

*Social Network Media in the Classroom: Analysing Errors and Teaching Language in
Arunachal Pradesh*

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Introduction and Overview

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. The creative aspect of the medium notwithstanding, the primary objective of the proposed study is to show that the Web-mediated and other forms of electronic communication has become a veritable medium to hide the lack of grammatical and stylistic competence. The study hypothesizes that with an increase in the number of English language users, the quality of the language use is on the decline. There is a growing tendency of reductionism towards developing communication abilities at the cost of correctness.

Social Network Media in the classroom: its rationale

Incorporation of technological aid has imparted a major change in 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.

However, there is a divided opinion amongst the linguists and educators who 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 find the film adaptation of Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' more appealing and interesting than the Folio or Clarendon text that is usually prescribed.

Since its launch in 2004, Facebook has emerged as the most popular networking site among the students across disciplines and nationalities. Although it 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 language used in the medium can be informal, creative and non-academic. This no-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, unlike an institutional system, no systemic push is required. Facebook as a learning media can be truly facilitative as the system is highly 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 providing 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 gets 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.

Teaching Language in Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh is a home to around twenty three major tribes and almost an equal number of sub-tribes. The state is a home to unique cultural beliefs and customs. The insularity of the people of the state is further compounded by the remoteness of its location, infrastructural challenges and a predominantly oral linguistic structure. The policy of cultural integration initiated by the Government of India since late 1960s appeared to fill the linguistic void of the region as numerous organizations pitched for the introduction of English and Hindi in the schools and a gradual replacement of Assamese language as the lingua franca. (Chaube, 1973) The geo-political inaccessibility has also affected in the institutionalization of educational system in the state. With no uniform script and language, with the exception of the Buddhists in Kameng and Lower Lohit areas, (as they used Tibetan and Tai-Khampti for the Buddhist religious texts) the tribes of the state had used Assamese as the link language. (Elwin, 1957; Chaube 1973; Barthakur, 2011). During 1970-71, a movement spearheaded by the students at Pasighat demanded a total replacement of Assamese as the medium of instruction in the schools with English and Hindi (Chaube, 1973; Barthakur, 2011). While the movement succeeded in introducing English education in the state as the then administration of NEFA got all its schools affiliated to the Central School system, yet it acted as a catalyst in dividing the entire state on community and linguistic lines; the Wanchos of undivided Tirap district were in favour of retaining Assamese as the medium of instruction primarily because of it being the root language of the NEFamese creole as well as the link language between the hills and the plainsmen. (Chaube, 1973; Barthakur, 2011) Secondly, as the movement in favour of English and Hindi has proved detrimental in the development of a proper script and printed literature of the tribes of the region. With no script of their own, thus, the written form of communication for the people belonging to these communities has so far remained English or the IPA, while the oral communication varies between tribal dialects, Hindi and Nefamese creole.

Against the backdrop of the tonal variety of their language, coupled with the lack of a script and a lexicon, using CALL for students belonging to these communities require developing tribe specific linguistic and grammatical applications. As of now, no such customized or customizable CALL tools or programmes are available for the English-learning students belonging to these communities.

Teaching English language has further proven to be a challenge to language teachers in the state as syntactic, morphological and phonological rules vary from tribe to tribe. Since there is a lack of printed material for their native grammar and linguistics, the students are largely unaware of the rules governing their own language vis-à-vis English. Of late, however, quite a few dictionaries and grammar written in English are available in the market, yet there is no policy for institutional implementation of the same in the feeder levels.

It has been found that the errors committed by the students have a common pattern and it is reflected in oral as well as written modes of communication particularly in the areas of orthography and syntax. Further the experiment has helped in making students aware about the nature of the errors they commit in English and it has also facilitated an understanding of cross-dialectal lexical and grammatical differences.

This paper deals with some of the findings of a continuing research on Facebook as a collaborative learning tool in Arunachal Pradesh, the north-easternmost state of India.

Methodology

The primary objective of the research was to study the impact of social network on students and how the same can be used productively in the classroom. Secondly, given the backdrop of a non-formal, non-institutional and oral knowledge of their respective mother tongues, the study also aimed at analysing the impact of social media, especially Facebook in their use of English.

