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Young Professional ESOL Learners Confront Competing Demands of Social Media and ESP

Abstract. English language learners from non-English speaking nations are confronting an increasingly challenging environment as they try to develop language skills to meet the competing demands of contemporary social media on one hand and those of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) on the other. Social media's explosion onto the global scene has created the need for non-English speakers to in effect learn two diverging contextual and communication patterns within what is supposed to be a common language.

English, at least a form of English, dominates social media communications on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and a whole host of abbreviated format international social media platforms. Moreover, these platforms have developed communications mechanisms that do not even conform to normally accepted, conversational patterns of spoken or written English. The English of some social media platforms is informal, littered with special and unique abbreviations, grammarless, decidedly unstructured and abruptly short. The vocabulary is explicitly simple in most cases, consisting mostly of one and two syllable words. The introduction of the “emoji” graphics (now totaling over 2600 according to Unicode Standard, the emoji lexicographer) has added image elements to the phonetic root language vocabulary. The near total lack of punctuation, further

complicates the process of learning to communicate effectively to other than a select audience or specific groups of people.

ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools are growing in use in education and in language teaching in particular, with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) becoming widely used to facilitate vocabulary and structural grammar development among English Language Learners (ELLs) at all levels. It has been noted that blogs and other web-based tools have significantly enhanced writing and reading skills.

The young non-native English speaking professional is simultaneously confronted with the increasing need to acquire skills in one or more forms of ESP, be it academic, occupational or both, to be a competitive member of the global economy. Simultaneously, the informal elements of social media ignore these demands and focus on a casual and frequently unconstrained set of language behaviors.

The results of this study indicate that English for Speakers of Other languages (ESOL) students, particularly those developing ESP skills, are confronting what could logically be construed as two languages carrying the same name. This presentation and accompanying methodology explores the details and implications of this emerging phenomenon and is addressed by supporting materials, data and recommendations addressing the challenges of diverging language pathways between social media and English for specific purposes.

Keywords: social media, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), diverging language pathways, communications mechanisms, linguistic components

Introduction

Research and publication regarding the relationship between language learning, particularly second language (L2) learning, and social media usage among student populations is gaining educator interest at a significant pace. Indeed, entire volumes have been authored on the subject, such as: Lamy & Zourou (Eds.) *Social networking for language education* (2013) and Meskill, *Online teaching and learning: Sociocultural dimensions* (2015). Among the issues discussed within these and other sources is whether the increased use of casual or informal language on social networking sites is impacting English language learning.

In both the United States and in Great Britain, the issue has been the topic of newspaper articles condemning the use of what is now referred to as “text speak”. The British *Sunday Times*, as long as 7 years ago (January 10, 2010) noted the rise of the usage of “text speak” as a casual substitute for generic English among those under 25 years of age in an article titled “Textspeak teens lack the right words for work”. According to The Sunday Times, youngsters’ abbreviated forms of communication are hurting their chances of securing a job. In an article in the Los Angeles Times, Michelle Maltais (2012) noted, “Well, there’s some good and bad news coming from the hours they spend speed-tapping notes to one another. Good news: The hours your kids are spending face-to-phone screen are paying off. They have become fluent in a second language. Bad news: That language is texting. Worse news: OMG, there isn’t (yet) a texting portion on the SAT, so they’ll need to work harder to recover those grammar skills they are killing with every LOL and BRB.”

Taking opposing views are linguists John McWhorter (2013), who noted that discussions of language change are not a new subject, in his TED Talk presentation “Texting is killing language...JK!!!”, and Tannen & Trestor (2013) in their book *Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media*. Both argue that social media are offering opportunities for language to evolve in positive ways. What should be of interest to the ESOL teaching community is that this discussion is an active one within the generic English language learning community, which acknowledges that this is a topic of continuing interest and study. As such it ought to raise question about the impact that this debate may raise for those non-English speakers learning English for Specific Purposes, who are exposed to the social media and “text-speak” on a continuing basis. A companion question is one of the impact of the use of emoticons or “emojis”, as they are often called, within the text-speak environment. A discussion of these and related issues continues below.

Text-Speak, what is it and where did it originate

“Text-speak” is an informal term for the abbreviated language used in text messaging and other forms of computer mediated communication, and is very commonly used in informal communications on social media sites,

globally. The term “*textspeak*” was coined by linguist David Crystal in 2001, in the first edition of his book *Language and the Internet* (2006). It is an informal, abbreviated form of English, which varies across the English speaking and non-English speaking world. It is essentially slang, which also employs symbols to convey a message. It was initially primarily intended to be used in person to person situations, but that has changed somewhat with the growth of social media which have a more broadcast character to wider audiences such as twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram. Instant messaging and texting condense language to its lowest common denominator; these forms frequently misuse grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation for the sake of brevity. However it is essential to remember, “But this is still communication. We need to understand ‘textspeak’ in all kinds of situations, because it is one of the languages our students use daily.” (Green, 2010). Marcel Danesi (2016) also observes:

“Some observers are decrying textspeak as a product of modern-day inertia and laziness-inducing technologies. Helprin ([*Digital Barbarism*,] 2009), for instance, cautions that such forms of communication, and the internet generally, produce an addictive effect on how people process information, rendering them much less pensive and less inclined to appreciate artistic and literary greatness. Others respond that textspeak is no more than an efficient way to create written messages for informal communication. People use textspeak, not to generate thoughtfulness and literary communication, but to keep in contact and to facilitate communication. In no way does this imply that people have lost the desire to read and reflect upon the world.”

