

THE IMPACT OF USING NET LINGO IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION ON OFF-LINE WRITING TASKS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of using net lingo (such as `btw` means `by the way`) in computer-mediated communication on off-line writing tasks among Cohort Two students of the Overseas Link B. Ed. TESL Programme. The subjects consisted of almost the entire population of the Cohort Two students. A survey questionnaire was administered to determine the extent of net lingo usage among the students as well as to examine the relationship between net lingo usage in computer-mediated communication and its usage in off-line writing tasks. The findings showed that net lingo was fairly extensively used by the students in computer-mediated communication and that the more frequent the students use net lingo in computer-mediated communication, the more likely it will emerge in their off-line writing tasks. The results suggest that lecturers and students need to take some action to counter the emergence of net lingo in writing tasks.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there have been growing concerns regarding the impact of net lingo on the English language. It has been said that the usage of net lingo is corrupting the standards of English (Johnston, 2003). Some educators even claimed that the drop in students' performance in English language papers could be caused by the prolonged use of net lingo (Teh, 2004). This claim seems justifiable as it is possible that frequent exposure to net lingo could lead to it being a habit. As such, students may unconsciously use net lingo in their writing. With the increasing accessibility of computer-mediated communication (CMC) such unconscious use of net lingo would thus not be surprising. In this study, CMC refers to e-mailing, online chatting and text messaging.

In Malaysia, 74 percent of mobile phone subscribers send at least a text message per day (Koay, Azilawati, Malini, & Ng, 2004). As net lingo is the online lingua franca due to its time-saving nature, these users would have been exposed to the lingo at some time or other in the past. Since approximately eight hundred thousand Malaysian students are such users (Koay, Azilawati, Malini, & Ng, 2004), there is a possibility that the conversational writing they use in CMC which includes shorthand, non-conventional spellings and emoticons could inadvertently creep into their schoolwork (Lee, 2002; Smith, 2004).

When net lingo begins to seep into off-line prose, most educators and linguists (for example, White, Beckerman, Pritchard, & Schanbaum, 2002) agree that it poses a problem. This is because of its informality which could be attributable to its freewheeling nature (Baron, 2001). The lack of standardization across its users also causes incomprehensibility which could be annoying and impractical (Rubin, 2003). Ironically, it is this very characteristic of net lingo that renders some linguists (for example, Crystal, 2001; Kamel, 2002) to see it as an indication of diversity and creativity, which is capable of enriching and expanding the writing skills. This perhaps explains why some experts (for example, Jansen, 2004) suggest capitalizing on this latest trend to generate students' thinking processes during brainstorming sessions in class. That notwithstanding, many educators (for example, DeKorne & Chin, 2002) are inclined to impress upon their students that there is a clear distinction between conversational and formal writing styles and that only the latter is acceptable in academic work.

In light of the above viewpoints, there is a need to investigate the issue of net lingo from the Malaysian perspective, especially with respect to the next generation of English language educators. This is because the impact of net lingo on their off-line writing tasks could influence the standards of the English language in Malaysia as they are the future implementers of the English language syllabi. Furthermore, it is their generation which is at the forefront of net lingo usage.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the study was to investigate the impact of using net lingo on off-line writing tasks among Cohort Two students of the Overseas Link B. Ed. TESL Programme. It sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How widespread is the usage of net lingo among Cohort Two students?
2. Is there a relationship between the usage of net lingo in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its usage in off-line writing tasks among Cohort Two students?

METHODOLOGY

The subjects of the study consisted of 114 Cohort Two students of the Overseas Link B. Ed. TESL Programme who were studying in Foundation Quarter III at the International Languages Teacher Training Institute. They were between 19 to 20 years of age and had comparable level of English language proficiency as determined by their English Language grade in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia 2002.

A survey questionnaire was administered to the subjects in June 2004. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher after consultations with English language lecturers at the International Languages Teacher Training Institute as well as through a review of literature. The instrument was validated by two lecturers from the institute's Research and Development Department. The questionnaire was used to determine the extent of net lingo usage among the subjects as well as to examine the relationship between net lingo usage in computer-mediated communication and its usage in off-line writing tasks. There were two main items in the questionnaire. For each item, the subjects had to respond to a 5-point Likert scale ('Never' to 'Always'). The following were the two main items:

When using the following computer-mediated communication, how often do you use net lingo?

