

Attitude of Students Towards Using Social Networking Tools in the Writing Classroom: A Study at the Undergraduate Level

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Abstract

The present study attempts to explore the students' perspectives on using social networking tools to teach writing skills at the undergraduate level. Writing in an academic setting usually becomes unpleasant for the students as the content is limited and often monotonous. Hence, there is a need to rethink the pedagogy involved in teaching writing skills and offer students realistic settings to practice writing in authentic situations. This can be done by using social networking platforms as a supplementary tool in the writing classroom as students find it interesting and spend most of their time on these platforms. In this study, the researcher has conducted an online survey on 350 undergraduate students from Haryana, Punjab, Chandigarh and Himachal Pradesh, to enquire about their views on incorporating social media in the traditional writing classroom.

Keywords- social networking, ELT, writing skills, undergraduate level

Introduction

In 2020, the education sector witnessed a major upheaval due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The disruptions caused by the pandemic changed this sector forever. One of the most drastic changes was seen in classroom teaching. Forced by the circumstances, the traditional classroom teaching had to be shifted to the online platforms. While these platforms turned out as saviours for the stakeholders, particularly the children, this shift was not without challenges. Though online teaching was not a new phenomenon, the total absence of physical classes posed a new challenge for both instructors and students. Technology had been a part of the traditional curriculum for a long time, but it had never replaced it. The sudden onset of the pandemic made the teachers and learners scramble to familiarise themselves with the technology. For a considerable time, teaching-learning was completely online, but this transition from offline to the online classroom has not been easy. Today, though things are going back to normal, they may never be the same again. There is a return to the classroom environment, but the online platforms also co-exist. As a result, there has been a 'hybrid' mode of learning. As indicated by the present circumstances, this learning model might remain a part of the curriculum for future generations. This new normal requires that the teachers reorient their pedagogy following their academic domain. And, as a result, like any other subject, there is a necessity to rework the pedagogy involved in English Language Teaching.

Language acquisition in terms of its primary skills, namely- Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing is crucial for gaining linguistic proficiency. Among these, writing is considered as the most difficult to attain as learners can become competent in writing only with conscious effort. The ability to write well does not

only include a mastery of the grammatical rules but also the ability to think critically (*The Neglected "R"*). To verify that students are competent enough to write, it is not essential that they can write only in a controlled environment such as a classroom but also in meaningful situations outside the classroom. Further, writing in an academic setting usually becomes unpleasant for students as the content is limited and often monotonous. They write about topics that are prescribed in the syllabus and not about what they wish to write on, which makes the entire activity unrealistic for them. Hence, there is a need to rethink teaching and learning models to replace the traditional "closed classroom" models, which emphasise the delivery of information either by an instructor or a textbook rather than being learner-centric (McLoughlin and Lee). King also noted that "a model in which students are expected to be passive learners cannot thrive in the twenty-first century as in this century, students will think for themselves, pose and solve problems on their own and will focus on the production of knowledge rather than the reproduction of knowledge" (30). This dilemma has been further aggravated by younger students' inclination and dependence on technology. Today's students are tech-savvy and find the traditional methods of teaching the English language less engaging now. Hence, the instructors need to talk to them in a digital language. Further, the expanding lexicon of Web 2.0 applications (podcasts, weblogs, wikis, mashups, etc.) signals changes in the learning landscape, where learners are active participants, creators of knowledge, and seekers of engaging, personal experiences (McLoughlin and Lee). This has necessitated the need for English Language teachers to keep themselves updated with the latest technologies that the students engage in and incorporate these effectively into their curriculum to make the learning experience more relevant and exciting.

Why Social Networking?

