



# Netspeak in Students' Academic Writing: A Case in the Philippines

**Justy Tuquib**

Language, Literature, and Research Faculty  
University of San Carlos  
Cebu City, Philippines, 6000  
Tel: +63926006025  
Email: [jptuquib@usc.edu.ph](mailto:jptuquib@usc.edu.ph)

**Remedios Bacus**

College of Teacher Education  
Cebu Normal University  
Cebu City, Philippines, 6000  
Tel: +09950268501  
Email: [bacusr@cnu.edu.ph](mailto:bacusr@cnu.edu.ph)

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**Abstract:** The study explored the presence of Netspeak in senior high school students' academic writing. Several studies have revealed that students' writing in a face-to-face setting has been observed to be declining, and a limited body of literature explored this phenomenon during a pandemic where classes were largely done virtually. With teachers complaining on the dominance of Netspeak on students' written communication skills, the study explored whether this phenomenon becomes more evident during the pandemic. The researchers analyzed their academic writing outputs and examined the presence of Netspeak. A total of six (6) writing prompts was completed by 62 students and was given weekly through Canvas, the school's learning management system. Through discourse analysis, the study revealed that students' written communication responses showed forms of Netspeak which can be categorized into orthographic deviations, neosemanticism, neologism, and social media expressions. The researchers further argued that the presence of Netspeak could be attributed with so much language creativity and freedom that students enjoy over the Internet amplified by the pandemic. With so many factors involved in the conduct of the study, further studies should explore how students can lessen the use of Netspeak, especially in the field of academic writing.

**Keywords:** academic writing, discourse analysis, Netspeak, written communication, neosemanticism, neologism

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## Introduction

Writing is an essential skill not only in school but also in the workplace; thus, language programs include the teaching of writing. The skill of writing should be mastered as early as the elementary level as it is a critical point for literacy and a foundation of a more complex and higher form of learning. The School of Professional Advancement of Tulane University emphasized that writing is a crucial skill in the workplace to communicate effectively. Barrot (2016) highlighted that writing skill in the workplace is seen as writing effective business correspondences. In the Philippines, the

teaching of writing starts as early as elementary level and continues until senior high school curriculum as a core subject (Department of Education, 2019). However, despite its huge importance in school and in the workplace, writing remains a prevalent problem in English Language Teaching (Saavedra, 2020). The severity of writing problems in school ranges from simple spelling down to a more concerning issue on “social media use” writing (Thangraj & Maniam, 2015; Nutakor & Israel, 2023). Netspeak is infiltrating students’ practice of what academic writing is (Belal, 2014; Hashim, Yunus, Ibrahim, Jeri, & Sukr, 2018). This could be a critical factor why Filipinos fall behind their neighboring Southeast Asian countries when it comes to writing (Balinbin, 2020) as Philippines tops second on social media use who spend an average of more than 4 hours every day (Sumague & Riones, 2022).

There have been numerous studies that pointed out how technology contributed to the decline of students’ written communication skills (Purcell, Buchanan, & Friedrich, 2013; Warschauer, 2007; Al Sharqi & Abbasi, 2020). The infiltration of Netspeak or the language use over the internet (Crystal, 2001) is reflected based on their use of language abbreviations, spelling alterations, and excessive use of punctuations (Thangaraj & Maniam, 2015; Lakhal, 2021). Risto (2014), together with Songxaba and Singcuba (2019), amplified the same point on the impact of texting and social media on students’ academic writing skills. Both studies affirmed how students use the same language style even in academic writing activities in schools.

These observations and findings were mostly determined before the pandemic, which poses a great research problem on how severe this problem is today, now that students are learning and mastering the skills of writing virtually. Schools in the pandemic era either conducted classes purely online or through a blended learning setup. Many schools today are incorporating technology and cloud-based learning (Hew, Jia, Gonda, & Bai, 2020). In the Philippines, distance learning modalities are realized through the use of technology and internet connection like online platforms (Department of Education, 2020). With this learning set-up, students can freely and remotely access social media sites while attending classes (Alsayed & Althafaqi, 2022). It immerses the students more in the world of internet and of social media (Zhao & Zhou, 2021; Sobaih, Palla, & Baquee, 2022). It exposes them to the language use and style used on the internet as websites and social media sites become one of their major sources of learning (Arulchelvan, Md Yunus, & Suliman, 2019; Muftah, 2022). The study of Jaca et al. (2019) has already identified that even before the pandemic, it was observed that students had problems in producing academic texts. The pandemic has opened a new mode of learning, but language teachers are concerned on how this new learning set-up influences the way students write (Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012; Amin, Rafiq, & Mehmood, 2020). With this established body of research, the research gap of whether or not the presence of Netspeak becomes more evident during the pandemic-era remains unanswered.

