

Original Research Article

Influence of the Informal Chat Writing Styles Used on Social Media Platforms on Students' Linguistic Styles in their Academic Work Writing

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Abstract

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Most students use informal styles of communication and expression when writing tests, assignments, examinations and Moodle group discussions. This study attempts to find out how the informal chat writing styles used on social media platforms such as WhatsApp have affected communication in academic writings and have led to the learner's lack of interest in the importance of orthography in communication. The study used the communicative approach in which data was mainly collected through document analysis. An analysis of the works of level three students who were siSwati mother tongue speakers and were doing a course in Translation Studies at the University of Eswatini was done from two tests, two assignments, WhatsApp group messages and one Moodle group discussion. The study found that the informal language in students' tests, assignments, and even Moodle is influenced by the way students informally communicate on the said social media platform. It was also established that there is a significant shift in the importance of standard orthography to phonetics. The study concludes that as much as informal chat platforms are good for teaching and learning, they have adverse effect on students' use of standard orthography. The study recommends that parents, teachers or lecturers should stress the importance of the use of standard orthography, particularly when writing formal texts.

Keywords: Academic writing, English language, Informal language, Learners, Social media chat platforms, Standard orthography

INTRODUCTION

Scholars indicate how informal chat platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook benefit students in their academic activities focusing more on the transfer of information, sharing study materials and vocabulary acquisition, however, literature says little about the influence of these chat platforms on communication in academic writings (i.e. how the writing styles used in these chat platforms are gradually affecting learners' consciousness of standard orthographies). The University of Eswatini (UNESWA) just like some other universities of

the world uses blended learning for both full time and distance learners. At first, full time students were engaged in face to face learning only and blended learning was mainly used by distance learners. Nevertheless, due to Covid 19 both groups were forced to engage in blended learning where both face to face and online learning were the methods of teaching and learning. As a result, students and lecturers created informal chat platforms to transfer information and share study materials. English and siSwati are the official

languages with English language being the language of instruction at UNESWA. All courses including those offered by the Department of African Languages and Literature are taught in English. Though the Department of Academic and Communication Skills equips students with note taking skills where short forms are used, academic texts should be formal. However, some features of informal forms utilised on social media are observed in some students' academic texts. The created chat platforms for specific courses were expected (by some instructors) to use formal language but they never insisted on the formality of the chats, hence, the presence of informality on the platforms. Therefore, this study attempts to explore how the writing styles used in informal chat platforms affect communication in academic writing focusing on English texts. That is, how learners communicate with the instructors. A course in translation studies uses English and siSwati for practical translation but English texts were chosen for this study because of the presence of informal forms seen in them as opposed to the siSwati texts. The study particularly intends to answer the following research questions:

1. Which informal forms of writing are normally seen in students' academic work?
2. How do the styles of writing used in informal chat platforms affect communication and the work of the students?

Social media platforms and education

The introduction of messaging applications fixed in mobile phones such as SMS, WhatsApp, BBM, line etc. created informal chat platforms (social networks) which have become part of users' daily lives. Informal chat platforms are frequently used for communication purposes due to their efficiency. According to Cetinkaya (2017:3) these platforms "have potentials to provide cooperation, increase social interaction, interest and motivation, sense of belonging, academic success, student-student and student-teacher interaction, support learning anytime and anywhere, provide peer support, feedback, and allow for sharing of information in education". Due to the potentials mentioned above and the numerous possibilities that they offer, social networks have become popular and the majority of people are joining them.

There is extant literature on the effectiveness of WhatsApp and Facebook in teaching and learning environments Cetinkaya, 2017; Cetinkaya and Sutcu, 2018; Yahaya, 2019; Kartal, 2019; Barhoumi, 2015. Cetinkaya (2017) explores the effects of WhatsApp usage in education and established the opinions of students on this subject. The analysis indicates that the majority of the students developed positive opinions towards the use of WhatsApp in their courses and that they demanded the same for other courses as well. The

study suggests that the use of WhatsApp in education be encouraged as supportive technology.

Cetinkaya and Sutcu (2018) also compare vocabulary acquisition between learners who were using WhatsApp and those who were not. The participants comprise of 123 grade nine learners. Two groups were formed – one was the WhatsApp group and the other comprise of those who were without the WhatsApp. The scripts of learners were compared and the study established that the WhatsApp group was better compared to those who were without the WhatsApp. The study recommends the implementation of WhatsApp as a support to the traditional learning environment as the use of WhatsApp seemed to be effective in improving learners' vocabulary.

