

## **FACEBOOK AND STUDENTS' SUB-STANDARD ENGLISH: A CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH**

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### **Abstract**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of the most frequently used social media is Facebook (FB). This paper is going to focus on the two sides of the same issue. Firstly, the present scenario of Facebook effects on students. During teaching English in a foreign language context for almost a decade, it has been observed that the errors students make in their writing are influenced by many factors, among which the students' Facebook register and rhetoric is one of them. Secondly, this study is going to deal with the other issue that many second language/ foreign language learners have taken Facebook as a means to improve their English language skills. Lastly, the study proposes how Facebook practicing could be used as an English language teaching and learning tool, especially in Bangladesh, where English language enjoys the status of a foreign language. The paper is based on the qualitative analysis of the observations and comments of students collected through purposefully designed writing tasks assigned to students of a few selected classes of 'Basic English' and 'Composition and Communication Skills' courses of English Department in a top ranking private university located in the capital city of Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Facebook, error, mistake, interlanguage, banglish, FL, L1, L2, academic writing.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Technology has become very much part of language learning at all different levels throughout the world, whilst the interest in learning languages, in general, and English, in particular, has increased tremendously. We are likely to find its usage in the primary sector as well as in the adult education. People no longer need to make the case for computers to be provided in education, because computers are there in abundance in all their modern forms. We may see traditional computers in labs, teachers and students walking around with laptops or tablet PCs, and many people will have a mobile phone in their pocket that is capable of doing rather more than the mainframe computers that initiated computer-assisted language learning in the 1960s (Motteram, 2013).

The impact of the Internet on language learning in the context of higher education has been increasing exponentially. In the past, early incarnations of the Internet provided

students with the opportunity to find information online and to share their findings with other language learners. For today's generation, web 2.0 tools, namely the 'writable web', (Karpati, 2009, p. 140) allow for the creation of new content; thus previously unexplored communication channels have been opened, providing language learners with new incentives and opportunities to easily interact with people across the globe (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012).

Referring to the engagements of the young generation with blogs, wikis, forums and social networking sites (SNSs), the Facebook Press Room Statistics has noted that the new generation of students can express themselves in various ways that are electronically intertwined. During the last decade, the numbers of students and educators are becoming active members of SNSs such as Facebook (FB) surged. As there are 28 million students between the ages of 18-25 using FB and over 500 million users worldwide

(Facebook Press Room Statistics, 2011), it is not surprising that teachers are finding ways to use social networking in academia. Blattner and Fiori (2009) have recognized that educators should acknowledge the importance of utilizing these types of web 2.0 tools in the context of higher education, especially since they meet the connectivity demands made by today's Digital Natives (Farris-Berg, 2005; Prensky, 2001, 2006 ; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Before getting into the in-depth discussion on the issue, a brief overview of the key constructs may be useful. Since the ill-formedness of English has occupied a major part of the discussion in the paper, the two concepts – error and mistake – would be very relevant. In language learning process, mistakes and errors are inevitable elements. Learners make errors in the process of constructing a new system of the language they go for acquiring. Thus, learners' errors, which are systematic lapses noticed in the learners' output, have long been an interest for many researchers in the field of second language acquisition (Corder, 1981; Ellis, 2008). Earlier, (Corder, 1967), errors were looked at as a problem that should be avoided and eradicated. However, errors are now considered as a process oriented result that learners produce, and from which they can learn (Corder, 1967); they provide evidence of the learners' achievement level in the target language (Gass & Selinker, 1983, 1995); they contain valuable information on the learning strategies of learners (AbiSamra, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975); and they also supply means by which teachers can assess learning and teaching and determine priorities for future effort (Richards and Sampson, 1974). Conducting an error analysis is therefore one of the best ways to describe and explain errors committed by L2 learners. This kind of analysis can unfold the sources of

these errors and the causes of their frequent occurrence. Once the sources and causes are identified, it is possible to determine the remedy, as well as the emphasis and sequence of future instructions.

