Chat Language and the Challenges of Students in Written Composition

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Abstract: With the prevalence of the internet and social network platforms in this digital age, most people opt for text messages as a fast and convenient means of communication and prefer real-time online chats to face-to-face social interactions. The cyber language is replete with writing errors that are not conventionally acceptable in academic writing and which can impede comprehension in some cases. As teenage participation in this new media increases, this study investigated the impact of chat language on the written composition of senior secondary school students who are prospective candidates for O'level and or A'level examinations. Data were generated from the students' written essay scripts and analyzed using Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar as the theoretical framework. The study adopted the quantitative and qualitative research methods in which 842 senior secondary 2 and 3 (SS2 and SS3) students of selected schools in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, are the population. The result revealed that online chat language and text-based messages mostly affect students' writings in mechanical accuracy and expression. The study therefore recommended that the negative effects of the social media on the students' writings should be checked in schools.

Key words: texting, online chatting, composition, effective writing

Abstrak: Dengan prevalensi platform internet dan jaringan sosial di era digital ini, kebanyakan orang memilih pesan teks sebagai sarana komunikasi yang cepat dan nyaman dan lebih memilih obrolan online waktu-nyata daripada interaksi sosial tatap muka. Bahasa cyber penuh dengan kesalahan penulisan yang tidak dapat diterima secara konvensional dalam penulisan akademik dan yang dapat menghambat pemahaman dalam beberapa kasus. Seiring dengan meningkatnya partisipasi remaja dalam media baru ini, penelitian ini menyelidiki dampak dari bahasa obrolan pada komposisi tertulis siswa sekolah menengah atas yang merupakan kandidat prospektif untuk ujian tingkat O dan tingkat A. Data dihasilkan dari skrip esai tertulis siswa dan dianalisis menggunakan Hallicay's Systemic Functional Grammar sebagai kerangka teoretis. Studi ini mengadopsi metode penelitian kuantitatif dan kualitatif di mana 842 siswa sekolah menengah 2 dan 3 (SS2 dan SS3) yang dipilih di Port Harcourt, Rivers State, adalah populasi. Hasilnya mengungkapkan bahwa bahasa obrolan online dan pesan berbasis teks sebagian besar memengaruhi tulisan siswa dalam akurasi dan ekspresi mekanik. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini merekomendasikan bahwa efek negatif dari media sosial pada tulisan siswa harus diperiksa di sekolah.

Kata kunci: SMS, chatting online, komposisi, penulisan efektif

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the internet has emerged as a notable new technology which has spread all over the sectors of education, business, economics and other disciplines. While we admit that the internet has revolutionized the way people live in modern times, the most far-reaching is the impact it is having on the way we communicate. Due to this new means of communication, people are easily able to communicate and exchange ideas and feelings via text messaging or social media chatting. To a large extent, online chatting shares the features of face-to-face interactions (Bamgbose, G. (2018). The influence of social media on the English language in Nigeria. *The Nigerian Voice*, 3rd April, 2018. Retrieved 20th May, 2018.and has informally been referred to as 'media-written interactions' (MNI). Participants employ abbreviations, neologisms, jargons, cyberslang, emojis and hashtags in order shorten the time it takes to type a text or respond to a chat. They prefer these short forms to detailed sentences because they believe that the more concise

you are with your post, the better. This, according to them, is called 'respect towards your follower's time'.

As students frequently visit the social media sites, they tend to get more ingrained with the pattern of communication and writing mostly because, it is easier and faster and no one basically examines what is written there. This compels students to display numerous writing errors ranging from incorrect spellings to 'ungrammatical' sentence constructions (Mphahlele & Meshamaite, 2005), errors in mechanical accuracy, use of non-standard orthography, cyberslang, misuse of homophones, mix-up in the use of British and American Englishes and many more, are now commonplace in their compositions. Chat language threatens students' literacy skills. It hampers their critical thinking, creative abilities and creates undesirable writing and reading habits (Craig, 2003).

