

USE OF NONSTANDARDISMS IN ESSAY WRITING AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACHIEVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

In the digital age, students' patterns of communication have been increasingly shaped by social media platforms, where brief, informal, and symbol-driven language has become the norm. This shift has contributed to the rise of nonstandardisms such as slangs, abbreviations, and phonetic spellings which, though effective for online interaction, have begun to intrude into formal academic contexts such as essay writing. The study adopted a survey research design to examine the effects of social media language on essay writing among secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. The population comprised 2,433 SS1–SS3 students across four schools, from which 335 respondents were selected using simple random sampling and Krejcie and Morgan's table. Data were collected with a 20-item structured questionnaire validated by experts and tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha. Out of 335 copies distributed, 295 were retrieved. Data were analyzed with arithmetic mean, and decision rules were based on statistical real limits of numbers. The results revealed that slangs, abbreviations, and phonetic spellings were prevalent in students' essay writing in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni. Slangs and abbreviations such as "u" for "you" and "bcos" for "because" appeared frequently (Mean = 3.78), with an overall cluster mean of 3.66, showing they reduced grammatical correctness and formal quality. Similarly, phonetic spellings like "wen" for "when" and "dat" for "that" recorded high means (3.81 each), with a cluster mean of 3.70, indicating widespread usage. Respondents agreed such spellings distorted meaning (Mean = 3.78). Teachers were observed correcting these errors, highlighting their negative impact on academic writing. The study concluded that nonstandardisms present a major challenge to students' proficiency in English essay writing and recommended deliberate pedagogical strategies, continuous teacher interventions, and awareness programs to strengthen formal writing skills amidst growing digital influences.

1. Introduction

In the 21st-century digital age, social media has become a powerful force shaping not only social interaction but also educational engagement among students. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) are widely used by secondary school students to share information, collaborate on assignments, participate in learning communities, and access academic content. When effectively harnessed, these platforms facilitate connectivity, offer access to diverse resources, and promote student-centered learning (Okafor, 2023). Yet, alongside these educational benefits, social media has also introduced a distinctive form of informal communication popularly known as social media language.

The rapid growth of social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, has reshaped the way students communicate. These platforms encourage fast, informal exchanges through text, photos, videos, and instant messaging. In the process, a distinctive digital language has emerged, one that relies on shortcuts, symbols, and unconventional expressions. This language includes acronyms such as "LOL" (laugh out loud), alphanumeric substitutions like "b4" (before) and "l8r" (later), vowel deletions such as "pls" (please), and phonetic spellings like "gr8" (great) (Songxaba, 2020). Code mixing, illustrated in expressions like "oh chim, biko help me" for "God please help me," further reflects the hybrid nature of this form of expression. Collectively, these features constitute what scholars describe as Nonstandardisms, that is, deviations from the norms of Standard English that are effective in informal communication but problematic in formal contexts such as essay writing.

Nonstandardisms are forms of language use that depart from the accepted conventions of Standard English. They are common in informal interactions, especially among young people and within digital spaces such as social media, instant messaging, and online forums. In essence, nonstandardisms represent creative but unconventional ways of expressing ideas, which, although suitable in casual contexts, become inappropriate when applied to academic writing (Squires, 2019). Slang falls under this category as it consists of informal, often trendy words and expressions that reflect group identity or peer culture. Abbreviations, another type of nonstandardism, involve shortening words or phrases for speed and convenience, such as writing 'u' for 'you' or 'bcos' for 'because'. (Yuldashaliyevna, 2025) Phonetic spellings occur when words are written the way they sound, rather than according to their correct orthographic rules, as seen in "wen" for "when" or "dat" for "that".

In essay writing, the use of such nonstandard forms diminishes grammatical accuracy, clarity, and overall quality. While they may enhance quick communication in social spaces, their presence in formal contexts interferes with the objectives of the English Language curriculum, which is designed to promote mastery of Standard English for effective communication (Manafa et al, 2025). Essay writing is a structured form of formal expression that conveys ideas, arguments, or explanations in a clear, logical, and coherent manner. It is expected to demonstrate grammatical accuracy, proper spelling, structured thought, and adherence to formal registers (Li, 2025). Essays may take different forms: expository essays explain a topic, descriptive essays create vivid pictures through sensory details, narrative essays recount personal experiences, argumentative essays present evidence-based viewpoints, and analytical essays examine concepts or texts in detail.

