

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ENGINEERING STUDENTS' USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the impact of English language anxiety among the engineering students of north east India in general and Arunachal Pradesh in particular. Purposive sampling of two hundred undergraduate students of engineering was done for this survey using three questionnaires. It has been found that in the absence of written script in their respective L1s and a lack of emphasis on grammar and language teaching in the feeder levels, students show a high level of anxiety in using English in formal modes of writing and speaking. However, they display enough confidence to use the same in social media platforms and in the process, form their own notions of correctness. The 'likes', 'following' and 'sharing' of their updates and profiles are perceived by them as a validation of their style of writing and popularity. As a result, it has been found that the informality of language use in these platforms is severely impacting the use of English language by the students in the formal modes of discourse as well.

Keywords: *Foreign Language Anxiety, Digital habitat, Link language, Web Mediated Communication.*

I INTRODUCTION

1.1. The advent of internet and emergence of social, professional and academic networking sites has propped up new opportunities to connect and communicate. The Web 2.0 provides enormous opportunities to innovate in the way we communicate, inform, entertain and participate. But at the same time, it opens us to a number of concomitant issues ranging from privacy to propriety in terms of content we upload, the mode we choose to communicate, and the form of language we opt to put our views across. It also poses quite a few questions pertaining to appropriating these platforms for imparting classroom based learning to the students of the north east and utilizing it in a balanced manner to make learning effective and voluntary.

1.2.With human or F2F mode of communication having certain limitations, the web and electronically mediated communication addresses these gaps. With the advent of a ‘digital habitat’ (Pohjola, 2011) and ‘ubiquitous computing’ (Mark, 1999) media and mobile technologies have received a tremendous boost in the ways of communication. The mediated mode of communication presents a dual mode of adaptability which plays a major role in the use of language. The first mode of adaptability lies with the users’ level that constantly innovates and devises newer strategies to communicate conforming to the demands of a particular portal or a device. The second mode of adaptability lies in the developers’ level that provides newer options and apps to make communication user friendly.

1.2.1.The general term, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has been widened in the recent times to incorporate the mobile telephony mode as well. As against the normal computer process involving encoding, transmitting and decoding the information which doesn’t take into account the context in which communication takes place or varies, a major shift appeared with John December’s study (1997) which expanded the scope of the definition by incorporating a variety of human contexts that play a mediating role in CMC. December’s study is an extension of researches on the psycho-social factors of human component vis-a-vis CMC (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Spears, Lea, & Lee, 1990), as well as social context (Lea, 1992).The results derived from these works conform largely to a homogeneous target group with clearly defined modes of communication and devices.December in one of his later studies (1996) has made a technological and terminological distinction between CMC, Mobile telephony and Internet mediated communication while advocating an integration of all three. It is on the basis of this argument that the term Web Mediated Communication is referred to in the context of this paper. December’s argument is further reinforced through the later studies of Herring (2007) who concurs that communication through computers or mobiles using internet as a mediating mode involves a similar architecture of encoding, transmitting and decoding. The recent developments in the field of voice input messaging as in the case of Siri (in case of Apple devices) or Dragon Mobile Assistant (in case of Android devices) further reinforces the suitability of the term than the previously restrictive CMC.

II. BACKGROUND

2.1.The research is primarily focused onEnglish language use online by the students of engineering in Arunachal Pradesh using different portals and devices through web mediation and its impact on their written and oral modes of communication. The strategies they adopt stem from foreign language anxiety that prevail vis-à-vis L2, i.e., English language.