It is a matter for great concern that writing on any composition topic in English language, a core academic subject, is a huge challenge as students could not consciously make the difference between the formal use of the language from its informal use for other purposes such as the social media. It is upon this premise that we set out to investigate the impacts of chat language on effective writing of compositions among senior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Framework: Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)

This study adopted the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). SFG is a form of grammatical description originated by M.A.K. Halliday. It is part of social semiotic approach to language study called Systemic Functional Linguistics. SFG is concerned primarily with the *choices* that grammar makes available to speakers and writers.

Traditionally the choices are viewed in terms of either the content or the structure of the language used. In SFG, functional bases of grammatical phenomena are divided into three broad areas, called metafunctions: the *Ideational*, the *Interpersonal* and the *Textual*.

Written and spoken texts can be examined with respect to each of these metafunctions in register analyses. Thus, SFG is a study of meaning construction through systems of lexicogrammatical choices that serve functions within social and cultural contexts. Each metafunction has its own system of choices, each choice resulting in a structure.

B. Conceptual Review

1.   Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-Mediated Communication (henceforth, CMC) is an umbrella term which refers to a communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers (Herring, 2001). While the term refers to those communications that occur via computer mediated formats, it can also be applied to other forms of text-based interactions such as mobile telephony (or texting). Bodomo, A. (2010). *Computer-mediated communication for linguistics and literacy*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference. gives the definition of CMC to include the use of other technological devices to perform tasks on the internet other than just sending text messages. Meanwhile, Ooi, V.B.Y. (2002). Aspects of computer-mediated communication for research in corpus linguistics. In P. Peters, P. Collins and A. Smith (Eds.). New frontiers of corpus research. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi. lays more emphasis on the multi-modal nature of the medium by referring to it as 'a mode of communication that centrally involves the computer as a medium, and made via a hybrid of speech, writing, graphics and orthography'. Popular forms of CMC include bulletin board, e-mail, useNet groups, listserv mailing list, internet relay chat (IRC), web pages (weblogs), Skype, audio-visual chats, text messaging via mobile phones, etc.

The modes of CMC can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous CMC takes place in real time where all parties are engaged in the communication simultaneously; however, they are not necessarily all in the same location. Examples of synchronous communication are online chats, video and audio calls and/or conferencing. On the contrary, asynchronous CMC refers to communication which takes place when the parties engaged are not necessary online simultaneously. In other words, the sender does not receive an immediate response from the receiver. Examples of asynchronous communication are text messages and e-mails.

2.   Computer-Mediated Discourse (Web 2.0)

Computer–Mediated Discourse (henceforth, CMD) is a sub-field within the CMC. It is a specialization within the broader interdisciplinary study of CMC, 'distinguished by its focus on language and language use in computer–networked environments and by its use of methods of discourse analysis to address that focus' (Herring, 2001). Computers in this sense, broadly include any digital communication device (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015).

CMD uses web 2.0 which refers to a world-wide website that emphasizes user-generated content (UGC); usability (ease of use, even by non-experts); and interoperability (the website can work with other products, systems and

devices) for end users. A web 2.0 website allows multiple participants to communicate simultaneously in a virtual community. This is in contrast with the web 1.0 era when people were limited to the passive viewing of the content. CMD is considered multi-modal when its production and reception involve other channels of communication, in addition to plain text (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015).

3.   Social Networking

In today's world, pre-teens and young adults can access social media applications from many entry points including desktop computers, laptops, smart phones, tablets and Ipads. There are over 100 social networking sites (SNSs) with their technological affordances supporting a wide range of interests and practices. Participation in any of these sites is a matter of preference and purpose. Examples of some popular SNSs are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Whatsapp, WeChat, Skype, Snapchat etc. These sites do not only connect friends and families, they also help users build a reputation and bring career opportunities and monetary incomes (Aichner & Jacob, 2015).

