

Making a case for social networks and apps in language classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The impact and use of social media and other learning apps even among non-native users of English like our students cannot be underestimated or negated in our classroom today. New-age jobs, research activities and assignments and a powerful peer pressure have made the use of social media a necessity everywhere. In this context, can we say that knowledge of English among the vernacular-medium undergraduate learners is a deterrent and does not enable them to use social networks and language apps? A study was conducted among undergraduate learners in a suburban college to understand the situation. This paper argues that incidental and sometimes deliberate learning of English occurs during such use. Analysis of the results showed that limited or lack of knowledge of English language, grammar and spelling rules is not an obstacle for students while using social media and apps, and that learning occurs even in these digital spaces.

Keywords: English language teaching and learning; social media and apps in language learning; virtual learning;

Social media started in a very small way in 1997 but went on to have a major surge around 2003. The present proliferation, or rather blitzkrieg, can be dated around 2004-2005 with Facebook and the entry of Twitter in 2006. 2016 witnessed yet another shift that was revolutionary, a buy-button which made advertising and shopping handy. The scene today includes thousands of media platforms and apps with different features which are easily accessible, simple to use and free. With affordable and accessible prices and plans, and dozens of features, smart phones are gaining more popularity

especially among the millennials. A quick look at some statistics by statista.com about the number of social network users in India reveals active internet users soaring to 462 million and social media users to 250 million (January 2018). The study further claims that this will increase to 258.27 million in 2019, from 168 million in 2016, while Facebook is projected to reach 319 million users in India by 2021. Interestingly, more than 50% of active users are college students.

The fact that the pervasive presence and use

of the smart phone in our classrooms today is here to stay should make teachers have a relook at the teaching-learning scene. Both teachers and learners are co-participants in this process where not only the teaching-learning process but the evaluation of reading, interpreting and assimilating needs to be redefined over the existing traditional patterns. Technology-mediated teaching and learning with systematic use of online dictionaries, language apps, educational videos and games is the need of the hour. It can be seen that the exponential growth of social networks and apps has brought about an increase in new and alternative vocabulary which has been fuelled by messaging apps such as Snap Chat, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp. Today, students are communicating with one another as they never did in the past and are also randomly forming groups with shared values and interests; it is time to develop the very channels they use to do it.

The range of activities engaged in by students includes posting comments online in the form of emoticons or GIFs, accessing a wide variety of audios and videos, which are either forwarded or self-created, utilizing Google maps, booking tickets online, and using food apps and shopping sites extensively. Everywhere the dominant language used is English. The use of internet-enabled apps and social media includes an exposure to English in different formal and informal settings and is a global phenomenon that has caused changes in communication patterns as well as in the

English language used. About the use of social media and apps, Sockett (2014) points out that “these activities are frequently conducted in English, so that, for many young people, the classroom setting represents only one amongst a multitude of opportunities for contact with the target language.” In another study, Toffoli and Sockett (2015) observe that young people spend more time learning English online than in formal, institutional settings. This exposure of non-native English users to English language media and communities is bringing about an awareness of the process of using social media and the influence of English is enormous.

I teach in an urban, only-girls college in metropolitan Mumbai. My students have cleared their board exams in the vernacular medium and are presently completing their undergraduate studies in the vernacular medium. English is a compulsory paper which they have to study for three years. The aim of this paper is to address some of these points by presenting the findings of an empirical study conducted with 82 vernacular students from Marathi and Hindi medium from my college. Hindi and Marathi are the dominant languages used at home, college, workplaces and other social spaces. The study included their frequency of use, perception of usefulness of technologies and their observation about their language skills in English. **(See Appendix)**

There is a constant outcry among academicians about a remarkable reduction in learning skills by students in all the four language skills (LSRW). Studies suggest that

young people no longer know how to spell, or use correct grammar because they use programmes that auto-correct their work and features like predictive texting sometimes disable their ability to think. This can be further substantiated by the communication done during texting and posting, which includes shortened turns of phrases, use of keystrokes, expressive emoticons and acronyms which have become mainstream and are greatly in use. Acronyms such as 'brb' and 'lol' 'ikr', 'asap', 'idk' and words such as cool, selfie, awesome, wassup, bro, have made their way into the ordinary speech of young people, and even into the pages of some respectable dictionaries. Socio-linguists can endorse this.