Across all forms, however, formal language remains essential for clarity and academic rigor. Several studies have shown that linguistic habits acquired on social media are gradually eroding students' ability to produce formal written English. Chijioke and Nwala (2024, p. 112) observed that students often transfer social media textisms into their academic essays, leading to errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction. Such intrusions compromise the quality of essays, obscure meaning, and negatively impact academic performance. For instance, phrases like "u r welcome" instead of "you are welcome" or "dis bcos I was tired" instead of "this is because I was tired" illustrate a breakdown in formal syntax and orthography.

Frequent reliance on text language continues to distort students' ability to master formal English expression. Mukenge (2024) noted that the use of such nonstandardisms blurs the line between informal and formal registers, thereby weakening learners' ability to adapt effectively to academic writing. This tendency undermines the English Language curriculum objectives, which emphasize clarity, grammatical accuracy, and communicative competence. Ohamobi et al. (2018) highlighted that professional development of teachers plays a critical role in addressing such linguistic challenges, as trained teachers are better equipped to guide students away from nonstandard usages. In a related study, Osegbue, Manafa, and Ohamobi (2022) argued that collaborative teaching practices enhance teachers' effectiveness in reinforcing correct language habits. Similarly, the absence of ICT integration in teaching has been shown to increase students' dependence on informal registers, limiting their preparedness for global competitiveness (Manafa, Ohamobi & Osegbue, 2022). Furthermore, leadership approaches directly affect teachers' supervision of student writing (Osegbue, Manafa & Ohamobi, 2021). Strengthening teacher capacity, embedding ICT tools, and enforcing instructional innovations are therefore vital for mitigating nonstandardisms and ensuring curriculum objectives are met.

Although digital shorthand may serve its purpose within online platforms, its migration into academic contexts undermines the skills required for essay writing. Logical organization, grammatical precision, and formal vocabulary are compromised when students habitually use informal digital expressions. Studies, such as Jimoh (2020), have reported that textisms manifest in essays as spelling errors, sentence fragments, inconsistent capitalization, and slang usage. Zeeshan (2025, p. 998) highlighted this trend by noting how students often replace formal sentences such as “I will see you tomorrow” with “c u 2mrw,” thereby weakening the distinction between digital and academic discourse. In Nigeria, particularly in Rivers State, this trend is especially worrisome. Social media language has begun to affect students’ proficiency in essay writing, assignments, and high-stakes examinations such as WAEC and NECO. Despite this, most existing studies, including those by Jimoh (2020) and Ngulube and Nwamaka (2023), have focused on university undergraduates or general language trends, with little attention given to secondary school students. This neglect is problematic because secondary education is a foundational stage where critical language skills are developed.

The problem, therefore, lies in the increasing influence of social media on the language habits of secondary school students, particularly in formal writing tasks. Social media encourages abbreviations, phonetic spellings, emojis, and informal syntactic structures that conflict with the conventions of academic writing (Okafor & Eze, 2022). Teachers frequently report frustration over the appearance of textisms and chat abbreviations in assignments and examination scripts, suggesting that informal digital communication is eroding students’ capacity for formal expression. Although the influence of social media language on writing has been widely acknowledged internationally, there is a lack of research that specifically focuses on its effects on secondary school students in Rivers State. Most literature generalizes findings across education levels or highlights university contexts, leaving a gap in understanding its impact at the secondary school level, where English serves as both the medium of instruction and the basis for evaluation. This study aimed to bridge the gap by investigating the extent to which social media language influences essay writing among secondary school students in the Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. It investigated the types of digital expressions found in students’ essays, evaluated their impact on grammar, coherence, and spelling, and proposed pedagogical strategies to strengthen formal writing skills in the face of rising digital influences.

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, it aims to investigate the use of slang and abbreviations in essay writing among senior secondary school students in the Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. Second, it aims to identify the types of phonetic spellings employed by these students in their essay writing. To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions: How are slangs and abbreviations used in essay writing among senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State? Furthermore, what types of phonetic spellings are present in the essay writing of senior secondary school students in this area?