Yahaya (2019) investigates the effects of WhatsApp and Facebook on students' academic performance at the University of Development Studies (UDS), Wa Campus. The study revealed that students mostly use WhatsApp and Facebook for chatting, academic and religious purposes. The study showed that the two informal chat platforms are utilised more for chatting followed by accessing academic materials and then religious reasons. WhatsApp is more beneficial to students when doing academic work than Facebook. The study also revealed that the use of WhatsApp and Facebook have both positive and negative effects on students' academic performance. They reduce students' focus on academic work and affect their performance negatively. The study recommends that lecturers and guardians educate students about the effects of WhatsApp and Facebook and how they can profitably balance their usage in academic works and other settings. The current study is similar to this one except that the current study looks at how the use of informal chat platforms has affected students' communication in academic writings. While Yahaya's study utilised questionnaires to gather information from students, this study compares students' pieces of work.

Kartal (2019) explores the effectiveness of the mobile instant messaging WhatsApp in learning a second language. The study revealed that WhatsApp can be used to improve the four language skills namely: reading, listening, writing, and speaking plus the integrated language skills and vocabulary. WhatsApp further increases motivation and language attitudes, fostering learner autonomy, increasing interaction and lowering language anxiety.

Formal and informal writing styles

The ability to write is essential in our global community since communication across languages is becoming more important nowadays. Writing can be classified into two writing styles namely, formal and informal writing styles. According to Kaur and Saini (2014), formal texts consist of texts such as government or official

documents, research papers, literary arts (poetry, novel, plays, stories), [and academic writings in general] while informal texts consist of chat room data, short messages on social media and SMSes. They further mention that formal texts are structured as they follow particular rules while informal writing style is both unstructured and semi-structured in nature as it incorporates casual sentences/phrases, symbols and icons without any constraints (2014).

Writing, especially in academic settings, requires concentration and an open mind. According to Emerson (2004), academic work is characterised by the use of formal language since writers are expected to plan their writing, pay more attention to the form and review their work. This means that learners should be particular about how they write their school work as they are required to use formal language. In addition, Basma (2013) and Chen and Wu (2019) posit that the activity of writing demands from learners to draw on many skills such as that they must write, think and compose texts with appropriate grammar and accurate spelling. This implies that vocabulary knowledge does not only require knowledge of word meanings, but also the usage of the correct spelling. Knowledge of the orthography of a language is crucial for learning systems as it plays the most important and core role in teaching and learning (Chen and Wu, 2019).

However, some informal writing styles are reflecting on learners' academic work. This may have been caused by individual's contact with people from certain social groups, youth language, regiolect, translanguaging and social media to mention a few. These groups have brought many changes regarding how people communicate. Pérez-Sabater (2012) states that due to the influence of the language used on social media some comments published on the official Facebook sites of some universities have some level of formality and informality on their online communication. Pérez-Sabater's study compares online writing by English native speakers and non-native speakers. The study focused on the formulae of etiquette and protocol used for salutation, opening, pre-closing and closing as an indicator of the degree of orality and informality in online writing. The study established that comments posted on Facebook present important stylistic variations. In most cases, non-native speakers of English show more formal traits than native speakers when communicating electronically on social networking sites in the academic world.

The stylistic variations similar to those seen on the university Facebook sites are also seen in the University of Eswatini students' tests and assignments. Different social groups within society and especially social media have changed people's ways of speaking and writing to short hand writing on social media platforms and students are transferring those into the academic texts. Obi et al. (2012) correctly observed that students get used to the short hand writing they use when chatting with friends on