2.2.The state of Arunachal Pradesh homes twenty six major tribes and more than seventy sub-tribes, each marked by their unique belief systems and customs. They do not have a written script(barring Buddhists in Kameng and Lower Lohit areasthey use Tibetan and Tai-Khampti for the Buddhist religious texts). (Elwin, 1957)Rest of the dialects does not have distinctive grammatical markers as in English for personal pronouns, gender, singular and plural

number, etc. It was found during the survey that their L1 interferes in their use of L2, i.e., English. Lack of certain vowel sounds have also influenced markedly on their spellings of English. Linguistically, the dialects spoken in the state are rooted in the Tibeto-Burman language family, with major dialects like Nyishi, Adi, Galo, Apatani, Tagin, etc. coming under the *Tani* group. Despite their common origins, all these dialects are largely independent in terms of their structural, semantic and other linguistic properties.

2.2.1. The geographical inaccessibility of the region for many years had severely impacted the development of education in this part of the country with the first college established in 1964 at Pasighat. The medium of instruction largely remained Assamese which had also served as a '*link language*' between the hills and the plains. English was adopted in schools and colleges only in 1971 with the then NEFA administration affiliating all schools under the Central Board of Secondary Education. However, the ballads, cultural practices and indigenous knowledge continue to be transmitted orally from one generation to the other (Chaube, 1973).

2.3. The paper approaches Foreign Language Anxiety of the Arunachalee students on the backdrop of social history and linguistic structure summarized above. Though a single stroke overhaul in the medium of instruction from Assamese to English has resulted in setting up of many private English medium schools across the state, the medium of instruction, however, for the most part remained a creolized version of Hindi and NEFAmese (which has over the years, replaced Assamese as the *lingua franca*). The same is also true in case of the government schools. Although some schools had vigorously pushed for English, a lack of trained teachers and proper academic infrastructure has failed in imparting the desired results vis-à-vis the use of English. This has severely impacted on the process of proper acquisition of L2 on the part of the students. The lack of training in second language teaching and proper resources resulted in a deliberate overlook of teaching grammar in the feeder levels of education in the state.

2.3.1 However, of late, a deliberate neglect in the teaching of English grammar has been observed that across almost all schools of the northeast India. But Arunachal Pradesh, with a largest concentration of tribal population and a lack of script and written literature, the impact of language anxiety on the students have been found to be severe compared to those from other states of the region. With no strategy or academic mechanism to address the issue, the students have been found to devise ways to deal with the same on their own and in the process, they *form* their own notions of *correctness*. Further, the students are usually found to fill the void of proper grammar and language teaching by relying heavily on web resources and translation tools like Google Translate and Bing Translator. With no distinction between the *offer* and *propositional* meanings being presented by the web tools, the students are found to be using the web-processed language in three forms of discourse, viz., oral, written and electronic with several layers of overlap of the informal (electronic) on the more formal modes of communication.

2.4. The present study aims at showing some of the evolving trends of language use and customization among a largely heterogeneous group of students using English as a medium of communication.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. The current study is based on a survey involving two hundred undergraduate students of engineering at the North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology (NERIST), a premier engineering institute located in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. In order to make them participative and generate interest on the course, different web based platforms were used to observe the threads and modes of responses. Branch based closed user-group communities were formed for one platform (Facebook), while quick responses were sought through short messages on the other (Twitter). The students are being asked to post real time updates as well as comments in asynchronous modes. These were later analyzed to check their levels of understanding and interpretation of the content and the nature of the feedback given. An *open* mode of communication is being encouraged and the whole exercise is being conducted in a de-hierarchized manner.

IV. INSTRUMENTS

4.1. Three questionnaires were prepared and distributed to the students online using Google docs. The sample constituent is heterogeneous as students primarily belong to the eight north eastern states of the region and a few from the rest of India. While a few studies have expressed apprehension over the use of the web questionnaires citing problems related to sampling (Andrews et al., (2003); Howard, Rainie, & Jones, (2001)) as well as the veracity of the information collected (Dillman, (2000); Stanton, (1998)), the two most compelling reasons behind using online questionnaires were the target group's comfortability with the medium and their easy access to the network and devices. The three questionnaires are:

- (i) The English Language Classroom Anxiety (ELCAS) (customized from FLCAS Questionnaire)
- (ii) The Language Use and Proficiency Questionnaire
- (iii) The Social Media and Text Proficiency Questionnaire

4.1.1. The three questionnaires have been appropriated and designed to test the hypotheses and fulfill the primary objectives of research, namely:

- (i) There is a substantial degree of English Language Anxiety with respect to the use of English language.
- (ii) The innovations are strategized to cover up the lack of correct knowledge of the rules of English language.
- (iii) There is an overlap of the e-lingo on the more formal modes of written and oral communication.

