

Digital Linguistics and Online Communication: Examining Language Use in Online Academic and Social Interactions

Charito Ong, University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines, Philippines
Sterling Ong, Capitol University, Philippines

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of digital communication platforms has fundamentally altered language use, reshaping how students interact in both academic and social contexts. This study examines the intersection of digital linguistics and online discourse, focusing on students' adaptive language practices in virtual classrooms, messaging platforms, and social media environments. Drawing from two institutions in Northern Mindanao—a state university and a private school—the research investigates patterns of code-switching, multimodal communication, and lexical creativity in students' digital interactions. Anchored in a mixed ethnographic approach, this study employed digital discourse analysis, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews. A purposive sample of 100 students (50 per institution) was selected based on their active engagement in online platforms. Data were collected over eight weeks, with ethical consent, through screen recordings, chat logs, and focus group discussions. The analysis revealed frequent platform-dependent language shifts, hybrid code constructions, and the strategic use of emojis, abbreviations, and memes to enhance clarity, tone, and engagement. The findings underscore the evolving nature of digital language and the importance of integrating digital literacy into language education. The study advocates for curriculum enhancements that address multimodal communication and platform-specific discourse strategies. By offering a nuanced understanding of student communication in digital spaces, this research contributes to the broader fields of applied linguistics, language pedagogy, and digital literacy.

Keywords: digital linguistics, online communication, digital discourse, language and technology, virtual interaction

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Introduction

The digital era has revolutionized the way language is used, transmitted, and interpreted. With the widespread use of online platforms such as social media, learning management systems, and messaging applications, new forms of linguistic expression have emerged, reflecting the dynamic interplay between technology and communication. This evolution has given rise to the field of digital linguistics, which explores how digital technologies reshape language practices, discourse, and semiotic meaning-making (Jones, 2020; Tagg, 2021). In academic and informal settings alike, students navigate various forms of online interaction—ranging from structured class discussions to casual peer conversations—where they must adapt their language to suit platform-specific norms and multimodal expectations.

The shift to online communication, especially accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has blurred the boundaries between formal academic discourse and informal digital speech. Students are increasingly required to move fluidly between synchronous Zoom classes, asynchronous LMS forums, group chats, and social media spaces, employing a range of discourse strategies, code-switching behaviors, and digital artifacts such as emojis, memes, and abbreviations (Barton & Lee, 2022; Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2023). These practices are not merely stylistic; they carry implications for identity performance, power negotiation, and academic engagement in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. However, many curricula remain rooted in traditional language instruction, leaving a gap between students' digital fluency and institutional literacy expectations.

This study aims to bridge that gap by examining how students in a state university and a private school in Northern Mindanao use language in online academic and social contexts. Through a mixed ethnographic approach, the research explores digital discourse patterns, platform-based adaptations, and the pedagogical relevance of online communicative strategies. In doing so, it contributes to the growing scholarship on language and technology while offering practical insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to enhance students' digital communicative competence in a rapidly evolving linguistic landscape.

Statement of the Problem

As digital technologies increasingly mediate both academic and social interactions, students today must navigate diverse online communication platforms that demand new forms of linguistic adaptability. However, despite the prevalence of these platforms, educational systems have yet to fully explore or integrate the complexities of digital discourse into mainstream pedagogy. Students often shift between formal academic expression and informal digital language, incorporating code-switching, emojis, memes, and multimodal strategies that influence how meaning is conveyed and interpreted. These practices remain underexamined in local educational contexts, particularly in the Philippines, where digital literacy and linguistics intersect unevenly across schools. This study aimed to understand how students from a state university and a private school in Northern Mindanao engage in digital linguistic practices and how these shape their academic and social interactions online.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How did students adapt their language use across various online platforms in both academic and social contexts?
2. What digital communication strategies emerged as influential in shaping students' learning experiences and peer interactions?

3. How could the integration of digital linguistic practices into classroom instruction improve online discourse competence among students?