### *Research Objective*

The study explored the presence of Netspeak in students’ academic writing. It sought to understand the elements of Netspeak in the writing responses of the students to provide language teachers and curriculum designers the empirical understanding of the phenomenon.

## **Literature Review**

In the field of language teaching, writing accuracy means in conformance to conventions of language like grammar, spelling, punctuations, capitalization, and other mechanics of writing (Zhang, 1987 as cited in Wang, Engelhard, Raczynski, Song, & Wolfe, 2017). Thus, writing accuracy is in contrast with writing fluency since it concerns more on the norms of written communication (Forster & Skehan, 1997 as cited by Nostratinia & Razavi, 2016). Mechanics of writing refer to rules and conventions that are observed in written communication (Barrot, 2016). Allen, Crossley, Kyle, and

McNamara (2014) enumerated the elements of mechanics of writing: spelling, punctuations, capitalization, and abbreviations. These conventions of writing lay the foundations of academic writing which students need to master competently. However, these conventions of writing are challenged because of the existence of Netspeak (Thangaraj & Maniam, 2015; Tahir & Hassan, 2021; Wahid & Farooq, 2022).

One prominent figure and scholar that provided an extensive viewpoint about Netspeak is David Crystal. He claimed that Netspeak is a more popular term that refers the same with Netlish, Weblish, Internet language, cyberspeak, electronic discourse and etc. (Crystal, 2001). However, the term Netspeak is more encompassing compared to other terms. Netspeak covers the language that is used over the internet, in computers, and other internet-related technological applications. He pointed out that Netspeak is quite unique owing to the number of linguistic expressions it can produce, which can only be limited to the available characters in one's keyboard. A person may either type a sentence that simply ends in punctuations or may end it with an emoji or emoticon, which is distinct to Netspeak. He further clarified that the distinction between face-to-face communication and Netspeak includes the function of the technology, the results from the technology, and the difference between prosody and paralanguage (Crystal, 2001; Jeyaraj, 2014; Monderin & Go, 2021). First, in a face-to-face communication, the receiver can react to the utterance by observing visual cues (Storper & Venables, 2004). However, this is not the case of Netspeak in electronic communication (Bower, Hinks, Wright, Hardcastle, & Cuckow, 2001; Bergiel, Bergiel, & Balsmeier, 2008). In Electronic communication, the sender needs to type the message completely first on the screen or in the "chat box" and click "send" before the receiver can react to it (Crystal, 2001). The receiver cannot give a feedback while the sender is typing the message. This, according to Crystal, is one limitation of Netspeak. Second, there is a huge difference when it comes to the rhythm between Netspeak and face-to-face communication. While in face-to-face communication, the rhythm is spontaneous as both sender and receiver can directly react to the utterance (Gruber, Hargittai, & Nguyen, 2022; Hamilton & Holler, 2023). However, in Netspeak, there are many intervening variables to the rhythm or flow of conversation. For examples in emails, the factors include how constant the person is in checking his email, internet speed, computer access, and time-delay (Bower et al., 2001; Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004). With this limitation, Netspeak lacks the rhythm of an interaction that can be found in face-to-face communication. Lastly, there is the importance of intonation, stress, speed, rhythm, pause, and tone of voice in face-to-face communication (Wang, 2020; Woolridge, 2022). This is one aspect that Netspeak in electronic communication lacks. To compensate this lacking element, Netspeak users exaggerate the use of spelling and punctuations (Jurida, Dzanic, Pavlovic, Jahic, & Hanic, 2016; Wahid & Farooq, 2022) to achieve the same communicative effect (e.g. intonation, emphasis). For example, the expression "aaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!!!!" in Netspeak has the purpose of emphasizing the reaction based on the received utterance contrary to a simple "ah" in a face-to-face communication.

