EVALUATING NETSPEAK THROUGH VYGOTSKY’S SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY AND ITS EFFECTS ON PAKISTANI BUSINESS SCHOOL STUDENTS’ STANDARD ENGLISH

Sarwat Nauman

Abstract

The overwhelming influence of netspeak has engulfed students’ written work worldwide. To understand the widespread usage of netspeak, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory was taken into consideration. The purpose of this research was to examine three areas with regard to netspeak: Students’ perception of netspeak, students’ usage of netspeak and the effect of netspeak on students’ Standard English. For this purpose a questionnaire was adapted from Hussein and Lingwood (2012). The sampling was purposive which targeted 120 students from four private business Schools of Karachi, Pakistan. Through simple statistical measurements, it was concluded that students have a positive perception of netspeak; even though students’ perception of netspeak has no influence on their Standard English, yet, the usage of netspeak does influence Standard English.

Keywords: Netspeak; Standard English; Socio-cultural Theory; Diglossic

JEL Classification: Z000

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Introduction

Pakistan ranks seventh in the number of mobile phone users in the world and currently there are over 20 million Internet users in Pakistan (Attaa, 2013); where 99% of the Internet users visit English language websites (Atta, 2011). These Internet users are globalized, being involved in short and long distance relationships around the globe (Wellman, 2004). This new global village needs a unified language for communicative purposes which may be used for SMS, emailing, chatting and facebooking. The niche created is occupied by netspeak; which is a jargon appealing to a relatively young and computer-literate population (Crystal, 2001). Technology has brought forth a social change in Pakistan as well. Farid-ul-Hasnain, Johansson, Mogren, and Krantz (2012) while discussing this socio-tech revolution claim that Pakistani youngsters are frequently using the Internet and cell-phones for chatting and messaging and adopting the change in English orthography with ease (Aslam, Ahmed, & Sajid, 2011) becoming netspeak savvy. This social phenomenon that has taken over Pakistan can be explained through Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory which elaborates that human cognition and learning is social and cultural and not an individual phenomenon (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev & Miller, 2003).

The effect of netspeak is directly influencing the off-line English usage of students (Hussein & Lingwood, 2012). Habitual use of texting has an adverse effect on the academic writing of some students (Alkawas, 2011) therefore; keeping in mind the Pakistani youth, the purpose of this paper is to study the perception of students regarding netspeak. This research explores if this perception has an impact on the usage of netspeak. Furthermore, this research evaluates if perception and usage has an impact on students’ Standard English.

Literature Review

For ESL teachers, netspeak has emerged as a challenge in itself. The students who are already not so proficient in English language
are adopting netspeak. Crystal (2001) describes netspeak as being neither speech nor writing but a hybrid of both. With reference to Pakistan, the students are using irregular or non-conventional spellings in their writing (Aslam, Ahmed & Sajid, 2011) and regard Standard English as legacies of the older generation (Rehman, 2004). Lingwood and Hussein (2012) suggest that there is a three-fold effect on the off-line written language of the students due to the influence of netspeak: Firstly, Standard English is not taken into consideration while composing a written piece of work. Secondly, there is an increased use of symbols, dots, ellipsis and abbreviations; inappropriate use of capital letters and the punctuation is either missing or negligible. Thirdly, netspeak becomes a part of their off-line writing.

With netspeak creeping into the formal English writing of students; teachers find themselves battling with this new jargon, as teachers must ensure that their students master the form of English that is regarded as correct and acceptable and is a Standard worldwide. The linguistic features of Standard English are chiefly matters of grammar, vocabulary and orthography. It is the variety which is used as the norm of communication by the community’s leading institutions such as government, law courts and media (Crystal, 2001). On the contrary Stavfeldt (2011) holds the view that English Language teachers have not done much to change the conventional ways in which language is taught. In fact, he argues that there are teachers who declare that netspeak is not a development in the English language at all; rather they regard it as a degeneration of the language.

Even though Netspeak is problematic for teachers, Lingwood and Hussein (2012) report that students perceive the effects of CMC on their off-line English to be advantageous. The data collected by Alkawas (2012) shows that the students anticipate that they are conscious of their audiences while composing a written document; they know when to resort to netspeak and when formal writing should be exercised. This perception of the students is in agreement with the research of Varnhagen et.al (2010) in which it is concluded that there
is no relationship between the spelling ability of students and their use of netspeak. Maness (2008) explored the usage of netspeak in conversation of students among one another and with their librarian. He concludes that there is a marked difference between the way a student holds a conversation with their fellow students and the way in which a conversation is held with the librarian. The conversation with the librarian is formal and that with a peer has clear traces of netspeak in it.