On the other hand, mistakes, which are non-systematic lapses produced by learners, are seen relatively lightly. While the traditional view of error is linked to route of learning and interlanguage process, nowadays with the rapid growth of media use, Facebook, for example, a new dimension of strategy of learning a target language and error pattern has been observed.

### **METHODOLOGY**

To reiterate, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century one of the most frequently used media is 'Facebook' (FB). This paper has focused on the two sides of the same issue. Firstly, the present scenario of Facebook effects on students. While teaching English in a foreign language context, the researcher has observed that the errors students make in their writing are influenced by many factors, among which the students' facebook register and rhetoric is one of them. Then the study is going to deal with another issue that many second language (L2)/ foreign language (FL) learners have taken Facebook as a means to improve their English language skills. The paper would also make an effort to propose how Facebook practicing could be used as an English language teaching and learning tool, especially in Bangladesh, where English language enjoys the status of a foreign language.

In order to achieve the above mentioned aims of the study, it relied on the qualitative research paradigm, and conducted on a total of sixty five (65) students of three classes of two first year courses – 'Basic English' and 'Composition and Communication Skills'(in English) – at a top ranking private university located in the capital city of Bangladesh. As there is a tendency among the young research participants of self-monitoring and being

biased to some extent while responding to interviews and survey questionnaires, the researcher opted for a more objective data. As a means of collecting data, the researcher assigned writing tasks with different rubrics but requiring identical focus, to the first year students who were doing the above mentioned remedial English courses mostly offered in their first year at the university. The students were asked to write a reflective account of their experience of using facebook network. They were also asked to comment with examples on the language varieties they usually use in the FB and how they utilize and exploit such FB rhetoric. They were also asked whether their academic writings were influenced by the discourse and rhetoric patterns of their social network communication. While the task actually took 45 minutes of a 90-minute long class, it resembled to more like an in-depth interview in a written form. The scripts then were analyzed critically to identify the linguistic uniqueness such as substandard linguistic elements, and those elements were classified under broad labels.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This paper has studied the impacts of English used in Facebook on the Bangladeshi students' academic English language skill at tertiary level. From the observation of the participants in this study, it has been noticed that English used in Facebook by the learners of English as L2 or FL, affects some of the aspects of English language skill, for instance, flaws in vocabulary, imperfection in grammar, deficiency in pronunciation, weaknesses in phrasing and punctuation, lack of authentic writing, less prospect of multi-sensory learning and less space for independent learner.

The areas of deficiency which were observed in the corpus of the participants and believed to be detrimental to the acquisition of the target language (here English) are briefly discussed below.

## **The Areas of Deficiency**

### *Vocabulary Flaws*

It has been observed that in the almost monolingual context of Bangladesh, where Bangla (L1) is being used in all sectors, learners of the English language get limited exposure to the target language. As a result, the knowledge of English vocabulary of most of the learners is not adequate to deal with the specialized vocabulary used in textbooks, technical materials, essays or articles. Moreover, with their limited exposure to academic English, students are often unable to fully comprehend lectures or actively participate in class discussions. Many learners are also negatively affected by their limited ability to express themselves in written form. As we find that Facebook users use short forms of words in Facebook chats as well as comments, it has been observed in the analysis that the learners implement this practice in their academic writing tasks as well. They not only use short forms of English, for example "u" for "you", "plz" for "please", "btw" for "by the way", "G2G" for "get together", "bg" for "busy", "OMG" for "oh my God", "asap" for "as soon as possible", "tc" for take care, and "brb" for "be right back" in writing, but they also utter "cw" for "class work", "hw" for "home work" in reading discourse. This type of practice allows the learners to make spelling errors in academic writing. In addition, it has been also observed that students use Bangla terms for some particular technical terms, as they do not know appropriate English vocabulary for those terms.

