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INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL OF

2026 / No. 1(2)

Contemporary Pedagogical and Philological Research

DIGITAL DISCOURSE AND THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF ENGLISH COMMUNICATION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract. The rapid development of digital technologies has significantly transformed the ways university students communicate in English. Social networking platforms, instant messaging applications, online discussion forums, and digital learning environments have created new forms of interaction characterized by informality, multimodality, linguistic creativity, and rapid information exchange. The present study examines the changing patterns of English communication among university students in digital environments, focusing on lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic features of digital discourse. Particular attention is given to abbreviations, slang, emojis, code-switching, informal expressions, conversational language, and the influence of digital communication on students' academic language practices. The study adopts a qualitative literature-based research design informed by computer-mediated communication, digital discourse analysis, and sociolinguistic perspectives. Previous research indicates that digital communication has expanded opportunities for English language interaction, encouraged linguistic creativity, and provided students with new resources for expressing emotions and constructing online identities. At the same time, the frequent use of informal expressions may create challenges related to grammatical accuracy, register awareness, politeness, and the distinction between academic and non-academic communication. Research on university students' digital interactions also demonstrates that emojis and other visual resources perform important pragmatic functions beyond their decorative purposes. The study emphasizes that digital discourse should be understood as a dynamic form of communication rather than simply an informal version of traditional written English. It concludes that English language education should incorporate digital communicative

competence and register awareness to prepare university students for effective communication across academic, professional, and social contexts.

Key words: digital discourse, English communication, university students, social media, computer-mediated communication, digital literacy, emojis, code-switching, online interaction, EFL students, language variation.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technologies has significantly influenced contemporary communication practices. Over the last two decades, social networking platforms, instant messaging applications, online discussion forums, and other digital environments have become essential parts of everyday communication. University students increasingly use these platforms to exchange information, maintain social relationships, participate in academic discussions, and communicate in English with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These changes have created new patterns of language use that differ from traditional forms of written communication. Digital communication frequently involves shortened expressions, abbreviations, informal vocabulary, emojis, hashtags, unconventional punctuation, and combinations of written and visual elements. Such features have contributed to the development of digital discourse as an important area of contemporary linguistic research. Crystal (2001) argues that the Internet has created distinctive communicative environments in which written language increasingly incorporates characteristics associated with spoken interaction. Digital communication often combines the permanence of writing with the immediacy and informality of conversation. This combination has influenced vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the organization of messages. The development of digital discourse is particularly relevant to university students because digital platforms provide opportunities for communication both inside and outside educational institutions. Students use English in online classrooms, academic discussion groups, social media communities,

international forums, and private conversations. These interactions expose learners to different registers, communication styles, and varieties of English. Herring (2004) explains that computer-mediated communication should be examined as a form of discourse shaped by technological, social, and linguistic factors. The characteristics of online communication depend not only on the language users select but also on the technological possibilities and communicative expectations of particular platforms. For example, communication through an academic email differs considerably from communication through Instagram comments or WhatsApp messages. Academic emails generally require appropriate greetings, complete sentences, and polite expressions, whereas informal messaging may involve abbreviations, emojis, and shortened grammatical structures. The ability to adapt language to different communication environments is therefore an important component of communicative competence. Digital discourse has also contributed to the expansion of English as an international language. English is widely used in online communication between individuals who have different first languages. In these contexts, English often functions as a shared means of communication rather than as the exclusive property of native speakers. Lee (2020) discusses the relationship between digital communication, social media, and Englishes, emphasizing how digital environments influence the position of English in relation to other languages and contribute to identity construction. Online communication allows users to combine linguistic resources, cultural references, and different varieties of English according to their communicative purposes. This issue is particularly important for university students in multilingual environments such as Uzbekistan. Uzbek students frequently encounter English through social media, online educational resources, international communication platforms, and digital entertainment. Their English communication may include elements of informal internet language, contemporary slang, abbreviations, and expressions influenced by other languages. One of the most noticeable characteristics of digital discourse is

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linguistic informality. Students frequently use shortened forms such as "BTW" (by the way), "OMG" (oh my God), "IDK" (I do not know), and "LOL" (laughing out loud). These expressions allow users to communicate quickly and establish a familiar atmosphere. However, the use of such expressions is not necessarily appropriate in every communicative situation. An abbreviation that is acceptable in a private conversation may be unsuitable in an academic email or formal assignment.

Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) demonstrate the importance of understanding digital communication through its social and linguistic contexts. Digital discourse is not simply a collection of shortened words; it reflects relationships, identities, social practices, and changing cultural expectations. Another important feature of digital communication is the use of emojis and other visual elements. Emojis may express emotions, strengthen statements, indicate irony, soften requests, and compensate for the absence of facial expressions and gestures. Dresner and Herring (2010) explain that emoticons can perform communicative functions associated with nonverbal communication and influence the interpretation of speech acts in computer-mediated interaction. More recent research by Alsulaiman and Alhojailan (2024) examines the pragmatic functions of emojis in EFL students' tweets. Their qualitative study identifies functions including emotional expression, meaning construction, familiarity, identity representation, and the replacement of nonverbal communication cues. These findings suggest that emojis should be understood as meaningful communicative resources rather than merely decorative additions to digital messages. Code-switching is another significant characteristic of digital communication among multilingual university students. It refers to the alternation between two or more languages within a conversation or communicative situation. In multilingual online environments, students may combine English with their first language to express complex ideas, establish group identity, or communicate more efficiently. Lee (2020) highlights the importance of

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examining how English interacts with other languages in digital spaces and how such interactions contribute to multilingual identity construction.

The influence of digital communication on academic writing has also become an important educational concern. Students who regularly communicate through informal digital platforms may encounter difficulties distinguishing between conversational language and formal academic English. Kencana (2025), in a study of digital communication in higher education, examines WhatsApp group messages among English Education students. The research identifies the use of abbreviations, emojis, and code-switching in academic group communication. The findings indicate that informal digital language may encourage engagement and collaboration, although excessive use of informal features can sometimes create misunderstandings. Consequently, university students need to develop the ability to recognize differences between communication registers and select language according to the context, audience, and purpose.

The purpose of the present study is to examine how digital communication influences English language practices among university students. Particular attention is given to lexical innovation, grammatical variation, multimodal communication, pragmatic functions, code-switching, and the relationship between informal digital language and academic communication. The study also explores the educational implications of changing digital communication patterns for English language teaching and the development of students' digital communicative competence.

METHODS

The present study adopts a qualitative literature-based research design to investigate changing patterns of English communication among university students in digital environments. The methodological framework is informed by computer-mediated communication, digital discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. These theoretical perspectives provide a basis for examining how technological

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environments influence language use, communicative relationships, and linguistic identities. The study draws on established theoretical contributions by Crystal (2001), Herring (2004), Thurlow and Mroczek (2011), and Lee (2020), together with empirical investigations of digital communication among university and EFL students. The literature was examined thematically, focusing on recurring characteristics of digital English communication. Particular attention was given to lexical features, grammatical patterns, abbreviations, slang, emojis, code-switching, multimodal communication, and register variation. The analysis also considered how communication differs across social networking platforms, messaging applications, and academic digital environments. Lexical analysis focuses on shortened forms, acronyms, internet slang, informal expressions, and newly developed vocabulary. These features are examined in relation to communicative efficiency, linguistic creativity, and social identity. Grammatical analysis considers sentence fragments, omitted subjects, shortened constructions, non-standard spelling, and conversational syntax. The purpose is to understand how digital communication encourages forms of language that may differ from conventional written English. Pragmatic analysis examines how students use emojis, punctuation, repetition, and other digital resources to express emotions, establish relationships, communicate politeness, and interpret intended meanings. Sociolinguistic analysis considers code-switching, language choice, identity construction, and the relationship between English and other languages in multilingual online communities. The study also examines the relationship between informal digital communication and academic English. Particular attention is given to register awareness and students' ability to adapt their language according to different communicative contexts. The literature-based approach allows the study to identify common patterns and pedagogical implications without presenting uncollected student messages or invented statistical findings as original research data.