The hypothesis of the study is that incidental and sometimes deliberate learning of English occurs because of the use of the language in several internet platforms and is equally important, as it adds to their knowledge. This paper argues that there is more reading and writing among our students than ever before, and that, with greater exposure to social media tools and apps, there is greater learning potential.

A pre-test conducted orally before the survey among approximately 300 students confirmed the finding that more than 95%, write in the English script phonetically, while using varied media forms. Even when writing or responding in their native languages like Marathi or Hindi, the preference is to use the English script. Encouraged by this finding, a survey was

conducted using a popular online app Survey Monkey. The link was sent with ten questions to different WhatsApp groups of students which had been created earlier to facilitate interaction in the classroom. The survey was spread over four days at the end of which 82 completed responses were received. Questions included hours of internet usage, reasons for using sites, with options like communicating with friends, family members, learning, working, sharing information, preferences and practices related to the use of different social media and apps. Other questions tested whether their knowledge of English was a barrier while accessing different sites, and whether the use of these sites advanced their knowledge of the language, improved their conversation abilities, grammar and spelling, and brought about a sense of ease while using the language. **(See Appendix)**

From the responses it was concluded that while the learners think in their native language they prefer writing using the English script, which for them makes it faster and less complicated. They also unanimously agreed that it was easier to read this kind of writing, instead of scripts in their own language.

Given this finding, the question arises: what would the future of compulsory English and its scope of learning as the majority of users use the language as a second, third or even fourth language? It cannot be denied that there is an increase in the exposure to English at many different levels. With the spread of various apps and the social media, functional usage of English has gone up and

communicative competence has improved. These young learners who were not comfortable using the English language in formal situations had no compunction using it in their smart phones for a maximum period of six hours on a daily basis.

There is a passionate debate worldwide about whether reading has increased or declined after the introduction of internet platforms with protestors and defendants waxing eloquent on both sides. With each text and Facebook update, students become more familiar with and adept in written expression and they practise it too, more than any group of college students in history. Crystal (2004) remarked that with the spread of English as an international language, it is currently used by more non-native speakers than native speakers.

The need to ensure enhanced levels of English use and an improved impact on learning outcomes among our students is what we are striving for in our classrooms. Standardized assessment patterns and traditionalists who equate learning with the reading of physical books and other resources also claim that students spend more time in the virtual world, thereby reducing literacy and attention span. But having seen the proclivity towards this medium and its exponential growth worldwide, can we really dismiss its definite intrusion and potential in our classrooms?

The analysis of the survey results has indicated that the students' present knowledge of the language is not a deterrent while using social media and apps, nor is

not being aware of correct grammar and spelling rules. About 49 percent claimed that they had started speaking more in English and 41 percent said they sometimes did so. About 82 percent claimed that they were more comfortable using the language after using the sites. The responses of students concretised the finding that use of social media and apps does enable better understanding, acceptability and use of the English language.

The oral pre-test elicited responses where students eagerly admitted the importance of social media and the usage of apps in their lives and detailed the improvements in their vocabulary, which now went **beyond beautiful** and *nice to awesome, gorgeous and super*. Emoticons are a useful bridge aiding and enabling them to tide over the language barrier. They admitted that Facebook used by 67 users out of 82 was used extensively to check on friends and relatives, and the trailing posts in the comments section often made them write or at least attempt to write in English.

Use of Facebook, Messenger, TikTok, Google maps, apps downloads from Play Store, Google translator, dictionaries, PPTs, searches about different topics, videos on beauty tips, recipes, cartoon shows (like Doraemon, Tom and Jerry, and Shinchan) were some of the most used and followed sites. The feature of auto spell was helpful in enabling them to learn the right spelling and not being very conversant in English was not a barrier. The discussion clarified that though Hindi and Marathi were the dominant languages used at home, college,

workplaces and other social spaces, English took over while using the internet. Errors were not highlighted by both sender and receiver, with the comfort feeling ‘people will understand what I mean anyway’.