Social networking has become one of the most preferred platforms for social interaction through writing. Earlier, students often failed to realise the importance of writing as they believed that it had little value outside the classroom as a form of social interaction. For them, the value of writing was limited to qualifying for the examinations only. But now, Web 2.0 social networking tools, provide students with real-life settings where they can practice their writing skills in collaboration with their peers, critically review the works of others and make valuable suggestions. As a result of these platforms, we are now writing beyond the classrooms where millions of people can read and review our writings in this digital age. The students have fully synchronised themselves with technology, increasing the need to practice writing in authentic digital contexts so that they act responsibly and ethically in online communities. Unlike Web 1.0, where the users were only passive viewers of content, Web 2.0 allows users to collaborate and interact with their peers and create their own content (Wikipedia). Students find writing on social networking platforms more relevant as they write about real-life situations. Social networking platforms can thus allow students to engage actively in the target language. Also, writing is usually considered to be a solitary activity, as we have to write on our own without the possibility of interaction or the benefit of feedback, which makes it even more difficult (Byrne 4). These apprehensions can be dealt with, with the help of social networking tools which can provide immediate feedback and interaction from peers all around the globe. In a traditional setting, it is impossible to hold a conversation with more than one or two people at a time, but the internet makes it perfectly feasible and normal (Crystal). It can further deal with the problem of large classrooms, where each student cannot be given the required attention due to limited time and a vast syllabus. Additionally, as highlighted by David Crystal, there are no time-based constraints in social networking forums and Twitter conversations (20). This asynchronous nature of social

networking can allow learners to read and review their peers' writings in their own time and as many times as they want to.

Review of Literature

In *Students' and Teachers' Perspective Towards the Use of Social Media Technologies as a Supportive Learning Tool in English Language Classes: A Case Study from a University in Saudi Arabia*, the researcher concluded that the undergraduate students believed that social media allows them to socialise and use English worldwide (Alqarni). It underlines that apart from reducing classroom anxiety, it familiarises them with the vocabulary and varieties of English. According to the teachers, social media creates a comfortable and enjoyable learning environment as students are accustomed to the tools. Contributions similar to the above work have also been made in *The Use of Social Media in English Teaching and Learning: Exploring the Perceptions and Experiences of English as a Foreign Language Instructors* (Albiladi). This study provides evidence that instructors' use of social media in developing language abilities such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking can introduce numerous benefits. These benefits include motivation, students' autonomy, enhanced teaching practices and accessibility and a better learning environment. The work further discusses specific barriers, such as lack of support and training, which hamper the effective implementation of these tools. In *One Size Does Not Fit All: Exploring Online-Language Learning Challenges and Benefits for Advanced Learners*, the researcher contends that students find it easy to complete online tasks because they have attuned themselves to online platforms and technology (Kenney). She used Canvas to give students assignments and found that students switched to a formal literary style while completing online tasks. They were more precise and cautious while writing online because others would read their content. The use of this platform further led to increased participation from those students who engaged less in physical classes. In Langager's *Use of Social Media in Undergraduate Communication Classes*, the instructors agree that Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter are the most common platforms used to share content and discussions after class. They believe that social media offers valuable opportunities for collaborative learning, which enhances their learning objectives. Additionally, they confirm that despite the challenges in adopting social media for the classroom, it adds sufficient value to their courses. A significant work that focuses on in-class experience is *Social Media and Language Learning: Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence* by Florence Le Baron Earle. In this study, she examines first-year undergraduate students. She observes that a non-threatening environment created by social media, especially without the fear of being reprimanded, motivates students to engage in the target language (French). This study corroborates that social media allows students to compare the second language's cultural aspects with their own culture. It facilitates collaboration among students through discussion forums on the wiki and the possibility of reading other people's opinions, which further strengthens their communicative competence. The analysis shows that students responded favourably to implementing online activities to enhance their communicative competence.