### *Grammatical Imperfection*

It is believed that sufficient knowledge of English grammar not only helps students write paragraphs in standard English but also reduce the use of vernacular or non-standard English (i.e. using subjective pronouns in the place of objective pronouns, omission of certain prepositions, use of double negative form, mistakes in irregular verb forms, and so forth)

(Valentine & Repath-Martos, 1997). As English language follows the structure of subject + verb + object (S+V+O), while Bangla language follows quite the opposite – subject + object + verb (S+O+V), Bangladeshi learners make syntactical errors quite often. This error practice is further increased by the use of lots of ‘banglish’ (Bangla written with Roman alphabet) while chatting and commenting on Facebook, such as- “/Ami jabona/” means “I will not go” to make up English language deficiency as well as to feel the ease of communicating through mother tongue. It is observed that the participants of this study have demonstrated similar kind of practice in their academic writings, for instance, in writing tasks in classes as well as in their assignments. Moreover, this practice also affects learners’ both English and Bangla language skills. As a consequence, language skills of neither language are practiced in a perfect manner.

Apart from sentential errors, it has also been noticed that as there is no controlling device, and no one to point out uppercase-lowercase related errors in Facebook chatting, the tendency of not following capitalization principles in academic writing tasks go unabated.

#### *Pronunciation Deficiency*

In EFL (English as a foreign language) context, English language learners often have difficulties with English pronunciation. As languages differ in their phonetic structure, and English has many phonetic variables, English language learners frequently mispronounce words (Kurzweil Educational Systems, White Paper, 2004). Moreover, from the teaching experience, the researcher has also observed that in ‘Basic English’ course, where students from different departments come to reinforce their four skills of English language, there is marked influence of their regional dialects on their spoken English. Once they develop incorrect associations with the spoken and written forms of words, and these errors

become “fossilized”, they often fail to recognize even familiar words when they hear them, and are likely to misspell these words when writing (Kurzweil Educational Systems, White Paper, 2004). One of the unique situations with the Bangla speaking learners is that Bangla is a spelling based language while English is not. When English words are written in reduced, abbreviated forms, Facebook users go on pronouncing them as they are spelled. What they produce is neither English nor Bangla, rather it is ‘banglish’.

#### *Weakness in Phrasing and Punctuation*

Besides vocabulary and pronunciation, phrasing is another critical area posing threat for comprehension. A phraseological expression, also called a set expression, set phrase, idiomatic phrase, multi-word expression, sometimes simply idiom, etc., is, first of all, a (multiword) phrase – that is, a linguistic expression formed by several (at least two) lexemes syntactically linked in a regular way (Mel’čuk, 2012). It has been observed that choosing an appropriate idiom poses difficulty for foreign language learners. If words are grouped inappropriately, they lose their desired meaning. This study has revealed that the participants, as English language learners, are often unaware of the rules governing English phraseology and use wrong phrases in their Facebook comments, because foreign learners often tend to make out meaning of a phrase by taking meaning of individual words of a phrase rather than interpreting the phrase collectively as a whole which a native speaker usually does.

The participants are also indifferent to punctuation and its significance. While the use of pauses and nonverbal gestures clarifies the meaning of uttered words or sounds in spoken interaction, the use of punctuation marks such as commas, dashes, colons, and semicolons, help interpretation of written discourse as well. Misplaced or inappropriate use of punctuation marks can distort the intended meaning and

create ambiguity, whereas, appropriate use of punctuation can enhance clarity, as proper punctuation is both the sign and the cause of clear thinking (Truss, 2003, p. 202). In this study, it is the monopoly of the use of full-stop (.) is evident, and the use of comma (,) is hardly noticed. The avoidance of other punctuation marks, such as, semicolon (;) is also noteworthy while they chat and comment on Facebook wall. The resulting consequence is apparent in their academic writing as well. The participants have made errors mostly in the use of semicolon (;) and comma (,) and sometime they have not used them at all in their essay. In addition, while reading a text aloud in the class, they have not paid proper attention to the punctuation marks. As a result, it appears as a cluster of sounds and fails to provide the desired meaning. It is observed that the more opportunities English language learners have to simultaneously hear and read texts, the more sensitized they will be to the natural flow of the English language (Kurzweil Educational Systems, White Paper, 2004).

