

Discourse Analysis of the FACEBOOK Writing Project

Abstract

A great number of benefits have been claimed in a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) context; however, little research has been conducted by the method of discourse analysis, especially in FACEBOOK context. The purpose of this study is to, through discourse analysis, unfold and uncover EFL learners' underlying feelings about e-writing and their writing styles. The participants were twenty Applied English-majored college students, writing e-texts to their peers for 10 times on FACEBOOK. Based on the data collected from the learners' e-texts and reflection discourse, the results showed that the majority had positive attitudes towards e-writing. Besides positive feelings about this writing project, the learners presented highly active participation in sending e-texts to their peers. Through the e-writing project, they not only had more opportunities to use the target language, but also supported each other to deal with academic and personal difficulties. Furthermore, their e-writing style had also been analyzed. Through the analysis, it was claimed that EFL learners also used repeated letters, punctuation marks, emoticons, and special abbreviations in the e-writing. Implications of these findings for future studies are proposed to be of help to those who would like to apply e-mail writing to an EFL context.

Introduction

CMC refers to communication through a computer between or among people (Herring, 1996; Levy, 1997), including synchronous and asynchronous modes. Whether in synchronous or asynchronous modes, a wealth of studies using CMC has reported the benefits of applying this medium to language learning (Blake, 2005; Chen, Belkada, & Okamoto, 2004; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011). In a CMC context, learners are provided with a more equitable platform for discussion (Warschauer, 1996); moreover, they interact more with each other (Al-Fadda & Al-Yahya, 2010; Chun, 1994; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Elola, 2010; Goertler, 2009; Kern, 1995; Kuzu, 2007; Sharma, Ke, & Xie, 2010; Warschauer, 2009; Yang, 2009). Through the interaction, learners are fostered to use more formal and complex language (Warschauer, 1996). Especially in the blog-integrated writing environment, the learners outperform the ones who only write in class in terms of their writing performance (Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010). FACEBOOK, a form of CMC, is a social networking service, which has attracted at least 800 million active users.

Through FACEBOOK, users could build up their own personal space, exchange messages, and participate in any online social group (Goertler, 2009).

A body of work on language learners' use of CMC has been carried out; however, there is little research investigating EFL learners' attitudes toward FACEBOOK as a virtual English writing classroom and their social interaction by using the method of discourse analysis. Therefore, this study applied Halliday's functional grammar, the social presence model proposed by Rourke et al.(2001), and content analysis to interpret learners' perceptions of FACEBOOK for academic purposes. Social interaction is considered a significant procedure in language learning, according to Vygotskian social-cultural theory. In the similar vein, learning a language refers to participation in social activities (Lantolf, 2000). Thus, social interaction is one of the major exploratory themes in the study.

From the view of functional grammar, language is used as a way to show attitudes, comments, and even the relationship between writers and readers (Halliday, 1985, 1989). Functional grammar consists of three language function analyses: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In the study, only the interpersonal function is discussed for the purpose of investigating social interaction. One of the key characteristics in the interpersonal analysis is the use of pronouns. Pronouns show social distance and interaction between message senders and receivers. Besides the interpersonal analysis claimed by Halliday (1985), the model of social presence proposed by Rourke et al.(2001) serves as reliable categorization to examine online interaction. Through the above analyses, the EFL learners' attitudes towards English writing on FACEBOOK were revealed and their online social interaction was also analyzed and interpreted.

The differences between spoken and written languages were identified and categorized by Halliday (1989). In spoken language, speakers use more contractions, ellipsis, and grammatical words, whereas more content word and phrases are used in written language. In order to examine e-mail, a more speech-like written communication, the method of discourse analysis was applied in the study. Through the analysis, the writing style used by EFL learners would be revealed and moreover, their feelings about e-mail writing would be unfolded as well.

With the intention to understand the implementation of FACEBOOK in college composition classes, the purpose of the study was to explore EFL learners' attitudes towards e-writing on FACEBOOK, their social interaction, and their language

features of e-writing. Therefore, this study was guided by the following four questions:

1. What are the EFL learners' attitudes towards e-writing on FACEBOOK?
2. How would they describe the function of e-writing on FACEBOOK?
3. Is there any social interaction during the exchange of e-texts?
4. What special language features were used by the EFL learners?

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