social media and unconsciously tend to write the same in their academic work. Use of social media among students has reached high levels and it has affected their study time, grammar and spelling. It is a challenge for them to divert their attention from socialising to their school work (Ndaku, 2013). Students of the University of Eswatini are not immune to these types of challenges. They are taught how to write academic work at level one in a course called Academic and Communication Skills (ACS 111). However, due to various kinds of influences from their social classes, technology and the several messaging apps which came with social media styles of writing, they tend to mix formal and informal writing in their school work. The next section focuses on the research methodology used in this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature. Data was collected from the pieces of work of siSwati mother tongue students who were in level three and doing a course in Translation Studies at the University of Eswatini. All students who were registered in this course were siSwati mother tongue speakers. The data comprised of WhatsApp group messages, two ordinary tests, two assignments, and one Moodle group discussion. The informal features of social media were randomly selected from the English pieces of work in order to establish the extent to which student's use informal writing in their academic work and the effects of such use on communication. Though siSwati and English are the languages that are used in the translation course, the chosen pieces of work were in English as the researcher observed that the English texts contained many informal forms compared to the siSwati ones. The researcher jotted down all the informal forms found in the students' tests, assignments, WhatsApp group, and Moodle group discussion. WhatsApp group was specifically created for the course in Translation Studies. The researcher (course lecturer) was a member of the WhatsApp group and Moodle group discussions and always wrote words in full when communicating with students. This was done in order to keep the standard and to remind students that the groups were used as formal platforms for the course. However, the researcher did not insist on the formality of the chats. Communicative approach which sees context of the situation as crucial in communication was adopted in the study. According to this approach, a given language utterance is seen as appropriate to a certain use within a certain cultural situation (Mason, 2001). The following section deals with the findings of the study.

FINDINGS

This section focuses on the writing styles (focus is on

Table 1. English forms from students' WhatsApp group

Short Forms	Full Forms
Msg	Message
Shud	Should
Cud	Could
Tym	Time
U	You
C	See
2	Too; to
Hud	How are you doing?
wth; w̄	With
moro; 2moro; 2mrw	Tomorrow
Coz; cos; bc	Because
Y	Why
skul; xkul; xul	School
Btwn; b2n	Between
Ppl	People
Hw	How
a; r; ae	Are
Thru	Through
Ryt	Right
B	Be
Fr	For
WI	Will
Sum	Some
Pliz	Please
ohryt; ayt; oryt	Alright
grt; gr8	Great
gd; gud	Good
2day; 2dy	Today

English word forms only) students utilised on their WhatsApp group as indicated in Table 1, above.

Short forms from students' WhatsApp messages

It was mentioned earlier that in the translation class, English and siSwati are used as translations are done either from siSwati to English or English to siSwati, however, the study looks at the informal forms from the English texts only. This was based on the observation that English texts contain many short forms compared to the siSwati texts. Therefore, Table 1 presents English short forms found in students' WhatsApp messages.

The forms presented in Table 1 above were from the students' group conversations. The spelling forms vary. They can be classified into four types – The first being forms which consist of single letters such as *U* for 'you', *C* for 'see', *Y* for 'why' and *B* for 'be'; the second type is made up of numbers only as in *2* which represents the words 'to' and 'too'; the third type consists of letters only, for instance, forms like *wth; w̄* for 'with' and *cud* for 'could'; and the fourth one comprises of a combination of numbers and alphabetical letters as observed in forms such as *2day* or *2dy* for 'today', *b2n* for 'between' and

gr8 for 'great'. Examples:

Single letters:

Numbers:

our 1st test early next week.

Two or more letters:

Letters and numbers: *Just nt this coming weekend plz...next weekend at least since some of us have presentations from **2day** until Friday.*

The bold items show examples of the types of forms mentioned above. In the statement *Thank **u** sis*, the letter *u* stands for the word 'you' and it indicates a type which consists of single letters. For the sentence *All u nid is **2** worry about our 1st test early next week*, the number *2* stands for the word 'to' and it shows the form which is made up of numbers only. In *Yes, weekend **pliz***, we see the form which contains letters only while in a statement *Just nt this coming weekend plz...next weekend at least since some of us have presentations from **2day** until Friday*, we see that the word 'today' is being represented by *2day* which consists of a number and some letters.

Again, there are variations in spellings of the forms which are determined by individuals' ways of writing as some can be seen in the work of one or two students while other forms seem similar throughout. For example, forms such as *askul; xul* 'school' and *b2n* 'between', are

*Thank **u** sis (sister).*

*All u nid is **2** worry about*

*Yes, weekend **pliz**.*

rarely used as opposed to forms such as *b* for 'be', *wl* for 'will', *pliz* for 'please', *ppl* for 'people', *u* for 'you' and *c* for 'see' to mention a few which are used by the majority of students who included them in their conversations. The rarely used forms indicate that each student could come up with his/her own way of writing and some forms may be unknown to some members of the group. As a result, one is required to process the text before one could understand the message as Kaur and Saini (2014) highlight that a lot of processing is needed for one to understand the underlying meaning of certain messages on online communication. As a result, there is a possibility of not understanding the message and that could result in communication breakdown. The variations in spelling of forms are caused by the fact that there is no single standard way of writing on social media.