2. Method

The study employed a survey research design, which was considered appropriate because it enabled the examination of a large number of respondents and allowed for the evaluation of complex propositions. Survey research also permitted the quantification and electronic processing of multiple variables, which made it a suitable design for this investigation. This approach was consistent with Babbie’s (2020) assertion that survey design provided an effective means of studying large populations while maintaining analytical depth. The study was conducted in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area) of Rivers State, Nigeria. The area was geographically bounded in the north by Ohagi-Egbema, in the south by Ahoada, and in the east by Egbeda. It was situated at the border of the Niger Delta’s mangrove swamp forest, near the freshwater swamp complex. Onelga comprised three major areas, namely Ogba, Egbema, and Ndoni, and was one of the 774 local governments in Nigeria, with an estimated population of 11,625 people. Its geographical location extended from about 4°50’N to 5°30’N latitude and from 6°25’E to 6°40’E longitude. The inhabitants were predominantly traders, public servants, farmers, and artisans. This area was chosen because of the availability of adequate numbers of computer and robotic education students within the schools under review, which provided a reliable pool of participants for the study.

The study population consisted of 2,433 senior secondary school students in Omoku, representing students in SS1, SS2, and SS3 classes across four secondary schools. Specifically, Community Girls Secondary School, Omoku, had 609 students; Model Boys Secondary School, Omoku, had 607 students; Demonstration Secondary School, Omoku, had 626 students; while Sancta Maria Secondary School, Omoku, had 591 students. Altogether, this distribution yielded 755 SS1 students, 810 SS2 students, and 868 SS3 students, giving a cumulative total of 2,433 respondents. From this population, a sample of 335 students was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table. The sampling process was conducted using the simple random sampling technique, which was deemed suitable since it provided each student in the population an equal opportunity of being selected. This method minimized bias and ensured that the sample accurately represented the larger population.

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled Social Media Language Effect on the Essay Written of Secondary School Students Questionnaire (SMLEEWSSSQ). The questionnaire consisted of 20 items developed from a review of relevant literature and the research questions that guided the study. It was divided into two parts: Part One sought information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents. In contrast, Part Two was subdivided into four sections (A–D) based on the research questions. The items were presented on a four-point Likert scale with response options of Very High Extent (4 points), High Extent (3 points), Moderate Extent (2 points), and Low Extent (1 point). To ensure validity, the questionnaire underwent both face and content validation. Two experts from the Department of Guidance and Counseling reviewed the instrument. They were asked to examine the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items, as well as to identify and recommend corrections for any ambiguities or errors. Based on their suggestions, the researcher revised the questionnaire to improve its overall quality and alignment with the study objectives.

Reliability of the instrument was established through a pilot test involving 10 students from private senior secondary schools in the area who were not part of the main study population. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach’s Alpha, which ensured that the items reliably captured the constructs under investigation. Data collection was carried out by the researcher, who personally administered 335 copies of the questionnaire to the selected respondents. Out of these, 295 completed copies were retrieved and subsequently used for analysis. This represented a high retrieval rate, which enhanced the credibility of the findings. The method of data analysis relied on the arithmetic mean to answer the research questions. Each questionnaire item was assigned a numerical score, and the mean of the responses was computed. To determine the decision rule, the statistical real limit of numbers was employed. The total scale score (10) divided by the number of response options (4) produced a midpoint value of 2.5. Based on this benchmark, mean scores from 3.50–4.00 were interpreted as Very High Extent, 2.50–3.49 as High Extent, 1.50–2.49 as Moderate Extent, and 1.00–1.49 as Low Extent. These categorizations guided the interpretation of the results, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the actual degree of influence of social media language on students’ essay writing.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1. Research Question One

How are slang and abbreviations used in essay writing among senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State?