Amidst all their effects on our daily lives, the SNSs have their mega effects on formal writing. Users enjoy linguistic freedom on the social media platforms not for reasons of style or creativity, but for the obvious fact that no examiner is there to assess the written language. The fact that most youngsters are frequently visiting these SNSs and spending quality time on them, is one of the major reasons why formal writing skills are continually being battered, especially since the dawn of the new millennium. The report of Glen (2014) shows why social media writing is a world away from academic writing and why the two should not cross paths by any standards. He states:

> Using social media often means learning to use language in a somewhat different way: our register is different our vocabulary is different; our grammar may even be different. We embrace certain forms of informality [...] we develop a store of short words [...] and a greater appreciation of strong verbs. We treat grammar in ways that we daren't in our academic writing; that is, we assume a sympathetic audience who will know what we mean even when we bend the rules. [...] even in the more spacious confines of a blog, our style may be affected by the fact that a blog post is written in a compressed time frame [...] to compress reader-ready sentences [...] the limits of social media confirms one of the great strengths of academic writing. (Blog post, April 2, 2014).

Social media participants deploy a lot of shortcuts to make their posts as short as possible, buy time during chats or save their reader's time. Users may access multi-modal means of communication made available by the telephone technology such as emojis, photo or video sharing in place of grammatical explorations.

More so, since many people are not friendly with typing texts on the keyboard, they resort to using cyberslang which is made up of acronyms (initialisms), different forms of abbreviations, jargons and neologisms. Some of these are 'lol' (laugh out loud), 'omg' (oh my God!), 'tbt' (throw-back Thursday). 'kwim' (know what I mean?), 'hru' (how are you?) etc.

4.   Linguistic Features of Computer-Mediated Discourses

Scholars are interested in understanding the characteristics and effects of computer-mediated language and how it is changing people's way of communication. CMD systems change the form of written language to become more speech-like, more like a talking text (Ko, 1996). Various studies of CMD have observed that the linguistic structures of most online interactions are less standard, less complex and less coherent than the standard written language (Cristal, 2006; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015; Chiluwa, 2015; Abati, 2018).

In her survey, Murray (1985) reports that computer-mediated communication shows features of simplified registers associated with both oral and written language as well as other specific norms such as 'formulaic phrases', 'abbreviations', 'symbols', 'acronyms' and 'simple sentence structure'. Other linguistic features include paralinguistic features that are either written or expressed. Real-time genre of electronic discourse is more similar to spoken language than the written language (Herring et al, 2005). It tends to be interpersonally involved, syntactically fragmented and has a relatively low degree of information focus and elaborateness. In his study of a chat-like protocol known as Daedalus InterChange, Ko (1996) describes CMC as being *linguistically impoverished* compared to speaking and writing. This feature is in relation to information focus and elaborateness. Lind (2012) discovers that chat language is very highly elliptical with its omission level at 37%, which is twice as many words in normal speech. This condensed form of writing is wreaking havoc to academic writing in the classroom, especially in applying composition skills.

C. On Chat Language

Of all the activities that go on in the social media, chatting and texting hurt formal writing the most. Chat or chatting is an online synchronous communication which involves the interaction and exchange of messages

between participants in the internet. It can happen between two or more participants at a time in a chatroom. One person initiates a topic or discussion which is displayed on the screen and the other types and sends a response. Online chatting can be in form of texts, audio, visual or audio-visual communications. Participants *use netspeak* (Crystal, 2001), *textese* (van Dijk, 2016), *or* chat language in common parlance. *Netspeak and textese* are forms of abbreviated written – or, actually typed – language that are characterized by omission of letters, words, abbreviations, acronyms, cyberslang, letter/number homophones, emoticons, neologism, typos and grammatical errors.