### *Stylistic/Distinctive Features of Written Language*

Crystal (2001) in his book, *Language and the Internet*, identified five (5) main types of distinctive features of language. While Crystal is optimistic that these features are inherently part of the evolution of the English language, Mares (2016) opposed this idea as he argued that Crystal is outdated. Mares recognizes these features as deviations of Standard English; thus, English expressions that manifest any of these features can be considered as vices. These features make Netspeak different from the other communication styles. Crystal (2001) describes *graphic features* as "the general presentation and organization of the written language, defined in terms of such factors as distinctive typography, page design, spacing, use of illustrations, and color. Hasan (2018) mentioned that graphic features can be seen as students use emojis, emoticons, and excessive punctuations. The next feature, orthographic (graphological features) is "defined in terms of such factors as distinctive use of the alphabet, capital letters, spelling, punctuation, and ways of

expressing emphasis.” Hasan (2018) highlighted word spelling and capitalization as part of this feature. One example of orthographic features is spelling modification that can be seen in advertisements and in social media. Crystal clarified *grammatical features* as “defined in terms of such factors as the distinctive use of sentence structure, word order, and word inflections.” Features that involve syntax and morphology like ellipsis, passive voice, verb use, and personal pronoun, as specified by Hasan (2018), are part of this feature. One prevalent example is how netizens accept “she don’t like it” as grammatically correct. Crystal explained lexical features as “the vocabulary of language, defined in terms of the set of words and idioms given distinctive use within a variety.” Hasan (2018) enumerated the use of interjection, abbreviation, word letter replacement, word combination, code switching, code-mixing, and diction as areas of concern of lexical features. Lastly, he presented discourse features as “the structural organization of a text, defined in terms of such factors as coherence, relevance, paragraph structure, and the logical progression of ideas.” Hasan (2018) added that it also includes the interactional features and the stream of consciousness. As a discourse, it means that it is beyond textual level; thus, Crystal cited the arrangement of a research paper where it has an introduction then ends with a conclusion as an example.

These stylistic or distinctive features of written language have been observed to have surfaced in students’ written communication. Using these features allowed the researchers to better understand the presence of Netspeak in students’ writing prompts. Tahir and Hassan (2021) found out that the dominance of Netspeak captivated many students to use it especially in written communication. The constant exposure and use of Netspeak may eventually affect their academic writing skill. Khattab (2017) reported that students can differentiate when to use Netspeak and when to observe norms of academic writing. However, Khattab affirmed that despite this language shift, Netspeak still influenced the way students communicate.

#### *The Teaching of Academic Writing in the Philippines*

David et al. (2022) reported that teachers face an evident problem in students’ writing. Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (as mentioned by Balinbin, 2020) reported the dismal writing literacy of the Filipino 5th graders. With the pandemic worsening this literacy crisis (Acosta & Acosta, 2022), writing needs to be given more attention and immediate interventions. Factors range from outdated curricula, poor teaching quality down to language deficiencies like vocabulary (Roxas, 2020; Saavedra, 2020).

The provision of Academic Reading and Writing as a core subject in the senior high school curriculum aims to develop the writing and reading skills of the students (Department of Education, 2019). The course highlights the production of academic and professional correspondences that show the properties of a well-written text and process approach of writing (Panugaling, Autida, & Narca, 2016; Agbayani, Agbayani, & Meru, 2016; Cidro et al., 2016). One important aspect that the course aims to develop is students’ mastery of the properties of a well-written text that include organization, coherence and cohesion, language use, and mechanics. DepEd understands that writing is an indispensable skill not only in school but also in the real world. Thus, students are expected to produce academic and professional correspondences which observe technicalities and conventions of writing. An area of academic writing where Netspeak has no place, however, continues to be challenged and affected.

