Computer Mediated Communication: Writing Skills through Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Technology plays a significant role in language teaching today and it has become a very commonly used tool in schools and colleges all over the world. The difference is only in the extent to which technology is being utilised for the teaching-learning process. Depending on the availability of infrastructure, technology used in the teaching-learning process varies from simple tape recorders to iPads. Early technological aids supported a teacher-centred class, whereas the more advanced technology of today, like the iPad, is more suitable for a learner-centred class. Today, we have schools and colleges providing iPads or apps, with the lessons pre-loaded. The role of technology in language learning has taken various forms – a simple tool, a tutor, and as a medium to communicate. The various roles of technology, in turn, have created a great impact on language teaching. This paper explores the effect of computer mediated language teaching on writing. This experimental study was conducted in the first-semester postgraduate class of the electronic media programme, as part of the course work. Social media tools like blogging and WhatsApp were used in the study as a medium to help tertiary level students improve their writing skills.

Keywords: Technology, Learner-Centred, Computer Mediated, Social Media, blogging, WhatsApp, Tertiary Level, Writing Skills

Introduction

Technology plays a significant role in language teaching today, and it has become a very commonly used tool in schools and colleges all over the world. Technology has become such an integral part of our daily life that its role in teaching the learning process is not questioned anymore. Even traditional teachers who are not comfortable using technology in their teaching ironically use them in their personal life. This paper explores the use of technology in the context of the teaching-learning process. It examines how computer-mediated communication would help in enhancing the learners' writing skills. Social media, which has become 'viral' (read 'vital') today, is taken as the medium through which this research study is conducted.

Impact of Technology on Education

In the history of education, any advent of technology has always created a great impact on the teaching-learning process. Before the invention of the printing press, education in India was more an aural and oral tradition. The knowledge content stored in rare manuscripts were assessed only by a select few. These

esteemed teachers disseminated their learned knowledge to their disciples. Students were considered to be a 'clean slate' in which the revered teacher would write. Written manuscripts were scarce and very expensive. The invention of the press enabled widespread literacy, as books became accessible and affordable. Thanks to books, students were not expected to rely on their memory, but were able to refer to the text. The invention of the printing press revolutionised the teaching-learning process to a greater extent and made education accessible to people from different walks of life (Berger, 1995).

In spite of the availability of books, people have not given up on the aural/oral tradition, which is evident in the lecture-based teaching practiced even today in schools and colleges. When a new technology is introduced in education, it redefines the process of knowledge dissemination. The existing old technologies are enhanced, and not completely replaced. Blackboard and chalk are still used in education. We also have enhanced versions like whiteboards with markers and interactive boards. Both find their place in the teaching-learning process.

Audio tools like radio, tape recorders, and language laboratories led to innovative models in the teaching-learning process. The invention of television did help in spreading education through different channels. However, the real impact of it was limited due to various other reasons. The learning from television was more of an unconscious learning than deliberate and guided learning happening in classrooms. Later, computers became an integral part in this teaching-learning process. The standalone computer was limited in its role; on the other hand, networked computers with its multimedia

enhancements reinvented itself and the result was much more exciting for a learner. A student could send emails to another student in a very short time and the email could be a text, an image, an audio, or even a video clipping. We could see audios-videos of incidents happening in different parts of the world at the same time. This new innovation made learning much more exciting and interesting.

After networked computers, the next most interesting technology was social media. Though it was meant for socialising, Facebook, ironically, had its origin in a university and was intended to connect friends in colleges. So it becomes appropriate to explore the role of social media in education. Facebook was not the first social media tool. There were many successful attempts earlier – Bulletin Board System (BBS), CompuServe, AOL (America online), and Friendster. However, Facebook became the most popular social media in a short time. LinkedIn became notable in professional areas. In a short span of time, after Facebook, we have had many other social media tools like Orkut, blogs, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and so on. There are a few tools widely used and a few gone off air, like Orkut. In Southeast Asian countries, they have their own versions of Facebook and Twitter. However, the concept is based on their western counterparts. If we could concretise the role of social media in education, we would be able to visualise innovative uses of instructional technology.