4.2. Five point Likert scale was used in ELCAS and the Language Proficiency Questionnaire on a range of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating *strongly disagree* and 5 indicating *strongly agree*. The anxiety and language proficiency scores were derived by summation of the students' responses. The findings of the three questionnaires were further tallied and verified by analyzing language used by the respondents in social networking sites, their oral presentations in the classroom and formal modes of writing in assignments and semester examinations. The online mode of communication was surveyed on the basis of the language used by the respondents on their Facebook timelines,

Twitter feeds, blogs and Whatsapp messages. The issue of content privacy was handled firstly, in the form of a written declaration for using the data only for academic and research purposes and secondly, by pixelating the images and other personal information that could possibly compromise with the respondents' privacy.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Against the historical background provided, one of the trends that emerge is that the students who have been surveyed have little or no *formal knowledge* of rules of grammar and language as far as their respective L1s and English is concerned. This has been a major contributor towards raising the levels of anxiety while using English language in the class. The "state of apprehension, a vague fear" (Scovel, 1978, p. 134) makes learning as well as performance using English difficult for the respondents (Balachandran and Skully, (2004); Tobias & Everson (1997) and Gaudy and Spielberger (1971). Anxiety also has a detrimental impact on cognitive processes pertaining to input, process and output of information and knowledge (Tobias 1979, 1980, 1986). Extending the scope of anxiety to classroom situations, Horwitz, *et al* (1986) has coined the term Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) to denote "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." (pp.128, 1986) resulting in an inadequate or faulty understanding of the attempted language. This has also been validated by Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) when they posited that FLCA gives rise to negative self-assessment tendencies, which in turn impacts the students' performance in the foreign language class.

5.2. The English Language Classroom Anxiety of the surveyed students are found to be rooted primarily in their feeder level education during which no special emphasis was given on teaching grammar and language. Secondly, with a lack of script, lexicon and written literature in their own dialects, the students find it difficult to relate the grammatical rules of English with their mother tongue resulting in errors. Although in the recent years, the grammar and lexicon of some of the dialects have been published in English, the same is yet to be institutionalized across the schools in the state. Thirdly, there is no emphasis on teaching literature in the school level, which would have otherwise helped the students in understanding the nuances of style and contextual appropriateness of English language. The result of all these is a classroom filled with students using English in a way that is faulty and imprecise.

5.3. Further, with an easy access to the web and the devices, and in the absence of any comprehensive mechanism to deal with their levels of FLCA, coupled with their active engagement with social network platforms, particularly Facebook and messaging platforms like Whatsapp, the respondents are found to be increasingly resorting to such platforms for communicating with their online friends, as well as passing and providing information among their inter and intra branch mates. With an average of three to five hours spent on the social network per day (*Figure 1*) and upon observing their Timeline behavior and Tweet feed, it has been found that the respondents use social

network to negotiate with their varying levels of language anxiety.