#### *Discourse Analysis in Academic Writing*

Students’ writing outputs can be analyzed using both the details and the contextual knowledge. As one of the most used qualitative research methods, discourse analysis is the study of language ‘beyond the sentence.’ The analysis involves examining linguistic features such as vocabulary,

grammar, syntax, and rhetorical devices. It also includes the cultural contexts in which the text is situated. Hidayati, Choiron, and Basthomi (2015) stressed that language teachers, in an effort to improve students' language performance, pay attention to the discursive strategies employed by the students to convey particular meanings and perspectives. They highlighted the importance of written discourse analysis in understanding the social dimensions of communication. By analyzing written discourses, teachers can examine how the students' language reflects and constructs social norms, values, and ideologies. The students' use of discourse strategies reflects their ability to connect sentences to produce the required meaningful written (Ali & Ammash, 2021) or oral responses (Walldén & Larsson, 2022.) Similarly, Kashkuli, Ghanbari, and Abbasi (2018) explored the discourse strategies on Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency and found out a significant difference between the performance of the students who were taught using the critical discourse analysis-oriented approach.

Following the understanding of discourse according to Fiske (1987), the discourse analysis in the study focused on linguistic practice (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) following the steps discussed by Weaver-Hightower (2018) basing on Zimmermann's (2012) discourse analysis study. There has been a great consideration of Van Dijk's (2014, 2015) framework in the conduct of discourse analysis.

### **Methodology**

This study employed the descriptive qualitative research design to explore students Netspeak on their written responses. A total of 62 senior high school students, enrolled in one of the private basic education institutions in Cebu, the Philippines, were selected to complete the six writing prompts given once every week. Due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the writing prompts were implemented through the use of Canvas, the university's learning management system. The use of Canvas allowed the researchers to control the time per writing prompt, which in the case of the study is 30 minutes. In the allotted 30-minute time, the participants were asked to write based on the provided theme (e.g. *What qualities of a leader should we look for*). The themes of each writing prompt were carefully selected based on timeliness, relevance, and significance in consideration of the participants' demographic details as senior high schools' students. In 30 minutes, the students wrote their ideas until the time was up. Some completed the writing task before the given time while some completed the task just in time. The researchers disregarded whether they completed the task on time or not, since the study focused on the exploration of Netspeak in their written communication responses. After six (6) weeks of data gathering, their writing prompts were analyzed through the use of discourse analysis.

With the data collected, the four-step discourse analysis was followed. The first step was the identification of the research questions and to determine what to analyze. In the context of the study, it explored the presence of Netspeak in the students' writing prompts by examining their vocabulary, writing style, and their conformance to the conventions of writing. The next step was the examination of extant literature that supports the study. The study established the premises of Netspeak and stylistic/distinctive features of writing (Crystal, 2001) and conventions of written communication skills. In the third step, the determination of the themes and patterns, allows the categorizing and clustering of the initial themes. After the data were analyzed, themes and patterns were formulated grounded on the established literature. Finally, the review of the results and formulation of the conclusion was done. The results were carefully analyzed by constant revalidation. To guarantee trustworthiness of the results, 20 students were interviewed to validate the study findings. The interview was terminated when no new data emerged from the interview.

### **Results and Discussion**

An analysis of the students' written responses led to the emergence of three themes: orthographic deviations, neosemanticism and neologism, and social media style of writing.

### *Orthographic Deviations*

Orthography refers to the system of correct and accepted spelling based on established norms and conventions (Llaurado & Dockrell, 2020). Orthography is one of the conventions of academic writing that students must observe (Barrot, 2016). As one of the important areas in academic writing, students are taught at school what the rules of spelling of the English language are (Department of Education, 2019). With an American influence (Esquivel, 2019), the type of English mastered at schools in the Philippines is American English. Despite these established norms and conventions of American English in Philippine schools, the study found out notable orthographic deviations. Orthographic deviations or graphological deviations is described as the “deliberate misspelling to present some specific meaning” (Li & Shi, 2015). In one writing prompt, the student wrote:

*“With that said, Filipinos are not smart in using **sociiiiiii..**”*

*“For one thing, I am sure of is that, **SOCIAL MEDIA IS FOR SHARING AND SAFEKEEPING YOUR MEMORIES, OPPORTUNITIES IN LIFE, AND OPINIONS ABOUT THE WORLD, NOT A BRINGER OF VALID INFORMATION, BUT CAN BE A SHARER OF VALID INFORMATION.**”*

*“This is why I believe that **MOST**, not all, Filipinos are not smart in using social media.”*