Herring (2001) argues that this form of writing is appropriate for the context – that is, CMD, but we are of the view that it becomes a matter of great concern when the CMD form of writing overlaps with academic writing and other formal writing skills, away from its social audience. Herring (2001) also argues that majority of this writing pattern are deliberate choices made by users to economize space, mimic spoken language features or express themselves creatively. We rather assert that the students' transfer of these deliberate choices into their formal writings calls for investigation, because traces of this form of writing are creeping uncontrollably into their school work. When they were interrogated, the students retorted: 'It's fun!' This means that they enjoy the writing pattern since it saves their time and helps them bother less about correct spelling and other conventions of effective writing skills which they now tag as 'boring', 'stressful' or 'long hand'. Baron, N. (1984). Computer mediated communication as a force in language change. *Visible Language.* posits that 'underlying the contemporary handwriting is actually a deeper concern that the internet language is corrupting the way we craft traditional writing or even speaking face-to-face' (p.176). Van Djik, Van Witteloostuiin, Vasi, Avrutin & Blom (2016) affirms that children's text messages do not always adhere to conventional written language rules, because they use *textese*: a register that often transgresses grammar rules. Sometimes, the participants' use of abbreviations and short forms is deeply confusing, because the abbreviated words lack uniformity and tend to be contextually situated; encoding different meanings in different contexts. This makes writing very simple but reading and comprehension become a herculean task.

D. Features of a Typical Online Chatroom

These are some of the popular manipulations of language in typical online chats.

   i.   Non-standard spelling/unconventional orthography. Examples gud (good), haus (house), jux/jst (just), epp (help), ur (yours) etc. There

is generally no uniformity in the orthography as each person spells as he/she deems fit.

ii. Use of emojis to express emotions or reactions.

iii. Phonetic spelling. Examples: neva (never), dat (that), tot (thought).

iv. Letter/number homophone. Examples: gr8 (great), 9t (night), 2mr (tomorrow), 18r (later), b4 (before) 4eva (forever). Chiluwa (2015) refers to this as 'syllabogram or rebus writing.

v. Misuse of homophones. Examples: their/there/they're, it's/its, you're/your

vi. Use of acronyms and cyberslang. Examples: lol, omg, cya, uwc, bae, brb.

vii. Use of letters to represent words. Examples: c (see), u (you), y (why), b (be), n (and).

viii. Use of symbols, to represent words. Examples: @ (at), & (and), # (number, or for hashtags).

ix. Writing is sometimes either in all caps or all lower cases.

x. Holophrastic and telegraphic responses.

xi. Code–switching and code mixing: often as a result of inability to express oneself in one language variety.

xii. Free combination of the British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). This happens at the level of spelling, lexis and grammar.

xiii. Omission of subject pronouns and articles.

xiv. Short words are often preferred to long words. Use of non-conventional portmanteau words. (A portmanteau word was a word that is invented by combining the beginning of one word and the end of another and keeping the meaning of each [Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2010]. For instance, 'motel' is a portmanteau word for motor + hotel. Chatroom examples are: upandan (up and down), issorait [it's alright], nope [no problem]).

xv. While punctuation marks are generally omitted in so many cases, the comma and the exclamation marks are over-used (sometimes to create certain shades of meaning). The question mark is sometimes used to represent a whole sentence. Example: '?' could mean 'I couldn't understand it', 'I am confused', 'What do you mean?', 'Are you still there?' (especially when a response is long awaited). The asterisk (*) is used to denote disapproval, error or a mistake.

xvi. Use of funny transliterations. Example: 'let me come and be going' (I need to go).

xvii. Use of paralinguistic features, especially while representing such auditory information such as prosody, laughter and other non-language sounds. (Examples; Hahaha, kikikiki, Eheeem, Mtcheew. Sometimes participants write a letter multiple times just to sound

expressive. Examples; grrrrrrt, somebody heeelpppp, yeeeess, Bekkyyyyy).

xviii. Hashtag is used to stress key words in a post.

xix. Texts are often incomplete sentences, usually presented in fragments. Et cetera.

