



RESEARCH PAPER**Role of Netspeak as a Barrier to Learning English as a Second Language**

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ABSTRACT

Following the global trend, Pakistani students are increasingly becoming dependent on netspeak. However, what differentiates them from the rest of the world is the use of Roman Urdu for netspeak as Urdu is the first language in Pakistan. This study investigates the negative impact of netspeak on the academic writing of Pakistani students of English as a second language (ESL). The population consisted of 200 bachelor's students, while the study sample was 54 bachelor's students at the University of Lahore. Convenience sampling was used to collect the data. The data was collected through a five-point Likert scale survey questionnaire. The results indicated that the students mostly used emoticons, homophones, contractions, clippings and acronyms and the netspeak acted as a barrier in correct English usage for academic writing. It was also observed that netspeak as an emerging mode of communication has become deeply rooted as the students intentionally or unintentionally used netspeak in academic writings. The study recommends the need of inculcating metalinguistic awareness amongst students for comparing correct English words with netspeak as a teaching strategy.

KEYWORDS Emoticons, ESL, Metalinguistic Awareness, Netspeak, Roaman Urdu

Introduction

With the expansion of the use of the internet, ways of communication have transformed substantially beyond the traditional written expression. Social media has played a major role in the evolution of an internet-based informal language system known as 'netspeak'. Netspeak is an informal method of written language which is mostly used on the internet, comprising emoticons, abbreviations, and slang etc. Teenagers' frequent usage of short messaging services (SMS) and Instant Messaging (IM) has given rise to what is known as "textisms," or representative terms in netspeak. They deviate significantly from word accuracy regarding spelling and grammatical requirements since they are often shortened or made slang variants. Waldron et al. (2015) expressed that there are more than ten different types of "textisms," and most of these types use various orthographic or phonological abbreviations, including contractions (e.g., msg for message), phonological abbreviations (e.g., thru for through), initialisms (e.g., omg for oh my God) and shortenings (e.g., goin for going). Blom et al. (2017) find the variety of textisms requiring greater efficiency by the producer because of their multiple types e.g., (*tmrw* for 'tomorrow') is an example of contractions where reduction is required; (*thru* for 'through') is an example of phonological replacements with reduction, (*ttyl* for 'talk to you later') is an example of initialisms which also involves reduction, (*goin* for 'going') is an example of clippings based on phonological sound, and (*c* for 'see', *4* for 'for') are examples of single letter/number homophones. Other textisms, such as repeating letters to mirror

lengthening (sooooo for 'so') or accent stylizations (gonna for 'going') involve additions for emphasis.

Waldron et al., 2015 and Blom et al., 2017 consider textism positive for literacy skills. e.g., word reading, phonological awareness and spelling. However, their studies focus on English textism with English as a native language. Kaid Mohammed Ali et al. (2019) find the use of textism having negative impact on the writing of the students. Since netspeak involves a significantly different form of traditional English phrases and words in terms of orthography, spelling, and morphology, some concerns have arisen that long-term usage of netspeak could adversely affect second language students' ability to acquire standard English literacy. This would be more so if the textism is in native language. While the rise of netspeak is a global phenomenon, some non-English speaking countries, such as Pakistan, are observed to have a high prevalence of it. Netspeak in Pakistan is based on the derivation of Roman Urdu words through using English alphabets. Due to its informality as well as the fear that it may impact students' English language negatively, teachers discourage students to use netspeak for academic communication. The current study examines the role of Roman Urdu netspeak in hindering the learning process of English as a second language in general and writing in particular in a Pakistani classroom.

Literature Review

Learning English as a second or foreign language does not come without challenges even in a digital age. A study by Derwing et al. (2013) explores the primary factors affecting the acquisition of English as a second language which are the frequency of English spoken or interacted with at home, students' perceptions about the language, support provided for learning, their cognitive abilities in their first language, age, and intelligence. According to Sari (2020), student roles, instructional tasks, and communication assessment standards affect how engaged students are. In post-covid era, because of the impact of online activities on the language learner's engagement, it is crucial to implement a teaching strategy based on interdependence, commitment, and participation. Informal online language learning is characterised by its own structural mistakes, which may misguide new learners in acquiring the correct form of written and spoken English (Sockett, 2013). The role of internet-derived expressions and netspeak is multifaceted in this regard because, on the one hand, it provides a conducive platform to new learners who have not yet acquired skills in traditional English forms and, on the other hand, it poses a risk of derailing the use of correct English.