This word “**sociiiiiii..**” is an orthographic deviation of the term “social media.” This is a distinctive feature of Netspeak which can be seen in its unique orthographic representation (Jurida, 2007; Nasir & Jassim, 2019). The word “sociiiii” can be analyzed by dissecting different morphological processes it underwent. From its original word, social media, it was clipped into “soc” and then added with many “i” vowels. With a unique characteristic of shortening words (Baron, 2004), Netspeak establishes its creativity that students fully enjoy (Salvacion & Limpot, 2022). Tong (2019) presented the many forms of English Netspeak: abbreviation, compounding, homonym, and emoticons. The same forms of Filipino Netspeak has been observed among students in the Philippines (Gustilo & Dino, 2017; Salvacion & Limpot, 2022) as well as compound, blend, abbreviation, acronyms, unconventional use of punctuation marks, emoji/emoticons, and unique orthography. The samples provided showed this “unique orthography” and how students have the tendency to use this feature even in the parlance of academic writing. The constant practice of using Netspeak in writing challenges the conventions of academic writing (Rosen, Chang, Erwin, Carrier, & Cheever 2010; Thangaraj & Maniam, 2015; Tahir & Hassan, 2021).

### *Neosemanticism and Neologism*

In linguistics, neosemanticism refers to the new creation of meaning or sense of an existing word (Fjeld & Nygaard, 2012). Fjeld and Nygaard differentiated neologism as the creation of new words that eventually become acceptable words by a linguistic community. Behera (2013) further clarified that the phenomenon of neologism is caused by mass media, the Internet or word of mouth by the younger people. This has surfaced in the many instances of the writing prompts of the students as seen below:

*“However, there is still a vast majority of people who are the so-called **trolls** and there are people who still do not follow social media etiquette.”*

*“There have been many cases where a person got **doxed**.”*

*“Some Filipinos like to make **memes** that are mostly for those who can relate to a topic but some of those memes are too offensive to most people”*

*“They are smart in using social media because they usually don't public their post to prevent those '**keyboard warrior**' to leave a comment under their post”*

*“To conclude, **cancelling** people is an essentially harmful activity.”*

The words *trolls*, *doxed*, *memes*, *keyboard warrior*, and *cancelling* are few of the many examples of neosemanticism and neologism pioneered and created because of social media. Behera (2013) agreed that the sources of neosemanticism and neologism are pop culture (e.g. mass media and internet), scientific and technological innovations, nonce words (e.g. words coined and used for a single occasion), inverted (e.g. gay lingo and jejemon), and paleologism (e.g. a word that exists but has not been used for a long time). With the Philippines' active involvement in social media, these expressions are used by students also in their day-to-day communication. The media organization Media Landscapes reported that 73 million Filipinos are active users of social media and 98% of them access social media sites through their smartphones. This has continued as the pandemic hampered social interactions among the Filipino people. Sumague and Briones (2022) provided a detailed profile of social media use in the Philippines. He pointed out that the main reasons why Filipinos use social media are: to follow social media influencers and celebrities (51.4%) and use social media for work or for research (36.7%). With an active social media profile, students are more immersed with language in social media compared to academic use of language. In the validation of the results, all of the participants confirmed that their language is one that they learned in social media. It poses a grave threat to academic writing that Netspeak continues to penetrate even in academic writing.

### *Social Media Style of Writing*

In his book *Language and the Internet*, Crystal (2001) highlighted the distinct features of language over the internet: graphic, graphological, grammatical, lexical, and discourse. Of these 5 features, two are most notable- graphic and graphological. Hasan (2018) mentioned that graphic features can be seen as students use emojis, emoticons, and excessive punctuations. Graphological features, on the other hand, are seen in spelling and capitalization alterations. In Heid's essay, “The Evolution of the Language Used in Social Media” (2017), he described the language as “pseudo-language” that is represented in shortcuts, abbreviations, and many linguistic deviations. He also resonated Crystal's point that emojis and emoticons have become dominant markers of language in social media. The following are extracted statements from students' writing prompts:

*“Facebook is the number one source of fake news. According to my experience, I easily believe fake news because my parents persuade me to (I don't have a choice 🤖🤖🤖), and the news comes from Facebook (as always 😊). Facebook is a website that spreads fake news, but the problem begins with the audience; they should read the article before sharing it. As a result, we should not be so quick to believe what happens on social media 🤖🤖; instead, we should read and gather information before spreading information that could lead to a larger problem 🤖.”*