Early educational theories believed in learners being 'tabula rasa', whereas modern theories like constructivism tended to shift the focus from teachers to students. Students are no longer empty vessels to be filled. In the constructivist model, students are expected to actively

participate in the teaching-learning process. In the social constructivist model, learning extends to collaborative learning, where students apply cognitive strategies like predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarising among their group members. Social media provides a conducive environment for this social constructivist model.

If we could trace the role of computers in education, it can be seen that early CALL exponents tried to define the use of computers in education in three different forms: as a (1) resource, (2) tool, and later, as a (3) medium. When computers were invented, it was seen as a rich resource. Educational CDs and computer games made it a rich resource specifically for language. As the predominant language used in computers was English, the unconscious learning of the English language happened simultaneously.

Hole-in-the-wall, an experiment by Sugata Mitra proved that children can self-instruct themselves. And for them, language was not a barrier at all. They collaborated in groups and this group learning helped them learn about computers and the English language. Man being a social animal, he likes to do things in groups. Mitra quotes that this experiment showed 'what a group of children can do, if you lift the adult intervention'. He also deduced from his six years of research that children can self-organise and attain an educational objective. If young children can gain so much on their own, with appropriate resources, students at the tertiary level can achieve a lot more with supportive resources. In this experiment, the computer was used more as a tool, but with its own resources in the form of CDs. It also plays an effective role as a teaching aid, another version of a tool. In most of the classes today, teachers have come to depend on the use of the presentation software

to transmit content knowledge. However, if the tool or aid is not appropriately supported by pedagogy it would become just another passive tool which is ineffective in the teaching-learning process.

The third format sees the computer as a medium. It could be a medium through which instruction is passed or a communication medium that is used to communicate. This study attempts to use this aspect of computers – using the social media for communication purposes. The technology is used as a medium to communicate with learners and vice versa. Social media tools like blogs and WhatsApp were used for this study. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is an umbrella term which refers to human communication via computers (Simpson, 2002). It refers to human-to-human communication through a network of computers using the Internet, which can take place synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous communication happens at the same time in a real-time environment, such as chat rooms, audio/video conferencing, gaming, and virtual reality like MUD (Multi User Domain), MOO (MUD object oriented), and SecondLife. On the other hand, communication that happens at different times is called asynchronous communication, like emails, bulletin boards or mailing lists, online discussion forums, wikis, blogs, and other such social networking sites.

CMC promotes a free type of interaction between teachers and students that are often found lacking in a traditional classroom. It allows learners to voice their opinions without worrying about others. Further, CMC provides an alternative way to share content, which need not be restricted to text, but may also include graphics, audio, and video. Students get to read,

see, or hear it as many times as they want. This accommodates the different learning styles of learners. Researchers have been experimenting with computer-mediated communication for language teaching from the mid-1980s (Cummins, 1986). The focus of most of these researches were on the actual interaction, the language-focused language skills, and the affective factors. This research too attempts to explore the type of interaction that happens in CMC and focuses on the writing skills. Students' reaction to this exercise is also analysed as part of the study.

With the arrival of these new technologies, the need for inquiry into its influence on educational processes has led to interesting experiments in research design methodologies, which in turn have offered rich insights into the theoretical frameworks. Teaching the learning process in today's networked world is a complex process indeed. Learning is not restricted to the classroom alone. Extended learning has become the norm. Students have become self-directed and active participants engaged in CMC, while the roles of teachers have also changed considerably. The teacher of today dons many roles, like instructor, organiser, mentor, facilitator, counsellor, assessor, examiner, and more (Berger and Collins, 1995). Thus, CMC provides a great pedagogical tool for a collaborative learning environment for students of today. In this scenario, it becomes interesting to explore ways to create environments that are conducive to enhance students' learning. Social media was seen as one such interesting environment that can be utilised for enhancing students' writing skills.

