

# THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING ON THE WRITTEN ASSESSMENTS OF ESL STUDENTS OF POLYTECHNIC MERSING, JOHOR (PMJ)

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous global impact. One of the most major effects was in the realm of education. Educators and students had a difficult time finishing the year's curriculum. All institutions were shuttered for nearly a year when Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented. Following multiple layers of Movement Control Orders, the Malaysian government had implemented online learning, which is still in effect today. Therefore, convenience and flexibility are two advantages of online learning. Lessons, assessments, and practices are all administrated from wherever they are. The proposed paper will the challenges associated with writing mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Hence, two research questions are developed to serve the objectives of this study. They are ((i) are there any changes that can be identified in the basic aspect of writing mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization? (ii) what are the impacts of online learning on writing mechanics? For this study, Crispin Thurlow's (2003) non-standard typographic or orthographic forms will be used to analyze the ESL students' online written assessments.

***Keywords: online learning; spelling; punctuation; capitalization; written assessments; ESL students***

## **1.0 Problem Statement and Background Information**

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread globally, affecting nearly all countries and territories. The outbreak was first discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Countries around the world warned the public to be cautious. Handwashing, wearing face masks, physical distancing, and avoiding mass gatherings and assemblies have been among the public strategies. Lock-down and stay-at-home strategies have been implemented to flatten the curve and control disease transmission (Sintema, 2020).

Channel News Asia (CNA) created a timeline detailing how the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded in Malaysia since January 2020. On January 25, 2020, Malaysia detected its first three COVID-19 cases: three Chinese nationals from Wuhan who entered the country via Singapore. Then, Malaysians have been subjected to various levels of lockdown since the movement control order (MCO) was first imposed in March 2020, as the government battled the spread of COVID-19.

One of the most significant effects was in the field of education. Educators and students struggled to finish the school year's curriculum. When the MCO was implemented,

all institutions were shut down for nearly a year. The Malaysian government implemented online learning following multiple layers of MCO, which is still in effect today.

Polytechnic Mersing likewise closed down in the second week of March following the Malaysian government's intention to close down the institutions all over the country. When the first layer of MCO was imposed on March 18<sup>th</sup>, students were forced to return to their respective homes, and educators were asked to stay at home. Stay-at-home educators were instructed to continue marking and collecting student assessments digitally via digital applications such as telegram, WhatsApp, and emails. From March 18, 2020 to May 3, 2020, the MCO was implemented in four phases over a 47-day period. Following Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), the Malaysian government did not give up on its goal of providing education. As a result, all educators were required to continue the process of teaching and learning via online platforms like Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Zoom Meeting, and many more. Convenience and flexibility are two advantages of online learning. Both educators and students can communicate from any location. Despite this, technology-based devices can be used to complete any type of assessment submission. Lessons, assessments, and practices are all administered remotely.

Polytechnic Mersing educators also followed governments' decisions in carrying out the teaching and learning process. In the beginning, the process of teaching and learning continued with many difficulties, such as getting students for each session while they were at home, collecting assessments on time, and marking it digitally. Apart from that, the most pressing problem was internet access, with most impoverished students unable to purchase additional mobile data or install internet in their houses due to financial constraints. With the help of the Malaysian government, students in B40 households were allowed to receive free 4GB umobile data as well as a Simcard as time went on. To the educators, the struggle is real when mentioning marking the assessments; students were not committed in submitting nor completing their assessments whereas it's just for the sake of getting it done. However, this issue has yet to be rectified due to students' negative attitudes toward online learning. This paper, however, does not address the students' attitudes toward online learning. This paper investigates the impact of online learning on PMJ students' written assessments.

Polytechnic Mersing Johor (PMJ) is located in the Mersing sub-urban area of Johor. It is a tertiary institution for students who have completed their SPM and STPM but have been unable to gain admission to Malaysian universities. However, some students are willingly enrolling in Malaysian polytechnics because hands-on practices are widely available. The General Studies Department of PMJ accommodates three main departments namely Electrical Department, Information Technology Department, and Commerce Department. English Unit of the General Studies Department provides four courses for the students of those main departments. Communicative English is proposed by the Ministry of Malaysian Higher Education and consists of three levels: Communicative English 1, 2, and 3. All of the assessments for those three levels are structured to accommodate communicative purposes.

Due to the pandemic and the shift in the curriculum from face-to-face to online learning, PMJ students demonstrate a lack of competency in several aspects of written assessments such as organization of the writing, discourse, and mechanics. The aspect of mechanics covers punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, which are the fundamental items that every student should be familiar with. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the challenges associated with writing mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The English educators of PMJ have discovered that students frequently use improper abbreviations in their assessments such as 'wer' for where, 'r' for are, 'u' for you, 'y' for why, 'schl' or 'skul' for school and the list goes on. English lecturers perceive this as a

threat to the spellings of Standard English as these shortened forms are currently being used widely among netizens. These abbreviations or shortened forms are also known as netspeak.

