

## Orthographic Errors Analysis of English as a Second Language Learners' writing: lessons from the use of WhatsApp language

Constantine Kouankem

Higher Teacher Training College, Bertoua-Cameroon

E-mail: [kconsty2000@yahoo.fr](mailto:kconsty2000@yahoo.fr)

Orcid N°: 0000-0003-4085-7319

### Abstract

This article investigates the impact of WhatsApp language on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' writing performance. The study is based on the assumption that secondary schools learners' essay scripts are full of orthographic errors caused by the use of WhatsApp language. Data collection tools included questionnaires and learners essays. The descriptive survey design within the social learning theory and the constructivist theory of error analysis was adopted in the analysis of data. The study concluded that WhatsApp language negatively affects the orthographic performance of the Government Bilingual High School ESL students of Bertoua. The way forward proposes the development of teachers' skills in error analysis as well as the active involvement of learners in reflecting on the source of their errors as part of the remediation process.

**Key terms:** Orthographic errors, writing performance, Social media, WhatsApp language, ESL.

### Résumé

Cet article étudie l'impact du langage WhatsApp sur les performances scripturales des apprenants d'anglais langue seconde (ALS). L'étude repose sur l'hypothèse que les productions d'écrits des apprenants du secondaire sont truffées d'erreurs orthographiques causées par l'utilisation du langage WhatsApp. Les outils de collecte de données comprenaient des questionnaires et des productions d'écrits d'apprenants. L'enquête descriptive de la théorie de l'apprentissage social et de la théorie constructiviste de l'analyse des erreurs a été adoptée dans l'analyse des données. L'étude a conclu que le langage WhatsApp affecte négativement les performances orthographiques des élèves apprenants de ALS du Lycée Bilingue de Bertoua. Les pistes de solutions proposent le développement des compétences des enseignants en matière d'analyse des erreurs ainsi que l'implication active des apprenants dans la réflexion sur la source de leurs erreurs dans le cadre du processus de remédiation.

**Mots clés:** erreurs orthographiques, performances scripturales, médias sociaux, langage WhatsApp, ALS.

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## Introduction

Cameroon is a multilingual country. English language as one of the official languages coexists with about 275 indigenous languages (Ethnologue 2023), French which is another official language and many other lingua franca (Chia, 1983; Kouega, 1992; Wolf, 2001; Echu, 2004). The multilingual situation in Cameroon, especially the use of the two official languages, namely English and French has been as a result of the country's historical evolution. In line with Order No 264/14/MINESEC/IGEOF13/09/2014, the aims of the teaching of English in Cameroon are:

- To enable learners to act competently in real, life situations that require them to communicate in English ;
- To enable learners to use English as a medium of instruction and learning for all the subjects;
- To prepare learners to communicate in English in an international context;
- To develop the learner's ability to apply knowledge of language system, and develop behavioral strategies and skills necessary for social adaptation.

Social media are dominating the life of many people particularly that of students. Researchers have shown that social media namely Facebook, You Tube, Twitter, and WhatsApp are platforms that influence language learning in various ways. Asad et al (2012) stated that social media provides a platform for students to learn and discuss outside the formal classroom setting. Quader (2014) asserted that there are positives relations between the use of social media and the academic performance of students. According to this scholar, students who usually spend time on social media scored higher in reading skills test and had higher grades. Melor and Saheli (2012) found that integrating social media such as Facebook , in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms could help to broaden student's knowledge, increase their motivation, and

develop their confidence in learning ESL writing, as students are able to learn new vocabularies from reading the group member's comments, as well as by engaging in the peers' dialogue. In the same vein, Kamnoetsin (2014) pointed out that the Facebook platform assisted students in developing their grammar, vocabulary and writing, as it helps them share information and acquire new knowledge. In writing, the students may gain experience through composing various messages and in reading they have the chance to read a variety of new messages. Thus, they have the opportunity to learn new words.

