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WRITING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE ESL COURSE

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ABSTRACT

The research is intended to prove the relevance of a writing for social media supplement to the ESL university-level course. Currently, the context in which language training is performed, features the stage of information society development where one has to generate, distribute and handle information efficiently in order to succeed in their professional activity. Progress in information technology as well as communication services and tools impacts the way people think, study, interact and collaborate. A variety of social websites, services and applications such as Facebook, LinkedIn, eBay etc. has become pervasive and ubiquitous. In addition, English is lingua franca of modern e-communication. Writing for social media in English is an expertise students should master to be successful in their social and professional communication in the 21st century.

The paper provides the analysis of statistics of the use of English in social media discourse and results of Southern Federal University students interview about their attitude to the respective course supplement to be developed and implemented as part of the ESL curriculum.

Consideration is given to the concept of social media, the phenomenon of virtual language identity along with linguistic characteristics of social media discourse being a hybrid verbal behaviour, viewed as a mixture of speaking and writing activities.

The authors also focus on the main peculiarities of social media discourse to be taken into account while developing a writing for social media supplement as a plug-in to the ESL university-level course. The supplement is intended to help students develop and improve their communicative competence in the given area.

Keywords: Social media, discourse, ESL, writing, speaking, communicative competence, virtual language identity, hybrid verbal behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, revolutionary transformations of mass communication technology, primarily in the web space, influence the patterns of interaction between individuals. Internet communication encompasses a number of different ways people can interact over the web including email, social networking sites, instant messaging, forums, chat rooms, as well as voice messaging via IP applications. It is stated that Internet communication represents a historic stage in the development of the communication medium. It has

been widely used along with traditional oral and written communication, alongside all forms of electronic communication, such as radio, TV, telephone, fax, etc. [1].

The popularity of the Internet as a mass communication medium is mainly due to a high degree of web socialization. This fact is in turn caused by the ubiquitousness of broadband Internet connection and Web 2.0 technology, which provide really simple syndication, classification and public instant access to any number of web resources. These technologies have dramatically changed the strategies and tactics of people's work and social interaction in the Internet [2].

Internet communication, either formal or informal, has become the most powerful tool of socialization. Web 2.0 makes it possible for users to create different types of social content, such as posts, tweets, comments and instant messages, as well as to get access to great social communication tools on the web (blogs, wikis, social networks, e-learning and e-commerce platforms, professional and business-oriented social networking services).

This trend is affecting a lot of activities and communication formats pushing the limits of informal social interaction to all types of discourse, be it political and religious or educational and scientific.

According to the statistics, the language that is used as the main web communication vehicle, so called Lingua Franca of the Internet, is English. W3Techs data show that in the beginning of 2015 55.3% of the most visited websites have English-language homepages [3]. Moreover, the number of Internet users by language as of February 24, 2015 reveals that English is used by over 25 % of active users [4].

In light of the abovementioned, we should point out that the problem of effective use of English as the main communication tool in the Internet and, in particular, in social media is of primary importance being in the scope of modern linguistics and linguodidactics along with other issues, such as development and implementation of ESL/ESP self-study support materials [5]. It is obvious that English for social media communication has a number of specific features to be considered while developing and implementing the ESL course as part of the university ESL curriculum. We are confident that writing for social media in English is an expertise students are to master to be successful in their social and professional communication in the 21st century. However, the detailed analysis of popular ESL study packs and teaching materials, commonly used by foreign language educators, such as *(New) Headway* by John and Liz Soars, *English in Mind* by Herbert Puchta and Jeff Stranks, *North Star* by Frances Boyd and Carol Numrich, *(New) English File* by Clive Oxenden and Christina Latham-Koenig, *Outcomes* by Andrew Walkley and Hugh Dellar, *Cutting Edge* by Sarah Cunningham, Frances Eales and Peter Moor, *(New) Total English* by Diane Hall and Mark Foley etc. revealed the lack or fragmentary representation of the phenomenon being studied as a component of the syllabus.