Students' proclivity to use netspeak and its relationship with standard literacy is debatable in research academia (Chen et al., 2020). While the conventional notion of teachers is that netspeak disables students from acquiring skills of formal expression, studies by Waldron et al. (2015) and Blom et al. (2017) demonstrate that students of literary skills course who communicate through text messages more and use netspeak, attain higher scores in examinations. However, this correlation may not be causal and may influence students' prior exposure to literary language. For instance, students who text more must have acquired more exposure to the English language, which may have enhanced their test scores, independent of their usage of netspeak.

Chat communication through computers and smartphones has been addressed in a study by Andujar and Salaberri-Ramiro (2019). They tried to rectify discrepancies between the two communication modalities to ensure their capacity to assist in accurate language acquisition. Both situations involve participation, speed, presence, addressivity, voice, form/retype messages, average communication length, and students' expectations. The results show substantial differences between the system and the smartphone

regarding cognitive engagement and social interaction. Timing, perceived significance of contact, usage, and engagement are further differences between the two. Similarly, Ajabshir (2019) also discuss the effect of digital communication on the learning compared to traditional face-to-face learning. The practical language and dramatic social abilities were found different, although the post-test results at the levels of synchronous and asynchronous were not noticeably different.

Most textisms appear to be alterations of homophonous allographic synonyms of common terms (Shortis, 2016). This implies that for seasoned net-speakers, English netspeak terms and common words have a close relationship in the mental lexicon; hence, the cognitive processing of the two may have some parallels as well as some differences. This theory was first supported in several studies on the processing of English text. English learning is deemed relatively easier than some other languages, which are based on high-context phrases. Nonetheless, its acquisition as a second language always superimposes on the already learned native language of the learner. Frost et al. (2013) assert that this results in the emergence of a complex cognitive-linguistic framework in learners' minds as the learner consciously and subconsciously tries to form similarities between the two languages, reform the cognitive functions to incorporate the new characteristics of the second language.

The interlanguage theory developed by Selinker can aid in a better understanding of the contention. According to the notion of interlanguage, a linguistic system is created by a student of a second language who has not yet attained complete competence in the target language (Selinker et al., 2013; Tahir et al., 2021). As a result of a high degree of linguistic confusion and over-generalisation, a learner's capacity to naturally grasp and utilise the rules of the target language is distorted at this stage, when certain key L1 elements are kept and used in the usage of L2. Interlanguage, then, is when a learner's current language structure, which was formed during his initial language learning experience, does not correspond with some characteristics of the target language. However, (Minyar et al., 2020) contend that the acquisition of English through netspeak follows similar characteristics, processes, nature, and overall formulation rules as its conventional learning. Meanwhile, Tennen and Trester (2013) are of the view that due to the speed of expression during digital texts, students may lose the sense of the importance for context-based communication.

Material and Methods

This study examines the impact of netspeak on students' acquisition of the English language using a quantitative research methodology. Following a deductive research strategy, the researcher discovered quantitative data that assisted in reaching the study's goals (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018). Since this study intended to investigate the various impacts of using netspeak on English learning and find drivers of using netspeak, a quantitative approach helped the researcher in minimising the extent of interpretive biases. The quantitative design also facilitated the adoption of a deductive approach, which in turn, provided a conducive platform for testing theoretical aspects.

Data Collection and Research Tool

The purpose of gathering quantitative data is to broaden the scope of study results and give more information about the research issue (McCusker, 2015). Thus, the researcher uses the main data-collecting technique to examine the effects of netspeak on Pakistani students' English language and writing abilities.

Primary data was gathered to conduct the study using a quantitative approach of research. A survey questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was used to collect the data. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic details of the participants. The second part of the questionnaire had 23 items in total which were divided into 5 sections. The value of Cronbach Alpha indicates the statistical reliability coefficient for all 23 items. A significant Cronbach Alpha of 0.871 indicates high reliability.

Table 1
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.871	23

Population and Sample

200 bachelor's students from University of Lahore were the population of the study, while 54 University of Lahore bachelor's degree students made up the sample. Out of the 54 respondents, 37 were male while 17 were females. The age group fell between 18-23 years.

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was used to collect the data. This sampling strategy makes it easier for the researcher to get data from participants using a survey method since it allows for variable participant selection (Stratton, 2021).

Data Analysis

The stage of data analysis is when the researcher strategically arranges the information they have gathered. Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS for analysing data. The research analysed the responses through descriptive statistics and frequency analysis to decipher the patterns in responses. Moreover, Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure the high reliability of the data collection instrument. Quantitative data makes it easier to analyse the data through numerical support for the study. Additionally, the statistical analysis increases flexibility to explore ideas and comprehensive data relevant to the research issue (Jaszczolt, 2018).

