

Social Media Tools at Developing Academic Writing Skills

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Facebook is considered as an effective Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) form. It is estimated that 2/3rd majority of Pakistani Facebook users are below 24 years old. The users spent around 40 minutes every day on facebook. They are either reading posts or responding by different emojis or comments. The study attempts to weigh the role of Facebook in developing writing skills in the students of English literature. 210 students of literature from four public sector universities participated in this research. A 15 item questionnaire using a 5 – point Likert scale was applied to record their observations. All students were invited to write at least one academic paragraph. Later their views, draft and profiles were cross tabulated through a data base to determine the results. The results show that 87% students use Facebook. The users consider Facebook as an opportunity to improve their writing skills. Among those who do not use Facebook around 30% did not participate in paragraph writing. The communication traffic on Facebook is found pertinent, critical and relevant. It was established that Facebook and other social media channels can be useful of distant or e-learning prospects.

Keywords: Social Media, Facebook, Academic Writing Skills, Digital Writing

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented and never-ending growth of digital tools and apps has introduced enumerable learning approaches. Digital or e-learning has earned its acceptance due to its cost efficient and access feasible features. It makes learning a way easy in the environment where face to face learning is not possible (Mahmud and Ching 2012). The educationalists must realize this culture

and acknowledge the way it attracts the youth. The power of social media applications like facebook and twitter can easily be used for various academic purposes including teaching a language. Baker advocates that social media and e-learning is an evaluation in teaching/learning English (Bakar 2009).

It is vividly evident that the virtual world of social media has significantly entered in our physical lives. Hence, it is pivotal for the educationalist to bring this area into the pedagogy of learning, so these forums shall be effectively used for teaching learning. Researchers stress upon the need that the areas of Web 2.0 and other virtual forums must go through research to determine their role (Rollett, Lux et al. 2007)

Facebook

Facebook is an American online social media forum used almost worldwide for social networking. The network was launched in February 4th, 2004 by its founder Mark Zuckerberg. Initially it was only for the students of Harvard but from 2006 it is availed to everyone aging 13 or more. As of in January 2018, it has 2.2 billion active users. In the last decade, facebook has successfully emerged as a very popular forum to share and exchange the ideas. It has appeared as the most popular tool of digital communication (Hamat, Nor et al. 2010).

According a survey there are more than 25 million broadband users in Pakistan with 30% facebook users. In 2015, mobile phone subscription touched the number of 124 million users whereas 33% subscribers access facebook via their smartphones. The 2017 national census states that 60% population of Pakistan is under 35 years age. Some other facts include that an average facebook user spends 40 minutes a day to browse or chat on facebook. Nearly half of the population uses facebook after 6pm till midnight. Among the total users of facebook, 2/3rd majority of users is below 24 years of age. In short, the above cited facts reveal that the highest number of facebook users are between the age of 15 to 24. Hence, this is the age slot when they are either preparing to enter in a university or already studying in a university. During this study, the researchers found 86.66% students of the research population are using facebook. They admitted, they spent a great amount of time on facebook. Some of them are fully active and enthusiastically participating whereas some use it to scroll the timeline to find out what is going on. Doubtlessly, this single social media tool has forced people to stay engaged in reading and writing activities in a way which was never fathomed by the language teachers ever before.

Writing Skill

There is no harm in saying that many people opine that the standard of writing at higher education or school level is at decline . At higher education, the learning is symbolized with the leaning qualities like, innovation, creation, a broad comprehension, thorough interpretation and a presentable organization of knowledge. There has been a lot of research endeavors to determine the ways and methods of teaching these skills so that students may adequately adopt these skills at higher education (Gibbs and Gibbs Jr 1994).

It has been voiced by the researchers that the modern times are demanding new definitions of literacy (Street 2003). In this perspective it is noted that the students writing level has fallen on three perspectives. These perspectives or models are: the skill of study, social status of academic and academic literacy (Lea and Street 1998).

The Background of Academic Writing

Academic writing can be best described as an objective form of writing composed with indifferent tone for some critical and reasonable educated readers. It is based on deep investigation and intends to support or reject the ideas or concept in the argument. Given the fact, how modern technology and computers are changing the identity and limits of writing skills, writing remains the sole source of learning and demonstration tool of understanding on different subjects (Swales and Feak 2004). Hence in this perspective, English, being the lingua franca and a common mode of academic life, bears a paramount importance as so is the case of writing in English. Their ability to write effectively in English possesses enormous importance in academic and professional growth (Trzeciak and MacKay 1994). Today it is an inevitable fact for students to learn writing skills to study in his discipline and steer their careers successfully. That is why it is believed that writing skill is the highly dominant skill in the lives of students (Baynham, Lea et al. 2002). This background sets a challenging situation for the students especially for those who write in English as a second language. Not merely because the second language has different demands of structure and organization but their previous experience of writing in their first language as in that language they are not prepared for the academic writings deemed for graduate level. Hence they find their previous trusted ways of writing no more valid and result oriented. Their new context is having far greater formality, objectivity (Lillis 2002).