As per the findings in *A Study on the Impact of Social Media on Higher Education in India with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu*, the students feel more comfortable and enjoy their activities with social media, which improves their overall learning experience (V). Similar observations in her thesis *Effectiveness of Social Networking FACEBOOK for Teaching Science: A Study* (Singh). She confirms that using Facebook as a pedagogical tool in Class XI, along with traditional methods, proves to be more exciting and useful and is easily accessible to the students. The students react positively to this pedagogical tool, and there is an improvement in their overall achievement. In *The Impact of Social Media and e-Communication on the*

Younger Generation- A Study with Reference to Higher Education Students in Chennai City, P. Prasanna deduces that social media provides students with skills that help them survive in the world by improving their rate and quality of collaboration. *Social Media as an alternative pedagogy in Higher Education: A study* questions faculty members of Central Universities in India (Pathak). The survey concludes that social media could be used as an alternative pedagogy in Higher Education, as stated by the members.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE

The sample of this study comprised 373 undergraduate students from Panjab, Haryana, Chandigarh and Himachal Pradesh. A significant number of students belonged to rural and semi-urban areas. Out of 373 students, 171 students studied in a school where English was the medium of teaching, 159 students studied in Hindi medium schools whereas 6 students were taught in their regional language. All these students were English as a second language learners. The questionnaire was circulated online; hence the selection of the sample was random. However, it is important to note that students responded selectively to the questionnaire, leaving out some of the questions that they were not comfortable with.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The teacher/ researcher used Google Forms to conduct the survey online. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions about the student's background and his/ her use of social media. The analysis of the questionnaire is as follows-

Figure 1: The area to which the student belongs (rural, semi-urban or urban)

Whether rural, semi-urban or urban-
309 responses

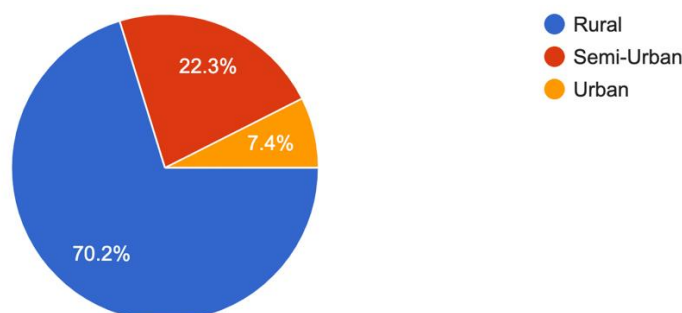


Figure 2: Age of the student

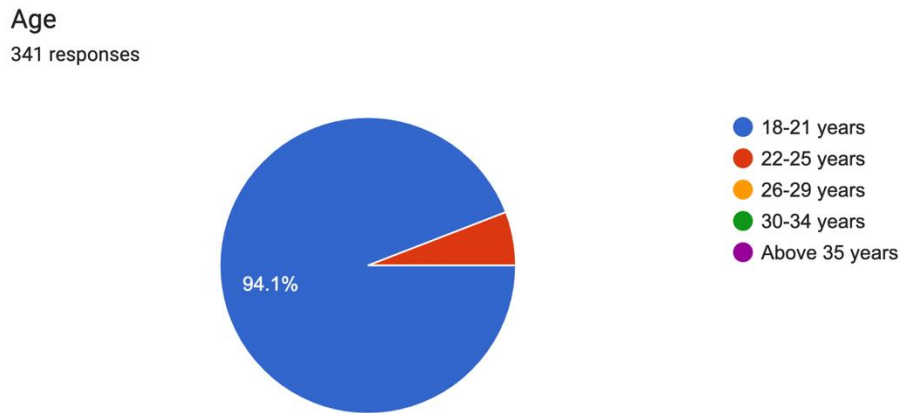


Figure 3: Student's competency in formal writing skills

How strong are your formal writing skills(letters, reports, essays, academic writing, resumes, writing professionally etc.)?