The following are the main objectives of the research:

- to define the distinctive features of the virtual discourse and linguistic identity;
- to analyze the types of user content in social media such as posts, comments, tweets, statuses, messages, etc. and key characteristics of English for social media in terms of spelling, vocabulary, morphology and syntax;

- to define and justify the need for writing for social media as part of the ESL curriculum at university on objective (statistical analysis of the use of English as the main communication vehicle in social media) and subjective (surveying of SFedU students) levels.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As more and more types of communication have been moving to the virtual communication space, attention is to be drawn to such concepts as virtual, or digital discourse, and virtual language identity. Language identity per se is a set of a person's traits and capabilities which determine his/her production and perception of various texts. The texts produced and perceived are described according to the goal of communication, degree of language complexity, depth and precision of reality reflection [6].

Language identity manifests itself through discourse which can be defined as a set of texts produced and perceived by interlocutors within a certain sphere of communication. With the emergence of virtual communication it is virtual rhetoric and virtual discourse that come to the fore. Basically, there is little difference between traditional rhetoric and virtual rhetoric [7]. However, due to a greater variety of linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic means employed in virtual rhetoric, its very nature does change. In other words, the key communication objectives being generally unaltered, the nature and means of virtual discourse, compared to the traditional one, accelerate, diversify and simplify communication. In addition, Internet discourse is a space for a number of voices to be aired [7].

O. Lutovinova defines virtual discourse as a text mediating virtual communication [8]. The virtual world represented by virtual discourse is a new social and cultural environment featuring a number of specific values among which are: unlimited information access; unlimited opportunities of establishing contacts worldwide; "demolition" of spatial and temporal borders; predominance of informal communication regardless of communicators' age, gender, social standing etc.; freedom of self-expression at times causing familiarity which, as the proverb goes, breeds contempt [8].

The actor playing the main role in virtual discourse is virtual language identity. The concept and the term were introduced by David Crystal in a number of his works, in particular, in "Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide" [9]. According to O. Lutovinova, virtual language identity is a specific kind of language identity determined by a situation of virtual communication which impacts alterations in levels of the structure of language identity [8], that is to say, features typical for virtual discourse determine communicators' specific language "behavior" thus constructing virtual language identity.

First, let us point out types, or genres of social media content which are of special interest for the research done, namely posts, comments, tweets, statuses and messages. Despite certain unique characteristics, they all share the following features: precision; brevity, which can go as far as to character limitation; language economy; spontaneity; meaning and sense orientedness.

Second, there is quite a number of features which make virtual discourse distinct from traditional rhetoric, the most conspicuous feature being the hybrid character of virtual communication, i.e. one can observe convergence of the spoken and the written

varieties of language used in virtual discourse which develops to such an extent that borders between speaking and writing get blurred.

The following are the elements of the written language variety constituting virtual discourse:

- communicators make use of symbols of a writing system;
- participants of virtual discourse are distant communicators;
- virtual discourse media employ text non-linearity manifested by hypertext;
- the texts produced are editable.

At the same time, virtual discourse possesses a few traits inherent to the spoken variety of language. These are:

- communicators neglect spelling rules: *and i totally understand.*
- spelling is often replaced by transcription: *G'night; Gotcha;*
- communicators save time and effort and pay scarcely any attention to their texts' form, as messages have to be sent instantly: *hey! that's really funny, i keep forgetting that video exists but every time i see stuff like that it's like i'm looking at a completely different person haha.*
- communicators tend to use errative language, i.e. make mistakes intentionally: *I don't even no German I;*
- communicators use a lot of informal and even obscene vocabulary: *I am an ashamed grammar dude! U need to hear about my shitty day....; International travel is a hoot.*
- various types of shortening are employed: *They kept the five levels of spanish bc it's important. LOL!!! I understand completely!! ; Congrats sis.*
- syntax is elliptical, inverted and simplified; communicators tend to use a lot of split and fragmented utterances: *Good Lord...Priceline to AirFrance, back to Priceline...been on the phone for an hour; Ur welcome!!!! Okay. Need to drive now. Will try when I am home:)*
- communicators make peculiar use of fonts and punctuation marks: *YAY!!!! Did the dinner go well??? SO SO true!! (I'm finishing the last eight I got in on MONDAY as we speak.... sigh.) But I see learning!!*
- emoticons are used abundantly: *hahahah thank you =] Will try when I am home:).*

Overall, oral and casual style is predominating in virtual discourse. Moreover, correct spelling and sophisticated writing may be taken as showing off. By all means, all this is to be reflected in ESL courses taught at the university level.