The emoticon: more than a face

Another element of informal, social media communication is the non-verbal images that frequently accompany text-speak. These images are frequently intended to convey an emotional message that is a companion to the spoken component. They have been termed emoticons or “emojis” as a generic descriptor. These non-verbal message images predate social media and have been in use since early internet email messaging. Unicode Standard has become the recognized lexicographer of “emojis” and as of June of 2017, they have recognized and published standardized images of

more than 2600 of these symbolic representations of emotions or other symbolic messages.

Folklorist Lee-Ellen Marvin (1995) called them the “paralanguage of the internet, the winks which signal the playfulness of a statement over the seriousness it might denote.” In a study of instant messaging, scholar Shao-Kang Lo (2008) describes emoticons as “quasi-nonverbal cues” – something that looks like a word, but performs the functions of a nonverbal cue, like a hand gesture or nod. Individual symbols – which serve a different purpose than emoticons – can add meaning to a message or express meaning all on their own.

Summing up texting and emojis

These mixtures of informal text and graphic images have become a standard communication methodology for the Igeneration (those under 25 years of age). Texting and adding associated emojis is now commonplace across social media, adding complexity and a new dimension to English language learning for the non-English speaker. An example from classic English literature may provide an illustration (with apologies to Louis Carroll and the White Rabbit). “IM L8. IM L8 4 A VRY MPORTNT D8”. 😊

Adding ESP to the mix for the English language learner

From the early 1960’s, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL teaching today. Its development is reflected in the increasing number of ESP courses offered to overseas students in English speaking countries, as well as extended course offerings in ESP at post-secondary institutions in non-English speaking countries around the globe. There is now a well-established international journal dedicated to ESP discussion, “English for Specific Purposes: An international journal”, and the frequent meetings of ESP SIG groups of the IATEFL, TESOL and TESOL International, as well as ICT and CALL conferences annually.

What is ESP?

While ESP has been an identified teaching area for over 50 years, it has only been in the past 20 years that its full breadth has been universally accepted. Dudley-Evans (1997) offered a set of defining characteristics of ESP that have since been broadly accepted as defining the field. Those characteristics are divided into two categories: absolute and variable. They are:

- *Absolute Characteristics*
 1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners
 2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves
 3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.
- *Variable Characteristics*
 1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines
 2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English
 3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level
 4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
 5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems

From the definition, we can see that ESP can but is not necessarily concerned with specific disciplines, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. ESP should be seen simple as an 'approach' to teaching, or what Dudley-Evans describes as an 'attitude of mind'. This is a similar conclusion to that made by Hutchinson et al. (1987, p19) who state, "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning". In contemporary usage ESP is normally associated with those aspects of ELL that are specific to academic, occupational and professional purposes. ESP education has taken on a substantially broader scope with the now very broad acceptance of English as the *lingua franca* in the sciences,

technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, as well as those of business and medicine, internationally. Thus the post-secondary student approaching any of these, and other, fields as well, must have a well-rounded command of written and spoken English specific to their discipline to be able to compete professionally in the global, 21st Century economy.

The essential tension between ESP and the less formal language of social media

As noted in the materials above, ESP is essentially an adult oriented English discipline with very specialized needs and components. It is intended to meet the communications needs of persons participating in specific occupational, professional and academic groups. The rigor of its vocabulary and contextual circumstance is considerable. It is more complex and precise in its communications expectations, across its various categories. It is far removed from the casual and unstructured nature of text-speak, and thus poses a challenge to the non-native English speaking ESP student, today, who confronts its rigor and simultaneously also confronts the informal demands of social media in everyday social communications.

These tensions can be easily illustrated as follows:

Social media texting communications:

- Informal
- Frequent use of abbreviations and word constructions
- Communications are unstructured
- Frequent grammar misuse
- Basic tense (past, present, future) usage
- Mostly first and second person
- Frequent use of emojis
- Simple vocabulary (normally less than 1000 words)
- Emotions laden content
- Little or no punctuation, except to create emojis
- Mostly active voice
- Largely declarative or interrogative
- No formal learning systems in place (self-taught or coached)

ESP (EAP/EOP/EPP)

- Structure and grammar critical and complex
- Largely third person
- Extensive and subject specific specialized vocabularies
- Virtually emotionless
- Complex sentence structures
- Use of punctuation is critical to communicating intentions
- Both active and passive voice used
- Full tense and case structures are in place
- Classes built around careful needs analysis and specific vocabulary
- Expects clear understanding of generic English.