350 responses

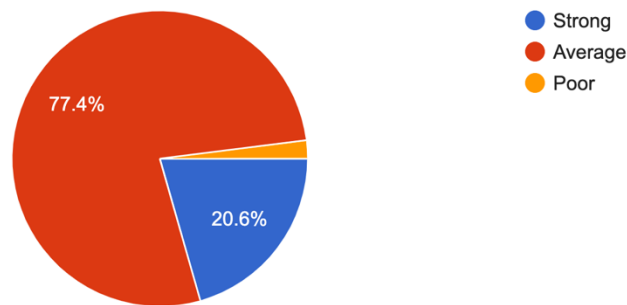


Figure 4: Student's use of online platforms for formal writing

Do you use or refer to online platforms such as Google for help while writing formal letters, reports etc?

349 responses

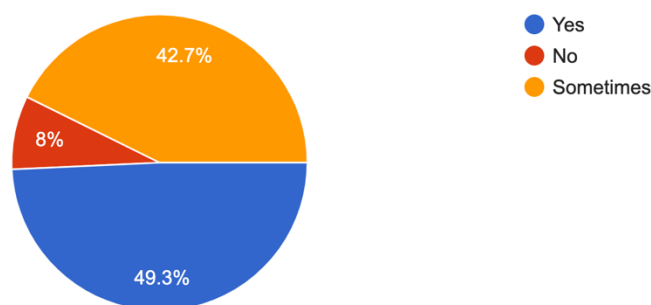


Figure 5: Student’s area of comfort while writing

Where/ What can you write more confidently?
342 responses

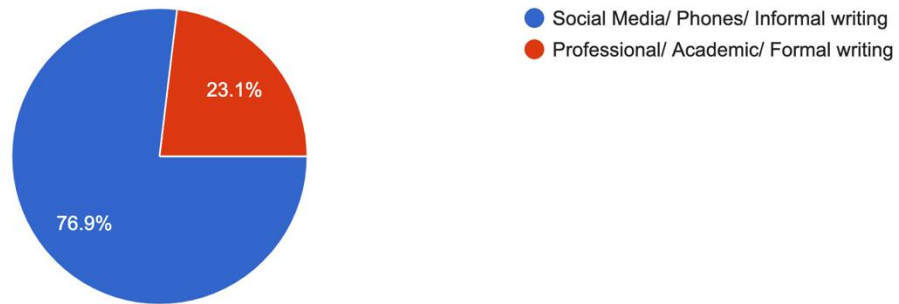


Figure 6: Learner’s use of social media/ social networking tools

Do you use social media?
350 responses

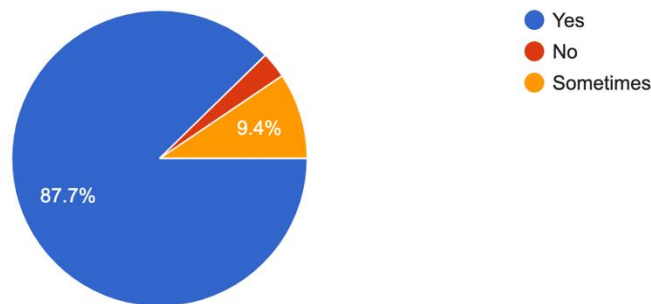


Figure 7: Learner’s span of using social media/ social networking tools

For how long have you been using social media?
349 responses

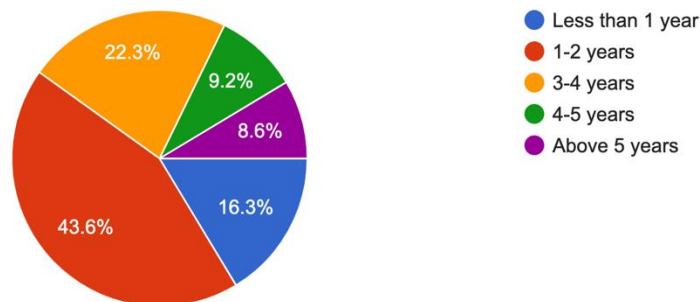