An internal project was undertaken involving the undergraduate students of engineering at 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 proper grammatical and stylistic knowledge has an impact on their levels of interest, understanding and effort which is 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 100 diploma and 200 certificate level of students of six branches of engineering. The selective sample of 300 students provided a representation of seven major tribes of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, viz., Nyishi, Adi, Galo, Apatani, Tagin, Nocte, and Monpa respectively. 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 along with curated content from the You Tube. Online quizzes on grammar and vocabulary were conducted at various levels and remedial measures were suggested.

Findings and Analysis

The research on using social media in the classroom in Arunachal Pradesh has provided some interesting results and it has projected certain trends as far as the use of English as an L2 is concerned. It is 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. In terms of orthography and syntax, a whopping 72% of the surveyed students were found to have major problems in the field of orthography, 21% on the other hand, had problems in both orthography and syntax. Only 7% of the surveyed students appear to use language correctly in terms of orthography and syntax. 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. Their oral expressability is further hindered by acute language anxiety syndrome. However, they find Facebook comfortable and ‘increasingly relaxed’ 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 which is substantially 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. For instance, in a user group consisting of students drawn from a heterogeneous mix of communities, it is found that students belonging to Adi community will form a sub-group comprising members of the same community and they show a tendency to communicate more with the members of the sub-group than with the rest. The medium of communication is primarily L1 using IPA with a liberal sprinkling of a creolized Hindi common to the speakers of the North eastern region in particular. The same is true of other communities as well. However, the students with a mixed parentage tend to communicate more in English and with other members of the group quite frequently.

With most of these dialects having no distinctive grammatical markers as we have in English for personal pronouns, gender, singular and plural number, etc., it is found during the survey that their L1 grammar interferes in their use of L2, i.e., English. Lack of certain vowel sounds have also influenced markedly on their orthography. This is also evident from their written assignments as well as their answer scripts of mid and end semester examinations.

Further, most of the students do a literal translation from the oral (which is heavily influenced by their respective mother tongues) to the written mode resulting in orthographic errors such as ‘Porty poor’ for forty four, ‘pibe’ for pipe and ‘five’ etc. as the L1 of most of the dialects don’t have sounds like /f/ and /v/. Around 63% of the surveyed students have shown problems in the articulation and writing of consonant clusters. For instance, ‘splash’ would be pronounced and written as ‘ispalash’, ‘scream’ as ‘iscream’, etc. However, cluster reduction is found to be minimal and almost negligible among the surveyed group of students.

Another notable tendency of the students that has come out is the use of space-fillers. During oral communication, it has been observed that the students make a very liberal use of the space filler ‘like’ and the Hindi word ‘na.’ In Hindi, ‘na’ implies ‘no’ (in oral communication) as in example 1 below:

/Tumne kaam kiya?/ [Have you done the work?] (Example 1)

/Na/ [No]

or, an interrogative marker, as in the sentence given in example 2:

/usne kaam kiya na?/ (Example 2)

[Has he done the work?] or may be, [He has done the work, right?]

or, at times, used as an emphasis with a pronoun, as in example 3:

/usne na kaam kar diya/ (Example 3)

[He has done the work.] (English doesn’t have any equivalent for the emphasised ‘na’ unlike Hindi.)

It is observed that in the oral communication using English, students use the word /na/ as a pause or as a mark of emphasis and seldom as an interrogative marker. The word /like/ is also used sparingly. The same tendency is reflected in their use of the language online. On being pointed out, while 30% of the surveyed students showed a marked change in reducing the number of such space fillers in their updates and online language, 58% of the 'informed' users have expanded the spaces between words, where they would have otherwise used the word 'na' or 'like.' 3% of the surveyed students resorted to ellipses instead of the verbal space fillers. During oral discourse too, 16% of the 'informed' or conscious users took an extended pause instead of using space fillers. The peer feedback presented online helped in minimising the use of such words in oral and written discourse.

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.

Conclusion

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.

As there is a lack of institutionalized pattern of imparting mother tongue in respective dialects, a detailed and customized CALL package can be prepared after categorizing the nature of errors committed by the students belonging to different communities. This would also help in highlighting the cross-dialectal differences in their respective use of L1 vis-à-vis English.

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 in such a heterogeneous academic ambience as Arunachal Pradesh 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 feedback in a de-spatialized manner, feasible scopes of inter-institutional collaboration exist which will provide innovative solutions to the problems faced by the students in similar cultural and socio-academic set ups.

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