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Tweeting by Saudi EFL Learners: A Study of English in Use at Qassim University

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Abstract: Language use patterns in electronic messaging have the potential to reveal much about the vocabulary corpus, syntax, and general proficiency of non-native users. This is of relevance to teachers as learners' academic performance and success is dependent on English language proficiency, especially in higher education. Using a mixed methods approach, this study examines the English language use characteristics evident in the morphosyntactic and paralinguistic features such as clipping, neologisms, language deformation in a corpus of text messages totalling 3600 words from class conversations of 68 EFL undergraduate students at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. Patterns of Twitter messaging (named **Twitterese** in this study) using the GroupTweet function of the app were studied as it is easier for group members to follow one account rather than rely on hashtags of each and every peer. Findings show that the participants exhibit remarkable English language proficiency as they use novel (and sometimes complex) language forms including modified/ deformed spelling, syntax, word selection, and massive abbreviations. Moreover, amongst the morphosyntactic features under study, the highest number of non-standard use/deformities were seen in deletion or overuse of punctuation marks, Verb use (38% non-standard), occurrence of non-standard English in the form of phonetic replacement of words (62%), non-standard spelling with deletion of vowels inside the word (59%), a departure from norm that appears to be intentional (for example, *abl** for *able*), massive clipping in the form of abbreviations, acronyms, and shortening of words. Voluntary interviews with thirteen participants helped gather specific data on the language acquisition, communicative proficiency, and general confidence in language use that the participants claimed was attributable to Twitterese. The study concludes that while this variety of language is not a substitute for Standard English, it adds to the language corpus of the users and aids their communicative proficiency.

Keywords: Communicative proficiency, electronic messaging, morphosyntactic and paralinguistic features, proficiency enhancement, Twitterese.

1 Introduction

Learning is a multidimensional process and learners' performance in the classroom is affected by what they learn in the 'outside', bigger world [1]. In continuation of this thought, learners in the contemporary knowledge society are apt to bring into the learning experience or the academic world a great deal of their non-academic experiences, and vice-versa [2, 3]. One significant example of this is the place of social media and electronic messaging apps in the lives of young learners [4, 5]. So deep-rooted is this technology in our world that it has begun to be seen as a potent learning tool much like the blackboard and chalk were for the previous generations. Consequently, teachers are and need to be part of their learners' 'inner circle' of communication means, and indeed they are nudging forward with a great deal of learning happening over these tools. The assumption is that both parties involved in the classroom processes, i.e. a teacher and students, are familiar with the technology, the tool, and its foppish language [6].

Though mostly ungrammatical and non-standard, this variety of language (English in this study) addresses the users' needs for abbreviated, meaningful, immediate communication. One event that facilitated the entry of the teachers (mostly non-digital natives) has been the pandemic which made it expedient for them to adopt it for their work even though their learners' writing in this distorted form appeared to them as an imminent threat to the pristine glory of standard English, which they aspired to teach to their learners. In the classroom lectures, the place of shorthand has been taken by this

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informal language genre while learners at the university level are conscious to stick to formal language for all academic work [7] which in reality is the language they use in practically all their e-communication.

Significance of the study

This research is important for exploring social media applications as a learning tool in academic writing for EFL learners at Qassim University, KSA. A deep study is done on the impact of social media platforms in terms of educational and language learning purposes and its effects on learners' language learning process supplementary to formal classes. Academic writing is challenging for EFL learners but they can use social media applications to gather materials and for collaboration purposes too. Snapchat, WhatsApp are very popular in KSA for social networking, but students and teachers use apps like Twitter and Instagram for general and educational purposes.

Social media platforms have gained exceptional popularity in the last few years, especially among young groups [8]. Few social media platforms are very much popular and in demand nowadays. Social media is not only used to communicate with each other but also social media is used as a learning tool in academic writing for EFL learners [9]. Few social media applications are high in demand like WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram which is gaining popularity day by day and the users are growing in numbers [10]. For young learners' social media has become an important part of life. Though social media not only used for communication purposes now they are playing a key role in the learning process too and gaining quick popularity for educational purposes too.