Though these researchers have brought out some positive effects of social media on the learning of English as a second language, the present work however, seeks to probe the negative influence of social media on the writing of secondary school learners in Bertoua. The present study was guided by the objective to investigate the impact caused by the use of WhatsApp language on the English as a second language writing of secondary school students. In order to achieve these objectives, the following questions were stated:

- To what extend does WhatsApp language influence learners of English as a second language writing skills?
- What WhatsApp language errors do ESL learners exhibit in their orthographic performance?
- What are the possible causes of such orthographic errors in essay writing?

Errors are unavoidable stages in the learning process. The findings of the study will serve as an eye-opener to English language teachers who are struggling to give their students a good standard of English. It will help to sensitize many teachers to the importance of error analysis. The findings will also capacitate and/or enable teachers to organize instruction in such a way as to apply WhatsApp error analysis techniques and

methodology to make learners aware of the errors they commit. Teacher would be able to make language teaching and learning more effective and assist learners in producing better writing essays.

## 1. Methods

This section focuses on research design, research setting, sample population and data collection techniques.

### 1.1. Research Design

The research design adopted for this study is the descriptive survey design. This type of research depicts the state of affairs as it exists (Kothari, 2004), the researcher can only report what has happened or what is happening or what he/she saw. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), descriptive survey design does not deal with the manipulation of variable. This method is therefore suitable in determining the possible influence of social media on the ESL students writing performance in the East region of Cameroon. The design involves collecting data on a sample of respondents who were selected to represent the teachers and students from the chosen school in the East region.

### 1.2. Research setting

The study setting is the Government Bilingual High School (GBHS) of Bertoua. It was selected purposively because it is closer to the author's office, hence it was easily accessible and had no time and financial constraints. GBHS Bertoua is located in the old structures of the military camp which served during the colonial period. The school is found in the East region of Cameroon in the Lom and Djerem division, Bertoua 2 subdivision opposite the Government Scientific High School Bertoua.

### 1.3. Target population

The respondents of this study are 50 students and 10 English teachers of the Government Bilingual High School Bertoua who constituted

the sample for this study. The learners' age ranged from 12 to 16 years. The English teachers sample were made up of four (4) male teachers and six (6) female teachers.

1.4. Data collection instruments and procedure  
Questionnaires were administered to students and teachers of GBHS Bertoua who were called upon to fill them in. Data was also collected using narrative essay written by the learners in English. The learners were given five narrative essay topics to choose from and write an essay on the topic of their choice. The respondents wrote the essay following the stipulated essay writing rules taught in class, namely the first draft, proofreading, making corrections and final work. These topics included:

- a. Tell a story about the passing away of a dear one
- b. Write a story that begins with one day a snake entered into our classroom
- c. A religious crusade I witnessed
- d. The day my brother got missing.
- e. The day a madman got into my class

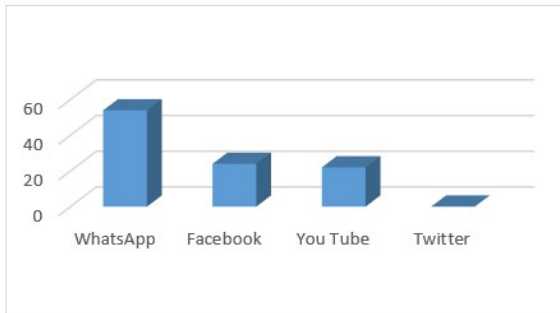
## 2. Results

### 2.1. Analysis of students' questionnaires

To find out the influence of social media on the writing performance of ESL students', a survey was conducted. Questionnaires were administered to 50 students of GBHS Bertoua. A number of questions were asked to the learners, some of them with their answers are provided below.

Q1: Which social media do you use the most?

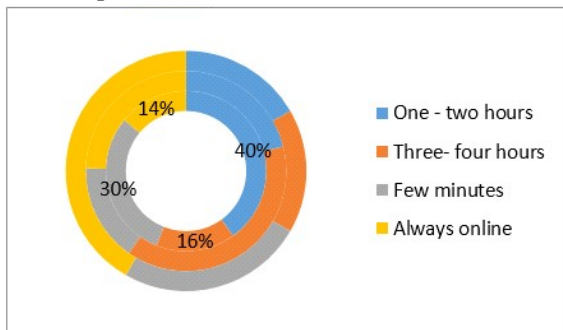
- |            |            |
|------------|------------|
| 1-Facebook | 2- Twitter |
| 3-WhatsApp | 4- YouTube |



**Figure 1: Use of different social media sites**

The majority of students 54% stated that they use WhatsApp the most, followed by Facebook 24% and YouTube 22%. None of the respondents said they use Twitter.