While trying to explain student efficacy with netspeak, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory should be kept in mind. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory emphasizes upon the role played by socio-cultural forces and the interaction between the child and his environment on child development (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev and Miller, 2003). Vygotsky also elaborated language acquisition by elucidating that a language is acquired over a period of time, where individuals accumulated it from the society they are a part of; their surroundings and are able to construct meaningful understanding out of symbols and shapes (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev & Miller, 2003). A research conducted on Polish teens living in UK showed that even though the Polish teens had been in UK for a small period of time, yet the effect of their surrounding on their language was so strong that they were replicating ‘linguistic and social constraints found in the speech of the locally-born teens’ (Schleef, Meyerhoff, & Clark, 2011, p. 2). Languages according to Vygotsky do not replace one another but they co-exist in a human mind (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev & Miller, 2003); one may be using one language at home and another language at work and another with friends without one overlapping the other. Grove, Caubergh and Looy (2014) explained that an individual learns what behaviors to establish through one’s environment, thus the technology revolution has also shaped the behaviour of its users.

It can be said using Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory, explains the adaptation of netspeak by the youth, as it is the language that they are accepting and acquiring from their highly net-based
environment. This theory also elaborates upon the rationale behind the students’ claim that they know where and when to use netspeak.

Nevertheless, researches that point out towards the self-efficacy of students with netspeak have been conducted in Pakistan, but through this research we will be able to understand if English has emerge as a ‘diglossic form’ (Crystal, 2002) in Pakistan where the formal and the colloquial English exists side-by-side.

From the theories and researches discussed above, three hypotheses are deduced:

H-1: The Pakistani students have a positive perception of netspeak.
H-2: The perception of business School students does have an effect on their usage of netspeak.
H-3: The perception as well as the usage of netspeak affects the Standard English of business school students.

Methodology

According to the aim of this research, purposive sampling was conducted where the sample consisted of 120 undergraduate students from four private business schools of Karachi.

The questionnaire was taken from Lingwood and Hussein (2012) as the aim of their research was similar to the aim of this research. The validity of the questionnaire had already been established by Lingwood and Hussein (2012). Keeping in mind the validity of the scale, a few changes were made in the questionnaire to suit the needs of the hypotheses under consideration. The questionnaire was based on a five point likert scale where strongly agree was given 4 points and strongly disagree were given 0 points.
Research Evaluating Netspeak through Vygotsky’s Socio-Cultural

Results

Measurement Hypothesis-1

The first hypothesis was - the Pakistani students have a positive perception of netspeak. Descriptive statistics (Table 1) was measured for ‘perception of netspeak’ in Pakistan and it was found that students from private business schools have more or less similar opinion about netspeak.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Statistics of Students’ Perception of Netspeak</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Students</td>
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<td>-----------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception of Students</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

It came out to be normally distributed data where according to our hypothesis - majority of the students had a positive perception of netspeak therefore the hypothesis was accepted.

Measurement of Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis stated - the perception of business school students does have an effect on their usage of netspeak. It can be seen from Table 2 that correlation between the perception of students regarding netspeak and usage of netspeak is .210 which is significant where $p < 0.05$. This proves that there is a positive relationship between the perception of students with regard to netspeak and their usage of netspeak. This positive perception of netspeak is responsible for enhanced usage of netspeak. The second hypothesis is therefore, proved.

Measurement of Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis proposed - the perception as well as the usage of netspeak affects the Standard English of business school students.
students. When the third variable is looked into using Table 2, impact of netspeak on Standard English; there is no correlation between the perception of students with regard to netspeak and the impact of netspeak on Standard English. It can be concluded, that it does not matter how netspeak is perceived by the students, it does not impact Standard English. On the other hand correlation between the usage of netspeak by the students and impact of netspeak on Standard English are significant with .372 where $p<0.01$. The results show that more the students use netspeak in their lives, more will it impact Standard English.

**Table 2**

*Correlation among netspeak variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of students</th>
<th>Usage of netspeak by student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usage of netspeak by students</td>
<td>.210*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of netspeak on Standard English</td>
<td>-.025</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Discussion**

With the widespread use of the Internet, netspeak has generated itself and has now become a common tool of communication erasing the boundaries between formal and informal language (Aleksic-Maslac, Vasic, & Darrer, 2010). The results of this research show that the students have a positive perception of netspeak, which is very much aligned with Soffer (2012). He describes the CMC or netspeak as an attribute of the post-modern era, since it is a deviation from the standard writing norms which signifies the ‘melting process of linguistic structures’ akin to melting down of the social structures. Yet, he explains that this deviated written text is in fact very structural
and ‘performative’ in nature. Soffer (2010) called the oral style of this written communication digital orality where the users of this orality are themselves the change agent as it materializes through their ‘interpersonal dialogical processes. Therefore, it is but natural that Pakistani students use and appreciate netspeak as Crystal’s (2002) claim that since immediate feedback is absent in traditional long distance written communication; therefore, new ways of expressing and reporting are required. Praiæ (2014) points out that English is used and found in all parts of the world due to the widespread use of the communication technology such as the television, radio and the Internet, therefore, it has the property of dual acquisition. By dual acquisition, Praiæ means that first, it is acquired informally in home environment and then it is learnt in a formal setting at school. He further elaborates that non-institutional learning of English continues throughout life, such that technical and online terminologies are spontaneously picked up. He calls English a supplementary language as it supplements for any gaps that exist in a language community. English has thus achieved the status of the lingua franca and is now shared and used by people across the globe in their own way (McArthur, 2003). It can be further said that the five phases of evolutionary pattern of English: Foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativisation, endonormative stabilization and differentiation that Mukherjee and Gries (2009) talked about in their research have now been completed in Pakistan and the English language has moved into a new phase. This phase may be known as the evolution in English due to the Internet.

