SHEIKHBAHAEE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN AND NON-IRANIAN WRITING PERFORMANCES IN VIRTUAL AND REAL ENVIRONMENTS

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE RQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIG LANGUAGE

BY:
FARNOUSH HADDADI

Supervisor:
PROFESSOR M. H. TAHRIRIAN

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Dedicated to

My dear family, friends, and all my professors at Sheikhbahaee University without whose support I would not have come this far.

Abstract

Writing has always been considered an important literacy skill for foreign/second language learners. The Internet provides such unique applications for the writing skill as weblogs, wikis, and social networking websites. Up to now researchers have put their focus on the learners' performances in the traditional paper and pencil environment or wikis and blogs; it is time to also consider learners' performances in the social networking websites. In this respect the purposes of the present study were: 1) to identify the most frequent Iranian and non-Iranian learners' errors in the virtual environment of social networking websites 2) to compare Iranian performances in the traditional and virtual environments, and 3) to compare Iranian and Malaysian performances in the virtual environment of social networking websites. With respect to the requirements of the research questions this study had three phases of data collection. For the first phase, the researcher selected 30 Iranians, female and male, aged 18 to 21 from one of the social networking websites and collected a 3200 word corpus from among their comments and wall posts. All of the learners were students of Computer Engineering and IT. For the second phase of the study another 3200 word corpus were collected from 30 Iranians, male and female, aged 18 to 21 who were studying Computer Engineering and IT at Sheikhbahaee University who were asked to write an essay on an assigned topic. Participants for the third phase of the study were 30, male and female, Malaysian language learners, aged 18 to 21, studying Computer Engineering and IT. Another 3200 word corpus was collected from among their comments and statuses. The analysis of the results revealed that most Iranian participants' errors were verb forms, dictions, prepositions, articles, plural 's', quantifiers, relative pronouns in the virtual environment of social networking websites, and Malaysian participants' errors were verb forms, diction, plural 's', prepositions, articles, quantifiers, relative pronouns. Based on the results of the t-test, Mann-Whitney, and Chi-square tests interesting similarities and differences were observed within and between error groups in each corpus.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Chapter One

Introduction

1. Background

Writing has always been considered an important literacy skill for foreign/second language learners. Therefore, there is no wonder why learning to write is one of the most highly valued concerns of education. However, as highly as it is valued, it is also one of the last skills that learners have control over (Haley &Austin, 2004). Since it is an active and productive skill, students learning to write in a foreign/second language face multiple challenges. It requires thinking strategies that allow individuals to express themselves in another language. It is a complex activity that requires a certain level of linguistic knowledge, writing conventions, vocabulary, and grammar (Erkan & Saban, 2011).

Haryanto (2007) states that writing involves more than just producing words and sentences. To be able to produce a piece of writing, we should be able to write a connected series of words and sentences which are grammatically and logically linked. Hence, writing as one of the four language skills, in real world contexts, is not a solitary enterprise; it is a social act. It is not an activity in its own right but one which serves the other skills. Thus, it can be concluded that writing is closely related with one's knowledge of grammar, reading, listening, and speaking.

Not surprisingly, with the advent of new technologies such as computer and the Internet some of the ways teachers and students function inside and outside classroom have changed. It can be said that the offered opportunities by the new technologies, the Internet in particular, are indeed unique in contemporary education. The world is changing and as Eaton (2010) contends, our learning styles are changing, and consequently our teaching and assessment styles are also changing. Students have

the opportunity to have the world at their finger tips; they are experiencing the world through technology in a way that their parents and teachers never did (Eaton, 2010).

The advantages of the Internet in facilitating communication and in providing access to information are contributing to the rapid expansion of its applications in all professional fields, including foreign/second language instruction. This expansion has opened new horizons for the integration of technology into the learning process (Roman, 2002). In this sense, Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni (as cited in Li, 2005) in their book *Internet for English teaching* list 5 reasons to use the Internet for the purpose of teaching English as a language:

1. It provides authentic language materials.

2. It enhances the student's level of literacy in conducting on-line communication.

3. It enables the students to interact with native and nonnative speakers for 24 hours on end.

4. It makes the learning process lively, dynamic, and interesting.

5. It gives both the students and the teachers the power to work efficiently.

Technology has become part of our lives, and in its light our ways of written communication have changed (Yutdhana, 2004). Therefore, students today, living in a global environment, where technology has transformed communication, require more sophisticated literacy skills than those required in previous eras. In the present era, literacy does not simply mean the ability to read and write a particular language (Knoble & Lankshear, 2008; Lund, 2004; Noordin, 2004), it also involves abilities and practices related to the particular media through which texts are transmitted and communications take place. Moreover, as Hammer (2007) states literacy has changed

radically in the last few years, it has become more complex, and also has changed into a social act.

What has to be noticed is that computer technology provides a variety of tools that can be helpful for developing writing (Haley & Austin, 2004). And obviously as Bloch (2008) states, the Internet has clearly become the prevalent technology for facilitating interactions among learners. Hence, it can be implied that the development and spread of the personal computer and the Internet have brought the most significant changes in the writing skill since the popularity of the printing press. In fact, as Dehghani (n.d) highlights, the Internet can be useful with any skill area in learning a foreign or second language. It is a great resource in practicing language skills. However, it is more effective with some skills than with others; for instance, the Internet provides great opportunities for the writing skill.

The Internet may provide an opportunity to write with freedom. The Internet also provides a linguistic freedom that may not exist in the classroom (Bloch, 2004). As Warschauer (1992, as cited by Bloch, 2004) argues, the Internet provides the opportunity for learners to take risks with the language they are learning without the fear of correction. For these reasons, writers in the Internet may produce a different type of writing than that found in the classroom due to the convenience they are provided in the Internet environment.