Have you ever found yourself using net lingo in the following writing tasks?

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Net Lingo Usage

In order to determine the level of net lingo usage in CMC as well as in the off-line writing tasks, the mean score for each student was obtained based on his or her responses to the items in the survey questionnaire. As the items were scored based on a 5-point Likert scale, the lowest and highest possible mean scores were 1 and 5 respectively. It is pertinent to note that in this study the level of net lingo usage in CMC was used as the gauge to determine the extent of net lingo usage among the students.

The criteria for determining the level of net lingo usage can be seen in Table 1, along with the distribution of net lingo usage in CMC. The criteria shown in Table 1 were also used to interpret the mean level of net lingo usage throughout this paper unless otherwise stated.

Table 1: Criteria to Determine the Level of Net Lingo Usage and the Distribution of Net Lingo Usage in CMC

Level	Mean Score	Net Lingo Usage in CMC
High	Greater than 4	38 (33.3%)
Moderate	2-4	74 (64.9%)
Low	Less than 2	02 (1.8%)

As can be seen in Table 1, a student is said to have a low level of net lingo usage if he or she had a mean score of less than 2; moderate if the mean score was between 2 and 4; and high if the mean score was greater than 4.

As mentioned above, the extent of net lingo usage by a student was determined based on his or her net lingo usage in CMC. As such, in order to determine the level of net lingo usage for a student, the mean aggregate score was obtained from the student's responses to how often he or she used net lingo when e-mailing, chatting online and text messaging.

As can be seen from Table 1, only two students obtained a score of less than 2, indicating that only 1.8% of the students had a low level of net lingo usage. The distribution of net lingo usage shows that more than half (64.9%) of the respondents reported moderate usage of net lingo while a substantial number (33.3%) reported high usage. In other words, the usage of net lingo among Cohort Two students was considerably skewed towards the higher end. This is consistent with the overall mean obtained for the level of net lingo usage in CMC medium as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean Level of Net Lingo Usage in CMC Medium and Off-line Writing Tasks

<u>CMC Medium</u>	<u>Mean Level</u>
E-mail	3.96
Online chat	3.11
Text message	4.39
Overall	3.82
<u>Writing Tasks for Academic Purpose</u>	
Taking lecture notes	3.63
Drafting essays	2.66
Brainstorming ideas	3.41
Overall	3.23
<u>Writing Tasks for Non-Academic Purpose</u>	
Writing announcements	2.61
Jotting messages	3.72
Writing informal letters	2.91
Overall	3.08
Overall for Off-line Writing Tasks	3.16

Table 2 shows the mean level of net lingo usage in CMC and off-line writing tasks. As can be seen from the table, among the CMC media, the students had a high level of net lingo usage in text messaging (mean = 4.39) and a moderate level for e-mailing and online chat. The table shows that the level of net lingo usage varied according to the medium used. This result is consistent with Thurlow's (2003) finding that language is inevitably affected by technological variables such as synchronicity and length. For example, according to him, there is a difference in the language used in an e-mail as compared to a text message, as e-mail is considered asynchronous and generally lengthier whereas text messaging is synchronous and much shorter.

The factors of synchronicity and length perhaps can also explain why text messaging (mean=4.39), taking lecture notes (mean=3.63) and jotting messages (mean=3.72) had the highest mean level of net lingo usage in their respective categories. This is because text messaging, taking notes and jotting messages often demand the texts to be constructed within a short time (Grinter & Eldridge, 2003; Hopper, 2003). It is thus not surprising for students to resort to net lingo because of its time-saving nature.

As can be seen from Table 2, the mean level of net lingo usage for both academic (mean=3.23) and non-academic purposes (mean=3.08) is moderate with one or two tasks tending towards a high level. The results suggest that the use of net lingo in CMC has permeated into the writings of the students be it for academic purposes or otherwise. The question that then arises is whether the frequency of net lingo usage in CMC can affect the frequency of net lingo usage in the writing tasks of the students. The next section examines this in greater detail.