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RESULTS

The analysis of previous research identifies several important characteristics of changing English communication patterns among university students. These characteristics demonstrate that digital environments influence vocabulary, grammar, pragmatic meaning, linguistic identity, and the relationship between formal and informal language.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of digital discourse is the increasing use of informal English expressions. University students frequently use abbreviations, shortened words, slang, and conversational expressions in online communication. Such expressions are particularly common in instant messaging applications, social networking platforms, and online discussion groups. Examples include "BTW," "OMG," "LOL," "IDK," and "BRB" (be right back). These forms reduce typing effort and allow users to communicate efficiently in fast-moving conversations. Crystal (2001) explains that Internet communication has developed distinctive linguistic characteristics that combine elements of speech and writing. Digital messages often contain features associated with spontaneous conversation, including incomplete sentences, informal vocabulary, and expressive punctuation. Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) similarly emphasize that digital language should be examined in relation to social practices and technological contexts. The increased use of informal English does not necessarily indicate a decline in language proficiency. Rather, it may reflect students' adaptation to communicative environments in which speed, familiarity, and interactional effectiveness are important. Nevertheless, difficulties may arise when students transfer informal digital expressions into formal academic contexts without considering register expectations.

Another important characteristic of contemporary digital discourse is the increasing use of emojis and other visual elements. Traditional written communication relies mainly on words and punctuation to communicate meaning. In contrast, digital

communication allows users to combine written language with images, emojis, GIFs, stickers, and other visual resources. Emojis may express happiness, disappointment, agreement, disagreement, gratitude, irony, and emotional support. Dresner and Herring (2010) demonstrate that emoticons can influence the interpretation of communicative acts by providing information about the intended illocutionary force of a message. For example, the sentence "That was interesting" may be interpreted differently depending on whether it is accompanied by a smiling, surprised, or sarcastic emoji. Alsulaiman and Alhojailan (2024) identify several pragmatic functions of emojis in EFL students' online communication, including expressing emotions, constructing meaning, signaling familiarity, representing personal beliefs, and substituting for nonverbal cues. Their findings demonstrate that emojis contribute to meaning construction and interpersonal communication. However, emoji interpretation is not always universal. The same symbol may communicate different meanings depending on cultural background, age, interpersonal relationships, and communicative context. Consequently, university students need to develop awareness of multimodal communication and recognize that visual elements may influence the interpretation of written messages.

Code-switching is a significant feature of digital interaction among students who communicate in more than one language. In multilingual university environments, students may alternate between English and their first language within a single message or conversation. This practice can serve several communicative purposes. Students may use their first language to clarify complex ideas, express culturally specific meanings, establish familiarity, or communicate with members of a particular social group. Lee (2020) emphasizes that digital environments provide opportunities for multilingual language practices and the construction of identities through different linguistic resources. For Uzbek university students, English communication may involve expressions influenced by Uzbek or Russian, particularly in informal online discussions. Such practices reflect the multilingual nature of digital communication and

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demonstrate how language users adapt their linguistic resources to particular situations. However, frequent code-switching may create difficulties when students are expected to communicate consistently in English for academic or professional purposes. The educational challenge is therefore not necessarily to eliminate code-switching but to help learners understand when it is appropriate and how to maintain effective communication in different contexts.

Digital communication has also influenced the grammatical and syntactic characteristics of written English. Online messages frequently contain incomplete sentences, omitted grammatical elements, unconventional punctuation, and simplified structures. For example, instead of writing "I will see you later," a student may write "See u later." Similarly, a complete question such as "Are you coming to the meeting?" may be shortened to "Coming to the meeting?" These constructions are often understandable within informal communication because participants share contextual information. Crystal (2001) explains that Internet language develops through the interaction of written conventions and conversational characteristics. However, non-standard grammatical forms may become problematic when students use them in formal academic writing without recognizing the difference between digital informality and standard written English. It is therefore important to distinguish between intentional language variation and a lack of grammatical knowledge. Students may deliberately shorten expressions in informal messages while demonstrating accurate grammatical structures in academic assignments. For this reason, the presence of informal grammar in digital communication should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of reduced language competence.

