Facebook as a Teaching Tool: Reflections from English Language Classroom for Engineering Students in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The paper shows the students’ use of English language in Facebook and its influence on their formal modes of writing, most notably in semester examinations and assignments. The study is a part of a two-month internal project involving the undergraduate students of an engineering institution in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, India. The paper analyzes some of the findings of the said project and attempts at showing the advantages, constraints and limitations of using Facebook as a pedagogic tool, especially in such remote areas of the globe as Arunachal Pradesh. Considering geographical inaccessibility and infrastructural bottlenecks afflicting the region, possibilities of cloud teaching and learning is suggested.

Keywords: Orthography, Bonding, Logogrammatic spelling, De-spatialized learning, Digital Habitat

Introduction

Can social media act as a learning tool? Can it be a complement to the institutional system of imparting classroom based learning? Can it be better managed and utilized as a source of knowledge dissemination?

The advent of internet and emergence of social networking has given rise to new linguistic styles and forms. These forms have evolved and received tremendous boost over the years from other forms of electronic media such as e-mail, texting, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Instant Messaging (IM), etc. According to David Crystal, internet mediated communication induced changes in language can be assessed in four primary areas, viz., sociolinguistics, education, stylistics and applied. It has revolutionized ‘the way people communicate’ (Crystal, 2005) both in written as well as oral forms. Thurlow (2001) presents five related areas where the impact of internet on language is discernible, viz., electronic emergence and acceptability of multilingualism, language change, oral discourse, stylistic diffusion with a concomitant de-compartmentalization of jargons, and an emergence of metalanguage and folk linguistics. Considering its impact on such fundamental areas of language as grammar, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation, and emergence of it as a genre, Crystal advocates the need of a proper ‘internet management’ (Crystal, 2010).

In the recent times, we have witnessed a calibrated institutionalization of social media as a measure for collaborative learning. One of the examples is the Project edveNTUre, the portal of the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore where students participate in discussion forums, take part in online quizzes and view streaming podcasts of their lectures prepared by their instructors. Another notable initiative is the collaboration of Apple Inc. with more than 600 institutions of higher learning across 18 countries, including the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Yale (Cohen, 2010) to provide academic lectures and other learning materials through ITunes U available in the Apple Music Stores.

The institutionalization of the genre has also generated much debate about the formal nature and correctness in the use of language. Linguists and educators differ over the merits of the medium. Linguists like Eleanor Johnson opines that while there are mistakes in writing and verbal discourse is strongly connected to internet usage, Crystal, on the other hand, attributes it to the ‘notion of [contextual] appropriateness’ (Crystal, 2010) over the emphasis on grammatical correctness as is the
norm today. Crystal strongly refutes Johnson’s opinion by citing the findings of a research conducted by Coventry University, which in a testing situation found that more the students involved in texting, the better their literary scores are. The research convincingly states that the ‘best texters are [usually the] best spellers’ (Crystal, 2010). This has also been revealed in one of the recent studies published in the British Journal of Developmental Psychology, which states that the students who texted regularly displayed a wider range of vocabulary and orthographic creativity (BBC, 2009). However, both Crystal and Johnson concede that the users have to learn the rules of language first before improvising or innovating the same.

**Factors responsible for its Development**

One of the pertinent questions is the very emergence and wider acceptability of the medium and contributing factors thereof. One of the primary factors for the same is the creation of a multiple-activity based digital habitat (Pohjola, 2011) incorporating ‘a gigantic global network of desktops, applications, communication channels, web pages, photos, songs, and other digital objects (May and Kristensen, 2004). To this is added the ever-expanding scope of mobile communication with high-end features and applications, resulting in what Turning Mark terms as ‘ubiquitous computing’ which aims to have computers ‘disappear from people’s awareness’ (Mark, 1999). Weiser also adds in the same vein: ‘our computers should be like our childhood: an invisible foundation that is quickly forgotten but always with us, and effortlessly used throughout our lives’ (Weiser, 1994).