Numerous research has been conducted in the past on the effects of social media on educational processes, but few of them concentrate on social media's function in learning English as a second language (11-16). It has been demonstrated that social media is used as a potent instrument to promote involvement and communication in educational environments, despite having a variety of functions and not being specially created for educational reasons [17]. Indeed, highly visible social media platforms give teachers and students the ability to build and take part in online communities designed for the sharing of particular content and fostering learning. Additionally, students use of social media as a learning aid is another factor.

Recently, Bal and Bicen [18] has explored the purpose of students' social media use and determining their perspectives on education and find out that it plays a direct impact in educational purposes too along with communication and general purposes. Al Arif [19] examined the application of social media in English language learning by EFL learners for the English study Program at the University of Jambi. The study main aim was to apply an exploratory study to examine the role of social media in learning English as a foreign language. Data were collected through a survey and semi structured interviews. During this study researcher observed that most of the students use a range of social media specifically Instagram and Facebook were most popular social medial among students. One of limitation which was concurred during this investigation was that students spend more time on Instagram and Facebook for general purposes than learning English as foreign language.

Vivakaran in [20] has explored the utilization of Social Media Platforms for Educational Purposes among the Faculty of Higher Education with at Tamil Nadu. Findings showed that social media platforms have a positive impact if they are used properly in teaching-learning process. It may create a negative impact which depends on individual use.

The potential of WhatsApp in assisting language learning was found to be significant in a number of empirical studies [21, 22]. Susilo [22], for example, applied WhatsApp and Facebook with 10 students in an English class at the Open University of Indonesia to explore the social networks' potential to enhance the students' collaboration and activity. The findings revealed that the use of WhatsApp and Facebook could have the potential to raise the learners' collaboration and activity outside their classroom, possibly due to the affordances that allow learners to easily share information anywhere and anytime.

Fattah [23] conducted a study in the Saudi context and investigated the role of WhatsApp in enhancing the achievements of Saudi EFL learners at the tertiary level. The findings indicated that WhatsApp plays an important role in learners' vocabulary, writing, and punctuation enhancement. As per their observation, it was found that the students who were using WhatsApp as a social media platform for learning English as a foreign language outperformed learners in traditional classrooms. They were good at language learning, especially in sentence punctuation and structuring of sentences. A few researcher observed that WhatsApp users had great improvements in choice of words while making sentences.

A study done by Alqasham [24] on Saudi EFL learner Agency towards the use of Social media, specifically WhatsApp for English learning at Qassim University confirms the role of collaborative and convenient environment for learners. They observed that WhatsApp improves the learning environment for learners to practice and enhance language learning. Using Social networking and WhatsApp had a good impact on the pedagogical implication of learning English as a foreign language. It also helped Saudi Education Ministry potentially in achieving their aim of enhancing the use of technology especially that which used social media in learning and understanding English as a foreign language.

Though there are various social media platforms available nowadays but Facebook as a potential platform for communication has also gained much popularity among educators and researcher in the education system. So, there are a considerable number of researchers working on the application of Facebook in the teaching-learning process. According to Smith and Anderson [25], Facebook, the most popular social media platform ever, has elements that enhance

educational commitment, engagement, cooperation, peer support, and peer-to-peer communication skills with classmates and teacher's activities [26]. However, it should be noted that in order for Facebook to be used in the educational environment, educators must have pre-planned objectives. As an educational tool, it also enhances language teaching and learning and offers benefits not only for students but also for educators. Facebook offers chances for learners to be engaged on tasks, for improving all four English language skills, and for increasing student motivation [27-29].

Much like Facebook, Twitter as an educational tool has been the subject area of research by many scholars [15, 30-36]. Being a microblogging tool, Twitter is highly effective in micro-teaching [37] improving learner attitudes and class engagement, especially in higher education [31, 33]. Apart from these benefits, Twitter in the classroom has been proven to enhance learner autonomy [46]. Additionally, as a classroom aid, the affordance of communication and interaction with native language users on the Twitter app rise a great advantage in language learning, as well as in creating awareness towards the exchange of meaning [35]. Taskiran et al. [38] investigated the potential of Twitter in assisting language learning and it was found to be significant in the empirical study. As per Blattner and Dalola [39] Twitter is an authentic and dynamic social media platform especially for L2 learning as it contributes to cultural and sociopragmatic awareness of the learners. It also enhances the interaction possibilities for practicing the language with native users which is a unique language learning opportunity for EFL students.