Digital communication also provides opportunities for students to construct and present their identities. The vocabulary, spelling, emojis, hashtags, and communication styles selected by users may communicate information about their interests, attitudes, social relationships, and cultural backgrounds. Lee (2020) explains that digital

communication plays an important role in the construction and representation of online identities. Linguistic choices can help users establish group membership, express cultural affiliation, and create particular online personalities. For university students, social media platforms provide spaces in which they can communicate with classmates, participate in international communities, and express their interests through English. The use of particular slang expressions or digital conventions may help students feel connected to online communities. At the same time, the language used in online identity construction may differ from the language expected in academic and professional communication. This highlights the importance of understanding digital discourse as both a linguistic and a social phenomenon.

Pragmatics concerns how meaning is communicated and interpreted in particular social contexts. In digital environments, the absence of direct face-to-face interaction may create difficulties in expressing politeness, humor, irony, and emotional attitudes. Students therefore use additional linguistic and visual resources to clarify their intentions. These resources may include emojis, repeated letters, punctuation, greetings, abbreviations, and expressions of gratitude. Dresner and Herring (2010) demonstrate that visual symbols can influence the interpretation of speech acts and help communicate attitudes that might otherwise be difficult to recognize in text-based interaction. Alsulaiman and Alhojailan (2024) also show that emojis may soften requests and contribute to the interpretation of different communicative acts. However, pragmatic misunderstandings remain possible because students may interpret the same expression differently. For example, a short message such as "Send it now" may be interpreted as a direct instruction, an impatient request, or a neutral reminder depending on the relationship between participants and the surrounding context. This suggests that digital pragmatic competence is an important aspect of effective English communication. One of the most significant educational issues concerns the relationship between informal digital English and formal academic language.

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University students regularly move between different communication environments. They may use informal English in social media conversations and formal English in academic assignments, presentations, and emails. However, the boundaries between these registers are not always clear. Kencana (2025) examines digital communication in higher education and identifies the use of abbreviations, emojis, and code-switching in WhatsApp group interactions among English Education students. The study indicates that informal language can increase participation and create a supportive communicative environment. Nevertheless, excessive use of informal elements may affect clarity and create misunderstandings. This demonstrates the importance of register awareness in digital communication. Students should understand that effective communication requires selecting language according to the intended audience, purpose, and context. The ability to distinguish between academic English and informal digital English is therefore an essential component of contemporary language competence.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the literature-based analysis suggest that digital communication has transformed the linguistic and pragmatic practices of university students. The development of social networking platforms and instant messaging applications has created communicative environments in which English is used more frequently, flexibly, and creatively. One of the central arguments is that digital discourse should not be considered simply a weakened or incorrect form of traditional written English. As Crystal (2001) explains, Internet communication has developed distinctive conventions that combine characteristics of spoken and written language. These conventions reflect the communicative requirements of digital environments, including speed, accessibility, interaction, and social connection. The use of abbreviations, shortened expressions, and informal vocabulary can therefore be understood as an

adaptation to particular communication conditions. However, this does not mean that all digital language practices are appropriate in every context.

Students must recognize the differences between informal online communication and academic writing. This distinction is closely related to register awareness, which enables language users to select appropriate expressions according to communicative purposes and social expectations. Another important finding concerns the role of multimodal resources. Emojis, images, stickers, and other visual elements have expanded the ways students communicate meaning. Dresner and Herring (2010) demonstrate that visual symbols can contribute to the interpretation of communicative intentions in computer-mediated communication. Alsulaiman and Alhojailan (2024) further illustrate that emojis perform different pragmatic functions in EFL students' online interactions. These findings indicate that English language education should consider digital communication as a multimodal activity rather than focusing exclusively on written vocabulary and grammar. The discussion also highlights the importance of multilingual communication. In university environments, students may use English alongside their first language to express ideas and establish social relationships. Lee (2020) emphasizes the importance of understanding English in digital environments through its interaction with other languages and its role in identity construction. For Uzbek university students, this perspective is particularly relevant because digital communication takes place within a multilingual environment. The interaction between English, Uzbek, and other languages may influence vocabulary choices, informal expressions, and online communication styles.