Reliability

A reliability test was conducted to examine the consistency of the data collection instrument and the relevance of responses with respect to the questions asked. The following table of case processing summary depicts that all the statements were sufficiently consistent, and thus no statement was excluded from the final statistical analysis.

Table 2
Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	54	100
	Excluded	0	0
	Total	54	100

a Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure

Results and Discussion

For this study, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to examine the overall patterns in the data. The results provided in the given tables depict the arithmetical mean of the responses. It can be observed that the mean value for most responses range around the value of 1 and 2, which is associated with the options of 'agree' and 'neutral' on the Lickert scale. It means that most participants showed a positive inclination towards the statements. Meanwhile, a low standard deviation for all responses shows that the dispersion of data is within acceptable limits. Similar tendencies were observed through Skewness and Kurtosis. The values indicate that most of the data is around the normal distribution curve.

Section 1 of the questionnaire (see Table 3) explored students' English language proficiency. Statements in this category assess participants' self-evaluation of their English writing abilities and the challenges they face while acquiring English as a second language. A significant proportion reported being "Neutral" (e.g., 39% for item 1), suggesting a moderate self-perception of proficiency. The respondents also indicated that they faced challenges in writing skills and needed support as 37% agreed and 7% strongly agreed for item 4.

Table 3
English Language Proficiency

SN	Items	STA	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S A	Mean	Std.
1	When it comes to English writing, I am not very proficient	6%	20%	39%	24%	11%	1.8519	1.05343
2	I find it difficult to write accurate spellings	19%	35%	15%	20%	11%	2.2963	1.29774
3	It is difficult for me to present my ideas in exams and assignments (in English)	7%	43%	17%	20%	13%	2.1111	1.20794
4	I often need support for English writing	4%	26%	26%	37%	7%	1.8148	1.02927

Section 2 of the questionnaire explored the Internet Usage and social media engagement of the participants (see Table 4). The data highlights high engagement with digital platforms, with 78% of respondents indicating frequent internet use (item5). Familiarity with social media and chat options was also prevalent, with 78% "Agreeing" and "Strongly Agreeing" (item7). The respondents used both Roman Urdu and English netspeak with 66 % agreement (item 9).

Table 4
Chat Time and Language

SN	Items	STA	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S A	Mean	Std.
5	I use internet frequently	0%	6%	17%	39%	39%	0.8889	0.88310
6	I spend a lot of time chatting online	4%	19%	15%	39%	24%	1.3889	1.15606
7	I am familiar with social media chat platforms and netspeak	2%	7%	13%	39%	39%	0.9444	0.99843
8	I use roman Urdu while chatting	7%	17%	15%	37%	24%	1.4630	1.23949
9	I use both Roman Urdu and English netspeak while chatting	4%	9%	20%	44%	22%	1.2778	1.03553

Section 3 explored the impact of Netspeak on English Language formal usage (See Table 5). 61% agreed to the negative impact of netspeak on correct usage of English (items 10-15).

Table 5
Impact of Netspeak on English Language

SN	Items	STA	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S A	Mean	Std.
10	While chatting I make use of clippings, abbreviations and contractions etc	13%	13%	13%	39%	22%	1.5556	1.32703
11	Frequent Online Chatting has a negative impact on my English writing	13%	13%	13%	39%	22%	1.5556	1.32703
12	Netspeak has a negative impact on my use of correct spellings	13%	13%	13%	39%	22%	1.5556	1.32703
13	Netspeak has a negative impact on my use of formal sentences	13%	13%	13%	39%	22%	1.5556	1.32703
14	Netspeak has a negative impact on my punctuation	13%	13%	13%	39%	22%	1.5556	1.32703
15	Netspeak has a negative impact on my grammar	13%	13%	13%	39%	22%	1.5556	1.32703

Section 4 explored causes of language deviation (see Table 6). The affective factors were explored and most of the participants (61%) agreed that pressure makes them use netspeak (items 16, 17).

Table 6
Causes of Language Deviation

SN	Items	STA	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S A	Mean	Std.
16	Pressure to type quickly for chatting leads to informal use	13%	13%	13%	39%	22%	1.5556	1.32703
17	Pressure to respond quickly pushes me to use Netspeak	13%	13%	13%	39%	22%	1.5556	1.32703
18	Online chatting becomes a hindrance to use correct spellings	0%	15%	30%	48%	7%	1.5556	1.32703

Section 5 explored whether the students felt trendy using netspeak (see Table 6) and the participants showed agreement. 63 % felt trendier using netspeak (item 19) while 69 % wanted to impress others through emoticons (item 20). However, only 50 % believed that netspeak will soon become a language register (item 23).