Writing Skills

Among all the four language skills, writing skills are given special importance in schools and colleges as it is mostly through writing that a student's language competency is tested. Teachers might teach them all other language skills, but the end of the term examinations mostly focus only on writing skills. Students at the tertiary level are well versed in writing after 12 years of practice. In spite of the familiarity, writing is the most preferred activity by students. It is very difficult to make students write on their own. Teachers have to resort to all kinds of threats to make them write in class. Without any practice, students are expected to write a three-hour exam paper, which makes it difficult for them. This paper attempts to incorporate items that would interest students and motivate them to write on their own.

Sample

This explorative research study was conducted among the first-semester students doing a Master's programme in media studies in Anna University. These students have a theoretical professional English course and a practical lab-oriented language lab course in their first semester. The theory course had a text book and a syllabus to be followed. The language laboratory course did have a syllabus, but the testing components were left to the discretion of the course instructor. The testing should be practical in nature, as it was a laboratory course. This study was done as part of this laboratory course.

Methodology

The chosen language laboratory course had only one contact class in a week. The teacher did not have any other interactions with the students for the rest of the week. If there was any public holiday on the day of the class, then there was

no language laboratory class that week. In such a limited teacher-student interaction context, the researcher decided to explore social media to complement and supplement classroom teaching. The tool chosen for this interaction was a blog, as it was easy to access and use. A blog (short form of weblog) is an easy-to-create and easy-to-update Web page that is mostly free and requires no advanced technological skills or any specialised software. Students need not install any software to use this tool. Bloggers can update their blogs using their laptops, mobiles, iPads, or any such handheld device. Blogs are like journals and the latest entry will be shown at the top, and the earliest will be archived. Audio and video can be embedded in blogs, and hyperlinks given to other sites too. Blogs, generally, are more reflective in nature and comment on topical issues. Richardson (2006) states that the best feature of a blog is that they are not built on static chunks of content, but instead are made up of reflections and conversations that are regularly updated.

Blogging

There are many blogging sites. In a few blogging sites, comments were published after moderation, and this led to a delay in the publishing of the comments. Students, when they are blogging for the first time, would like to see their writing immediately, not after a day. So a blogging site that would allow immediate uploading was chosen for this study and a class blog was created in blogger.com. Students were told about the class blog in the first week of their classes. As every laboratory course was supposed to have an observation note, to record what they do in their lab classes, even the Language Laboratory course was supposed to have such a record. This observation note was

replaced by the blog. Students were asked to record all their language activities in the blog. The first few classes were spent on teaching students about blogging and how to post their comments. As most students had Gmail IDs, it was easier. There were a few students who were not comfortable working online. Such students were paired with other students who were technologically active and willing to help. The teacher did give a whole class demo. However, students unfamiliar with the Internet preferred one-on-one tutoring.

Every week, there will be a post in the blog which will be an extension of what was done in the class. At times it could be a question based on topical issues. There was even a post on a movie review. A few students initially had difficulty understanding the concept of blogging. However, being part of a group helped them, and seeing other posts they were able to answer accordingly. In the initial days, there were responses like a formal letter, starting with Dear madam and ending with Yours faithfully. And a few responses were simple one-liners, as students were not comfortable writing longer comments. There were technological glitches too. Students complained that after typing almost a page, the comment completely vanished while uploading. These experiences taught them to write it in MS Word first and then copy and paste the text to the blog. Students were interested in new mediums like blogs, but were hesitant to use them. Once they were informed that these blogs would replace the traditional observation records for which marks were awarded, the students started blogging.

In the first few posts, the responses were just simple compliments and queries. However, when we had a movie review week, there were better

responses. Students started writing lengthy posts and reacting to others' comments. One post about the existence of God, (a student had presented a talk on the topic), triggered an intense discussion. Teachers had to play the role of a moderator and sort out their disagreements. The blog posts were decided to be weekly posts, and ironically, most of the students posted exactly a minute before the deadline. The lure of marks was the main reason for their regular posting.