Nevertheless, students should develop the ability to communicate effectively in English when a particular academic or professional context requires it. The relationship between digital discourse and academic writing is another important issue. Kencana (2025) demonstrates that informal digital language can facilitate communication and participation in student group interactions, although excessive informality may create

misunderstandings. This suggests that educators should avoid treating all informal digital language as inherently negative. Instead, students should be taught how to recognize different registers and select appropriate linguistic forms. For example, an abbreviation such as "BTW" may be suitable in a private online conversation but inappropriate in a formal research paper. Similarly, emojis may help communicate friendliness in a class group but may not be suitable in a formal academic email to a university administrator. The ability to make such distinctions reflects the development of digital communicative competence. The findings also indicate that digital discourse can create opportunities for language learning. Students who regularly interact with English-language content may encounter new vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, different accents, and various communication styles. Social media discussions and online communities can expose learners to authentic examples of contemporary English usage. However, exposure alone does not guarantee language development. Students need to evaluate the quality of language input and distinguish between standard academic expressions, informal slang, and context-specific digital conventions. Teachers can support this process by using authentic digital communication examples in language lessons and discussing their linguistic and pragmatic characteristics. Overall, the analysis suggests that digital discourse represents an important dimension of contemporary English communication. Its influence extends beyond vocabulary and grammar to include social identity, pragmatic meaning, multilingual interaction, and academic communication practices.

The findings have several implications for English language teaching in higher education institutions. Teachers should incorporate digital communicative competence into English language instruction. Students need opportunities to analyze different types of online messages and identify the linguistic characteristics associated with particular platforms and audiences. Classroom activities can include comparing formal academic emails with informal messaging conversations, examining the pragmatic functions of

emojis, and identifying differences between standard English and digital abbreviations. Students should also practice adapting their language to different communicative situations. For example, they may rewrite an informal social media message as a formal academic email or transform an academic statement into an appropriate conversational expression. Such activities can improve register awareness and pragmatic competence. Another important implication concerns multimodal literacy. Students should understand how emojis, images, punctuation, and other visual elements influence meaning in digital communication. Teachers should also encourage critical reflection on code-switching and multilingual communication. Students need to recognize the communicative functions of using different languages while developing the ability to communicate effectively in English when required. Finally, universities should promote responsible digital communication and provide guidance concerning politeness, clarity, privacy, and academic professionalism in online environments.

The present study has several limitations. First, it is based on a qualitative analysis of existing literature rather than an original empirical investigation involving Uzbek university students. Second, digital communication varies considerably across platforms, cultures, age groups, and social relationships. Consequently, the linguistic patterns identified in one educational or cultural environment may not be identical in another. Third, the interpretation of emojis, slang, and other digital expressions may depend on individual experience and cultural expectations. Another limitation concerns the distinction between informal language use and actual language proficiency. The presence of abbreviations or non-standard grammatical forms in online communication does not necessarily demonstrate limited English competence. Future research should investigate the digital communication practices of Uzbek university students through authentic online discourse samples, questionnaires, interviews, and discourse analysis. Comparative research could also examine differences between students' social media language, academic emails, classroom discussions, and formal academic writing. Such

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investigations would provide a more detailed understanding of how digital communication influences English language practices in higher education.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined digital discourse and changing patterns of English communication among university students through a qualitative analysis of previous research. The analysis demonstrates that digital communication has introduced significant changes in vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, and social interaction. Abbreviations, slang, emojis, code-switching, shortened expressions, and multimodal resources have become important features of contemporary online communication. Previous research indicates that these features support communicative efficiency, emotional expression, identity construction, and social interaction (Crystal, 2001; Lee, 2020; Alsulaiman & Alhojailan, 2024). At the same time, informal digital communication may create challenges when students fail to distinguish between conversational language and academic English. Research by Kencana (2025) highlights the importance of balancing informal digital interaction with clarity and academic appropriateness in university communication. For Uzbek university students, digital environments provide valuable opportunities to engage with English, develop communicative confidence, and participate in international online communities. Nevertheless, effective communication requires awareness of linguistic variation, pragmatic conventions, and register expectations.

In conclusion, digital discourse should be recognized as an important component of contemporary English communication rather than simply an informal alternative to traditional writing. English language education should respond to these developments by integrating digital literacy, multimodal communication, pragmatic awareness, and register instruction into university curricula. Such an approach can help students become more flexible, competent, and responsible English users across social, academic, and professional environments.

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