Regarding the time spent on social media per day, the results indicated that 40% spend one to two hours, 16% spend three to four hours, 30% spend few minutes and 14% are always online via their mobile phones.



**Figure2: Time spent on social media**

Q3: When you chat on Social Media are you conscious about grammatical spelling?

Most of the students 75% are not very conscious about grammatical spelling. Fifteen percent (15%) of the students said they are conscious about grammatical spelling and 10% stated that they are conscious about their spelling from time to time.



**Figure 3: Degree of grammatical consciousness on social media**

Q4: Do you think online chatting negatively affects your level of vocabulary? How?

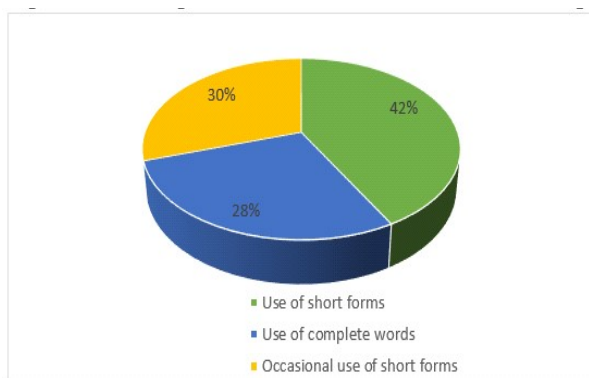
The majority of students 64% responded that their vocabulary is negatively affected by the language of social media. Due to excessive use of short forms and slangs, learners said they do not any longer try to look for the correct spelling of words. The remaining 36% stated that their English vocabulary is not affected by the language used on social media platforms.

Q5: Does the language of social media influence your formal writing? How?

From the findings, 80% of the students mentioned that the language of social media influences their writing in a negative way because they have the tendency to use abbreviations in their exam scripts. Twenty percent (20%) responded that it positively affects their writing and made them to improve their formal writing.

Q6: Do you use short form in formal writing as you do when chatting on social media?

Regarding this question, 42% agreed that they use short form in their formal writing. Twenty-eight percent (28%) responded that they do not use short form in formal writing situations. The remaining 30% stated that when they write any formal paper sometimes they unconsciously use short form they are used to on the social media.



**Figure 4: Percentage of the use of short forms in formal writing**

### 2.2 Analysis of students' essays

The learners were given five narrative essay topics to write on. The analysis of the essays given to the learners made it possible to detect a certain number of recurring orthographic errors emanating from WhatsApp language. The table below lists some of the errors observed.

**Table 1: WhatsApp words used by learners in their written essays.**

Errors	Correction
<u>bcos</u>	because
<u>somtin</u>	something
dd	demand
<u>skul</u>	school
2moro	tomorrow
L8	late
2	to
4	for
diff	difference
<u>cmr</u>	Cameroon
thx	Thanks
btw	between
H <sup>2</sup> O	water

The table above shows some of the errors committed by these learners. They omitted some letters of the words they wrote. They resorted to abbreviations in order to gain time. Whereas such abbreviations are not permitted in formal writing.

### 2.3 Analysis of teachers' questionnaires

To enhance findings on the influence of social media on ESL students writing, questionnaires were also administered to 10 English language teachers in GBHS Bertoua. Below are the responses of teachers regarding the influence of social media on the students' writing.

Q1. Does the use of social media influence student's writing? How?

All the teachers (100%) agreed that social media influences the students' writing and spellings. Some teachers said most of the students use short form of words like 'b4' for before. They also said the student use wrong spelling and wrong grammar. They turn to use social media expressions. Some students even use slangs and jargons.

Q2. Do your learners use short form of words in their exams scripts?