#### *Inadequate Exposure to Authentic Writing Style*

Facebook alone cannot be held responsible for the poor text quality of EFL learners. L2 or FL learners genuinely need authentic text samples in order to improve their writing skills. But authentic text samples are rarely found in the facebook rhetoric. More casual and informal language is the most frequently used medium in a Facebook communication. Second language learners often lack familiarity with the stylistic conventions for writing papers and essays. Many have never learned how to compose a standard academic essay or write a critique. From the researcher's teaching experience of English-102 course, in which composition and communication skills are prioritized, it can safely be noted that the students face difficulties in writing 1200-word extended essay. They seek for extra assistance to complete such assignments. For example,

students have been trained to be objective in their writing and avoid stating a subjective opinion while writing an argumentative essay. In this context, they need to learn a very different way of expressing themselves. Giving exposure to a wide range of stylistic conventions may be one of the prioritized focus while teaching English language learners models of genre-specific writing.

#### *Less Prospect of Multi-Sensory Learning*

It has been observed that too often English language learners operate in a closed system. They are asked to read, listen or write as solitary pursuits. Most readers learn best when all their senses are engaged. They benefit from the synergy of seeing language, hearing it, speaking it, and writing it simultaneously. Opportunities for this type of learning are getting limited by the excess use of Facebook, and that affects learners' writing in academic settings, especially at the post-secondary level (Kurzweil Educational Systems, White Paper, 2004). The study shows that the students of the courses mentioned above, who are also very frequent users of Facebook, have surprisingly been found to be single-sensor user of language, and the reasons could not be explained. Facebook, a platform with its versatility in terms of discourse, content, register, rhetoric and context, is likely to promote multi-sensory learning. But this skill has least been instilled in the academic writing of these students.

#### *Less Space for Independent Learner*

During assignment submission time, it has been found that English language learners of the English Department as well as from other departments, who are doing English 101 (Basic English) and English 102 (Composition and Communication Skills) courses, often spend many extra hours on assignments writing. They frequently have to seek help from outside the classroom, from more English proficient peers or spend hours on bilingual dictionaries.

Reliance on outside resources and easy availability of such resources limit the ability of English language learners to take charge of their own studying, and necessitates spending valuable time on the mechanics of reading and writing that could more profitably be spent on learning content (Kurzweil Educational Systems, White Paper, 2004). In the Facebook context, the same students are quite independent. Reasons of such difference in their roles can be the difference in the genres of discourse and the rhetoric used in such discourses. Unlike Facebook discourse, the academic writing is a high road writing requiring a compact rhetoric with cohesive and coherence qualities and well-formed language. On the other hand, Facebook discourses are informal and relatively trivial in nature, and the transmission of messages are mostly carried out using fragment sentences, and substandard linguistic features are well tolerated saying, 'It's OK'. This 'It's OK' attitude has encouraged to overgeneralize that it is okay for academic writing as well.

### Discussion and Proposed Solution

The problems resulting from indiscriminate use of language – more specifically of English language – by the students identified above cannot be rectified easily. The way it has influenced the students' language skills very silently and slowly is no longer skin-deep rather deeper, the prevention also needs to take place very strategically. First of all, in the context of Bangladesh the perspective about Facebook needs to be changed that it is not only to be used as a social communicative media; rather it also needs to be used as an academic platform for the learners. As a result, the users of Facebook should be encouraged to use Facebook in a more positive, formal and advantageous manner. For instance, the language teachers may encourage students to use Facebook to complete a few of their classroom activities. Secondly, the teachers may also allow students

to upload their best writing tasks on the Facebook, to be encouraged and to encourage others in academic writing. Moreover, Facebook can also be used to get feedback for improving writing skills. In addition, learners should be encouraged to use standard English while writing comments or chatting with friends on facebook, as repeated exposure to well-formed English is thought to be one of the best ways for English language learners to increase their reading and writing vocabulary.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude based on the above discussion, the Facebook as a communication platform can be reconstructed providing it with at least two roles – socializing and educating. Since Facebook is a medium without borders, its reconstruction may seem to be difficult. However, concerned language teachers may form closed circles with their student-clusters, and operate infiltrating purposefully designed lessons. A positive collaboration between the teachers and their student-groups may give a positive result. Thus an attempt to integrate Facebook as a tool in the academia and implement it meaningfully can be worth trying.

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