Rationale

Usually writing skill does not impress the learners much especially at their early stage of language learning (Bakar 2009). Teachers extend more stress on learning writing skills than teaching the writing skills (Pinkman 2005). Thus, they fail to find ways to motivate their students towards writing skills. On the other hand, the youth has fully synchronized themselves with technology. Their self-motivated spirit to stay connected with each other through digital tools and technology is fully recognized and an established fact. Consequently, the researchers got eager to find the possibility of using these tools and the social media platforms for teaching learning writings skills. Facebook communication is highly regarded for following its round the clock interactivity, convenient content delivery, managing learning resources, community collaboration, communication, sense of cohort, variety of learning performances and a community formative and summative assessment.

METHOD

The research was undertaken in the light two basic research questions:

- Does facebook in any way encourage towards writing?
- Does facebook help users improve their critical writing skills?

To pursue the answers of these questions, the researchers reevaluated the data that was collected for the doctoral research of one the researchers. The previous study had used a questionnaire designed on 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was designed for Academic writing skills and its reliability and validity had been established through test re test and face validity methods respectively. From the questionnaire, fifteen questions related to facebook and writing skills were selected and their responses were reevaluated for this study. The items in the questionnaire were based on following areas:

- How many students use facebook?
- How much time in average the devote to facebook in day?
- How do they participate on facebook?

Along with these questions they were asked to write an academic paragraph. The paragraphs were graded on the criteria of Academic Writing Disposition IMRAD. The result of paragraphs and the responses of the questionnaire were cross tabulated to draw the results of this study.

Population and Sample

The graduate and post graduate students of English Literature studying in public sector universities were approached for the data. Four public sector universities were selected, 210 students of these universities volunteered to submit their response of the questionnaire and participated to write the drafts to determine the results. The sample contained both male and female students.

Validity of the Instrument

The validity of the questionnaire was established through pilot testing and face-validity process. During the process of reliability and validity of the instrument, the readability test instrument was found quite appropriate as it provided accurate and reliable results. However, the questionnaire designed for students was modified as per the expert recommendations. A total number of 10 items were modified on the student's questionnaire and one open-ended question was added.

Similarly, five items were modified on the questionnaire designed for teachers. On content validity point all open-ended questions were redesigned and aligned with the research questions.

Data Collection

The whole data was collected by researcher in person. The researcher visited institutions to approach the students and teachers. As proposed in the sampling a total number of 210 students participated in this research. The institutes were requested to grant a total number of two hours for each session. The students were asked to compose a small controlled paragraph on various general

topics of literature to be analyzed for the identification of problems. Later the students were given the questionnaire designed on Likert scale for their opinion on academic writing skills. The researcher himself was present during the data collection process and guided the students in person regarding the questionnaire and paragraph writing. All the students were volunteer participants and the researcher carefully considered that no student was forced to participate without his or her ability. Moreover, in a view that writing in English might hinder in achieving the appropriate results and may cause hiccup in obtaining the accurate results, the questionnaire was composed in three languages: English Urdu and Sindhi. The students were given choice to record their response in any of the three languages. 90% students reported in English that is 10% students reported in other languages.

Rationale for using a multilingual Questionnaire

Research questionnaire is widely considered the most effective and convenient tool in the survey research. The questionnaire was designed to obtain the students opinion on the issue of problems in academic writing skills. The sole purpose of the questionnaire was to know their opinion, not to analyze their reading ability. In a situation where the questionnaire is designed to achieve a critical opinion of participants, it is vital to design it in a simple and clear language (Ohata 2005). If the questionnaire deals with language difficulties and anxieties, the participants should be given a clear understanding of the issue and they must be given enough freedom to express their views (Tanveer 2007). Language of the questionnaire plays a vital role in the authenticity of responses, if it does not cast any adverse impact on the results, the items should be written in the vernacular language (Tanveer 2007). The L2 interference does make a negative impact on the data, as it is often found that the participants are making efforts to understand the question rather than weighing their response.

Data Analysis

As the chief aim of the research was to explore the problems faced by the students of literature at English academic writing, hence in the light of the nature of the study, the researcher employed analytical statistical description. However, the researcher has also used t- test on the data to answer the sub questions. An analytical approach is used to explore the existence and significance of the problems by highlighting the percentage and significant occurrence of these problems. Whereas, t-test was applied to find if there was any significant difference of these problems with the writers under research at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) on male female variables.

The questionnaires presented to the teachers and students were designed with five rating points based on Likert scale. The options were: 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= UN (undecided), 4= disagree, 5= strongly disagree. For some of the items, the researcher has used following captions for the same ratings: (1) Always, (2) Sometimes, (3) Hardly, (4) Rarely and (5) Never.