Relationship between the Level of Net Lingo Usage in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and in Off-line Writing Tasks

In order to determine the relationship between the level of net lingo usage in CMC and its usage in off-line writing tasks, the correlation coefficients (values of r) were obtained between the mean level of net lingo usage in CMC and that in off-line writing tasks. Further, t-tests analyses were conducted so as to determine if there were any significant differences between frequent net lingo users and the occasional ones with respect to the usage of net lingo in off-line writing tasks.

Correlation between the Level of Net Lingo Usage in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) with the Level of Net Lingo Usage in Off-line Writing Tasks

The correlations between net lingo usage in CMC with net lingo usage in off-line writing tasks were interpreted based on Guilford's suggested interpretations for values of r as can be seen in Table 3. The coefficients for all the correlations under analyses are provided in Table 4. For all statistical analyses, the 5% level of significance ($p < 0.05$) was used throughout this paper.

Table 3: Guildford's Suggested Interpretations for Values of r

r value	Interpretation
0 – 0.20	Slight correlation; almost negligible relationship
0.21 – 0.40	Low correlation; definite but small relationship
0.41 – 0.70	Moderate correlation; substantial relationship
0.71 – 0.90	High correlation; marked relationship
0.91 – 1.00	Very high correlation; very dependable relationship

(Hall, 2004)

Table 4: Correlation Coefficients (values of r) for the Relationship between the Level of Net Lingo Usage in CMC and in Off-line Writing Tasks

Off-line Writing Tasks	E-mail	Online chat	Text msg	Overall
<u>Academic Purpose</u>				
Taking lecture notes	0.30*	0.15	0.36*	0.29*
Drafting essays	0.16	0.18	0.19*	0.22*
Brainstorming ideas	0.26*	0.20*	0.35*	0.29*
Overall	0.28*	0.23*	0.37*	0.33*
<u>Non-Academic Purpose</u>				
Writing announcements	0.15	0.21*	0.22*	0.27*
Jotting messages	0.32*	0.22*	0.48*	0.39*
Writing informal letters	0.44*	0.28*	0.32*	0.43*
Overall	0.42*	0.33*	0.45*	0.49*
Overall for Off-line Writing Tasks	0.38*	0.30*	0.45*	0.44*

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level, $p < 0.05$

As can be seen from Table 4, the correlation coefficient between using net lingo in e-mails with its usage in drafting essays was 0.16, that is, $r=0.16$. As the correlation was not significant, the results show that there is no correlation between the level of net lingo usage in e-mails with that in drafting essays. The results suggest that there should not be any worry about net lingo emerging in students' draft essays through frequent use of net lingo in e-mails.

However, the results above is more the exception rather than the rule as Table 4 also shows that there is a significant correlation between the level of net lingo usage in e-mailing, online chatting and text messaging with the level of net lingo usage in almost all of the other off-line writing tasks. Further, the table also shows that there is a significant correlation between the level of net lingo usage in CMC in general (overall) with all the off-line writing tasks. The results suggest that the more frequent the usage of net lingo in CMC, the more likely the lingo will emerge in students' writing tasks whether for academic purposes or otherwise.

Comparison between Frequent and Occasional Net Lingo Users with respect to Net Lingo Usage in Off-line Writing Tasks

Table 5 shows the means and standard deviations for the level of net lingo usage in off-line writing tasks for both frequent and occasional net lingo users. Frequent net lingo users were defined as those obtaining scores in the fourth quartile (top 25%) in the range of scores for net lingo usage in CMC. Occasional net lingo users were defined as those obtaining scores in the first quartile (bottom 25%). In all, there were 28 subjects for both the frequent and occasional net lingo user groups.