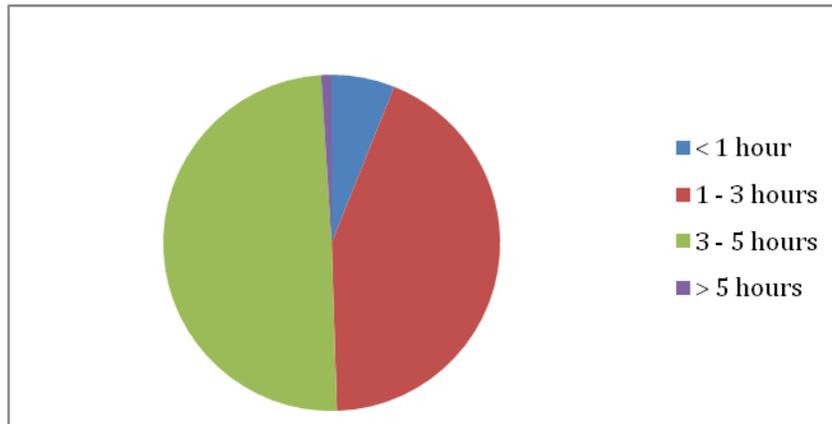


Fig 1: Average Time Spent On Social Media Sites by the Respondents per Day

Further, with its architecture that facilitates informal and relatively lax mode of communication with no inbuilt system to highlight the errors as in case of the MS Office, the students are often found to be using this informal medium for two major reasons: firstly, to hide or overlook their errors in grammar and style, and secondly, to make them appear fashionable and ‘cool’ amongst their peers and online friends. With the number of ‘likes’ and comments they generate on their posts and updates, the students derive confidence in the use of English in these platforms (Figure 2) and replicate the same in their written and oral modes of communication.

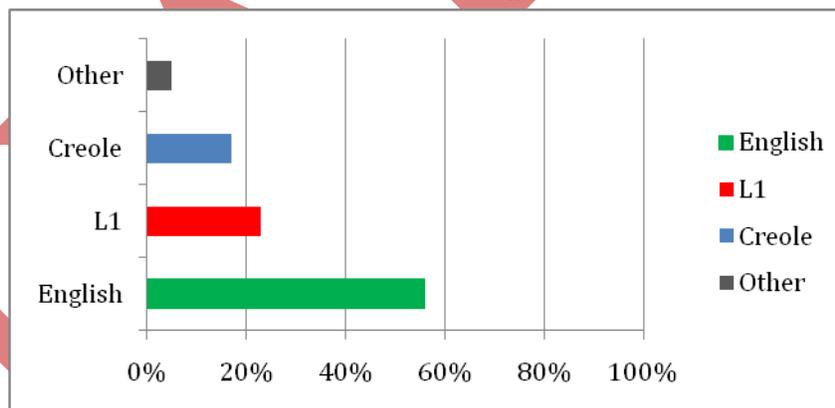


Fig 2: Respondents' use of language in social media sites

However, as they face problems with vocabulary, they are found to be resorting to code mixing and code switching quite generously. The classroom interventions and emphasis on correctness rarely helps as it was found that students prefer to remain silent and passive during the practice sessions with interaction with the teacher or the peers becoming non-existent.

5.3.1. Some of the major reasons of anxiety among the target group include:

- (i) Fear of being exposed about the lack of knowledge of grammatical rules.
- (ii) Fear of failure in meeting up with the expectations of the language teacher in the classrooms.
- (iii) Fear of committing erroneous articulation, particularly with sounds like /s/, /sh/, and /ch/, consonant clusters, and also with the pronunciation of words.
- (iv) Conflicting desires on the part of the students to imitate better speakers but falling short in terms of actual performance.
- (v) Lack of adequate vocabulary.
- (vi) Fear of a hierarchical physical setup in the classroom with teacher speaking from a raised platform thereby creating a physical barrier between the sender of the information and the receivers
- (vii) Fear of making statements lacking in cohesion and logic.

5.4. Of the 200 respondents, 155 are male respondents and 45 are females. The respondents belong to the 16-21 age group with as heterogeneous a composition as Mizo, Assamese, Garo, Khasi, Nepali, Nyishi, Apatani, Bodo, Tagin, Sangtam, Meitei, Adi, Hindi, Kokborok, Bengali, Nagamese, etc. and each having their own distinctive sub-tribes and sub-dialects. 77% (154 students) of the respondents had their school education from English medium schools, 11%, i.e., 22 students from Hindi medium schools and 12% (24 students) had their school education from the vernacular medium schools.