Objectively the urgency of developing a writing for social media supplement is based on the statistical data analysis. We have investigated the statistics on the Internet users in Russia, their preferences and online behavior. The latest estimates of the English language use in the Internet have been studied. Our findings are based on the statistical research conducted by Russian Public Opinion Research Center, Internet World Stats, Yandex, W3Techs, Adweek Blog Network etc. over the period from 2013 to 2015.

Subjectively the necessity to develop and put into practice such a supplement as part of the ESL curriculum arises from the results of a recent survey conducted by the authors in Southern Federal University (SFedU). The survey goals were to gather information on using English in social media by SFedU students and to learn about their attitudes to the respective supplement to be introduced. The survey was undertaken in February 2015. The paper based data collection method was used. 152 first- and second-year

students taking the ESL course were interviewed. The survey included 5 close-ended questions:

1. Please rate on a scale from 1 (strongly unimportant) to 5 (strongly important) the importance of social media (blogs, social networks, forums and so on) as a means of modern international communication.
2. Do you agree that English is essential for social media communication? (YES/NO)
3. How often do you use English in social media? (NEVER, NOW AND THEN, SOMETIMES, OFTEN)
4. Do you consider your level of English language competency sufficient to communicate effectively in social media? (YES/NO)
5. Do you consider it necessary to include a writing for social media supplement in the ESL university-level course? (YES/NO/DO NOT KNOW/DOES NOT MATTER)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A recent survey conducted by Russian Public Opinion Research Center shows that 69% of the population in Russia have an Internet connection. 52% of users access the Internet on a daily basis. Young people aged 18-24 are the most active Internet users (96% of young people use the Internet, 81% of these being university students). Top 5 reasons why people use the Internet are media resources (56%), information search (55%), news sites (55%), e-mail (53%), work and study (50%). 4 out of 10 Internet users (44%) are engaged in communication in social networks, chat rooms and forums. Also, 32% of Internet users look for friends, 31% of Internet users play games, and 25% Internet users do the shopping [10].

According to the international website *Internet World Stats* English is the most widespread language on the Internet. The proportion of English used in virtual discourse is 28.6% [11].

The latest estimates of the last-mentioned site show that Russia is the leader among European countries as regards the number of Internet users per country. 55.3% of all the websites publish their contents in English [3].

Yandex has conducted a research on the content of the Russian Internet segment (Runet). The main language for 91% of Runet sites is Russian. English is the most common foreign language: 3% of the sites are in English [12].

Facebook's most popular language is English, with over 52% of the site's English-speaking users [13].

Additionally, social platforms for online shopping are gaining popularity in Russia. The number of Russian citizens who use services of international online stores increased by almost half from 2013 to 2014, according to the study of "Yandex.Market" and "GfK". Online shopping in Chinese stores became more popular: the number of customers from Russia grew from 25% in 2013 to 39% in 2014. The proportion of Russian customers in English-language online stores increased from 21% to 26% [14].

The statistics given above proves that today English is the main communication vehicle in social media.

Here are the results of the abovementioned survey of the SFedU students undertaken by the authors.

The importance of social media as a means of international communication was highly rated by the respondents (4.09 on a five-point scale).

The survey findings show that 88% of the respondents consider English essential for social media communication.

87% of the students use English in social media at least now and then (Fig. 1).