For qualitative analysis, two sections were added under the headings of Task 1 and Task 5. In task 1, students were asked to write an academic paragraph on various literary topics. The paragraphs were qualitatively analyzed to explore the problems, on the other hand these paragraphs were transcribed on word processor for acquiring the Flesch Readability Ease score. The score helped to determine the standing position of these drafts.

On task 2, teachers and students were asked five open-ended questions to triangulate the data acquired through the questionnaire. The responses were qualitatively analyzed and correlated with each other to draw the conclusion.

The research questions for this study were most appropriately investigated using the exploratory tools of semi-structured interviews, questionnaire and classroom observations. These methods allowed for the gathering of rich data which was little constrained by the researcher's anticipation of what might emerge. A descriptive, interpretive approach to the data was thus possible, in which the theory generated was firmly grounded in the data itself.

The researcher in the interest of his research has exercised both qualitative and quantitative methods. However, before proceeding to apply this mixed method the researcher has dually considered the recent arguments by the scholars on both approaches. A brief review of researcher's findings is given as under:

Qualitative Method

Subjects related to humanities are deeply associated with the qualitative paradigm due to its holistic and interpretive design (Husen 1994). Moreover, subjects where there is a dearth of information can be explored and discovered with this approach too (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The subjects where data is infrequent and exists with huge diversity due to various social backgrounds can also be approached through this method (Mason 1996).

Qualitative method can be applied through three different ways which are: 1= interviews which are deep and open ended. 2= primary observation. 3= available documents (Patton 1990). In interview the research must present the interviewee's perception by showing their exact response. Secondly in primary observation the researcher must engage himself directly to achieve the first hand information on the subject being studied. Thirdly the document analysis process contains an approach to assess the passage with the view of his research objectives. On the other hand it is also regarded as a more taxing and demanding research approach too (Delamont 1992).

Quantitative Method:

The paradigm of qualitative research rests upon the fundamental principle that we can measure or observe everything with some measuring and observing tools (Glense & Peshkin, 1992). It is also viewed as an objective approach as it merely tests a hypothesis and announces it whether or not it should be accepted (Kahn 2004). Hence, it involves a number of measuring and scaling tools and devices in all the forms of data collection and data analysis.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Observations

Out of 210 students only 06 students did not write anything and submitted empty pages. All these 06 users were non facebook users.

The study reveals that there are more male facebook users than females. There is a significant incline of youth towards this social media tool.

Table No.01:

Male and Female Facebook users

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Facebook	Yes	98	84	182
	No	7	21	28
Total		105	105	105

Most of the users use it for more than 1 hour. Some users even use it for 3 or more hours. In response to post survey questions, most of the students admitted a rise in the duration of time they spent on facebook.

Table No.02:

Facebook engagement timing

			Total
	Male	Female	
More than 1 hour	67	51	118
More than 2 hours	29	33	62
2 - 4 hours	2	0	2
Not Using	7	21	28
Total	105	105	210

The social media interactivity allows students more learner autonomy, they are at ease to select the content for reading and writing instead of a typical school environment where they do not have such liberty. The absence of teacher encourages students for self-learning and fosters a productive learning independence. It was observed with social media interactive tools, students are willing to stay engaged for an unlimited amount of time. The extended engagement allows them more opportunity for reading and writing. Facebook interaction frequency, content, style and participation can help teacher to identify those students who are at learning risk of have some learning difficulties. It played significant role in collaboration and supported the students to exchange their ideas.

At facebook writing appears to be more interesting than the one usually composed under academic demands. It is a significant motivator for new writers who start participating with emojis and later write critical and functional discourses. It possesses the initial ingredients of academic writings because it is critical, relevant, interactive and receptive.

Conclusions

In the light of drawn results, it is evident that social media forums especially facebook play significant role in motivating the young writers. Facebook due to its critically and prompt interactive features has inculcated the spirit of writing in an entirely a novel fashion. The most promising part of facebook is its utmost and apt relevance with the writers. It has liberated the writing skill form the traditional academic indifferent monotone discourse and turned it into a living feature.

The immediate interactive feature of facebook has fostered the critical approach which in fact serves as the basis of academic writing. The writers and readers both feel the application of their written discourse and fully understand the consequences. They know, how their words, structures, punctuations, emojis and reactions can construct meanings to the readers. Hence, this very quality is the sublime acumen necessary required for an academic draft and facebook has successfully gifted it to the writers.

Recommendations

The educationalist may fully realize this culture and learn to apply it for academic purposes.

Teachers can provide appropriate and deeming to their teaching targets a scaffolding and safety net.

Facebook interaction options like, closed group and open group, survey tools, assessment tools can be used to encourage the students and the assessment of their drafts.

Instead of alienating our students from social media, let's incorporate it with our curriculum.

If social media can be used for politics and business, why not education?

The customized fb pages help students focus on the interest and relevance.

Facebook is a motivating platform; language teachers can use to improve the reading writing skills.

Facebook written status, comments and shared material stimulates better cognitive actions deemed for academic writing skills.

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