Secondly, the dynamic nature of the medium has resulted in its greater acceptability and wider appeal. Unlike the written medium, the electronic medium facilitates framing, hypertexting, options to start instant threads in discussion groups and forums, multimedia incorporation, etc. The economy and the effectiveness of the medium necessitated a medium, which is economically more effective and also ‘cool and fashionable’ (Crystal, 2010). Thus, the new language became a ‘medium of bonding’ (Crystal, 2010) with its ‘artistic and innovative dimensions’ (Crystal, 2010). The need of abbreviated language with alpha-numerals is further accentuated with the demands of certain portals, like Twitter, which imposed a character limit of 140, with virtually no scope for concatenated texting as we have in case of the SMSeSe. The limitations of cyberspace communication have resulted in the designing of the emoticons too, albeit at the cost of ‘emotivity’ (Cicognani, 1998). With the advent of multimedia texting, blogs, instant messaging, this new medium has received the necessary impetus to grow exponentially. With its emphasis on speed, brevity and spontaneity, the computer or internet-mediated communication is vibrant, unstructured and open. This vibrancy and openness is amply reflected in syntax, vocabulary, style and pragmatics.

The creative aspect of the medium notwithstanding, it has also resulted in getting the errors committed by the users overlooked in the areas of syntax, verb agreement, orthography, etc. This is especially true of the L2 users of language. While a majority of the L2 users are found to be unaware of the grammatical rules, quite a few users deliberately adopt and improvise the internet lingo. Thus, they exclusivize themselves by bonding with a select group or a web-based community and in the process, their errors get accepted as fashionable and in some cases, anti-conventional in terms of language use. This is particularly evident in erroneous or logogrammatic spelling, faulty punctuation, improper capitalization or non-capitalization and incorrect pronunciation in hypermedia sites as well as IMs, IRCs and Voice Chats.

**Facebook in the classroom: its rationale**

Since its launch in 2003 in the dorms of Harvard University, till date, Facebook has more than 1.1 billion users with more than 50% logging on to it at least once daily (Statististic Brain, 2014) With a humungous amount of data and activity, it is capable of generating maximum content on screen than the classroom. In the recent years, there has been a major shift in pedagogical practices and teaching theory in that the emphasis is given more on the student-centric facilitative learning. The role of a teacher is to create an environment that would encourage newer streams of thought, incisive arguments and logical deliberations. These apart, one of the foremost challenges for the teacher today is to generate and retain maximum possible interest in the class or the text and also prod the students to be
inquisitive. This is challenging given the fact that the whole gamut of knowledge today is made accessible through internet and sharing across multiple virtual platforms is possible using such multidimensional technological tools as Web 2.0. The role of a teacher therefore, is to speak to the students in their language, using their tools in order to make the class ambience productive and interesting. In order to achieve this, the teacher must embrace technology and develop enough skills to navigate through multiple platforms at ease.

The sceptics in the academia, however, have expressed their doubts in the plausibility of using social media as a complement to classroom or institutionally systematized learning architecture. Although they concede considerable ground on the issue of retaining classroom interest and providing maximum possible avenues of knowledge, they, however, cite practical problems in teaching, for instance, canonical literature in a multimedia format in the classroom. They are of the opinion that since the electronic medium is characteristically devoid of emotivity (Cicognani, 1998), it would be difficult for the learners to capture the nuances of thought and feeling, and the context in which a poem, drama or a novel is written. While there seems to be some logic in their perspective, yet new methods have to be devised to create a middle ground between embracing technology and imparting knowledge through pedagogic re-contextualization. While teaching a poem like Yeats’ ‘The Second Coming’ for instance, it would be difficult for the teacher make the students relate to the background and the context in which the poem was composed, not to speak of the images and symbols used in the same. Unless the students can relate to something with which they are familiar, it would be an exercise in futility to make them navigate through the maze of gyres and falcons in the poem. The solution to this is the re-appropriated multimedia texts of the same as found in the hypermedia site You tube. Instead of the mythical image drawn from the Spiritus mundi, what one finds in the You tube is the images of 9/11, the Afghanistan war and other contemporary events artistically interspersed with the text along with the desolate images of large-scale destruction and damage. Similarly, the intensity of emotional urgency is perfectly captured and appropriated in the videographic re-presentation of Andrew Marvell’s poem ‘To His Coy Mistress.’ The students may find the film adaptation of Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’ more appealing and interesting than the Folio or Clarendon text that is usually prescribed.