Though previous studies conducted on the role of social media and its impacts on the teaching learning process in Saudi Arabia concluded that social media platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter etc. are effectively utilized in the classrooms [4, 40], yet there is lack of studies that explore the complexity and dynamics of language learners' agency over the period through these platforms. It is still required to explore how the affordances or constraints that emerged from the dynamic and complex interactions of learners in their language learning environment with the use of messaging apps help them to pursue their learning aims [40]. Moreover, qualitative studies and research methods have also been deficient, calling for deep digging to investigate this aspect of language education. All these limitations in previous studies and gaps are explored in this study to fill the perceptible gap.

Research objectives

This study aims to analyse the characteristics of English language use in terms of morphosyntactic and paralinguistic features in the English language messaging of undergraduates on the GroupTweet.

Research questions

The study answers the following questions:

1. What are the non-standard language use patterns observable in the English used by Saudi undergraduate learners for Tweeting?
2. What are the most frequently deformed morphosyntactic features that appear in the Saudi EFL learners' Group Tweeting?
3. What is the Saudi EFL learners' perception of non-standard English language use for Group Tweeting purposes?

2 Methodologies

Research design

This study basically concerns the cryptic, acronymic, abbreviated English language use by undergraduate EFL learners at Qassim University and their perception of its role in their language acquisition, communicative proficiency, and general confidence in language use. The study took place in the academic year 1444AH.

Participants

A GroupTweet was created to provide a communication platform for the 68 EFL undergraduate students at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. These learners were enrolled in the sophomore year of the English program; they were grouped in the high ability language proficiency (at an entry level GPA of 3.5 or more) and a consistent GPA of 3 or higher in the university exams. The participants' consent to allow the researcher use of the data for strictly research purposes was duly obtained verbally. The participants' median age was 22.5 years.

Data building

Data were processed in three steps. First, the collection: All academic discussions including assignment updates and feedback for class tasks were carried out on the GroupTweet for a period of three months and data were downloaded and saved on a daily basis by the researcher. A roster of the printouts of the discussions was prepared totalling 489 pages in all. It was calculated that an hour of GroupTweet amounted to between 160 and 230 words on an average. Since we used Parisse [40] guidelines for density of corpus data in language studies, the study needed 30-40 hours of conversations. Accordingly, in the second step, random data totalling 6800 words were extracted for use in the study and manual parsing was done to isolate language use peculiarities. Thirdly, all peculiarities were converted to electronic form using spreadsheets to enable data handling. All similarly featured output were classified together and treated as one irrespective of individual differences. For instance, output such as *OMG* (Oh my God), *IDK* (I don't know), and *LoL* (Laugh out loud) were treated as Acronyms, and so on for other word categories. The following section summarizes the category-wise language use peculiarities and their analysis.

3 Results

RQ1: What are the non-standard language use patterns observable in the English used by Saudi undergraduate learners for Tweeting?

Data summarized in Table 1 below indicates the recurring patterns of non-standard language use patterns in the corpus. Linguistically, punctuation is the most affected in these Tweets in two ways: One, most punctuations that were necessary if the same Tweets were composed in standard English are deleted. This seems to be intentional to save the limited scope of letters allowed on the tool as well as because the group was more or less homogenous with comparable language abilities and hence, comprehensibility of messages even with missing punctuation. From these data, it cannot be said that there is language deficiency in the participants, rather, to the contrary. Phonetic replacements were the next most frequently occurring linguistic feature. Table 1 summarizes the morphemes that are, as a rule, always replaced by their phonetic counterparts.

Table 1: Replacement of morphemes.

Morpheme	Phonetic replacement
please	plz
your	ur
have	hv
great	gr8
thanks	thnx
next	nxt
enough	enuf

As can be seen, typically, the process involves deletion of the vowel sounds in the original/ standard morphemes. As a linguistic process, this is counterintuitive since the end product of the deletions is consonant cluster in most cases, a rather challenging result especially for non-native users of English. In the Saudi context, this can be a heartening finding as it indicates the ability of the learners to process complex structures in English morphology.

