The Impact of Social Media on the Decline of Formal Writing: A Comparative Study of Digital and Traditional Discourse

Raqib Abbas Jeryo[1], Murtadha Hamid Hamzah[2], Rusul Neima Kamal[3],
Fatimah AbdulJaleel AL_Shujairi[4], Halla Haider Muhi[5], Rasha Ihsan Saadoon[6], Baraa Sattar Hamad[7]

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts Humanities, AL-Mustaqbal University, Babylon, Hillah, 51001, Iraq[1&2&3&4&5&6&7].
Corresponding Author: *Raqib Abbas Jeryo - Raqib.abbas.jrew@uomus.edu.iq*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study investigates the influence of digital social media Iraqi EFL students' formal writing skills in Baghdad. This study aimed to ascertain the extent to which digital social media affect the formal writing skills of Iraqi EFL students, explore the perspectives, and lived experiences of both EFL learners and their educators regarding the relationship between social media usage and the cultivation of formal writing competence. The research employed a qualitative case study design. Interviewing both lecturers and engaging students in focus groups. Findings indicate a decline in adherence to formal writing conventions, alongside potential enhancement of speaking skills. This research firmly establishes the necessity for explicit instruction in register variation and responsible digital communication within EFL education.

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, the influence of digital social media on communication is undeniable (Humphreys, 2007). This study focuses on a critical intersection: the impact of these technologies on the formal writing skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. While social media offers opportunities for language practice and connection, the prevalent informal language and rapid communication styles may pose a challenge to the development of formal writing competence. This article examines these questions, guided by the perspective of educators and the lived experience of Iraqi EFL students at the University of Baghdad, a region where the challenges of limited language exposure outside of academic settings are acute.

1.2 Definitions

1. **Social media:** Digital platforms facilitating the sharing of thoughts, opinions, and information through computer-generated networks and communities (Dollarhide, 2021). For this study, social media encompasses platforms used regularly by Iraqi university students, including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube (Ravindran et al. 2022).

2. **Formal Writing:** Written communication characterized by adherence to established grammatical conventions, structured formats, precise vocabulary, and a demonstrable awareness of audience and purpose (Hayes, 1996). The intended style for academic assignments, professional correspondence, and other contexts requiring a high degree of linguistic accuracy and clarity (Jabeen, 2015).

3. **Formal Writing Competence:** Demonstrable ability to employ grammatical rules accurately, engage in proper punctuation and orthography, and structure logical and comprehensible long paragraphs that are easy to comprehend in their structure (Allaith & Joshi, 2011).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Developing effective formal writing skills is a crucial but challenging task for EFL students, ultimately impacting their academic and professional prospects (Johnson, 2017). With the omnipresence of social media, students are heavily exposed to abbreviated, informal, and grammatically simplified modes of communication (Humphreys, 2007). This exposure can lead to challenges in differentiating between formal and informal registers, resulting in a decline in writing quality within academic settings (Crystal, 2009). The present research sought to provide a nuanced understanding of how this influence manifests within a specific context: Iraqi EFL university students in Baghdad.

1.4 Aims of the Study

This study sought to address a significant gap in existing research by examining the following core issues:

1. The extent to which digital social media affect the formal writing skills of Iraqi EFL students.

2. Explore the perspectives and lived experiences of both Iraqi EFL learners and their educators regarding the relationship between social media usage and the cultivation of formal writing competence.

1.5 Limitations

As a qualitative case study, the findings are not intended to be broadly generalizable but to offer insight into the challenges and trends specific to a single university in Baghdad (University of Baghdad). The small sample sizes limit the scope of the finding to the unique community studied in the research.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study offers several key contributions to the field of EFL education. Findings will shed light on the challenges faced by EFL learners in the digital age, identifying how their social media habits influence their formal writing skills. This research will further inform instructional practices and curricula

development, offering targeted strategies for promoting formal writing competence while leveraging the potential benefits of digital communication tools. This knowledge can be helpful, given that the social media has a potential impact on WhatsApp languages.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Writing Styles

Formal writing has its roots in classical rhetoric, where structure, clarity, and eloquence were paramount (Hayes, 1996). Historically, written communication served as a means to convey ideas, establish authority, and document knowledge. The emphasis was on precision, formality, and a clear delineation between writer and audience. The late 20th century marked a pivotal shift with the advent of personal computers and the internet (Humphreys, 2007). Social networking sites (social media) have become the chief communication tools to everyone, including the learning youths (Okhakhu & Omoera, 2010; Oyedele, 2015; and Ehiemua and Omoera, 2015).

2.2 Social Media's Influence on Writing

One of the most evident impacts of social media on writing is the prevalence of casual language and slang (Crystal, 2009). Social media allows for the rapid dissemination of new phrases and linguistic trends, making language more fluid (Crystal, 2009). Users often create and share memes or viral content that encapsulate cultural moments, contributing to a lexicon shaped by shared experiences rather than traditional linguistic authority (Humphreys, 2007). New technologies do not merely alter the way people live their lives, but it affects the way they think (Roelofse, 2013).