5.4.1. 80% of the respondents (160 students) were found to have major anxiety while using English in the classroom in both written and spoken modes with 56% of the respondents (112 students) rating their proficiency in English as average. 51% of the respondents (102 students) have admitted having average to poor writing skills and having poor knowledge of grammatical rules of English. When compared to their use of mother tongue, 39% of the respondents (78 students) opt for reading a text in English if the same is available in both English and their respective mother tongues. But, despite their lack of knowledge of grammatical rules, 45% of the respondents (90 students) say they generally opt for writing in English if a choice between English and respective mother tongue is provided. However, as far as the spoken mode is concerned, 40% of the respondents (80 students) said they will opt for their mother tongue if a choice between the same and English is provided. Thus, it is evident from the data above that the students' level of anxiety while using English language is more in the spoken mode compared to the use of the same for reading and writing.

5.5. With the students opting for engineering, where the stress is more on developing communication skills than teaching them grammar, the errors they commit generally go unchecked and they are left with their own *notions* of correctness. It is with this residual knowledge the students opt to communicate in the online mode and use apps accordingly. The result is an overlap of these forms in more formal modes of discourse. Over a period of time, the language they use online which is generally devoid of any correction, gets perceived as a correct mode of writing

and they start using it confidence and quite frequently. This has been observed particularly in case of those students who have an online presence for more than 3 years, which constitute 52% of the respondents.

5.5.1. Since the questionnaires had identifiable information (like e-mail, name, gender) of the respondents, their Facebook timelines, tweet feed (wherever present) and blogs (wherever present) have been analyzed and the data was tallied with their more formal platforms for language use (like answer scripts, assignment sheets and oral presentations). Upon analyzing these, some of the common trends that have come out include:

- (i) 182 students, which constitute 91% of the respondents, have problems with their use of prepositions, particularly with their choice of *in, on, of, upon, from, at* and *about*. This is observed generally uniformly across the spectrum of the respondents irrespective of their mother tongue. The same is true in case of use or lack of the definite articles.
- (ii) Quite remarkably, the orthographic errors in the online mode have reduced. This is attributed to the red squiggles that appear upon the input of a word erroneously in web mode and their reliance on predictive text in the mobile mode of communication. However, the respondents have not been able to explain correctly the difference between the options that gets auto-generated with a squiggle upon the input of a wrongly framed sentence. Instead, they are found to be using either of the two options *mechanically* without any regard for the structure of the remainder of the text.
- (iii) Another interesting trend has emerged from 8% of the respondents (16 students) who score better than the rest as far as the knowledge and the use of the rules is concerned. While they deliberately innovate and deviate from the rules of grammar and orthography in the online mode, these deviations are also seen in their formal modes of discourse. For instance, students composing a message like:
“Lyf doesn't olwyz offers a choice btween gud n bad. At tyms, we need 2 gv up d so cld 'gud' tng 4 carving out d very 'best'...so folks! Choose wisely☺” [1] finds place in their answer scripts as well as assignments. Similarly, hash tagging in order to promote as in the example: *“Wn I luk out...itz ol black n white.#hazy#hazy# but stl I pause 2 smile cz dt mks lyf wrthwhile..”*[2] is also found common with this group of students in their formal use of language.
- (iv) One of the major findings of the study is with the use of punctuations. With the online mode being lax, liberal and informal with the use of proper punctuation marks, replacing those with smileys and winkeys or hash tags and ellipses has become a common norm in both formal and informal modes of communication. This is evident from the examples [1] and [2] above or as in the [3]:
wat exactly ur doing with ma jacket...with so much concentration... still i find it the most cute one even though ur not at all cute. lol ;-)[3] While emoticons, winkeys and smileys are used by the users to capture and express the mood at that moment of composing the post, the respondents have, however, failed to provide any logical reason for the use of the ellipses. 50 students were randomly asked for reasons for the use of ellipsis. Further, upon observing and tallying their time line, chats archive