Indeed, computer-based writing can affect the writing process and writing. Several researchers have found that the Internet provides a different context for writing than does the print medium or the classroom (Bloch, 2008). Notably, there is some evidence that the language produced while engaged in CALL is qualitatively more coherent, cohesive, and expressive than the language learners produce in classroom (Leloup, Poterio, & Cortland, 2003; Miller, 2008). Along these findings, it

is important to note that the quality of writing has improved as it has changed from traditional classes to writing with real audience around the world on the Internet (Muangsamai, 2003; Warschauer, 2007).

Indeed, the Internet provides such unique applications for writing skill as weblogs, wikis, and social networking websites. In addition to posting in these applications, members also can comment on other members' posts. In this manner a number of written dialogues may be initiated between members. Therefore as Blackstone, Spiri, and Naganuma (2007) note these applications become communicative and interactive when participants assume multiple roles in the writing process, as writers who write and post, as readers who read other writers posts, and as writer-readers who, returning to their own posts, react to criticism of their own posts. These interactions as Ellis (2008) mentions not only afford opportunities for learners to receive input, but also afford opportunities for them to produce output and to receive feedback. Therefore, the ease of writing and publishing on these applications makes them an appealing media to students and thus enhances the quantity and quality of students' writing (Warschauer, 2010).

Considering the above mentioned points, the Internet provides a new and different kind of environment for its users. Since the prevalent language of the Internet is English, users participate in the interactions by writing in English. However, users and learners who use English as the medium of communication in the Internet commit errors as they do in traditional paper and pencil environment. Thus analyzing their errors in this new environment is of high value.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Writing has always been considered an important literacy skill for foreign/second language learners. In this sense, up to now scholars have investigated

various aspects of writing performances of EFL /ESL learners in the traditional paper and pencil environment (Chuang, 2005; Hastuti, 2009; Karimi, 2003; Koosha & Jafarpour, 2006; Tahaineh, 2010; Wong, 2007).

With the advent of technology, the Internet provides an opportunity to write with freedom; it provides a linguistic freedom that may not be found in the classroom (Bloch, 2004). Eventually, the quality of writing has improved as it has changed from traditional classes to writing with real audience around the world on the Internet (Muangsamai, 2003; Warschauer, 2007).

Indeed, the Internet provides such unique applications for the writing skill as weblogs, wikis, and social networking websites. They provide a new kind of environment for their users and language learners. Researchers have conducted invaluable studies considering various aspects of blogs (Arani, 2005; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Hajiannejad, 2011; Kelly, 2008; Sakhamanesh, 2010; Zhang, 2009) and wikis (Elola, 2010; Huang, McConnell, & McConnell, 2009; Kovscic, Bubas,& Zlatovic ,2007;Kuteeva, 2011; Sze , 2008) especially in writing skill, and social networking websites (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Hutchinson,2009; Irdis & Wang, 2009; Ota, 2011; Pilgrim, & Bledsoe, 2011; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010).

These applications have such exclusive features as writing posts, comments and statuses. Members not only can write wall posts in these applications, but they can also comment on other members' posts. In this manner a number of written dialogues may initiated between the members. Therefore, as Blackstone, Spiri, and Naganuma (2007) note these applications become communicative and interactive when participants assume multiple roles in the writing process. Consequently, the ease of writing and publishing on these applications make them an appealing media to

students and thus enhances the quantity and quality of students writing (Warschauer, 2010).

Considering the above mentioned points, the Internet provides a new and different kind of environment for its users. So many studies have been done considering writing in the blogs and wikis but not the social networking websites. Since the prevalent language of the Internet is English, users participate in the interactions by writing in English. However, users and learners who use English as the medium of communication in the Internet commit errors as they do in traditional paper and pencil environment. Thus analyzing their errors in this new environment is of great importance.

In this respect, the present study 1) attempted to identify and analyze Iranian and non-Iranian learners' errors in one of the virtual environment of the social networking websites, 2) the researcher compared Iranian performances in the virtual and traditional paper and pencil environments, and 3) the researcher compared Iranian and Malaysian participants' performances in the virtual environment of social networking websites.

1.2. Research questions

The present study was planned to answer the following questions:

1) What are the most frequent Iranian and non-Iranian learners' errors in the virtual environment of social networking websites?

2) How do the learners' errors in the traditional environment compare with their errors in the virtual environment of social networking websites?

3) How do the learners' errors vary by their linguistic background in the virtual environment of social networking websites?

1.3. Significance of the study

Since the Internet has become an important phenomenon in our communications, investigating different aspects of this invention especially the opportunities that it offers in the field of education is of high value. Invaluable studies have been conducted about wikis and blogs in Iran, especially in the era of writing skill.

However, such studies, dedicated to the social networking websites, have not been conducted a lot in our domestic situation because basically implementing social networks in educational fields is a new issue. Indeed most previous studies consider language learners writing performances in wikis and blogs. It is time to investigate Iranian language learners writing performances within the social networking websites in the Internet environment.

1.4. Definition of key terms

Performance: As Brown (2007) mentions performance is the overtly observable and concrete manifestation or realization of competence. In reference to language, performance is the actual production (speaking, writing) or the comprehension (listening, reading) of linguistic events.

Interaction: Ellis (1999) pointed out that interaction is generally "used to refer to the interpersonal activity that arises during face-to-face communication. However, it can also refer to the intrapersonal activity involved in mental processing" (p. 3). In view of the need to include the variety of interactions in CALL, however, interpersonal interaction takes place not only in face-to-face conversation but also electronically over a computer network.

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Social networking website: Boyed and Ellison (2007) define social networking websites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (as cited in Collin, Rahilly, Richardson, & Third, 2011).

CHAPETR TWO

Literature Review