### **1.1 Objective of the study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges associated with writing mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

The following research questions have been developed to serve the research objectives: (i) are there any noticeable changes that can be identified in the basic aspect of writing mechanics such as spelling, punctuations, and capitalization? (ii) what are the impacts of online learning on writing mechanics?

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

The relevance of this research is discussed in this section. The proposed study is important for students because it will create an awareness of the need for appropriate writing abilities since they will be professionals who must communicate in writing in their careers. The reputation of the company will deteriorate if they fail to employ correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in their professional writing as currently they are influenced by most of the netspeak abbreviations. Hence, students should practice correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in Standard English. Furthermore, it is important for English language educators to address the problem with ESL learners and assist them in proper writing skills for their written work in a way that improves their employment prospects.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **Online Learning**

Despite the COVID-19 crisis, online learning has allowed educators and students to continue teaching and learning without interruption through online learning. The global pandemic crisis is driving the most extensive experimentation in online education. Dhawan (2020) mentioned in his study that learning takes place in synchronous or asynchronous environments that are facilitated by the internet. Synchronous learning implies that a student will virtually attend a class session each week, at the same time as the instructor and classmates, despite the fact that he/she will be learning from a distance while asynchronous online classes mean that the students don't always need to be online at the same time as the instructor or classmates. Shahabadi & Uplane (2015) stated that due to established demands in numerous eras such as education, synchronous e-learning has been expanded. There are no physical meetings in the online educational environment. Asynchronous e-learning is defined by another component since the conditions and causes that drive it are distinct. "Asynchronous learning refers to instruction that is not bound by place or time," Khan (2006) stated based on these components (Khan, 2005). Bakia, Shear, Toyama & Lasseeter (2012) in their study cited that the internet allows teachers and students to access learning materials. In addition, Jeffrey, Milne, Shuddabby & Higgins (2014) quoted that online learning makes use of learning materials such as Youtube videos, PowerPoint presentations, e-books, and audio that are available on the Internet. Dwiyantri & Suwastini (2021) summarises that online learning makes use of the internet as a learning platform. However, implementing the teaching and learning process fully through online is a new learning for most schools in Indonesia. They added that many things have to be considered and improved in its implementation. In short, due to the pandemic, not only Indonesia, but most countries, have

decided to implement full-online teaching and learning, and the internet has become a means of communication.

### **Written Assessment**

As this study depicts a relationship between online learning and written assessments, some related literature reviews have been done on written assessments. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four skills that must be taught in language classes. According to Durga and Rao (2018), writing is the most challenging of the four skills, whilst Dewi (2020) stated that writing is important to teach since it allows students to think creatively and expand their vocabulary. According to a case study conducted by Yusuf (2019), the use of assessment in the form of feedback helped students strengthen their skills. Brown (2001) in his e-book titled *Teaching by Principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*, mentioned about six categories that can be used in assessing writing, among others, (i)content, (ii) organization, (iii)discourse, (v)syntax, (vi)vocabulary, and(vii)mechanics.

### **Typography, Orthography & Abbreviations**

Nisphi & Armanto (2020) in their case study defines typography, orthography & abbreviations as follows:

- Typography refers to the use of non-alphabetic keyboard symbols such as numbers; repeated punctuation; and special symbols such as '&', '@', and others. Typography also includes non-standard capitalization and replacement of numbers or letters for words like '1<sup>st</sup>' 'B4' and so on.
- Non-standard orthography consists of abbreviations; phonetics stimulated letter substitution (for example, d for t, z for s); spelling that mimics dialectical pronunciation; and spelling containing sounds like "heloooooooo" or "heeeiii".
- The form of abbreviation found in the online language on the Instagram site varies widely, but generally, this abbreviation adapts from phrases or clauses that come in English such as "COD" which means "Cash On Delivery", "ASAP" means "As Soon As Possible", "BTW" means "By The Way", "FYI" better known as "For Your Information" and "GWS" which stands for "Get Well Soon".

Nisphi & Armanto (2020) analyzed Instagram conversation using the technique of Simak Libas Bebas Cakap (SLBC) where 200 comments are taken from Instagram using random sampling so that all comments are taken randomly from random uploads.

### **Influence of Netspeak/SMS language in Written Assessments**

Shazia Aziz, Maria Shamim, Muhammad Faisal, and Priya Avais (2013) discovered that 83 percent of students believe spelling is the most affected area of language, with a 0.04 ratio in percentage. Eighty percent of educators believe spelling is the most affected area. Data was gathered through questionnaires and student essays. The data was analyzed using Suppliance in Obligatory Context. It is a quantitative study. As statistical tools, percentage and average methods were used.

The impacts of SMS on the writing skills of Pakistani students at Gujarat University were studied by Zahid Yousaf and Mehmood Ahmed (2013). It was a survey research. A quantitative technique and multiphase sampling were utilized to acquire data. The tool comprised a set of questionnaires. According to the findings of this study, excessive SMS use

prompted students to write incorrect spellings and the use of SMS abbreviations is not normal in exams and regular academic work, which is extremely destructive in academia.