Figure 8: Duration of using social media/ social networking tools in a day

How much time do you spend on social media in a day?
350 responses

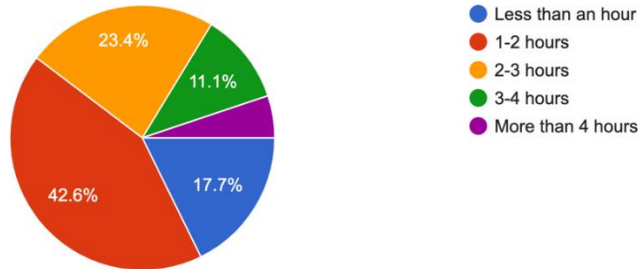


Figure 9: Online apps/ platforms used by the learners

Which platforms/apps do you use the most? You can choose more than one-
355 responses

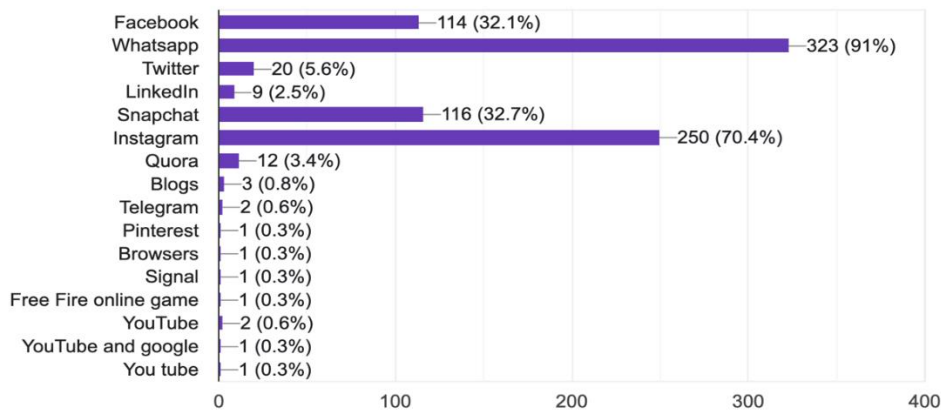


Figure 10: Kinds of communities/ pages/ groups followed by the learner on social media/ social networking tools

What kind of communities/ pages/ groups do you follow on social media? You can choose more than one-
350 responses

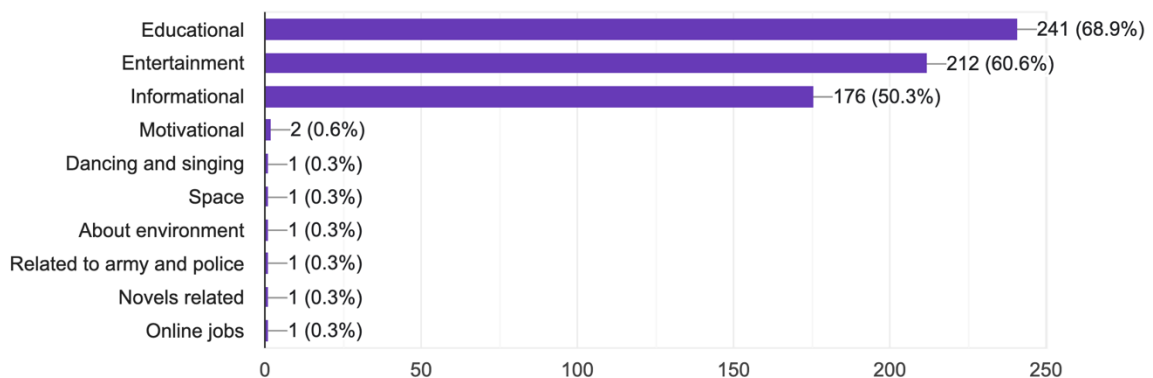


Figure 11: Learner’s purpose of using social media/ social networking tools

For what purpose do you use social media? You can choose more than one-
353 responses