Moreover, both abbreviations and acronyms find great favour in **Twitterese**, given the limited allowance of letters in the tool. Table 2 summarizes the frequently occurring examples.

Table 2: Abbreviations and acronyms.

Word/ Group of words	Abbreviation/ Acronym
See you later	syl
I don't know	idk
Picture	pic
Laugh out loud	lol
Class work	Cw
Good	Gud
Am	m

Abbreviations denote new concepts, approach to language, and real objects and, immensely enrich the language. In other words, they bridge the chasm between limited lexis and the needs for thinking. In the dataset in this study, the rich repertoire of abbreviations and acronyms point towards the 'hidden' semantic strength of the participants as they find effective correlation between words and contextual interaction. They form a unique paralinguistic resource for the second or foreign language user/learner, empowering them with unforeseen communicative flexibility.

RQ2: What are the most frequently deformed morphosyntactic features that appear in the Saudi EFL learners' Group Tweeting?

A conclusion that can be derived from the dataset of this study is that morphosyntax exists only nominally in **Twitterese**. But first, a functional definition of the term. We understand morpheme as word, and syntax as sentence formation. However, linguistically, a word in English sometimes takes an inflection or deletion to suit the needs of the sentence or the syntax. For example, a morpheme, when used as the subject in singular form, is used in its root form. On the other hand, when it occurs in the place of the verb, it may need an inflectional addition to ensure noun-verb agreement. Similarly, verb forms sometimes need alteration to number, gender, person, tense and aspect. So also, singular and plural forms of the morpheme. However, the dataset here shows that inflections in verbs are the most frequently dropped in **Twitterese**. Talking of verbs, supporting verbs such as have, am, are either dropped or clipped to single or double letter phonetic equivalents.

Punctuations, where used, substitute several words, such as to express extreme surprise or shock, for instance when the researcher (also the teacher) indicated that an assignment submission date had expired, 54 of the participants only responded with repeated use of the exclamation mark (!!!!= 37) or the interrogatory mark (????= 17).

Table 3: Deformed language used.

Punctuations <i>mark</i>	Frequency
!!!!	37
????	17

RQ 3: What is the Saudi EFL learners’ perception of non-standard English language use for GroupTweeting purposes?

Informal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants on purely volunteering basis. Initially recorded on the researcher’s mobile phone (with prior consent of participants), all interviews were transcribed on the MS Word and parsed for recurring themes. The semi-structured interview questions were along the following themes: The truncated language use offers the participants worldwide interaction The participants are familiar with the popular **Twitterese** conventions **Twitterese** gives them greater language use leverage in academic language use **Twitterese** is a great communication tool.

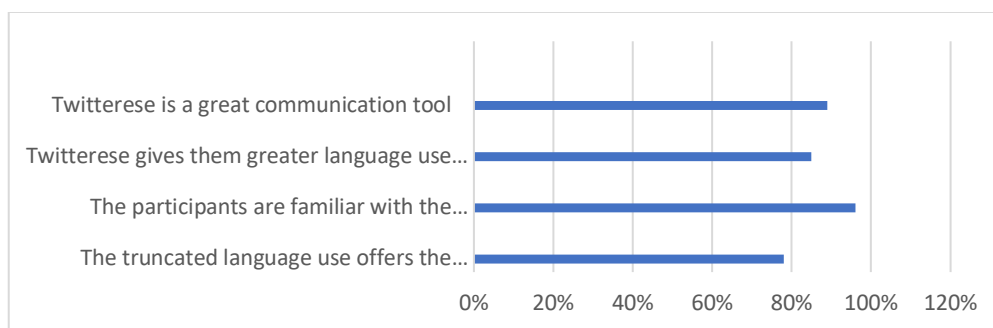


Fig. 1: Learners’ perceptions on Twitterese use.

Respondents generally reported that they are immensely comfortable with the use of tech tools like messaging on GroupTweet as they have practically grown up with such practices and also because they are a part of their real life. Two participants even added that they felt that the conventional practice of physical note-taking and assignments submission should be replaced with tech enabled substitutes as this will also prepare them for the real, professional lives which are likely to be woven deeply with technology. One respondent reported that the learners felt more connected to teachers that integrated one-to-one messaging apps into their tutorial schedules to enable learners virtual access. All the respondents supported the role of **Twitterese** in making them feel connected with their counterparts the world over as it was a language paradigm that they felt was exclusive to their generation.