80% of the teachers stated that their students usually use short form of words in their writing. Ten percent (10%) responded that their students are conscious in formal writing situation and therefore do not use the short forms of words. The remaining 10% said the students sometimes use the short forms of words in their academic writing.

## 1. Discussion

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and the constructivist notion of error analyses. Both theories are used in the interpretation of data presented herein.

#### 1.1.1. The Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory is one of the theories of learning which has been introduced by Bandura

(1977). According to Bandura (1977) people can learn new behaviour and information by observing, imitating and modeling. In the social learning theory, a new pattern of behaviour can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behaviour of others. In relation to social media, people are influenced by what they use and/or watch. This theory is used to establish the extent to which imitating the language of social media among students in the chosen school affect their writing skills.

3.1.2. The constructivist notion of error analysis According to Olusegun (2015), this theory suggests that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences. The constructivists argue that learners bring into the classroom concepts they may be using outside the classroom. As pointed out by Moru and Mathunya (2022), learners do not come to class as empty vessels; rather, they bring with them prior knowledge from previous classes and other interactions with the environment. In this view, as they communicate in an informal manner on WhatsApp out of classrooms, the language used on this platform is then internalized and reproduced by them in their academic essays. As a consequence, their informal language structure resurfaces in the formal written work.

### 3.2. Interpretation of results

Though many researchers (Quader, 2014; Asad et al, 2012; Blattner and Fiori, 2009) found that there are positive relations between the use of social media and the academic performance of students who use them, Cabrera (2008) asserts that when students use social media as a means of learning, they tend to get used to wrong spelling and Internet slang words.

The findings of this study show that the majority of students use WhatsApp as their favorite social media platform and most of them usually spend

three to four hours on this platform. Students connect with their friends through WhatsApp platforms, however, this chatting platform has a negative impact on the ESL learners. These learners write in short forms on WhatsApp when they chat with their friends and consequently they tend to use those same abbreviations and slangs in their formal writing. Most of the students do not pay attention to the orthographic errors on social media; in formal writing situations they commit the same errors in their assignments and exam scripts. Shih (2011) found that students who use social media rely heavily on online auto correction tool, resulting in less awareness about the accuracy of the spelling outside of the social media platforms when no help is provided for their writing. Hezeli (2010) revealed that the use of misspelled words by replacing normal words and terms in the language is a cause for alarm hindering the ability of students to communicate effectively when writing academic papers. The findings of this research also highlights the fact that learners are not conscious of grammatical errors and spellings due to the influence of the social media language.

With the advent of Covid-19, some teachers have included WhatsApp as a learning platform in their teaching methods. This platform serves to share course related materials with their students, communicate to their students, issues regarding their course work's assignment or any upcoming event. The findings show that according to GBHS Bertoua teachers, the use of WhatsApp sometimes influences students' writing. Some of the teachers hold that WhatsApp has no effect on their learners' performance in English. However, others state that this platform has a negative effect on the students writing performance because the students have the tendency of using abbreviation and slangs in their formal writing.

### Conclusion: The way forward

Most of the orthographic errors identified in this study find their source in the use of WhatsApp language in formal writing situations. This suggests that learners have not made a proper context distinction in applying the rules of old and new knowledge (Olusegun, 2015; Makonye, 2016). The persistent use of social media language by learners also indicate that teachers should develop skills in analysing learners' errors. Teachers should be able to identify, diagnose and remedy errors learners frequently commit (Moru & Qhobela, 2013; Moru et al., 2014; Moru & Mathunya, 2022). Once the diagnosis is posed, remediation should be carried out by teachers (Booth et al., 2014; Makonye, 2016; Makonye & Fakude, 2016). For instance, if an orthographic error results from the interference of social media language into the learners' writing performance, the learners' attention should be drawn to the contexts in which certain jargons and spellings are applicable and where they are not. This can be achieved by giving a number of suitable illustrations (Makonye, 2016). Remediation sessions should also be reinforced by class exercises and tests. As suggested by Davis et al. (2020), learners should participate in reflecting on the origin of their errors from their own perspectives. In this regard, they are actively involved in their own knowledge acquisition.

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