It can be concluded that English is used profusely both in its oral and written form today. While Twitter forces one to write concisely and briefly, acronyms reduce space, but they just cannot be placed anywhere. The use of the English script while writing definitely augurs well for academicians, as it proves that, whether the students surf, research or text, one cannot discount the fact that there is a definite engagement and understanding with the English language.

Research activities on the internet require higher-level reasoning and critical thinking skills. With the deluge of information, the student actually requires intelligence to surf, skim and scan through what is required and useful. Social media may not aim at improving creative writing but is a fast and convenient way of interacting with an audience. Crystal, the renowned linguist and author, mitigates all fears when he dispels accusations about texting and misspelling by speaking for the motion that “texting is the latest manifestation of the human ability to be linguistically creative” and adds ‘patterns’: “You’ve got to know that the letters are there in the first place in order to leave them out!” He clinches the argument by speaking for “texters” as the best spellers, and finally stating that texting improves literacy skills, contrary to popular opinion. Thus, the potential for using this medium

to teach effectively cannot be underrated. A headline in *The Times of India, Mumbai edition* (Jan. 2018) claims that vernacular users will form the largest, i.e. 75%, of internet users base by 2021 in India. To accept that social media and apps are not a temporary event but are here to stay is advisable. Traditional modes of assessment, reading, analyzing, interpreting and assimilating, need to be redefined as much as changes in vocabulary, spelling, grammatical structures and functional usage. Communicative competence is required in a multilingual setup like India along with confidence and greater receptivity to the language. The millennial users finally have drawn up new rules bringing about their own alignment with digital age jobs.

Teaching in the New Age demands a stronger and more focussed interrelationship between technology-mediated teaching and learning methods than the one that prevails now in traditional classrooms. Encouraging students to evaluate and contribute resources that they find appropriate will give them an opportunity to develop indispensable digital literacy skills. Systematic use of online dictionaries, language apps, educational videos and games, and enabling students to find and share digital resources that are related to content/topics in the curriculum are some steps which can be taken up.

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APPENDIX

Survey on 'Using English while operating on social media and Google apps'

1. How many hours of internet usage do you have per day? [No. of Respondents: 82]

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| 2 hours | 40.24% |
| 4 hours | 28.06% |
| 6 hours | 13.41% |
| > 6 hours | 18.29% |

2. Which sites do you like to access the most? [No. of Respondents: 67]
Facebook – 100%

3. Why do you use them? [No. of Respondents: 79]

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| To communicate with friends | 29.11% |
| To communicate with family | 05.60% |
| To share information | 08.86% |
| Learning | 32.91% |
| Working | 03.80% |
| Others | 20.25% |

4. Does your present knowledge of the English language prevent you from using these sites?
[No. of Respondents: 80]

| | |
|-----|--------|
| Yes | 40.00% |
|-----|--------|

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| No | 23.75% |
| Sometimes | 36.25% |

5. Does using these sites add to your knowledge of the English language?

[No. of Respondents: 79]

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Yes | 74.68% |
| No | 05.00% |
| Sometimes | 20.25% |

6. Do you think you speak/converse more with people in English after using these sites?

[No. of Respondents: 80]

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Yes | 45.75% |
| No | 10.00% |
| Sometimes | 41.25% |

7. While answering or replying in English do you focus more on correcting your grammatical errors? [No. of Respondents: 79]

Yes, I do consciously try to type the correct answer. 54.51%

No, I don't pay attention to grammatical errors. 07.59%

I sometimes try to check or try auto correct while typing comments. 37.90%

8. Do you use the corrected spelling which you get with auto correct in other situations?

[No. of Respondents: 80]

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Yes | 63.75% |
| No | 06.25% |
| Sometimes | 30.00% |

| | | | | | |
|---|--------|--------|------------------|--------|--------|
| 9. Are you more comfortable in using English after using these sites? [No. of Respondents: 78] | 82.05% | 17.95% | Respondents: 70] | Yes | 78.57% |
| Yes, I am more comfortable now. | | | No | 04.29% | |
| No, there is no change in me. | | | Maybe | 04.29% | |
| | | | Sometimes | 01.43% | |

Note: The responses of 8 of the subjects were treated as null and void because of those students' wrong understanding of the question (i.e., 11.42%).

10. Do you think use of social networking sites and apps helps you in the way you are using English now? [No. of

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