The following forms seem to have alternative spellings: *coz*; *cos*; *bc* 'because', *wth*; *w̄* 'with', *moro*; *2moro*; *2mrw* 'tomorrow', *btwn*; *b2n* 'between', *a*; *r*; *ae* 'are', *ohryt*; *ayt*; *oryt* 'alright', *2day*; *2dy* 'today', *grt*; *gr8* 'great' and *gd*; *gud* 'good'. It is also observed that the number 2 is used to stand for the words 'to' and 'too' as in the following statements - *All u nid is 2 worry about our 1st test early next week*; and *me 2*. In the first statement, the number stands for the word 'to' while in the second one it stands for the word 'too'. This is confusing since the number 2 in these cases does not correspond with the situation in which the utterances were used. This is not in line with the communicative approach because in these cases the number 2 is used to refer to two different words with two different meaning which cannot be used in the same place in a sentence. Communicative approach considers a certain word appropriate when used in a certain use within a certain cultural situation.

Short forms from students' tests, assignments and Moodle group discussion

One sees the short forms from social media when looking at learners' pieces of work as Table 2 presents various types of forms that are found in students' tests, assignments and Moodle.

When looking at the forms presented in Table 2, one sees the presence of informal forms of writing in the students' works. Learners seem to have imported informal forms which are commonly used in different social settings including: academics, regiolect, social groups and WhatsApp communications into their academic work. The forms in Table 1 and 2 are more or less similar as both Tables contain a mixture of forms. As it can be observed from Table 2, some forms that are normally used in informal settings have been transferred into the school work. The types of forms are the same as those from Table 1. That is, there are forms which consist of single letters as in *b* for 'be' and *n* for 'and'; the second type is made up of numbers only as in *2* and *4* for the

words 'to' and 'for' respectively; the third type consists of letters only for forms like *nid* for the word 'need' and *hv* for 'have'; and the fourth one comprises of a combination of numbers and alphabetical letters as in *b2n* for 'between'.

One would assume that short forms are written when people try to avoid writing long words but when one looks at the data one realises that social platforms shorten almost all the words regardless of their length. This is observed in situations where only one letter has been omitted such as in forms like: *cn* for 'can', *wht* for 'what', *wth* for 'with', *hw* for 'how', *ae* for 'are', *nw* for 'now', *bt* for 'but' and *dd* for 'did' just to mention a few. This makes it hard for the lecturer to determine whether the transferred forms are the result of social media or spelling mistakes. The use of social media's style of writing in academic papers may have a negative effect on students' academic performance in general due to the errors of spelling. Students may also end up repeating courses because of not paying attention to the requirements of academic texts as Emmerson (2004) earlier stipulated that academic work requires writers to plan their writing, use formal language, pay more attention to the form and review their work.

This indicates that some students are slowly forgetting the significance of orthography when dealing with formal texts such as the academic one. In some students' work there were cases where a paragraph contained many short forms while in others one could see that the student accidentally wrote short forms. The following extract shows several short forms that a student used:

A text is any spoken n written wk which is put togethr in a way tht it makes complet sense. For example, John is kicking the ball. Wheres non-text are words or written work which does nt make complete sense when you read them. For exampl, to town. In the example above we do nt get wht the sentence means and we can tell tht it is an incomplete sentence.

The use of many short forms in scripts gives the impression that learners are used to chatting with friends using the short forms and it is difficult to divert to the academic setting. This implies that even if the student knows the spelling of words s/he may get them wrong because of the frequent use of the short forms and that may affect his or her presentation of information. The paper argues that the number of short forms, spelling errors and abbreviations seen in students' work show the excessive use of social media as learners used to make similar mistakes but not as many as they are now during the digital age.