Table 1. Mean response of respondents on slang and abbreviations used in essay writing among senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State

S/N	Items	VHE	HE	ME	LE	Total	Mean	Decision
1.	Students often use slangs and abbreviations in their essay writing.	200	50	30	15	295	3.68	VHE
2.	The use of slangs reduces the formal quality of students’ essays	195	50	40	10	295	3.45	HE
3.	Abbreviations such as “u” for “you” or “bcos” for “because” appear frequently in students’ essays.	244	40	11	-	295	3.78	VHE

S/N	Items	VHE	HE	ME	LE	Total	Mean	Decision
4.	slangs in essays reflect students' social media habits.	231	44	20	-	295	3.71	VHE
5.	Abbreviations affect the grammatical correctness of essay	256	10	9	20	295	3.70	VHE
Cluster Mean							3.66	VHE

Source: Field Survey, (2025)

The results in Table 1 show that respondents agreed to a high extent that slang and abbreviations are commonly used in essay writing among senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area. The highest mean score (3.78) was recorded for the statement that abbreviations such as “u” for “you” or “bcos” for “because” appear frequently in students’ essays, indicating that this practice is widespread. Similarly, slangs in essays were strongly linked to students’ social media habits (Mean = 3.71), suggesting that digital communication patterns influence academic writing. Furthermore, respondents agreed that abbreviations negatively affect the grammatical correctness of essays (Mean = 3.70) and that slangs reduce the formal quality of students’ essays (Mean = 3.45). With an overall cluster mean of 3.66, the interpretation is that the use of slang and abbreviations in essay writing is prevalent and has a considerable impact on the quality and correctness of students’ written English.

3.2. Research Question Two

What types of phonetic spellings are present in the essay writing of senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State?

Table 2. Mean response of respondents on types of phonetic spellings are present in the essay writing of senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State

S/N	Items	VHE	HE	ME	LE	Total	Mean	Decision
6.	Students use phonetic spellings such as “wen” for “when.”	251	32	12	-	295	3.81	VHE
7.	Words like “dat” for “that” are common in students' essays.	260	20	10	5	295	3.81	VHE
8.	Teachers often correct essays for phonetic spellings.	211	35	49	-	295	3.54	VHE
9.	Teachers often correct essays for phonetic spellings.	223	35	30	7	295	3.60	VHE
10.	Phonetic spellings confuse the intended meaning of sentences.	249	30	16	-	295	3.78	VHE
Cluster Mean							3.70	VHE

Specifically, Table 2 focused on how students frequently substitute words such as “wen” for “when” and “dat” for “that” with high mean scores of 3.81 each, indicating a strong tendency towards phonetic representation in their writing. Teachers also play an active role in correcting such errors, as reflected in mean scores of 3.54 and 3.60, showing that phonetic spellings are a recurring issue addressed in classroom feedback. Additionally, respondents agreed that phonetic spellings often distort meaning in sentences (mean = 3.78), which underscores their negative impact on clarity and overall writing quality. The cluster mean of 3.70 (VHE) further confirms that phonetic spellings are a significant and widespread feature in students’ essays, posing a challenge to effective communication in formal writing. This suggests the need for more targeted interventions in teaching spelling and formal writing conventions.

3.3. Use of Slangs and Abbreviations in Essay Writing

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that slang and abbreviations are widely used in essay writing among senior secondary school students in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, with a cluster mean of 3.66 reflecting a very high extent of usage. The frequent replacement of formal words with shortened forms such as 'u' for 'you' and 'bcos' for 'because' demonstrates how informal digital communication styles are increasingly migrating into academic contexts. This corroborates Afolayan's (2021) argument, which maintains that students’ immersion in social media platforms encourages linguistic habits that blur the boundaries between formal and informal expressions. In a similar vein, Eze (2022) emphasizes that habitual reliance on such shorthand diminishes learners’

ability to distinguish between standard written English and casual online expressions, ultimately lowering the formal quality of academic essays.

Nevertheless, Musa (2023) advances an alternative perspective, contending that exposure to slang and abbreviations can foster creativity and adaptability, thereby illustrating the evolving and dynamic nature of English as a living language. From this angle, while slang and abbreviations appear to compromise grammatical correctness and academic formality, they also reflect how young people creatively adapt language to meet their communicative needs. This tension underscores the dual implication of nonstandard usage in students' writing: both as a threat to curriculum objectives and as evidence of language evolution.