In order to maintain the pace and atmosphere of the interaction in the chatroom, participants endeavor to write, almost at the same speed of speaking. This makes them devise several means (as outlined above) to meet expectations.

E. Writing a Composition

Writing a composition entails bringing ideas together and carefully arranging them for the purpose of achieving unity and beauty in what has been created. Thus, essays are not just written, they are composed. The writer relies entirely on the written words to get his message to his target audience. The writer needs to state his message formally, clearly and appropriately. Specifically, the ability of a writer to put his message across to his target audience depends on his lexical and structural choices. It is important to note that mistakes in lexical choice are less generously tolerated than in syntax (Carter, 1992). There are three stages of a writing process: the pre-writing stage, the writing stage and the re-writing stage (Osuafor, 1998; Ojo, 2007). Drawing an outline in the prewriting stage usually provides a scaffold for the draft in the writing stage. Re-writing is the final stage of writing where the reader revises, corrects, edits and improves on what he has written. Osuafor (1998) affirms that "writing is not a simple process at all. Professional writers do not hand in even the second draft. Sometimes they need to rewrite and rewrite until they are able to get a seeming perfectly finished copy that clearly communicates the idea" (p.9). The qualities of good writing include economy, unity and clarity (Eko, 1987).

The ESL composition class requires senior secondary students to do a substantial variety of writing tasks (often referred to as 'Continuous Writing' at this level), on the different topics they have been taught and from which they are expected to attempt any one of their choices in an examination. Questions are set on descriptive, narrative, argumentative and expository essays. Included also are letter writing, speech, article and report writings.

Candidates' performances are evaluated based on the acronym COEMA – that is, Content: relevance of the writer's ideas to the central theme of the chosen question; Organization: unity, coherence and paragraph development; Expression: clarity, variation of sentence patterns, appropriateness of style and judicious use of figurative language; and Mechanical Accuracy: this punishes undeniable errors of grammar,

punctuation errors, spelling errors and disuse of the capital letters where necessary. COEMA is the West African Examination Council (WAEC) assessment guideline for continuous writing in English Language question papers. This study investigated the effects of online chatting on the students' writing skills based on COEMA.

F. Empirical Review

There have been mixed feelings from extant literature regarding the possible effects of the social media and social networking on the academic performance of students. Studies show that students' participation in the social media could have positive effects, negative effects or no correlation at all. In the studies conducted on the students of Kogi State University, Asema, Okpanachi, Edogoh (2013) discover that the social media have a negative relationship with the students' academic performance. A similar study was carried out on students of Covenant University, Otta, by Ayodele, Mosunmola, Senanu, Gbenga & Adeonke (2015) and the result shows that the social media have a positive correlation with academic competence.

Meanwhile Tuan (2013) and Wood (2014) find out positive impacts of the social media on language and learning, the findings of Ghanney et al (2017) show that the social media negatively influence participants' reading skills, writing skills and speaking skills in every way. In a textual analysis of the effects of three social media: Facebook, 2go and Twitter on the ESL writings of the students done by Iro and Mohammed (2014), the results indicate that students' writing is hampered by serious writing impediments occurring at three crucial aspects which are lexis, grammar and punctuation. They report that the students distort their writing with their social media experiences and practices thereby producing unclear, vague and unintelligible essays, especially to the audience who are not familiar with this negative trend.

In an interaction with Dr. Lee Newton on the influence of the new media on writing, he explains that "this generation of teenagers is the group that has written the most throughout their lives. Although they write a lot, quality has suffered because their writing skills are weaker".

METHOD

This study used quantitative and qualitative methods for the analysis. We based our research on the writing habits that occur most frequently on two social networking sites (SNSs) often used by the students: Facebook and Whatsapp; and how often these writing patterns occurred. Facebook and

Whatsapp were chosen because they allow students to write longer statuses against the space limitations of Twitter.