Another defining feature of social media is the restriction of character counts, particularly on platforms like Twitter (Humphreys, 2007). This constraint has necessitated a shift towards conciseness and precision in writing. The demand for conciseness often results in the use of shorthand, acronyms, and emojis, which can convey complex emotions or ideas in a fraction of the space (Crystal, 2009).

The informal nature of social media writing has also led to notable shifts in grammar and punctuation standards (Crystal, 2009). Traditional writing emphasizes adherence to grammatical rules, yet social media often embraces a more flexible approach. Frequent use of wrongly spelt words in an essay may erode the direct intended meaning of communication (Songxaba & Sincuba, 2019). WhatsApp may promote word cutting and such word cuts may be confusing for different people and even be meaningless for some readers (Songxaba & Sincuba, 2019).

2.3 Collaborative Writing and Social Media

Pupils' writing ability can be improved by building their interest, motivation and enjoyment in writing through technology (Graham & Perin, 2007). As stated by Sudjana, Rifai (2005), the message that is sent

through communication symbols is expected to excite and give confidence as well as motivation to the pupils to participate actively in the learning process. Writing can be improved when students use social media because students follow foreign English Language teachers online and make use of various social media sites such as You Tube to watch English Language tutorials (Ilyas & Putri, 2020).

2.4 Challenges in EFL Writing

EFL students encounter distinctive challenges in developing effective formal writing skills, impacting their academic and professional success (Johnson, 2017). Common obstacles include linguistic barriers, limited vocabulary, and difficulties in structuring coherent arguments (Smith, 2018). These challenges hinder EFL students from articulating opinions with clarity and precision, impeding their overall language proficiency. Learners using EFL may not be able to write correctly and appropriately in English, if their writing is highly influenced by WhatsApp language (Songxaba & Sincuba, 2019).

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine the impact of social media on the formal writing skills of Iraqi EFL students at the university of Baghdad. A case study approach was deemed appropriate to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of both lecturers and students within a specific institutional context.

Participants: Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). Five (n=5) lecturers (2 male, 3 female) from the English Department with experience teaching writing courses were selected. Inclusion criteria included a minimum of three years of teaching experience and familiarity with social media platforms. Sixty (n=60) Iraqi undergraduate EFL students (30 male, 30 female) enrolled in various degree programs participated in focus group discussions. Students were selected to represent a range of academic disciplines and self-reported levels of social media usage. All participants provided informed consent.

Research Tools: Data collection involved two primary tools:

Semi-structured Interviews: A semi-structured interview protocol was developed for use with lecturers. Questions focused on their observations of changes in student writing skills over time, their perceptions of the influence of social media, and their strategies for addressing writing challenges.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Three separate focus groups, each consisting of 20 students, were conducted. The FGDs aimed to explore students' experiences with social media, their perceptions of its impact on their writing, and the challenges they face in developing formal writing skills.

Data Collection Procedure: Following ethical approval from the university's research ethics committee, lecturers were contacted via email and invited to participate in interviews. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Students were recruited through announcements in classes and invited to participate in FGDs. The FGDs were conducted in a comfortable setting, facilitated by an experienced moderator, and audio-recorded with consent.

Data Analysis: Data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then read and re-read to familiarize the researcher with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, based on recurring patterns and themes within the data. Codes were then organized into broader themes and sub-themes. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the content of the data. Finally, the themes were defined and named, and illustrative quotes were selected to support the findings. To ensure rigor, a second researcher independently coded a subset of the transcripts, and inter-coder reliability was assessed. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of the interview and focus group data revealed several key themes directly addressing the two research questions: the impact of social media on students' formal writing skills and the related experiences and perceptions of students and lecturers.

Theme 1: Perceived Decline in Formal Writing Quality due to Social Media Influence: Both lecturers and students consistently reported a perceived decline in the quality of students' formal writing, which they directly attributed to the influence of social media.

Lecturer Perspectives: Lecturers expressed concerns about a range of writing errors, linking them to social media habits. One lecturer, coded as FL2, noted: "I'm seeing more and more students submitting essays riddled with grammatical errors, like incorrect verb tenses and missing punctuation. It's like they can't switch off the social media mindset when they're writing formally." Another lecturer, ML1, stated, "The biggest problem is the informal language that creeps in. Students use abbreviations, slang, and text message lingo in their academic papers, which makes them sound unprofessional and undermines their credibility." Lecturers noticed a disconnect between the ability to communicate online, and the ability to write formal essays.

Student Perspectives: Students themselves acknowledged the challenges in maintaining formal writing standards due to their social media habits. A student coded as FS15 stated, "When I'm writing an essay, it's hard to remember all the rules. I'm so used to just typing whatever comes to mind on WhatsApp, I make silly grammatical mistakes." Another student, MS22, admitted, "Sometimes, the way I write on

social media just bleeds into my schoolwork without me even realizing it. It's like my brain is wired to write in short, informal bursts." These comments emphasize the subconscious transfer of linguistic habits from social media to formal writing tasks.