As can be seen from the Table 5, for taking lecture notes, frequent net lingo users have a higher mean of 4.04 as compared to 3.11 for occasional net lingo users. The difference was found to be significant, $t(54)=3.31$, $SE=0.28$. Similarly, significant differences were also found between the two groups of net lingo users on the other two academic writing tasks, drafting essays, $t(54)=2.09$, $SE=0.38$ and brainstorming ideas, $t(54)=3.68$, $SE=0.31$. Significant differences were also found in the overall mean for academic writing tasks between the two groups, $t(54)=3.63$, $SE=0.26$.

A t-test analysis on each of the non-academic writing tasks also revealed significant differences on the level of net lingo usage between the two groups: writing announcements, $t(54)=2.44$, $SE=0.29$; jotting messages, $t(54)=4.49$, $SE=0.27$ and writing informal letters, $t(54)=4.92$, $SE=0.31$. Significant differences were also found in the overall mean for non-academic writing tasks between the two groups, $t(54)=5.33$, $SE=0.22$.

Likewise, significant differences were also found in the overall mean for off-line writing tasks between the two groups, $t(54)=4.77$, $SE=0.22$. It is to be noted that for the level of net lingo usage in all the off-line writing tasks, the means were higher for the frequent net lingo users.

The results from t-test analyses above indicate that frequent net lingo users have a greater tendency to use the lingo in their off-line writings. The findings are consistent with that of correlational analyses in the previous section. The results from both analyses seem to support the general concerns that using net lingo can become second nature.

Table 5: Comparison between Frequent and Occasional Net Lingo Users with respect to Net Lingo Usage in Off-line Writing Tasks

Off-line Writing Tasks	Net Lingo User Group	
	Frequent (N=28)	Occasional (N=28)
<u>Academic Purpose</u>		
Taking lecture notes		
Mean	4.04	3.11*
SD	1.00	1.10
Drafting essays		
Mean	3.00	2.21*
SD	1.61	1.17
Brainstorming ideas		
Mean	3.96	2.82*
SD	1.14	1.19
Overall		
Mean	3.67	2.71*
SD	0.99	0.98
<u>Non-Academic Purpose</u>		
Writing announcements		
Mean	2.86	2.14*
SD	1.11	1.08
Jotting messages		
Mean	4.14	2.93*
SD	0.93	1.09
Writing informal letters		
Mean	3.57	2.04*
SD	1.35	0.96
Overall		
Mean	3.52	2.37*
SD	0.90	0.70
Overall for Off-line Writing Tasks		
Mean	3.60	2.54*
SD	0.89	0.76

* Mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level, $p < 0.05$

Nonetheless, it is to be noted that the correlation between the level of net lingo usage in CMC and in drafting essays was the lowest ($r=0.22$); likewise, the mean level of net lingo usage in drafting essays was also the second lowest for the frequent users (mean=3.00). Both these results seem to suggest that while net lingo has emerged in students' writings, there have been some restraint by the students in using net lingo when writing texts of a more formal nature. These results are consistent with that of a parallel study (Kho, 2005) which found that the Cohort Two students were exercising restraint when using net lingo in formal writings and were aware of the differences between conversational and formal writing styles.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the study show that Cohort Two students of the Overseas Link B. Ed. TESL Programme use net lingo fairly extensively. Further the findings show that the use of net lingo in CMC has an impact on students' off-line writing tasks. Results from the correlational and t-tests analyses suggest that net lingo usage can become second nature as significant relationships were found between the level of net lingo usage in computer-mediated communication and in off-line writing tasks. The results suggest that the more frequent students use net lingo, the more likely it will emerge in their off-line writings. However, the results also suggest the possibility that students may restrain themselves from using net lingo in more formal writings.

Nevertheless, findings from the study suggest that the impact of using net lingo should be taken seriously. Since the usage of net lingo is becoming an unavoidable trend, educators and learners need to take some action to prevent or counter the emergence of net lingo in off-line writing tasks especially among teacher trainees. English language educators specifically need to consider including the issue of net lingo in classroom discussions so as to enhance learners' awareness on the inappropriateness of using net lingo under certain circumstances such as writings of more formal nature. Unless the negative effect of net lingo on off-line writing tasks is minimized, there is a possibility that the standards of the English language may decline in Malaysia despite the government's efforts to raise its standards.

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