(wherever possible) and whatsapp messages (wherever available), it has been found that the ellipsis is used for the following reasons:

- (a) It acts like a space filler. For instance, there is a tendency of some of the students to use words and sounds like *umm, like, ki* (Hindi post position) while speaking. The same gets translated spontaneously to ellipsis while writing.
 - (b) Ellipses help in filling up the gap for a lack of an appropriate word.
 - (c) For marking a change from one code to another
 - (d) For denoting something in continuum
 - (e) For no reason. 23% of the respondents (46 students) have mentioned that they use ellipses for no reason. It could mean any of the above or nothing at all.
- (v) As the users have the freedom to change and mix their codes frequently in the online mode (owing partly to lack of a proper vocabulary or the lack of word itself in their mother tongue), this is reflected in their use of incomplete sentences in the formal modes of writing and speaking.
- (vi) A lax structure in the online mode is also evident in the students' deviation from SVO pattern of English in their formal modes of writing. For instance, *The man (S) built (V) a strong wall(O)*. [4] A student communicating online may use it thus: *The strong wall man build*. [5] or *The strong wall build man*. [6] In sentences [5] and [6] for instance, there is a conspicuous lack of prepositions along with a deviation from the grammatically valid SVO pattern for English. With no green squiggles to mark the errors in the online or textese mode along with a lack of knowledge on the part of the students, they form their own *notions* of correctness and use either of the two sentences without any particular reason. Errors are also found in their use of plural forms of nouns and verbs.
- (vii) It has been found that 95% of the surveyed respondents (190 students) use the online translation tools for translating text/words/sentences from one language to another. They use it for both the submission of assignments or for everyday communication online. The two most notable tools they use include the Google Translate or Bing Translator. The use of results generated by these tools too has contributed in imparting a faulty knowledge the users. With the users rarely applying reason and opt for a blind copy-paste of the result as displayed, there remains no chance for them to differentiate between the correct and incorrect forms of language use. However, we found that the displayed results are based on the data fed to the translator slot by the user. With neither Google Translate nor Bing Translator have any option to input or detect data in any of the languages/dialects spoken in the north east (barring Bengali in Google Translate), the students use Hindi as the input language, the data of which gets translated into English by the translator.

However, Hindi as spoken in the north east is more of a creole than grammatically correct form, the students feed the data in the colloquial or creolized form only which provides faulty results. For instance, a grammatically correct sentence in Hindi as: *Main wahaanjaunga* [7] can be translated to

English as *I will go there*. [8] However, students' use of colloquial Hindi doesn't take into consideration the nuances of grammar and instead, the same will be entered as: *Hum wahan par jayega*. [9] in which *Hum* is the plural marker for *We* but used as singular here, *par* is a post position and *jayega* is again in the singular form. When such forms are entered for translations into either of the translating tools, the result it generates is: *We will be there*. [10] which is a complete deviation from the actual meaning of the sentence. Similarly, for a root (but faulty) sentence like: *Uskapaasmerasara kitab hain*. [11], instead of a grammatically correct one like *Unke paas meri saari kitabein hain* [12], the user gets two responses like: *Its got my whole book*. [12] (Bing Translator) or *He is my whole book*. [13] (Google Translate) instead of getting the correct response: *He has all my books*. [14] Instead of applying reason and rule, it has been found that the students blindly follow whatever is offered on Google in both oral and written modes of communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

6.1. From the observations, findings, and analysis, it can be inferred that English language anxiety contributes in compounding the problems in language use by the students as they remain hesitant in getting their errors corrected in the class. Secondly, it has a direct bearing on the language they use online as it offers them with a medium which is *open* and *informal*. With no checks and content management, the students are left with forming their own notions of correctness and the same gets reflected in their formal use of English language in both oral and written modes of expression.

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