Some recent commentary on social media and language learning

Lamy & Zourou (2013) volume explores the concept of the social web and language learning in post-secondary education. As they note, the terms "social networking", "social media" and "social web" must be distinguished from "Web 2.0" references. The latter refers to the technological platform on which the former exist and evolve. The books contributors explore the uses of numerous social networking platforms, including Facebook, RenRen, Second Life, Livemocha, Google wave, Busuu, English Café, and Babel.

Meskill's reprinted edition notes that learning through the use of internet platforms depends on complex human interactions for success. The text uses sociocultural theory as its foundation to examine the dynamics of these interactions. It seeks to understand meaning making in all of its social, linguistic and cultural complexity. Each chapter examines how it is that culturally and historically sources of meanings get negotiated through social mediation in online instructional venues. It extends the ways we think and talk about online teaching and learning.

Tanner and Trestor (2013) and their contributors examine how our everyday lives are increasingly being lived through electronic media, which are changing our interactions and our communications in ways that we are only beginning to understand, and shed light on the ways language

is being used in, and shaped by, these new media contexts. They explore how Web 2.0 can be conceptualized and theorized; the role of English on the worldwide web; how use of social media such as Facebook and texting shape communication with family and friends; and that individuals engage with technology including reading on-screen and on paper; and how all of these processes interplay with meaning-making.

In recent journals, Yunus, Salehi & Chenzi (2012) discuss the strengths and weaknesses of using social networking tools in the ESL writing classroom. They note the advantages strongly outweigh the disadvantages. Advantages they note include:

- contemporary students are largely digital natives, so use of social networking is familiar and comfortable to them;
- use of social networks such as Facebook give the students English composition skills and that the chronological order of the sites allow for convenient building on previous materials;
- students have a wider audience of peers and friends and global interaction is possible;
- students take greater responsibility for their work because of the wider audience;
- students can see comments directed to the class as a whole, and not just those directed specifically to them;
- and parents can easily view student work.

Disadvantages were focused principally on the student teacher relationship:

- which can be complicated by a virtual environment;
- the time it takes to edit and critique may be when using online materials;
- learner access to both a computer and to the internet;
- learner familiarity with the online environment;
- student inclination to spend online time playing computer games and chatting when they are supposed to be writing;
- and the availability of online sources from which to retrieve materials rather than thoughtfully engaging in their own creative work.

Wang & Vasquez (2012) reviewed current research on the use of Web 2.0 technologies in second language (L2) learning. Its purpose was to investigate the theoretical perspectives framing it, to identify some of the

benefits of using Web 2.0 technologies in L2 learning, and to discuss some of the limitations. The review reveals that blogs and wikis have been the most studied Web 2.0 tools, while others, such as social networking applications and virtual worlds, have been less frequently explored. They note that very few studies surveyed have actually examined students' progress and learning outcomes associated with these tools, the most frequently reported benefit associated with Web 2.0 technologies is the favorable language learning environments they help to foster.

Jabbari, et al (2015) made a presentation at SITE2015 in which they discussed the benefits of using social media with English language learners (ELL). They find that social media and Web 2.0 tools provide significantly promising contextual frameworks for ELLs in this digital age. They propose that social media enhances the quality of language learning for two reasons: social media expand the former limits of place and time in sustaining meaningful language instruction; and the nature of the new generation of language learners makes use of social media almost idiosyncratic as opposed to the former, more formal, language learning settings and approaches.

Kleanhous & Cardoso (2016) propose a research agenda to examine the effectiveness of collaboration generated peer feedback on writing and speaking in ESP online classes. This is built on prior research by Kleanhouse in 2016, which is reported to show positive on student writing and speaking skills. They report that students thought the collaborative approach was "an innovative and interesting way to do their homework (pp. 227–228) and that students felt it "[...] helpful; reading others' posts helps understand the task better if I have difficulty" (p. 228). They noted the positive motivational impact of peer feedback in addition to teacher comments. They conclude by noting that they perceived the learner-centered environment was most beneficial as had been predicted by CALL researchers.

Conclusions and recommendations

While there is broad consensus that there significant benefits to the use of social media within the teaching environment for ELL and for ESP specifically, there is also evidence that there are challenges associated with texting and chatting, particularly as the use of "text-speak" is

concerned. Linguists and ELL educators remain divided as to whether text-speak will have or not have a negative impact on the non-English language ESP learner who is also confronted with the daily exposure to it on social media. The obvious answer is added research, which is easy to say and not quite so easy to accomplish. As Wang and Vasquez (2012) noted, research to date has not been methodologically rigorous, and while there is a large proliferation of published case studies, true empirical research is famously missing. This issue is not new to the education field, and the reasons have been repeatedly discussed. It will remain for future researchers to engage in the meta-analysis of the published materials to develop more profound conclusions.

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