Another observation is that it looks like social classes, particularly, online community's way of writing stresses the pronunciation of words. For instance, a word like 'my' has been changed to *mai*. In this case, the word 'my' has only two letters but in this case it has three letters. The form *mai* shows the phonetic transcription of the word and this gives one the impression that the writing style

Table 2. English short forms from students' tests, assignments and Moodle

Short Forms	Full Forms
wat; wht	What
Dat	That
Hu	Who
Mai	My
Cn	Can
Shud	Should
Cud	Could
Tym	Time
U	You
C	See
2	Too; to
Olwz	Always
wth; wit; w̄	With
coz; cos; bc	Because
Y	Why
Mst	Most
btwn; b2n	Between
Ppl	People
Hw	How
a; r; ae	Are
Thru	Through
Ryt	Right
B	Be
fr; 4	For
Wl	Will
Nw	Now
Dd	Did
bwt; abt	About
Bt	But
Dis	This
en; nd; n	And
Hv	Have
Nid	Need
Lang	Language
Thre	There
Prefis	Prefix
nou; nun	Noun
Veb	Verb
Ful	Full
B4	Before

used on social media somehow focuses on the pronunciation of the words rather than just writing short forms. This is based on the observation that words like 'are' (*a*) /ɑ:r/ or /ɑ:ː/ and 'verb' (*veb*) /vɜ:b/ are also written in partial phonetic transcription in this data.

Based on the findings presented above one may conclude that informal language from different social groups including the one used in online communication is indirectly promoting lack of engagement on the part of students when it comes to correct orthography as they tend to forget the importance of orthography when writing formal texts. Kaur and Saini (2014) posit that social media tends to be grammatically incorrect, has lots of

spelling errors due to its informal nature and as a result, incorrect words are accumulating day by day. Students' works which are full of spelling errors make it hard for lecturers to understand the scripts and communication is negatively affected. This also puts stress to lecturers as it was observed that lecturers are forced to spend more time on trying to understand the text as well as to learn the forms used by students instead of awarding marks.

DISCUSSION

The use of informal chat platforms for academic purposes

shows that they are potential and useful tools in educational contexts especially during the uncertain number of lockdowns due to the Corona pandemic. However, the style of writing used in social media may have a negative effect on communication, orthography and learners as it indirectly reduces learners' concentration as far as writing correct orthography is concerned.

Informal styles of writing emerge from various groups within societies. These may include: academics, slang, youth language, regiolect, translanguaging, and social media just to mention a few. This is evident in Tables 1 & 2 above as learners utilised certain forms from some of the mentioned groups. For instance,

Academic	Social class	Social media
shud	ohryt	U
ppl	gud	C
btwn	skul	2

These are examples of some of the informal forms used by different groups in communities. Though some of these forms belong to other groups other than social media, they are currently common on social media chat platforms. Social media is diverse. It has since incorporated forms used in other social groups into its writing style. Unlike small social groups such as academics, youth, and other professionals who may have limited number of participants, social media communities draw participation from an extensive range of users of various levels of expectations and experiences who belong to different disciplines (Xu et al. 2015). Additionally, due to the advancement of social media and digital platforms, the growth of social media community exceeds that of the other small groups. Hence, the phrase 'social media form' is used in this study to refer to all the informal forms found in students' works. Again, the researcher observed that before the creation of 'social media' chat platforms the other informal forms were not as common as they are now during the digital age.

The social platforms have affected communication in various ways. They affect how individuals relate to one another, how they construct words and meaning in their everyday life. Informal chat platforms brought together different ways of speaking/writing from various social groups and that seems to have influence on learners' focus as they seem to forget the significance of using correct orthography where required. Based on the list of forms provided in Table 2, one sees that the writing styles from various social groups have been transferred into the school work and that may have a negative effect on students' academic performance in general due to the errors in spelling. Learners spend more and more time on social media as Ndaku (2013), Oshrive (2015) and Sandra and Ismail (2016) noted. They spend time chatting with friends and get used to the style of writing utilised on social media. There are various reasons why people use short forms while communicating on social media. These include among others: to avoid writing long

passages because hand held devices such as cell phones, as correctly noted by Kobayashi (2008), are relatively small in size and the screen limits the amount of information that can be written or seen at one time; to save time or because a person does not know how the word is actually spelled or that s/he forgot the spelling. The tendency to use short forms on social media is unconsciously transferred into students' academic work as seen in the following test extracts:

Extract 1: *This text is informative **coz** the author is transferrng **info** about the Alzheimer disease.*

Extract 2: *Half-truth because **4** one to **b** a competent translator one needs **2** have a good passive working knowledge of his/her second or third languages.*

When looking at extracts 1 and 2, one sees a mixture of formal and informal forms of writing. In extract 1, the short forms *coz* and *info* have been used and in extract 2, there are forms such as *4*, *b* and *2*. This indicates that students are gradually shifting focus from use of standard orthography to an informal one when dealing with academic writings. The informal features of language used in social media have been incorporated into the academic work. Pérez-Sabater (2012:81) states that "the incorporation of the new electronic genres to the academic world has affected the use of established traditional communication exchange media in universities..." The use of these forms in the students' tests may imply that learners are used to chatting with friends using these short forms to an extent that they fail to see when the context is different. They seem to have difficulty diverting to the relevant platform and paying more attention to the form and reviewing their work. This may affect communication flow and students' performance due to penalisation for spelling mistakes. Again, the use of short forms in academic writings does not conform to communicative approach as students transfer forms used in social media into the academic setting.

Students' tests and assignments indicated that some students are less addicted to social media than others based on the number of short forms found in their work. In some works (i.e. the majority), short forms are less in number while in others one can find a paragraph which is full of short forms and that indicates that some learners fail to remember that they were no longer chatting with friends or are not concentrating on their work as Chen and Wu (2019) indicated earlier that the activity of writing requires learners to think and compose texts that have appropriate grammar and accurate spelling. For instance:

Extract 3: *A translator is one **dat** changes **lang 2** another **n** usually knows **1** other **lang** which s/he translates to from **de** one he knows. A professional translator is one **dat** changes different **lang sn** is competent in various languages and does it as **en** occupation.*

Extract 4: *A text is any spoken **n** written **wk** which is put **togethr** in a way **tht** it makes **complet** sense. For example, John is kicking the ball. **Wheres non-text** are*

words or written work which does *nt* make complete sense when you read them. For *exempl*, to town. In the example above we do *nt* get *wht* the sentence means and we can tell *tht* it is an incomplete sentence.

Based on the information provided in extracts 3 and 4 above, one can see many short forms that have been used by the students. This makes it hard to understand what they are trying to say, especially if within a single paragraph there are many short forms used as is seen in the extracts above. It is argued that the presence of spelling mistakes and use of short forms in students' writings is not new since learners have always been writing them accidentally but not at the same rate. The rate at which they occur has since increased after the usage of social media. The presence of various short forms utilised in social media contributes to students' frequent use of incorrect spelling, abbreviations and short forms in their academic writings. The paragraphs consist of a mixture of full words and short forms. For instance, in extract 3, sentence one, the form *lang* appears twice and in sentence two the word *languages* is written in full. Similarly, in sentence one, the number *1* is used to represent the full form *one* but in other situations where the word is written it appears as a full form. This causes a lot of confusion to the reader. Again, the forms *en* and *n* appear in Table 2 above to represent the word 'and' but when reading the second sentence one finds that the form *en* in this context stands for the word 'an' rather than the word 'and'. This presents some inconsistencies which may seem normal in social media communication as mentioned earlier that there is no standard form in social media but in academic communication such an inconsistency hinders the flow of information.

Again, based on the number of short forms used in this paragraph it is not easy to determine whether the errors are the result of the use of short forms or that the student has incorrectly spelt the words. The same applies to extract 4. It is hard to determine whether the words *togethr*, *complet*, *wheres*, and *text* are written this way because the student was not aware that they are incorrectly spelt or if it is the result of shifting from standard form to informal one. These words are singled out because it is possible to omit a letter if one is in a hurry. The use of informal language in academic work affects communication flow and it imposes an inappropriate style of writing on the formal institution. According to Asensio (2003), one of the adequacy conditions for communication is the use of appropriate style in the relevant context. As a result, communication is negatively affected by the use of informal forms in academic work because the writer fails to produce texts that are clear and understood by the reader.

In addition, the lecturer is forced to learn the short forms in order to understand the forms, sentences and paragraphs especially when the forms are unfamiliar to him/her. It is not easy for one to follow the text if one is not familiar with the short form in question. This also

affects one's time as the lecturer may take longer than s/he expected to finish one script. This shows that the use of informal forms in the academic work affects both learners and lecturers in one way or the other.