We selected a total of 10 pages from 5 students' Facebook pages, 4 students' Whatsapp pages and 1 students' group Whatsapp page to examine their status posts and chats on the social media. We chose these pages because they are managed by the students themselves. There was a total of 652 posts throughout the pages in thirteen months.

Data were generated by administering a composition test of 4 questions drawn from the WAEC syllable for continuous writing. Each student was to attempt only one question of his/her choice. The population was 842 students. These were SS2 and SS3 students from ten private secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State. Evaluation was based on COEMA. The purpose of using COEMA was to ascertain the greatest influence that chat language has on the written composition of the students. Sample size was calculated using Taro Yamane's formula. The sample is a representation of the features required for the analysis.

Table 1:
Population of participants

	From ten private Secondary Schools										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
SS 2	20	30	30	40	29	90	35	30	41	32	377
SS 3	40	43	32	32	44	88	35	51	50	50	465
Total	60	73	62	72	73	178	70	81	91	82	842

Determination of a sample size from a given population here is using Taro Yamane's formula.

Taro Yamane's formula: $n = N/1+N (e)^2$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population size

e = level of significant error (5%)

Therefore:

n = 842/1 + 842(0.0025)

n = 842/1 + 2.105

n = 842/3.105

n = 271.17

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The data for the analysis consist of 271 scripts of students written compositions. After analyzing them, the following observations were made:

A. Casual Expressions Example

The Verbal Group 'like' in the examples above shifted from its Mental Process of expressing emotional feeling and was used informally in the composition. It is often used as a slang in oral conversation to show surprise, uncertainty or inaccuracy. Examples:

1. The first day I came to the school, I was like wow.

2. Well, after that our holidays, I got a new school and I have paid my school fix. The school is a big school and has like 3 campuses.

In example 1, *like* shows a pleasant surprise, while in example 2 it shows probability. The students' deployment of this expression in their formal work reveals the extent causality in their social media chats is rubbing off on their formal writings.

B. Use of Short Forms and Phonetic Spelling

In examples 3 and 4, the students made use of the dollar sign ($) and the ampers and (&) as symbols to represent the word 'and'. This feature is repeated in several other scripts.

3.   How are you, how is mummy $ daddy ...

4.   ... my new school has boarding facilities for both boys & girls.

5.   Sir pls, I want to thank you for rebuilding our school. Thks sir. But pls, there is still a little issue the govt needs to solve.

6.   How are you and ur family?

7.   I watched the carnival with so much joy cause I have never seen 1 like it before.

8.   They have a library that is well equipt.

The short form 'thks' stands for 'thanks' or 'thank you', 'pls' stands for 'please', the figure '1' stands for the spelling 'one', 'cause' stands for 'because', 'ur' stands for 'your' and 'equipt' for 'equipped'. Students are becoming increasingly lethargic to correct spellings and are beginning to appreciate these short forms as a faster and a more stylistic pattern of writing. This sneaks unconsciously into their school work.

C. Combination of the British and American Varieties of English Language

The Relational Processes 'is' and 'are' in examples 9 and 10 perform the interpersonal function of enquiring about the well-being of the family members who are here referred to as *guys*. *Be* in example 11 is a Relational Process that is used in the imperative form to manipulate the Mood Network. 'Guys', 'kinda' and 'gotta' are American English lexis that the students infused their British English spellings and sentences.

9.   … how is your parents and siblings, I hope you guys are doing well.

10.   How are you and your family, I hope you guys are doing good.

11.   You gotta be conscious of yourself and let him be the leader.

12.   I was kinda looking awkward.

Students have continuously been encouraged to restrict their writing to one international variety of English Language, preferably the British, but the cross-cultural pattern of interactions in the social media chats is finding its way into formal writing.

D. Use of Cyberslang and Acronyms

In examples 13 and 14, 'Xup' is a cyberslang that means 'What's up? or 'What's happening around you?'. 'Lol' is an acronym for 'laugh out loud' which indicates a mood of laughter.