Writing Skills

One interesting finding from this experiment was that students took extra care while posting their comments online, as they knew it would be read not just by their classmates or the teacher, but also by others visiting the blog. The blog address was posted on other social networks to get feedback from other sources. Students took time and effort to frame their comments and they were very conscious of not hurting others while discussing controversial issues. They did not give this much attention while answering the end-of-semester examination paper. The other important development was the keen interest shown by a few of the students to continue blogging. They wanted to continue to keep in touch with each other through their class blog. The third most notable feature was the effort they took to update themselves before posting their comments. Students started reading up on topics of discussion to respond to the given query. The competitiveness between students helped in inculcating this reading habit. However, this was not practised by all students, just the most competitive ones. There was also another group of students who were happy posting one-line comments and just writing stock phrases while commenting on others.

Another important feature noted was that self-motivation played a key role in their continuation of blogging. The lure of marks was a strong motivation, but regular encouragement from the teacher was also very helpful. Apart from marks, there were a few other factors that influenced them to respond to queries in the blogs – sharing information, being the first to respond, and trying to showcase their knowledge.

One interesting development was that students unhesitatingly verbalised their expectations of their teacher. They expected the teacher to provide direction, to facilitate, mentor, give immediate feedback, interact, and respond to students collectively and also individually. They strongly felt that teachers should be actively involved in the discussion, not only in asking probing questions, but also in interacting in the process, which is referred to as 'social presence in the community of inquiry' by Rourke. For this kind of online interaction, faculty accessibility and timely responsiveness were key features. The blog being an asynchronous form of communication, timely responsiveness was not maintained regularly.

WhatsApp

The late response of blogging forced the researcher to explore other social media tools, and WhatsApp was utilised for communicating with students. If blogs acted as lab records for one group of students, WhatsApp became a medium of communication with another group. Blogging was used with one sample group, whereas WhatsApp was utilised for another group – the first-semester engineering students. These students had one theoretical paper in Foundational English, which focused on four language skills, LSRW, along with grammar and vocabulary. A class WhatsApp group was created, whose primary focus was to

communicate with students, apart from classroom interaction. The initial communication was more about sharing information about various facilities in the college and any other relevant information. However, later, as the comfort level between teachers and students increased, there were postings about topical issues and there were discussions on a few. Unlike blogging, however, where all students were forced to respond (the lure of marks!), here not all students responded. A few were very articulate. Surprisingly, a student who was usually quiet in class was much more articulate and interested in social media. The teacher's impression of that quiet boy underwent a sea change after seeing his funny and quirky responses in WhatsApp. From the initial information sharing to the discussion about topical issues, WhatsApp interaction was happening very actively.

Writing in WhatsApp

Unlike blogs where respondents were expected to write in the proper format, WhatsApp does not expect one to write in proper sentences. Contracted forms are completely accepted. Further, emojis, gifs, and other visuals are also used to communicate. One interesting feature of students writing to teachers in WhatsApp was that students were still very conscious that they were writing to their teacher. They followed the protocol and used respectful terms. Even accidental typing errors by students were taken seriously and they profusely apologised for them. Another noticeable feature was that with the mobile being an extended arm for youngsters of today, even a quiet student was encouraged to send a query to his teacher without any problem. Speaking to a teacher might inhibit the shy student, but sending a message was not that

inhibiting. This interaction with students through WhatsApp gave a lot of positive vibes and helped in creating a rapport with students, which is still continuing. Apart from social interaction, this tool was also used as a medium through which teachers could share their resources with students. Blogging was done within the given template. The teacher posted on different topics every week and students responded to it. There were arguments and discussions in their responses. However, the whole discussion was over in that one thread for that week. On the other hand, WhatsApp interaction was not that formal. It was more of an informal conversation, though it was formal in tone. In these modern communication tools, the line between formal and informal gets blurred. There is always a negative side to this interaction. Experts say that teacher-student interaction outside the classroom should be restricted. However, in today's connected world, it will be difficult to ignore the social presence of each other. It becomes mandatory that certain etiquette be followed in this interaction outside the classroom which would complement the classroom teaching. If both are at cross-purposes, then no teaching-learning would happen. It is a fine balance and teachers have to manage it effectively.