Table 6
Netspeak Preference

SN	Items	STA	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S A	Mean	Std.
19	Use of Netspeak makes us feel Trendy	0%	11%	26%	54%	9%	1.5556	1.32703
20	I use emoticons to impress others/to feel trendy	2%	13%	17%	50%	19%	1.2963	0.98344
21	I take pride while using Netspeak	0%	19%	33%	39%	9%	1.5556	1.32703
22	Overuse of netspeak is ruining English	0%	19%	30%	33%	19%	1.4815	1.00453
23	Netspeak will soon become one of language register	7%	15%	28%	37%	13%	1.6667	1.11592

Overall, the respondents found a negative correlation between the use of netspeak and academic writing.

Discussion

Acquiring a foreign or second language, whether it is English or any other language, is a tedious process. According to Derwing et al. (2013), the primary factors influencing the learning of English as a second language depend on the amount of English that is spoken or interacted with at home, how students perceive the language, the support that is given, how well-developed their first language cognitive skills are as well as their age, and intelligence. In this sense, while implementing a teaching method based on interdependence, commitment, and participation, it is essential to consider the implications of latest trends and activities on language learner engagement. In this respect, the current study has found that rather than inherent characteristics, deterioration of standard English skills is due to persistent weakness in mitigating the errors. Moreover, the results demonstrate that, generally, netspeak has a negative impact on students' ability to improve their English usage in formal college/university settings. This is because netspeak's quick responses, less nuance, and socially accepted incorrectness encourage students to use it more frequently. 61% of respondents found the need to quickly type causing pressure to use netspeak deviatitons. A total of 63 percent respondents strongly/agreed that they feel trendy using netspeak and 48% strongly/agreed that they take pride in using netspeak. However, the majority also agreed that the use of netspeak and its increasing trend is a cause of ruining their standard written English. This endorses the result of Mohammed Ali's (2019) study. Although it is a common misconception among instructors that netspeak prevents students from learning formal expression abilities, studies by Waldron et al. (2015) and Blom et al. (2017) concluded that children who use netspeak and text more frequently do better on tests of literary skills which the present study negates. This is because of the usage of Roman Urdu as netspeak by the sample of this study, as a significant number of students indicated that usage of Roman Urdu along with English netspeak does not help them in improving English writing. A total of 61 percent respondents found a negative correlation between the use of netspeak and improvement in English language usage. The reasons were negative impact on the use of grammar, spellings and punctuation. However, the main barrier was due to the use of Roman Urdu. A very high proportion of participants, around 61% used Roamn Urdu for online chatting. However, 66% showed usage of both Roman Urdu and English netspeak for chatting. This shows a high tendency to use non-standard English for communication. If netspeak was used only in English by the majority the results might also have been different with reference to improvement of English writing skills excluding spellings.

Conclusion

The current research used a quantitative methodology to investigate the barriers that netspeak poses in learning English as a second language. Results found that the deterioration of standard English skills is caused by a consistent inability to correct errors rather than by inherent flaws. Additionally, the study found that using netspeak typically has a detrimental effect on students' capacity to develop their English writing skills. This is because netspeak discourages students from using online communication as a learning opportunity due to its fast pace, lack of subtlety, and socially acceptable incorrectness. This is mainly because of the Roman Urdu trend in Pakistan for netspeak because students who text in English more likely must have had greater exposure to the English language, which may have enhanced their exam results, regardless of whether they use netspeak. The study concludes that the students' use of roman Urdu remains a barrier in aiding English writing skills since a sizable portion of the participants stated that using roman Urdu prevents them from learning English through online conversation. The study further recommends strategies to be used to make ESL students use English netspeak as was done by Andujar

and Salaberri-Ramiro (2019). More studies are required to explore the impact of English netspeak on the writings of ESL students in the Pakistani context.

Research Implications

Behavioural and Linguistic Shifts: The findings reveal a dynamic interplay between digital communication practices and formal writing skills, underscoring the evolution of language use in online contexts.

Pedagogical Concerns: The influence of netspeak and online habits on grammar, spelling, and formal writing suggests the need for targeted educational interventions to mitigate potential negative effects.

Cultural Dynamics: The data reflects the dual role of netspeak as both a creative linguistic tool and a potential disruptor of traditional language norms, emphasizing its significance in contemporary communication.

Recommendations

Considering the findings, the study has a few recommendations. It is important to integrate writing skills trainings focused on grammar, spelling and idea organization with the students' netspeak constructions. Online trainings, in this regard, could be more helpful. Peer review and collaborative writing activities must be encouraged. Reflective practices identifying the influence of netspeak on formal English skills and guided practice to mitigate negative influences are required. Conscious use of language while following language trends must be fostered while keeping pace with the Netspeak trends.

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