The researcher assumes that the excessive use of short forms used on informal chat platforms may result in the production of learners who will not know the spelling of words in the future, especially, those who use them from an early stages of education. Tertiary students who are not good at spelling are also likely to have a challenge of not mastering the spelling of words.

Another feature of informality observed in the WhatsApp group is the use of English and siSwati in the same sentence. For instance:

Extract 5: *Pliz suggest sikhatsilesirynt for a majority.*

Extract 6: *Can it please be any time after 2pm? English kunema presentations n asikho sure about the time but I think atoba before lunch.*

It is clear that though the group was created for formal conversations between learners and the teacher, students treated the group as an informal chat platform regardless of the purpose of the group and the formal messages that were posted by the teacher. This suggests that chat platforms created for academic communication are likely to have features of informality in spite of the formality of the field. Emerson (2004) states that some stylistic protocols which have been created for academic purposes are intended to communicate proficiently with an adequate level of formality of the field in question.

As mentioned earlier, online communities seem to pay more attention to how words are pronounced and less attention to how they are written. This is seen in the presentation of words like 'my' which has been changed to *mai*, which indicates the actual phonetic transcription of the word. Words such as 'are' (*a*) /ɑ:r/ or /ɑ:ʔ/ and 'verb' (*veb*) /v3:b/ are also written in partial phonetic transcription as mentioned earlier. Once more, short forms of words like *gud* for 'good', *ohryt* for 'alright', *nid* for 'need', *cud* for 'could' and *gr8* for 'great', just to mention a few are spelt exactly as they are said in spoken language. As much as the short forms mentioned in this paragraph are not in line with English standard orthography, the researcher considers them an improvement on the part of spoken form of language. Based on this, it looks like social media styles of writing is gradually shifting students' focus on the significance of standard orthography to the actual pronunciation of words.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In most cases, university content is expected to be formal. However, the study shows that learners' writings are lately incorporating the informal forms into their

academic work. That is, they are shifting from standard orthography to informal writing. Four types of informal forms are observed in the students' WhatsApp group, assignments, tests and Moodle discussion group. The first are forms which consist of single letters such as *U* for 'you', *C* for 'see', *Y* for 'why' and *B* for 'be'; the second type is made up of numbers only as in *2* which represents the words 'to' and 'too'; the third type consists of letters only, for instance, forms like *wth*; *w̄* for 'with' and *cud* for 'could' are made up of letters only; and the fourth one comprises of a combination of numbers and alphabetical letters as observed in forms such as *2day* or *2dy* for 'today'. The use of these informal forms in academic writings affects students' performance, communication flow as it is hard to understand what one is trying to say, especially if within a single paragraph there are many short forms used and if the reader is not familiar with the forms. In such cases, the lecturer is forced to learn the short forms in order to understand what the student is saying. This has a negative effect on communication since the student fails to produce texts that are clear and understood by the teacher or lecturer. Again, students may end up repeating the courses not because they do not know the content but because they do not pay attention to the significance of orthography and what academic writings require. It is assumed that excessive use of short forms used on informal chat platforms may result in the production of learners who will not know the spelling of words in the future, especially, those who are introduced to WhatsApp style of writing at an earlier stage of education. Tertiary students who are not good at spelling are also likely to have a challenge of not mastering the spelling of words. Transferring social media forms into academic writings is not in line with the communicative approach. It is concluded that informal chat platforms are good for teaching and learning however, they have adverse effect on students' use of standard orthography. They reduce learners' focus on the spelling and they tend to forget the significance of orthography when writing formal texts such as academic work. Nonetheless, as much as social media forms are shifting students focus on the significance of standard orthography, they seem to put stress on the actual pronunciations of words.

The study recommends that lecturers and parents/guardians should emphasise the use of complete forms when learners chat on social media with others especially the primary, secondary and high school learners. This may assist them to remember the standard orthography. Language courses should have spelling tests regularly in order to help students with spelling. Again, linguists and phoneticians may need to see how some social media styles could be incorporated into the International Phonetic Alphabet to come up with alternative transcriptions which will correspond with the orthography as some spellings are currently far from their actual pronunciation.

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