*“Filipinos are both smart 🤖🤖 and not smart 🤖🤖 in using social media. It depends on how well educated 🤖🤖 that they are that the way they use social media is always different.”*

These extracted statements from their prompts showed one common feature- the use of emojis and emoticons. These examples use symbols to create a specific “emoji” or emoticons. According to

Grannan (2016), emoticons are the combinations of letters and numbers to achieve a specific pictorial icon. These icons are not devoid of meaning but they contain cultural communicative messages. The term is a portmanteau of “emotional icon”. Emoji, on the other hand, refers to pictographs of faces, objects, and symbols. These emoticons and emojis are not only used, as seen in the statements, as a creative feature but to highlight a certain message (Bai, Dan, Mu, & Yang 2019). They need to exist to convey a variety of meanings that words cannot completely deliver. The word “happy” may be more emphasized through the use of the happy emoticon “(^\_^)” just like in the sentence presented. In the point of view of the users, the expression must not be taken as purely graphic since it contains a communicative meaning of emphasizing the feeling or state of being happy. Lo (2008) said that these emojis or emoticons have a positive impact on the readers of the message. This could be the reason as to why millennials are using these emojis and emoticons even in academic writing. Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta (2014) argued that emoticons and emojis are needed as a support to written communication due its absence of nonverbal cues. In the conducted interview with the participants, the participants revealed that they feel that a statement is “incomplete”, “ineffective”, and “deficient” in the absence of emojis and emoticons (Zhang et al., 2021). As shown on the statements above, Netspeak is dominantly reflected in the way they write.

The influence of Netspeak in students' academic writing shows how creative students have become in forming words and creating structures in representing their ideas. It ranges from their unique orthographic representation down to their production of “never-been-heard” English words and expressions. As these words and structures reflect their writing styles, it also leaves one challenge among English language teachers worldwide- being knowledgeable of how social media works in language learning.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study explored the presence of Netspeak in students' academic writing. These Netspeak influences were seen as they used orthographic deviations, neosemanticism and neologism, and social media style of writing. The findings confirmed Netspeak's influence in students' writing. Context and purpose are great factors that determine the extent of using Netspeak. Learning today is almost entirely conducted online. Students have been more immersed in the Internet and social media sites. With their exposure to the type of language used in social media, Netspeak, they found a platform to freely express their identities, their voices through the creative use of language. While students enjoy this “language freedom”, language teachers face a huge problem in teaching students how to control their language use. Netspeak enjoys great popularity among the type of students today, and many language teachers have not yet fully understood how this language trend works among students. The uncontrolled use of social media influences their understanding and practice of what academic writing is. With accuracy as the foundation of academic writing, Netspeak poses a bigger challenge among language teachers worldwide. Teachers are mandated to teach students the conventions of spelling, punctuations, capitalization, grammar, and other areas of grammar; however, the language orientation of students is one that they see and use in social media. Teachers today are going against a trend leaving them a dilemma on how to take advantage of the trend in their language teaching practices.

The findings verified Netspeak's impact on students' writing. The use of it depends on the context and purpose. With learning predominantly happening online, students are exposed to internet and social media platforms where they can freely express their identities and voices using creative language. Since students, like most netizens, enjoy linguistic freedom, English teachers are faced with the daunting task of teaching language control and adapting instruction to address this linguistic trend. Faced with the dilemma of leveraging this trend, teachers need to be conscientious on teaching students on the conventions of writing.



With the unregulated influence and the unsettling impact of social media affecting students' application of academic writing, language teachers bear a professional obligation to understand how language evolves so that they can properly help students how to use the English language in context. Their understanding equips them to guide students in the contextual use of the English language. This may be achieved by implementing strategies that develop students' strong academic writing abilities such as providing explicit writing instructions and engaging students in collaborative projects. Schools may also initiate programs that foster a supportive writing environment where students provide and learn from peer feedback to improve their writing skills. Furthermore, future researchers may conduct translational studies on effective pedagogical strategies to address the challenges associated with influence of social media and Netspeak. This can include, but is not limited to, classroom observations and case studies on how teachers bridge the gap between social media language and academic writing and teacher professional development focusing on the understanding social media language trends vis-a-vis enhancing students' writing skills.

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