4 Discussions

Findings of the first question indicated that the recurring patterns of non-standard language use patterns in the corpus. Linguistically, punctuation is the most affected one. Ben Zimmer [42] notes that **Twitterese** is more of a conversation or speech-like discourse it lies ‘somewhere between speech and writing’, evolving each day with regional language use or variety finding a representation in the tweets in the more than 200 million posts every day. In a way, Twitter and **Twitterese** are a linguist’s delight as geography, economic status, and even race are reflected in this new language. With specific reference to English, user generated jargon, distinct from language use on other social-networking sites, visible in Twitter conventions like the hashtag (#) which ‘mention’ another user, OMG for ‘Oh My God!’, 4 for ‘for’, TBH for ‘To be honest’, BFN for ‘Bye for now’ and so on, add to the truncated Twitter lingo and are used across board much like many other **Twitterese**.

Findings of the second question indicated that, morphosyntax exists only nominally in Twitterese. This study has established that even in the non-native English speaking learner base (KSA) under study here, language use in the virtual space has taken on a highly idiosyncratic character with abbreviations, neologisms, and acronyms being coined by the users and other users easily grasping their meaning. In a way, communication has reached its zenith in this space where rules of grammar, syntax, and morphology no longer bind the language or its users and the playing ground if open to one and all to deviate from them as they feel like.

Crystal [43] and Waldrone et al. [44] note how language use is witnessing new options, much removed from the standard ones. These features have, in fact, been given a nomenclature considering their all-pervading presence in our live: Textese, which applied to this specialized language use across all messaging apps and tools. They are characterized by contextual changes of words in terms of orthography and use, and are divergent from established norms [45]. Though Textese can be a language teacher's nightmare, it cannot be denied that it is a kind of interlanguage which promoted communication in the target language, adding to the bilingual language repertoire of the users [37]. Moreover, studies such as Tagg [46] and Lyddy et al. [47] on the language features that e-messages carry, led to the conclusion that the language of the text is a distinctive variety of English characterized by the unique syntax, morphology, orthography, and phonology that lie therein.

Respondents to the third research question reported generally that they are immensely comfortable with the use of tech tools like messaging on GroupTweet as they have practically grown up with such practices and also because they are a part of their real life.

5 Conclusions

The study found that Saudi Twitterese follows no standard English patterns when used by undergraduate EFL learners. The most frequent words were, plz, ur, hv, gr8, thnx, nxt, enuf. The findings show that this language cannot be labelled 'fringe' given its widespread popularity and use amongst the participant sample, and historically too, the earliest 'tweets' have been the telegraphic messages which did not do any harm to standard English. Data, especially the interviews show that the freedom to use language as they liked enormously boosted the participants' confidence and their language use demonstrated the ability to coin and comprehend new morphemes and syntax.

Recommendations

One remarkable feature of Twitterese is that most of the Tweets carry a shortened URL or link to longer Tweets/ pieces, facilitating users to greater language use by making content available that would otherwise perhaps have gone unnoticed. In this capacity too, as teachers, encouraging learners in the use of Twitter as a supplementary language learning tool can be a great idea and one which, it can be safely predicted, will be welcomed by the young people. The freedom to use language as they feel like gives a new dimension to learner motivation and promotes learning outcome. It is therefore, recommended that teachers need not discourage non-standard language use as in Twitterese though they may gently remind their learners that all formal diaspora require of the users to use the strictly formal variety. Texting as a language of the virtual world may, in fact, be included as a non-credit course component to make it viable for teachers and learners to connect in a common language paradigm in the future.

This study has been unique in many ways but there have been certain limitations here too. Gender was not considered as a factor in this study which could have added a new dimension to the outcomes since many previous studies have concluded that there are gendered differences in language use. Apart from this, the perceptions of teachers who are at the receiving end of the learners' transference of textese to academic output, was not taken into account here. It is hoped that future replications will include these factors to make the results more generalized.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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