3.4. Types of Phonetic Spellings in Students' Essays

The results also reveal that phonetic spellings, such as 'wen' for 'when' and 'dat' for 'that', are highly prevalent among students, with each recording a mean score of 3.81. This suggests a firm reliance on sound-based approximations of English words, which likely stems from the influence of spoken language and informal communicative practices. Idris and Muhammad (2025) explain that such patterns emerge when learners transfer oral speech habits into writing, especially in contexts where mastery of conventional orthography is incomplete. The distortion of meaning attributed to these spellings (Mean = 3.78) further highlights their negative impact on clarity and academic precision.

At the same time, the findings show that teachers frequently address phonetic spelling errors in their corrections (mean scores of 3.54 and 3.60), underscoring the recognition of this problem within the school system. According to Ibaba (2025), consistent teacher intervention remains critical for helping students develop stronger orthographic competence, particularly in multilingual settings where interference from local languages compounds spelling difficulties. On the other hand, Yusuf and Syhabuddin (2024) argue that phonetic spellings, while considered errors in formal writing, may also be seen as signs of creative linguistic adaptation. From this perspective, students are not merely making mistakes but are actively negotiating between speech and writing in ways that reflect their communicative realities. This challenges the view that phonetic spellings are entirely detrimental, instead positioning them as part of the natural trajectory of language acquisition. Taken together, the findings confirm that slangs, abbreviations, and phonetic spellings are widespread in students' essay writing, shaping both the quality and clarity of formal expression. While these nonstandardisms compromise grammatical accuracy and hinder the attainment of English Language curriculum objectives, they also illustrate how young people creatively adapt language under the influence of digital media and spoken interaction. The issue, therefore, emerges as both a pedagogical concern and a linguistic phenomenon, requiring balanced strategies that enforce standard writing conventions while acknowledging the realities of evolving language practices among learners.

3.5. Implications of the Use of Nonstandardisms in Essay Writing for Achieving English Language Curriculum Objectives

The use of nonstandardisms such as slang, abbreviations, and phonetic spellings among senior secondary school students has far-reaching implications for achieving the objectives of the English Language curriculum. One of the key goals of the curriculum is to develop students' competence in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and coherent expression in formal contexts. The frequent intrusion of slang such as 'gonna' for 'going to,' abbreviations like 'u' for 'you,' and phonetic spellings such as 'dat' for 'that' undermines this goal by normalizing informal linguistic habits that conflict with standard orthography and formal writing conventions.

Another implication lies in the area of essay writing, which is central to the curriculum as a tool for assessing students' ability to organize ideas logically, apply correct grammar, and communicate effectively. When students transfer informal digital expressions into essays, the quality of their written work is compromised, leading to reduced clarity, coherence, and grammatical accuracy. This not only weakens their academic performance but also impedes their preparedness for national examinations such as WAEC and NECO, where mastery of formal English is critical. Furthermore, the persistent use of nonstandardisms risks eroding students' capacity to distinguish between formal and informal registers. The inability to switch appropriately between contexts undermines communicative competence, a skill that the curriculum emphasizes as essential for success in higher

education and the workplace. Teachers are also burdened with the constant correction of such errors, which reduces the time available for advanced instruction.

4. Conclusion

The study revealed that nonstandardisms such as slang, abbreviations, and phonetic spellings were commonly used in the essay writing of senior secondary school students. These practices, largely influenced by social media and informal digital communication, lowered the formal quality, grammatical accuracy, and clarity of students' written work. Frequent use of forms like "u" for "you," "bcos" for "because," "wen" for "when," and "dat" for "that" reflected the dominance of informal language patterns in academic contexts. Teachers regularly corrected such errors, yet their persistence pointed to a disconnection between students' writing habits and the goals of the English Language curriculum. The results indicated that consistent reliance on nonstandard forms hindered the achievement of curriculum objectives, especially the development of proficiency in standard written communication. Left unaddressed, these habits could negatively affect students' performance in examinations and reduce their ability to use English effectively in academic and professional environments. The study highlighted the importance of targeted instructional approaches that strengthen students' awareness of standard English, provide intensive practice in formal writing, and emphasize the dangers of transferring informal language into academic work. Effective integration of corrective feedback into teaching and learning can close the gap between students' current practices and the curriculum's expectations, thereby improving overall language competence.

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