The positive perception of netspeak by the Pakistani business school students contribute in their usage of netspeak. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory elaborates that learning takes place at two levels: Firstly, through interaction with others; secondly, it becomes a part of the mental structure (UNESCO, 2003) - the usage of netspeak with reference to its perception can be very well understood. As in case of netspeak, it has definitely been adopted by the Pakistani youngsters from their environment and now it has become a part of their mental
structure. Therefore, to assume that netspeak will become a part of students’ mental structure as Vygotsky puts it, and yet it will have no effect on the Standard English of the students is a far cry.

This research also shows that there is no correlation between ‘students’ perception of netspeak’ and ‘the impact of netspeak on Standard English’; but, there is a strong correlation between ‘the usage of netspeak’ and ‘impact of netspeak on Standard English’. The results confirmed what most educators believe that with pervasive use of netspeak, standards will be lost (Dorda, 2010). It can be thus said that when students get habitual of using netspeak, it creeps into their formal writing, regardless of what their perception about netspeak is.

Fig-1

*Progression of netspeak from perception to Standard English*

This proves that the students may think that they are able to very well identify their boundaries when using netspeak and it has only a negligible effect on their academic writing but it is not so. Farina and Lyddy (2011) point out that the usage of netspeak reflects upon the skill of meta linguistic knowledge of the user of netspeak which allows him to switch between different languages; Farina and Lyddy have only confirmed Vygotsky when he said that two different languages can coexist in mind without interfering. The interference of netspeak on Standard English can be explained thus: Usage of netspeak affects Standard English because netspeak and Standard English are not two languages but both are one language; netspeak being the diglossic form of Standard English. This proves that the fears of teachers regarding the academic English of students being influenced by netspeak are realistic as Crystal (2001) says, ‘There is
of course nothing new about fears accompanying the emergence of a new communications technology (p. 2).’ Nauman and Hussain (2014) assess that the Pakistani English teachers are custodians of the Standard English; yet, the everyday writings of Pakistani English language learners is influenced by netspeak. On the other hand Erling (2005) propose that the English language practitioners should distance themselves from the ideologies of L1 varieties and should teach the language to bring out its communicative purpose.

Erling (2005) wants to pave the way for a more heterogeneous language learning environment where two varieties of English, the Standard English and the netspeak exist together, yet in different domains. Zimmerman and Milligan, (2007) call instructors ‘digital immigrant generation’, and student ‘digital native generation’ as they studied the gap that exists between these two generations; writing being one area where this difference is highlighted. University instructors must realize that a proper strategy needs to be adopted to overcome the perceived gaps in students’ writings (Zimmerman & Milligan, 2007). It is high time that teachers start using the internet as Jarvis (2005) suggests by devising activities where students may use and even post on the web. McLoughlin and Lee (2008) put forward that today’s challenge for English teachers is to use the information evaluation to facilitate learning in such a manner that learning is less prescriptive. This can be done, according to them, using the social software tools. But for such a massive change to happen, it is recommended that English language teachers are taught courses such as World Englishes mentioned by Chang (2014). This course aims at the understanding of topics such as ‘English as the global lingua franca, varieties of English, native and non-native division, and the standard ideology’. She concludes that this course not only helps students realize the power that comes with English language, but it also helps them to appreciate the various varieties of the English language. The course further helps the learners to detach themselves with the hegemony of native standards of English. Such courses will surely help English teachers to view the English language more
holistically, with all its variants and versions. With such comprehensive understanding of the language, new vistas will open for its usage, making the netspeak acceptable within its online domain.

Even though the younger Pakistani generation has accepted netspeak wholeheartedly, the older generation of instructors need to realize netspeak as a reality. Emphasis should definitely be given to Standard English; yet, the territory and importance of netspeak should not be neglected. The future research can be conducted upon the usage of netspeak, perception of netspeak and impact of netspeak on Standard English in governmental universities of Pakistan as the governmental universities cater to a different segment of the Pakistani society.

**Conclusion**

It can be extorted from Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory that netspeak is a social phenomenon that is learned by the youth from the net culture that surrounds them. In light of this theory, it is but natural that students indulge themselves in netspeak as it is now a part of their socio-cultural being. The aim of this research was to see what perception Pakistani students hold regarding netspeak and also to see how their perception of netspeak and their usage of netspeak influenced Standard English. It was thus concluded that they welcome netspeak as a source of communication on the internet and the mobile, yet the downside of netspeak is its negative effects on students’ academic and Standard English. It is also established that netspeak is a diglossic form of the English language and these diglossic forms overlap one another. This overlap is responsible for the penetration of netspeak into the academic writing of the youth.
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