Theme 2: Shift Towards Brevity and Loss of Elaboration Skills: The focus group participants consistently highlighted another negative trend; the inability to further write complex ideas after social media use.

One lecturer (coded ML3) commented, ""They're so used to getting their point across in a few words that they can't seem to expand on their ideas and develop a proper line of reasoning. My student's essay paragraphs are short and lack content." Student acknowledged that these social media trends had negative impact on their education as well. FS 47 expressed the challenge that she had as she said, "It is difficult to write longer when you are used to the constant short tweets."

Theme 3: Positive Perceptions of Speaking Skills: In contrast to a negative outcome for writing, there was a perception of the enhancement in speaking skills through interaction with different users.

MS10 explained, "I follow native speakers on twitter and try to write like them. When I get replies, my written skills have improved." MS 12, further highlighted the impact through YouTube videos as she added "Watching YouTube videos helps to improve my pronunciation and also increase my understanding of the different cultures."

Theme 4: Student Awareness of the Need for Explicit Instruction: A final key theme to the need to differentiate between formal and informal writing and how students felt the curriculum was outdated and had been updated, coded FL1 stated, "Our students need explicit education and training. Social media and formal writing are different. Students need to know that." Student also concurred, coded FS 22 explained that if the new system had a unit it would have been much easier to understand. "Our students and lecturers should make clear the need to update our content," she stated. "With everything being digital, there needs to be focus from both side"

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that social media has a nuanced and multifaceted impact on the writing and speaking skills of Iraqi EFL students in Baghdad. While social media appears to enhance speaking confidence and fluency by providing opportunities for practice and exposure to diverse language users, it also contributes to a perceived decline in formal writing skills due to the promotion of informal language use, brevity, and a blurring of registers.

These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the potential negative effects of social media on grammatical competence (Ghouali & Benmoussat, 2019; Songxaba & Sincuba, 2019). The prevalence of abbreviations, slang, and unconventional punctuation on social media platforms can lead to the internalization of non-standard forms of writing, making it difficult for students to switch to a formal writing style in academic and professional contexts. This aligns with the concept of linguistic interference, where the features of one language (in this case, social media language) negatively influence the learning and use of another language (formal English) (Odlin, 1989). This is further compounded by the findings of this study that lecturers feel that students are unable to properly develop complex arguments through extensive language use because the concise language used on these platforms has affected them over time, as shown by Palfrey and Gasser (2008).

The positive impact of social media on speaking skills may be attributed to the increased opportunities for interaction and exposure to different accents and communication styles. Social media platforms can provide a low-pressure environment for students to practice their speaking skills, gain confidence, and receive feedback from peers and native speakers. This aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which suggests that language acquisition occurs through exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). Zhou (2021) highlighted that the frequent interactions that users and EFL students have while using platforms such as YouTube improves oral fluency because of repetition.

The blurring of formal and informal registers is a significant concern, as it indicates a lack of awareness of the social and contextual appropriateness of different language styles. As FL1 said in results "Our students need explicit education and training, students need to know the language". This suggests that students may need more explicit instruction in register variation and how to adapt their language use to different situations. Teachers must also incorporate teaching that has the social media language, not as a teaching standard but to educate as well as integrate.

However, as Ekundayo (2014) argues that the methods of SMS and e-mail will not ruin effective communication in English. Rather, the methods display a new interesting variety according to a "technolinguistic" dimension. This variety refers to the creative redeployment of extant language rules and items as constrained by the dynamics of technological or mechanical devices, which should be isolated and taught as such in Standard English.

The study has shown a need for curriculum and instruction re-evaluation. Social media can no longer be seen as a challenge, but now as tool where educators and lecturers can change curriculum to provide EFL learners an explicit view of different learning techniques.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that social media has a dual impact on Iraqi EFL students in Baghdad. It enhances their speaking skills through increased exposure and interaction but negatively affects their formal writing skills due to the informal nature and unique conventions of digital communication. These are technology-induced changes and will keep happening as time goes by. The curriculum must update, and students must be taught the difference.

7. Implications and Limitations

The findings of this study have several implications for EFL education. Educators should recognize the potential negative impact of social media on students' formal writing skills and implement strategies to address this challenge. This could include providing explicit instruction in grammar and writing conventions, incorporating peer review activities, using technology to support language learning, and creating opportunities for authentic communication in formal contexts. While some methods in the social media system can prove beneficial, explicit instruction in order to help learners differ between formal and informal language is required.

The study also highlights the need for digital literacy education, which would equip students with the skills to critically evaluate information online and to distinguish between formal and informal language styles. Students need to be able to effectively use social media for learning and communication without compromising their formal writing abilities.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, this study was limited by its focus on a single university in Baghdad and its small sample size. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts. Further research is needed to explore the impact of social media on writing skills in different settings and with larger, more diverse samples. Second, future studies should seek to explore what factors would create a more explicit understanding. Future research should also consider the impact of social media on all four language skills.

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