Although Facebook is a public portal, its accessibility is user controlled and it allows formation of exclusive communities and pages depending on the tastes, likes and preferences of a particular member group. This factor, coupled with a judicious management of its services, Facebook can prove to be a veritable medium to elicit opinions and provide instant feedback. Being user-controlled and options for having closed user groups, class-specific/subject-specific/course specific communities/pages can be formed, ideas can be floated and generated, arguments and counter-arguments can be updated and alternate perspectives can be accommodated and deliberated upon – something which is not possible within the time based limitations of a classroom situations. Similarly, the medium would be a boon for those students who are reticent and hesitant in the class and cannot express their views and opinions openly. Being user-controlled, a new sense of privacy too can be attributed, as only the members of the specific community would have the access to the content. The members of the community may be encouraged to upload their essays on the page for peer viewing and reviewing and at the same time, the teacher too could chip in with his feedback and comments. The page may also be used for the students’ feedback on the teacher and the course(s) taught along with options for instantaneous testing, quizzes and results.

Secondly, like the user-controlled accessibility, the creation and sharing of the content in the medium too is user-controlled. With multidimensional options in technology like Web 2.0, the user can load and link his content to several other formats and sites through hyperlinking, web-link sharing and video posts. Such multidimensional convergence, which is practically impossible in a classroom situation, offers the user to have multiple perspectives on his writing as well sources of his research. This also helps the evaluator or the reviewer to arrive at a balanced opinion before providing his feedback.

Thirdly, the discourse used in the medium is highly, informal, creative and non-academic. This non-academic diction helps in better expressivity on the part of the students. This is particularly true in case
of the L2 users who have the problem of speaking, writing and composing grammatically correct and stylistically/contextually appropriate language. Pointing out their mistakes and giving them rule-based exercise in the classroom have shown limited positive results. Secondly, they fail to act and in many cases, they prefer to remain silent in the class fearing errors and a subsequent blow to their self-esteem. However, the discourse in this medium short and crisp, the chances of committing errors are reduced substantially and students find it easier to express themselves. Being informal, it helps the teacher to point out the errors in a friendly manner and suggest options for correcting the same electronically. For instance, considering their fluency in the use of computers and internet navigation, the teachers may suggest the students to join relevant online forums to handle with their problems without directly pointing out their errors. The web-link may be provided which they can click instantly and get solutions. For example, for the students having problem in the areas of grammar and syntax, the teacher may post the link of the VOA English Learning portal that a student may use instantly and get their confusions cleared.

Fourthly, the participation is voluntary and unlike the institutional system, no systemic push is required. Facebook as a learning media can be truly facilitative as the system is democratic and non-hierarchical. While in an institutional set up, there is a top-down hierarchical structure with the teacher delivering lecture, preparing notes, evaluating assignments and answer scripts and provides feedback. Each of these steps would have a subjective bearing of the individual that may prove detrimental to the student. Devoid of any parallel options to crosscheck multiple perspectives, the evaluation and feedback would be based on a one-dimensional reading of the text. However, with Facebook, it has been found that the onus gets shifted to the students. They create content, evaluate their answers amongst peers, post comments, and share the learning process. The notion on power associated with the teacher in a classroom would be minimised resulting in an open and unhindered expression of ideas and opinions.

However, one of the flip sides of using social media as a learning tool ironically lies in the stuff and the content itself! Since the discourse is informal, short, innovative and constantly improvised, it leaves a very little option for expository writing. Instead, what we have are micro-sized knowledge bases, supported by web-links, video and blog posts and tweets. While this may put a big question mark on developing the analytical and logical skills of a user, the medium on the other hand, with its convergence and integration of several other formats is hugely capable of making the process of learning fun and inclusive.