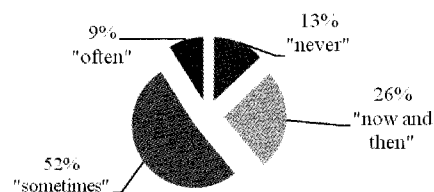


Figure 1. Frequency-dependent breakdown of students using English in social media

84% of the respondents consider their level of English language proficiency insufficient to communicate effectively in social media (Fig. 2).

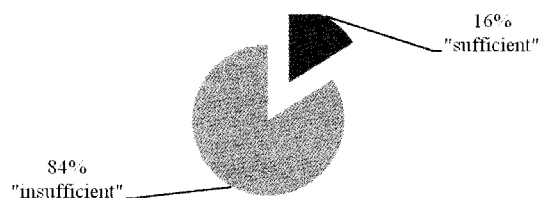


Figure 2. Percentage of students considering their level of English language proficiency sufficient to communicate in social media

59% of the students consider it necessary to include a writing for social media supplement in the ESL university-level course (Fig. 3).

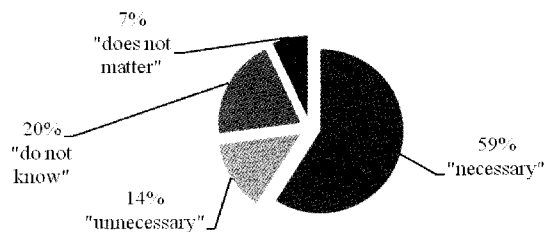


Figure 3. Distribution of students' attitudes to the respective supplement to be implemented

In accordance with the statistics it may be concluded that one's proficiency in writing for social media in English will provide more opportunities for graduates and ensure that they are effective in their social and professional communication. Thus, a writing for social media supplement must be developed and implemented as a plug-in to the ESL university-level course. The latter can be used at any stage of working with a unit/module of an ESL coursebook depending on the objectives and content to be studied. We consider the writing for social media section as a combination of the presentation, practice and production components.

The language to be taught can be presented both via screenshots of real social media discourse and relevant hyperlinks so as to get students involved into virtual interaction and familiarize them with the tangible features of digital communication. The presentation section is hence viewed as a practical student's guide.

The practice section can comprise language and pre-communicative preparatory exercises whereas the production section spans exercises aimed at developing reading (reception) and writing (production proper) skills.

Here is a list of exercises that can constitute the practice section:

- Write what the abbreviations/emoticons stand for;
- Fill in the gaps with the social media discourse from the box;
- Match the emoticons/abbreviations and their meanings;
- Classify the following language units as formal, neutral, and informal/colloquial.

Production exercises can be exemplified by the following tasks:

- Label the reviews as positive or negative (if they are talking good or bad about something);
- Classify the texts on the basis of their genres (review, article, email, tweet, comment etc.);
- Read the review and use the notes above with further details of your own to write a similar review;
- "Decipher" the following post/message;
- Write a post or a tweet on a certain topic;
- Comment on a post/tweet/status;
- Turn the given formal text into a tweet;
- Continue and/or complete the following status/post;
- Text a friend of yours via Facebook informing them of ... using the following items;
- Compress the following text into an instant message limited to... characters; leave out all the language units whose absence would not distort the idea.

CONCLUSION

The research shows that English for social media as a conspicuous element of virtual discourse on the micro-level and an integral component of communication on the macro-level is of vital importance for modern communication. It is to be taught to ESL students in order to see their English language proficiency to advantage making their English more authentic. English for social media is defined as a hybrid form of communication integrating features of both the spoken and the written varieties of language and mediating virtual discourse. It was proved that it is essential to include into an ESL coursebook a supplement designed specifically to teach English for social

media. The supplement is to contain presentation, practice and production sections which constitute didactic patterns enabling instructors to teach English for social media effectively. The presentation section is a concise student's guide familiarizing students with the specific features of social media discourse. The practice section encompasses language and pre-communicative, or preparatory exercises which lay the foundation for production skills. The production section is constituted by exercises to develop reception (reading) and production proper (writing/texting) skills.

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