13.   Xup? I know you'll be expecting my letter by now.

14.   She is growing larger than normal. Lol.

These expressions are regular features of online synchronous mode of chatting that help participants to type fast, save time and respond almost at

the speed of speaking. Cyberslang and social media acronyms threaten grammatical explorations and elaborate details to a very large extent. It redirects the tone of the writing.

E. Over-use of the Comma

The comma was not only wrongly used in examples 15 to 17, it was also over-used. It was wrongly used in place of the full stop and question mark.

15. I have found admission in a very good school, named blessed children academy, it is located at 18 eligbolo street Port harcourt, it has so many students, teachers, it has…, it has…

16. What about mama, how is she doing, how about uncle Joe, how is he doing, have you seen favour our friend, I heard she…

17. I wish to tell you about my new school, I love everything about the school, the teachers are caring, and the school is fun.

In online chatting, disuse of the full stop aids them to type faster and avoid searching for the capital letter to start the next sentence. In some cases, questions and enquires are made without a question mark at the end, or any form of punctuation at all.

In example 15 for instance, *I have found… good school* is the Given information, while *named… it has…* is the New. The Nominal Group which is the Theme informed the addressee of the writer's success in his search, the Rheme revealed the name of the school, its location, population size etc. The over-use of the comma in the examples resulted in complex clauses that formed run-ons. These types of constructions distorted meaning in the examples since punctuation marks are graphological markers that guide meaning-making in sentences.

F. Misuse of Homophones

The words 'your', 'were', 'its', 'sheared' and 'there' in examples 18 to 22 were misused for their homophones 'you're', 'where', 'it's', 'shared' and 'their' respectively.

18. How are you? I hope your fine

19. The school has a big field were we can play

20. Its another opportunity for me…

21. Our teacher sheared the project topics…

22.   … while boarders return to there hostels.

The errors caused the sentences to be faulty while meaning too, is affected.

G.   Nominal Group Deletion

The deletion of the Nominal Group in example 23 caused the sentence
to become ambiguous. The subjects of *Hope, missing* and *forgetting* are not
known.

23.   How are you and your siblings? Hope all is well, missing you a lot
since you travelled to Ghana, but not forgetting your big head.

The writer relies so much on the interpersonal metafunction of the grammar
which is x-rayed in the Mood Network, using interrogatives. The semantic
implication of the deletion is that the Nominal Group could at best be
presumed to be 'I' or 'We'. The subject deletion clustered many thoughts
into one compound complex sentence. This is a typical feature of space
management in online chatting.

H. Orality in Written English

The excerpts from the narrative compositions written by the students in
examples 25 to 26, as well as the concluding part of the letter in example 24
are speech-like. The narrative technique can pass for an oral interaction
where the narrator can make repetitions to show intensity or describe
manner.

24.   It's time to go 'oh', tell your parents I said good bye

25.   …the wife waited and waited and waited, then the news got to
her, she wept and wept and wept ooo till …

26.   …he was fixing the knots, he would not get it & he was trying &
trying…

Other effects of the online chatting which reflected on the scripts we
investigated include difficulty in streaming a coherent discourse, gross
disregard for the use of punctuation marks and capital letters, elliptical
sentences. In the scripts involved, ellipsis caused a suspension of meaning in
the sentences and in some cases sentences become ambiguous. Disuse of the
punctuation marks may be connected to the fast writing (or typing) in online
chatting in which the information focus is on the lexical items regardless of
other elements that enhance good communication. Frequent use of punchy
sentences without connectives could account for the students' difficulty in
composing a standard coherent piece of writing.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This research finds that there is frequency of errors found in the content, organization, expression, and mechanical accuracy. Table 2 shows the result in percentage, whereas following after are discussions of each of the components is more detail.