Dr. Mubasher Nadeem et al. (2012) conducted a reflective study on English language users in October of 2012. The study included 100 university graduates as participants. This research employed both a quantitative and qualitative approach. A questionnaire was distributed to the participants, and their responses were discussed in general. Some of the text messages were shared by the participants. As a result of this study, students are aware of the effects of SMS on second language learning. According to the data, the spelling, grammar, and syntactic systems of the English language have been mutated and affected as a result of the excessive use of SMS.

In a nutshell, digital technology has taken over the planet, and its effects can be seen in every corner of the globe. The majority of educational case studies discovered that technology has a significant impact on our education and poses a threat.

### **3.0 Theoretical Framework**

Brown (2015) suggested six categories for assessing writing in his e-book *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*, including (i) content, (ii) organization, (iii) discourse, (iv) syntax, (v) grammar, and (vi) mechanics. He adapted these six categories for evaluating writing from J. D. Brown (1991). The aspect of mechanics suggested by Brown includes the spellings, punctuation, capitalization, citation of references (if applicable), tidiness, and appearance. For this study, aspect of mechanics only will be explored to find changes in their written assessments. Citation of references, tidiness, and appearance are not examined because online submissions do not require tidiness or appearance, and this is a vocational/technical English course that does not demand the submission of lengthy essays.

The ESL students' sample written assignments will be analyzed using Crispin Thurlow's (2003) non-standard typographic or orthographic forms (spelling). These forms are classified into the following categories:

- G-Clippings (without the final –g letter), such as "going" (going)
- Abbreviations (letters deleted at the end, omitting the –g letter), such as "aft" (after)
- Contractions (removal of middle letters), such as "nxt" (next)
- Acronyms and initialisms (made out of the first letters of several words), such as "LOL" (laugh out loud)
- Number of homophones, such as "B4" (before)
- Letter homophones, such as "U" (you)
- Non-conventional spellings, such as "nite" (night)

### **4.0 Methodology**

#### **4.1 Sample / Participants**

The individuals or participants are the researcher's students. Therefore, nonprobability sampling will be employed because they are available throughout the semester and it is more convenient for the researcher. The researcher anticipates that the students will exhibit some of the characteristics he/she wishes to study. Only a small group of participants is described in this study and the findings are not generalized to a population.

## **4.2 Research Design and Instruments**

A quantitative method will be employed for this study. This study has independent and dependent variables. The Independent variable is online learning and the dependent variable is students' written assignments. To measure the data, students' written assignments are employed as the instrument of the study.

## **4.3 Procedure**

Electrical, Information Technology, and Commerce Departments are the three main departments at PMJ. Electrical and Electronics Engineering are offered by the Electrical Department, whereas Business Management and Secretarial Science are offered by the Commerce Department, and Digital Technology is offered by the Information Technology Department. As convenience sampling is used, the researcher chooses her own class of Business Management students (40 students in total) for this study. This is a semester two-class, and they are taking Communicative English 2, the second level of Communicative English course. Students should have completed Communicative English 1 in semester 1 as a prerequisite for this course. In total, there are four assessments in Communicative English 2 or also known by the code DUE 30022: a presentation, a written assignment, a test, and a role-play.

The written assignment will be used to test the students' spelling abilities in this study. The written assignment requires students to write a 10-step process/procedure. Hence, the students must watch a provided video titled "Telephone Skills for Better Service" to assist them in completing this assignment. The provided video is just as a sample while they have to come out with "Steps in Answering a Professional Phone Call" that consists of 10 steps. In addition, students have to determine three precautions when answering a phone call during the process/procedure. Since this is a classroom assessment, students are expected to complete the task in an hour.

The written assignment task description will be uploaded to Microsoft Teams, and students are required to respond digitally; they do not have to print it, as well as handwritten and hand submissions are not necessary. Students will have an additional 15-20 minutes to submit their work in Microsoft Teams. Due to the fact that the submission is also digital/online, students will require additional time caused by frequent network disruptions. After that, the researcher will have two weeks to mark students' assignments based on a provided rubric by the Ministry of Higher Education, followed by a week to analyze non-standard typographic styles.

## **4.4 Data Analysis**

The data of this study will be analyzed through descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics are used to examine overall test score trends. Microsoft Excel will be used to calculate the overall trend of test scores.

## **5.0 Limitations**

The findings cannot be generalized to all ESL students at all Malaysian polytechnics because only 40 ESL students will be participating in this study.

## 6.0 Recommendation

This research could be expanded in the future to look at issues in written assessments for Semester 5 ESL students. The last topic in DUE 50032 is Job Hunting Mechanics, according to the curriculum. Students are required to produce a resume and cover letter for that particular topic and the educators will be able to assess using H.D.Brown's (2001) six areas of assessing writing.

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