While comparing both blogs and WhatsApp in the teaching-learning process in this study, very distinctive features emerged. Blogs remain a very structured writing process and students benefited a lot while writing for blogs. However, it cannot be assured that all students benefited. Some students came and confessed that they used downloaded materials for some topics. On the other hand, WhatsApp was much freer to use and there were not many rules for writing there. And students were not expected to write lengthy

passages. Blogs were strictly moderated and students did not comment more than was required. In WhatsApp, though the teacher was the group admin, students took the lead and posted information on their own. The sense of competition and being the first person to respond to teachers made them more active on WhatsApp than on the blog.

When the semester was over, students stopped writing on blogs, as writing on it was basically to score marks. However, they continued to use the WhatsApp group even after the course was over. As the admin, when I offered to delete the group in WhatsApp, the students rejected the idea. They said they would like to keep in touch with the same batch and the teacher. However, after the course, the group was not as active as it was during the semester, although once in a while students would walk in and have discussions on any issue. Blogs, on the other hand, are not used by students at all.

The language used by students, particularly students of low proficiency, showed good improvement while they were messaging in WhatsApp. More than language competency, what changed to a great extent was the confidence of the students. The initiative they took to respond, both in blogs and WhatsApp, was very noticeable. More than using blogs as a tool/aid, the use of WhatsApp as a medium worked better with this group of students.

There are limitations, as mentioned earlier. For either WhatsApp or blog, students should have a higher-end mobile phone and mobile data. Though most students have these facilities, they might not be very proficient in their usage. Most of them did not use blogging; only a very few used it. This was new to many students. On the other hand, WhatsApp was used by all students. However, when some resources were shared by the teacher, many students did not have the appropriate app to read those resources. They did not know that they needed different apps for reading Microsoft or pdf files. These technological glitches were minor and other students were able to find solutions for such issues. On the writing component, WhatsApp was limited in use. It was more of a communicative platform than a writing tool. One advantage was that students predominantly used English to write their messages and they made sure that they used appropriate words. The unconscious learning they engaged in while using this medium was impactful and much more relevant for their day-to-day life.

Conclusion

This study was conducted over a period of one year, where two batches of students were taken as samples. It needs more data collection to see its effect on the teaching-learning process. Social media is strongly rooted in today's communication process. Exploiting social media for an effective teaching-learning process is a smart way to use available resources. Blogs and WhatsApp have their uses and each medium can be utilised for a specific writing function. When students need to write lengthy opinions or analyses, blogging will be effective. If the need is to communicate information or find some information, WhatsApp messaging would be more suitable. Both employ the English language, thereby ensuring students use them inevitably. This study was thus able to prove that each medium has its own strengths and limitations, and needs to be utilised wisely to make them effective.

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ELTAI READING CLUBS

ELTAI has launched Reading Clubs in educational institutions with the primary objective of creating a 'culture of reading' among school and college students. This initiative is based on a research-based framework that takes into account differences in age, gender, interests, and location.

Objectives of the Reading Club:
❏ To create a love for reading in students and enable them to become better, lifelong readers;
❏ To enable them to reflect on what they read in order to lead them to become effective writers and speakers;
❏ To familiarize them with different text types (genres) and enable them to engage in appropriate reading strategies; and
❏ To employ synchronous (both virtual and physical meetings) as well as asynchronous modes – Web tools, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Blogs, Reading Logs, MOOCs (audios, videos, quotes, blurbs, reviews, etc.) to sustain their interest.

ELTAI would like to have MoUs with institutions that are willing to implement this initiative and help to achieve these objectives collaboratively. Institutions interested in this project may please write, expressing their interest, to: indiaeltai@gmail.com with a copy (Cc) to Dr. Zuleiha Shakeel, the Coordinator of the project at: **zoowasif@gmail.com.**
For a brief description of this initiative, visit our website at: http://eltai.in/reading-clubs/.
For an outline of the respective roles and responsibilities of the host institution and ELTAI, visit the website at: http://eltai.in/roles-and-responsibilities-of-the-host-institution-and-eltai/.