Table 2:
Frequency of error using WAEC checklist

Items	Frequency of error	Percentage
C = Content	55	20.29%
O = Organisation	43	15.86%
E = Expression	68	25.09%
MA = Mechanical Accuracy	105	38.74%
	271	99.98%

A. Mechanical Accuracy

The most common error that was found in all the students' scripts were the error of mechanical accuracy (MA = 38.74%). Spelling and punctuation errors were very frequent. Use of capital letters was below average. Because students do not care about grammatical correctness while doing social networking, it appeared awkward to be restricted to writing right. So, they dangled between correct and incorrect grammar. Errors of omissions, especially of articles, correspond with the same manner students post their chats without proofreading the hastily typed text. Most students have left the autocorrect feature of their phones to effect capitalization, this affected their written works. Students used more of the simple declarative sentences in the same manner they write short messages in the social media.

B. Expression

This is the second highly recurrent error in the study (E = 25.09%). The most outstanding feature of their expression is its informality. The students were unable to write for their audience. The tone in the scripts was generally casual. There were poor word choices and no variety of sentence patterns. Students used slang in the narrative essay and the informal letter writing without marking them. Most of the scripts were as plain as the text

they send during chats, devoid of any embellishments with linguistic aesthetics such as figures of speech or idioms. Twenty cyber acronyms were noticed. Four students used paralinguistic features, example 'Hahaha', to indicate hilarious laughter.

We posit that over-reliance on emojis and other multi-modal features of these phones had effects on the students' expressive abilities. There were indications that some of the students have knowledge of the subject matter but lacked the skills to express their thoughts. They ended up clustering the content in two paragraphs of few punchy sentences. Thus, clarity was not really achieved due to colloquialism and ambiguity.

C. Content

This is the third in the order of hierarchy of errors in the scripts that we surveyed (C = 20.29%). One obvious fact here is that most students could not write up to the required length of essay, which is 450 words. Students wrote as if they were in a hurry to end the composition. Ideas were collapsed into one paragraph and soon the composition ended. The students that wrote in more paragraphs had shallow content. Proper introduction to the topics posed some challenges to the students and some submitted their scripts without fulfilling the demands of the questions they chose. This implies that students are becoming lethargic to critical thinking and writing a lengthy piece because they enjoy the short posts in their chats on social media.

D. Organization

In the scripts we evaluated, paragraphing posed a lot of challenges to the students (O = 15.86%). Ideas were either expressed in fragments, run-ons or clustered in one or two paragraphs. The contents of some scripts were so short that they did not create room for paragraph linkers. Some of the ideas were presented in a stream of consciousness, so that the composition could not cohere. Logical presentations and smooth paragraph transitions were observed in only nine scripts. The students lacked proper organisation of their composition due to their fragmented posts in the online chats.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study showed that text-based synchronous computer mediated interactions have negative effects on students' composition skills. The interactive medium disfavors effective language use and limits elaborate expressions in written compositions. However, Colomb &Simutis (1996)

posit that the medium makes it well suited for class discussions in which widespread participation is the desired outcome. While activities in the social media may help students in some ways, they actually deform their composition skills; encourage the much maligned 'tech-talk' and cause students to be lethargic. Many of the students who were good writers and spellers are gradually losing the skills because they want to conform to the trends of the social media.

We recommend therefore, that students must consciously write for their target audience, especially in the ESL courses. They must curtail frequent use of *textese* even while doing social networking, so as to control errors of mechanical accuracy. There's need for regular practice of the three stages of writing. This helps students to master the fastest means of getting to the last stage while working within a specified short period. The multimodal features of their phones could accompany simple correct sentences while chatting; better than textese. Being too apt and concise affect the length of the essay. Students must learn to be moderately detailed.

Finally, online chatting, and social networking generally, can favorably compete with formal writing, especially the composition skills. 'Technology cannot replace effective writing' (no matter how beneficial it may prove to be), says Cynthia Ryan, an associate professor of English at the University of Birmigham (Science Daily, 2014). Context is the key, 'neither autocorrect, a thesaurus, nor any other kind of resource can be counted on, to do the work for the writer', she concludes.

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