

Chapter 7

Social Networks and Creative Writing in EFL

Reima Al-Jarf

King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

A sample of Facebook creative writing club pages created by Arab Facebook users and a sample of Facebook creative wall posts from each creative writing club page were collected and examined. The study aimed to find out the types of creative text forms (genres), themes and discursal features of the Facebook English creative texts posted by non-native writers. In addition, a sample of Facebook Arab creative writers who are non-native speakers of English was surveyed to find out the personal, social, and cultural factors that impact their creativity in English as a foreign language. The chapter describes the data collection and analysis procedures and the challenges that a researcher faces in collecting, sorting out and analyzing creative texts posted on the Facebook wall. It reports results quantitatively and qualitatively. Implications for developing creative writing skills in foreign/second language learners using Facebook are given.

INTRODUCTION

Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have been used by Arab users for many purposes such as reporting breaking news, posting special events, launching political campaigns and special causes, announcing family gatherings and sending seasons' greetings. Another emerging type of wall posts is creative writing in English which is their foreign and/or second language. Some EFL/ESL Arab Facebook users post lines of verse, short

anecdotes or points of view, express emotions, personal experiences, interpersonal relations, sarcastic comments and/or inspirational stories or sayings written in literary style. A sample of Facebook creative writing pages created by Arab Facebook users was selected. Then a sample of creative Facebook wall posts from each creative writing page was collected and examined. A sample of Facebook Arab creative writers who are non-native speakers of English was surveyed to find out the reasons for their creative writing

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activities in English as a foreign language. This chapter aims to find out the types of creative genres, types of creative writing themes posted and features of the Facebook creative discourse in English by Arab non-native writers and the characteristics of the Facebook environment that nurtured their creativity.

BACKGROUND

In foreign language classrooms, some students and instructors feel that writing is a chore. Some students are hesitant to write because they might be inhibited, might be afraid of making mistakes or because they are incapable of generating ideas. To enhance students' writing skills, in general, and creative writing, in particular, researchers have utilized several instructional strategies and practices, such as collaborative creative writing activities and projects (Feuer, 2011; Vass, 2002), the integration of cooperative learning, journalizing, and creative writing (Bartscher, Lawler, Ramirez, & Schinault, 2001), using wordless picture books (Henry, 2003), plot scaffolding (O'Day, 2006), the cluster method (Sahbaz & Duran, 2011), the integration of creative and critical written responses to literary texts in different genres (Wilson, 2011) and others.

In addition to the above classroom techniques, several technologies have been utilized in the past two decades to develop L1 and L2 students' writing abilities. For example, early studies by Casella (1989) found the word processor to be an effective tool in helping students compose poetry, because of its formatting features and ease of revision (Casella, 1989). Similarly, the integration of electronic mail and word-processing in an intermediate pre-academic ESL course improved the academic writing abilities of nonnative students who responded to writing prompts using electronic mail and word processing. Improvement

was noted in the use of cohesive features, length of text produced in each medium and text-initial contextualization (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001). Another effective technology was presentation software, such as PowerPoint, which were used by elementary school students to create electronic books that integrate text, audio, and graphics. The presentation software was used to introduce the concept, plan the story on paper with the help of a worksheet, create the story on the computer, and share it with others (Hodges, 1999).

Apart from word-processing, e-mail, and Powerpoint presentations, many earlier studies used specially designed systems and programs to develop students' writing skills. For example, *Systeme-D*, a word processing program for creative writing in French, helped students exploit more of the linguistic features as well as the system's dictionary (Scott, 1990). Another computer program called *The Bald Headed Chicken* assisted primary-level and limited-English-speaking students used to manipulate graphics and text, to create their own stories, and to save them on disk or print them (Gammon, 1989). A computer network available to schools, called the *Writers in Electronic Residence (WIER)*, enabled students to post their creative writings which were then discussed by professional writers, students and teachers (Owen, 1995). Furthermore, *KidPub*, a World Wide Web site, was designed to accept stories submitted by or on behalf of children and young people under the age of 16 and publishes them, giving each story its own Web page. With the help of a mentor, a child published a story via this Website. The system allowed her to track the number of times her story was read, as well as reading and responding to reader comments and reactions (Keiner, 1996).

At a later stage, online journal writing, computer labs, and online courses were used to enhance students' writing ability. In their case

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