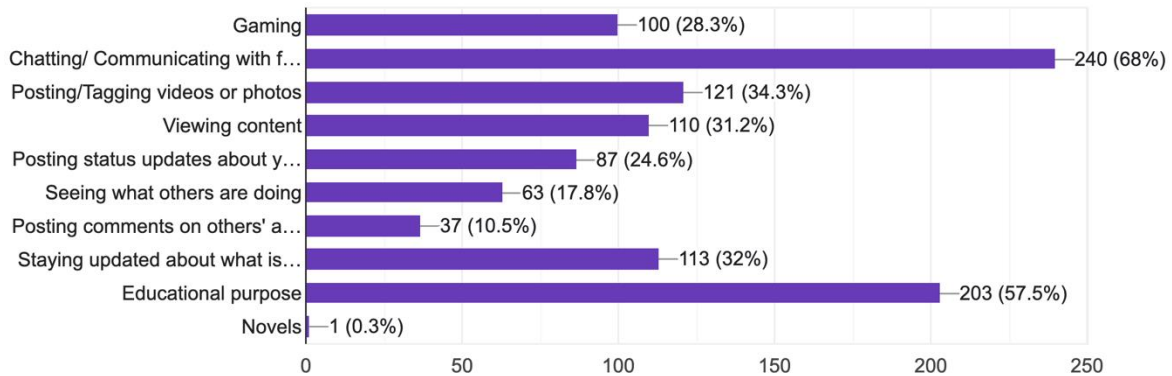
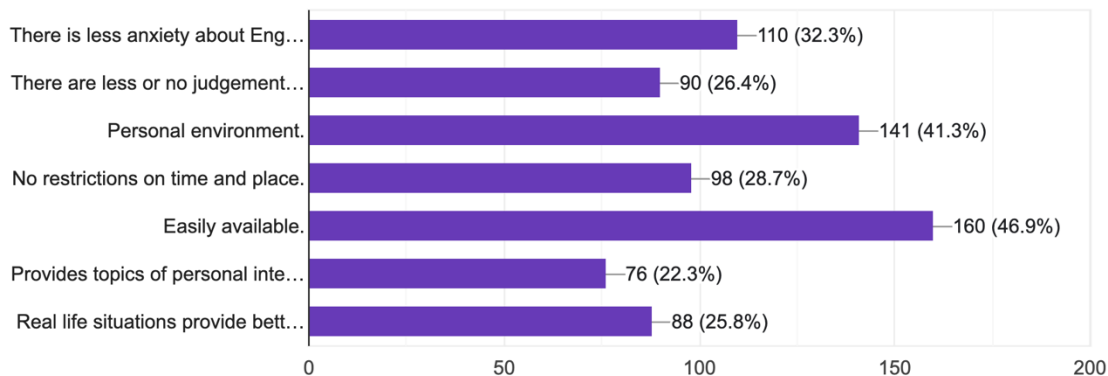


Figure 12: Learner’s response to the benefits of using social media/ social networking tools for writing

What, according to you, makes social media a comfortable place for writing? You can choose more than one-
341 responses



FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The study suggests that introducing social networking tools in an undergraduate classroom can boost students’ English writing skills. The students believed that writing on social networking platforms offered them immense benefits such as freedom from the fear of being judged for writing incorrect English, easy accessibility, exposure to authentic language and much more. Social networking tools can be ideal in an undergraduate writing classroom as these tools can allow students to choose content from what is happening around them and what interests them, thereby making the entire process more enjoyable and realistic. They can enable them to select the content they want to write. Activities based on social networking tools can make writing more realistic as students can relate it to a specific purpose instead of writing under obligation. It can make them active participants in selecting the content, which remains out of the question in a traditional classroom where the teacher mainly determines the curriculum. Hence, it

can be argued that social networking platforms can prove to be effective in enhancing students' writing skills at the undergraduate level.

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