Methodology
A two-month internal project was undertaken involving the undergraduate students of NERIST, located in the north eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, India. The students of the institute are required to study selections from English literature along with Professional Communication as compulsory courses. Even with the use of AV slides and video clips, it was observed that the participation of the students in the classroom ranged from being minimal to low. Their written assignments too are dull and lacked in coherence of expression and arrangement of ideas. Lack of interest, understanding and effort were visible during their oral presentations as well.

In order to make them participative and generate interest on the course, we started using Facebook as a medium to share multiple perspectives on a given text. Branch based closed user-group communities were formed, involving 120 diploma level students of six branches of engineering. The students were encouraged to post real time updates which were later analyzed to check their levels of understanding and feedback was posted in the community page. Peer review and correction was allowed along with the posting of tweets and video links on the said text. Secondly, for the students having problems with grammar and vocabulary, they were asked to subscribe to VOA Learning English’s Facebook page. Online quizzes on grammar and vocabulary were conducted at various levels and remedial measures were suggested.
Findings and Analysis

The Classroom Social Networking Project has given us some interesting results and it has projected certain trends as far as the use of English as a second language is concerned. It was found that the students who are usually silent in the class have come out with interesting perspectives on a text while posting comments and responding to feedback on the updates posted by their friends on a given issue. This has also improved their performance as they become vocal and responsive in terms of defending their stand as posted on Facebook. However, this is found to be dependent on the condition that the teacher starts the discussion with a comment or an update posted by a user pertaining to the text on the Facebook wall.

With no rigidity on the grammatical and stylistic rules, although this has resulted in making them open and responsive as against their performance in the classroom, yet it has proved detrimental in making them aware of the grammatical rules and their application in the language. While 54% of the surveyed students have major problems in the field of orthography, 46% on the other hand, have problems in both orthography and syntax (Barthakur, 2011). This has also reflected a disturbing position as far as the use of English as L2 by the students in this part of the country. 86% of the surveyed students are found to have problems in the major areas of grammar and this lack of rules prohibits them from expressing their views in the classroom. However, they find Facebook comfortable in terms of application or lack of it as far as the grammatical rules are concerned.

The users’ level of comfortability is also evident in their preference of L1 over English and the frequency of code switching and code mixing is higher than in the offline mode. Interestingly, this is attributed primarily to the differences along their community lines more than anything else. It was found that despite making closed user communities on the basis of their branch affiliations, a tendency to create an intra-group using their unique linguistic code was apparent.

The state of Arunachal Pradesh homes twenty six major tribes and more than seventy sub-tribes, each marked by their unique belief systems and customs. They do not have a written script. Most of these dialects do not have distinctive grammatical markers as we have in English for personal pronouns, gender, singular and plural number, etc. This has proven to be the primary cause for their L1 interfering in the use of L2, i.e., English. Lack of certain sounds have also influenced markedly on their orthography, as students tend to transcribe the sounds they articulate into writing. The most notable instances are the words starting with sounds /f/, /v/, clustered sounds like /cl/, /bl/, etc. Thus, words like /fake/ is written and pronounced as /pake/, velvet as /velbet/, /clumsy/ as /kulumsy/, and /blue/ as /bulue/. It is evident from their written assignments as well as their answer scripts of mid and end semester examinations where there is an overlap of the informal modes of writing with the formal one.

As all these were evident during their use of English language on Facebook, it provided a real time option for the administrator (or the course instructor) and the peers to correct their errors and provide hyperlinks and video links for a further study in that area. The nature of their errors has also provided the administrators with a database to identify and categorize the nature of their errors and offer customized solutions. A preliminary study of this database shows that there is a definite pattern of errors committed by the students belonging to different communities. This, in return, has helped in focusing on correcting these specific errors instead of giving generalized course/lectures on English grammar.

Conclusion

With knowledge bases becoming more accessible and content creation becoming relatively easier due to technological interfaces, using social networking sites as Facebook as an instructional tool would make teaching more integrative and interactive. For this, a re-contextualization of the theories of teaching and pedagogic process is required along with a proper linguistic and content management of these sites. With cloud computing and cloud learning gaining wider acceptance given its ability to provide instant solutions and feedback in a de-spatialized manner, such innovative tools of learning would appeal to the learners more than the usual methods followed in an institutional set up.
References


