles. Future research should investigate effective language learning strategies and interventions to address the grammatical and lexical errors in the students' chat interactions. Designing language support programs or integrating language training into the curriculum can enhance students' English language skills and reduce reliance on machine translation tools.

Exploring cross-cultural communication and its impact on language usage can further enhance the understanding of the observed differences. Teachers and learners should be aware of privacy and safety considerations and follow the correct etiquette when using messaging apps for language learning purposes. Also, further investigations should be done to consider the long-term effects of messaging app use on language proficiency or the impact of different social interactions on second language acquisition. Finally, future studies should investigate how cultural factors influence students' choice of language style and formality in different communication settings.

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