Framework of the Study

This study was anchored on Multimodal Discourse Theory and Digital Literacy Theory, both of which support the exploration of language use in digitally mediated contexts. Multimodal Discourse Theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) emphasizes that communication in the digital age involves not just written text, but also visual, audio, spatial, and gestural modes. This theory is relevant in analyzing how students construct meaning using emojis, memes, punctuation, and other non-verbal elements during online interactions. It enables the researcher to examine how these multimodal elements influence meaning-making, tone, and relational dynamics in digital communication.

Complementing this, Digital Literacy Theory (Belshaw, 2011; Mills, 2010) frames students' ability to adapt linguistically to various platforms as a key competency in today's educational environment. Digital literacy extends beyond basic technical skills—it encompasses critical thinking, contextual language use, platform-specific discourse practices, and the ability to shift registers depending on the audience. This theory situates digital linguistic behavior not as a deviation from standard norms, but as a reflection of students' emerging communicative competence in diverse and evolving digital contexts.

Guided by these theoretical lenses, the study adopted a conceptual model that explored the relationship between platform-specific features, students' linguistic adaptations, and communicative strategies. The framework posits that online platforms (e.g., Zoom, Messenger, LMS) shape discourse features, which in turn influence language practices such as code-switching, multimodal signaling (e.g., emojis), and lexical innovation. These practices impact academic engagement and social cohesion in online settings.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed ethnographic approach to explore the digital linguistic practices of students in online academic and social settings. Combining digital discourse analysis, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews, the research was conducted in two academic institutions in Northern Mindanao: one state university and one private school. These sites were selected for their active use of digital platforms in both instructional delivery and student communication. The focus was to capture how students linguistically adapted across platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Facebook Messenger, and other messaging apps commonly used in their academic and social interactions.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 100 participants—50 from each institution. Participants were chosen based on their regular engagement in online academic activities and peer communication through digital means. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring adherence to ethical research protocols. Data collection occurred over an eight-week period and involved the collection of chat logs, screenshots, online discussion transcripts, and screen recordings (with participant permission). These data were triangulated with insights from virtual participant observations and follow-up interviews conducted via video conferencing. Interviews were designed to gain deeper insight into students' reflections on their language choices, perceived communication challenges, and the impact of digital media on their discourse.

The data were analyzed through digital discourse analysis methods, particularly examining multimodal elements such as emoji use, code-switching frequency, textual features (e.g., punctuation, spacing, abbreviations), and linguistic shifts across platforms. Thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was used to identify recurring communication strategies, contextual factors influencing discourse, and patterns of digital linguistic adaptation. To enhance reliability, peer debriefing and member-checking were conducted with a subset of participants. This methodological design allowed for a contextualized understanding of how students manage meaning-making in fluid and multimodal digital environments, both in formal and informal contexts.

Results

The analysis of students' online interactions revealed three major themes: (1) Platform-Dependent Linguistic Shifts, (2) Multimodal Communication Strategies, and (3) Lexical Innovation and Peer Identity Performance. These findings reflect the evolving dynamics of digital language and students' adaptation to the communicative affordances and expectations of different platforms.

Platform-Dependent Linguistic Shifts

Students exhibited noticeable variations in language use depending on the platform and audience. In Google Classroom and LMS environments, language was generally more formal, closer to academic English conventions. In contrast, communication in group chats and Facebook Messenger allowed for relaxed structures, extensive code-switching, and informal expressions. Many students instinctively shifted between English, Cebuano, Filipino, and Taglish, depending on the context—a phenomenon supported by earlier studies on translanguaging in digital spaces (García & Kleyn, 2023). These shifts were not random but reflected intentional adaptations aligned with perceived communicative expectations.

Multimodal Communication Strategies

Students regularly employed emojis, GIFs, memes, and visual symbols to enhance the tone, emotion, and clarity of their messages. This multimodal layer of communication served not only as expressive reinforcement but also as a strategy to manage digital presence and relational dynamics. For instance, emojis were used to soften disagreement, signal humor, or show empathy—functions also highlighted in recent work by Georgakopoulou and Spilioti (2023). The use of memes was particularly notable among peer groups as a bonding mechanism and a form of socio-cultural commentary.

Lexical Innovation and Peer Identity Performance

Students demonstrated a high degree of creativity in their online language use, coining abbreviations (e.g., "FR" for "for real," "Lods" for "idol/lods"), reshaping standard phrases, and using trending expressions from popular digital subcultures. These lexical innovations were tied to peer identity performance, signaling group belonging, wit, and awareness of digital trends. The findings align with Tagg's (2021) observations on how youth cultures innovate linguistic forms to reflect affiliation and self-expression in online communities.

To provide a clearer comparison of the digital linguistic practices observed across different online platforms, the table on the next page summarizes the thematic patterns identified in the

study. It contrasts how students adapted their language use, multimodal strategies, and lexical choices in academic versus social digital environments. This side-by-side presentation of findings offers insights into the role of platform-specific contexts in shaping students' discourse, tone, and communicative intent.

Table 1

Summary of Thematic Findings on Linguism in the Philippines and Texas

Theme	Academic Platforms (LMS, Zoom)	Social Platforms (Messenger, FB, GC)
Platform-Dependent Language Use	Formal tone, English-dominant, minimal emoji use	Informal tone, code-switching (Filipino/Cebuano-English), emoji-rich
Multimodal Strategies	Occasional emoji use for emphasis or politeness	Frequent emojis, GIFs, memes; used for humor, tone modulation, connection
Lexical Innovation	Adherence to conventional syntax and spelling	Creative abbreviations, slang, trend-based expressions (e.g., "Lods," "FR")
Communication Purpose	Instructional, task-focused, clarifying assignments	Social bonding, affirmation, expression of humor or emotions

The findings demonstrate that students are not passive users of digital language but active participants in shaping discourse through context-sensitive adaptations. Their ability to navigate linguistic shifts, leverage multimodal elements, and craft identity through digital expressions reflects a growing form of communicative competence that is often overlooked in traditional academic settings. These insights underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that recognize and integrate digital linguistic practices into formal instruction to better support students' language development in an increasingly technology-driven world.

Conclusions

This study shed light on the evolving nature of language use in digital spaces, particularly among students navigating both academic and social online interactions. By examining their platform-specific discourse patterns, multimodal strategies, and creative lexical innovations, the research highlights how students actively shape their communication to meet the demands of various digital environments. Their frequent code-switching, emoji use, and adoption of internet-born expressions are not merely stylistic choices but strategic adaptations that reflect audience awareness, social positioning, and meaning-making in context.

The results affirm that students possess a nuanced and context-aware digital communicative competence—one that challenges conventional views of language proficiency limited to formal academic expression. This underscores the importance of revisiting traditional curricula to incorporate elements of digital linguistics and online discourse practices. Educators and curriculum developers are encouraged to embrace a broader, more inclusive understanding of language that values students' digital experiences as legitimate and educative. Doing so not only promotes engagement but also empowers learners to navigate digital spaces with critical awareness and communicative agility.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the growing discourse on language and technology by offering grounded insights into how virtual environments are reshaping linguistic norms

and learner identities. It calls for further investigation into how these evolving practices influence language learning outcomes and interpersonal relationships within digital academic communities. As communication continues to migrate online, it becomes imperative that language education reflects the realities of students' digital lives—bridging the gap between formal instruction and the linguistic demands of the 21st century.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, this study recommends a pedagogical shift that integrates digital linguistic awareness into language instruction. Educators should incorporate authentic online discourse tasks—such as chat-based discussions, meme analysis, and emoji interpretation—into the curriculum to develop students' multimodal communication skills. These activities can help bridge formal academic competencies and real-world digital fluency, fostering deeper engagement and relevance. Moreover, teacher training programs should include modules on digital discourse analysis and platform-sensitive language use to prepare educators for the linguistic realities of online learning environments.

Institutions are also encouraged to develop clear guidelines and support systems for inclusive digital communication, ensuring that all students, regardless of their linguistic background or platform familiarity, have equitable opportunities to participate. Recognizing code-switching and multimodal practices as valuable tools rather than deviations can help reduce language-based bias and support identity expression. Finally, future research should explore the long-term effects of digital linguistic engagement on academic writing, critical thinking, and professional communication to further refine instructional approaches.

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Contact emails: charito.ong@ustp.edu.ph
sterong@cu.edu.ph