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**Review of doctoral dissertation of**  
**Syed Adnan Zafar**

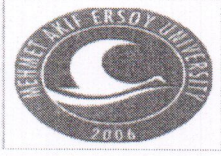
*Adult Language learners in social networks: Investigating linguistic and cognitive  
development in social media settings*

Doctoral thesis written at the Faculty of Humanities, Department of Applied Linguistics of  
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University under the supervision of  
dr hab. Jarosław Krajka, prof. nadzw  
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**1. Introduction**

Syed Adnan Zafar, in his dissertation, addresses the topic on social networks and the social connection among the people and how these social networks affect the linguistics and cognitive development of adult learners. The topic selected and addressed by Zafar is immensely important in that there are few studies that investigate how young adult learners, especially Polish EAP learners, acquired academic writing abilities and skills using social networks and in social media settings. It is widely acknowledged that new generation grow up with their electronic devices, and much of their informal learning also occurs through these devices, and they learn how to use the keyboard, a touchscreen,

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and a mobile phone as they learn how to walk. Technology has become increasingly integrated into our daily life and has been changing the ways we live and use our skills (Kessler, 2017). Writing, for example, is one of these skills which technology has affected profoundly.

While new technological developments and devices have transformed writing in several ways, little research has examined how information and communication technologies in the social network age affects language learning, especially from the perspective of adult language learners. This brings out the question whether the new technological devices and new ways of communication has any beneficial or harmful effects on linguistics and cognitive development of language learners.

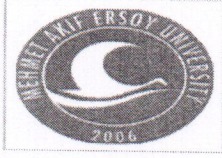
It is in this context that the doctoral dissertation of Syed Adnan Zafar has to be evaluated, and it clearly stands out from several studies conducted in the field due to its comprehensive treatment and review of English for academic purposes, adult learners and second language learners, and the in-depth statistical analysis of the data collected, not to mention the lesson plans prepared for social network site-based intervention.

## **2. Evaluation of Practical English Writing Course Design and Lesson Plans**

The review of the scientific achievement of Syed Adnan Zafar submitted in fulfillment of requirements for the Ph.D. degree needs to be made in two sections. Before the very dissertation is to be reviewed, the undersigned needs to evaluate the practical English writing course design and related lesson plans.

When the practical English writing course design is considered, it must be indicated that huge amount of time and a lot of efforts seem to have been put into the design. The

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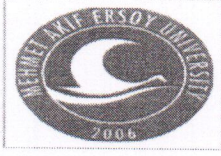


course design started with the identification of the learners' inclination towards the use of social network sites and their usage of English in academic English writing. The course benefited from pre-test to capture the participants' knowledge of key concepts in practical English usage, which included several studies as the resources for the pre-test. The course later benefited from the inclusion of several topics such as writing process and organizing paragraphs and main body and several grammatical structures and functions such as modal verbs and passive writing.

On the experimental side, SNS-based interventions were introduced to the course design systematically to follow the participants' knowledge in the writing process and to determine the effectiveness of social network sites on learners' improvements of EAP writing skills and competencies. Syed Adnan Zafar included the course design with the detailed information on how each topic is discussed and introduced and how each intervention is conducted together with the invaluable resources in Appendix A.

Regarding the lesson plans provided in Appendix B, I can state that they are also very detailed and informative. Each lesson plan not only provided information on the procedure, but also explains how the teacher introduced the course content and the interaction that took place. Moreover, it must also acknowledged that the lesson plans for social network site-based intervention explain, in detail, how groups worked together to contribute to each other's postings and how they combined their notes into paragraphs in addition to paraphrasing them.

As a final note, I can say that the practical English writing course design and related lesson plan provide a solid base for the data collection and analysis and serves the main objective of the dissertation.



### **3. Evaluation of the doctoral dissertation**

#### **3.1. Structure, scope, sources**

The scope of the topic selected for the dissertation is assessed positively. In order to investigate adult learners in social networks and the effects of social networks on the participants' linguistic and cognitive development in terms of academic writing, a variety of issues have been discussed before the methodology, data analysis and findings sections, which presents sufficient information to the readers. However, considering the research questions and the content of the dissertation, one could wonder why the thesis title does not feature the concept of EAP writing, since it does seem to be highly relevant for the dissertation.

The dissertation is composed of seven chapters, contains a list of figures, a list of tables, list of abbreviations, introduction, a brief outline of the dissertation's structure, references and eight appendices. It seems that the abstracts both in English and Polis are missing, though. The first three chapters seem to form the necessary background for the introduction of the several related topics, and the chapter four provides the empirical part of the thesis by presenting previous research into adult language learning with social network sites. The rest of the chapters provide the methodology (Chapter Five), data analysis (Chapter Six), discussions and conclusions (Chapter Seven).

The way how the relevant topics are introduced in the first three chapters and the way empirical research is described in the fourth chapter fully conforms to the procedures of describing research adopted in international linguistics journals and dissertations, even though the titles of the chapters might be rewritten to make them shorter. For example, the title of the Chapter Five is "Investigating linguistic and cognitive development in social

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media setting of adult learners: The design of the study” can be shortened as “Chapter Five- Methodology”. The same can be done with chapter six.

Regarding the theoretical background to the study, namely the first three chapters, the dissertation needs to be especially praised for its comprehensive discussion of the importance and the role of English for Academic Purposes in terms of course materials and needs analysis in the first chapter, the description of adult learners and second language learning in the second chapter, and the representation of the current information and communication technologies and the social network sites in the third chapter.

In the fourth chapter, the author skillfully confronts different perspectives represented by various authors. However, the reviewer finds this chapter slightly weaker in terms of the studies reviewed. This might be attributed to the fact that there are few studies conducted mainly on academic writing skills of adult learners and use of social network sites. In order to compensate for the shortcoming in the coverage of the previous studies, previous studies that focused on the use of technology in academic writing can also be introduced to this section by carefully categorizing them.

Despite these reservations, the dissertation does review the field sufficiently by using high number of well-selected sources, especially in the first three chapters, aptly representing research into academic writing and adult learners. The sources are used appropriately, mainly paraphrased, with great care devoted to proper documentation of sources. However, there seems to be a problem regarding the use of in-text citations. In in-text citations, we never use ‘&’ in the main text unless we provide the citation in parentheses. For example, on page 172, “..... presented by Sani & Bature (2014)”, which must be changed as “Sani and Bature (2014)”. This issue must be thoroughly checked



throughout the dissertation. Another issue is with the content of the references. The last edition of APA (sixth edition) requires the use of DOI numbers if they exist. However, the dissertation seems to ignore this requirement. In APA format, date of access is no longer provided for online resources. However, the references include several dates of access, which must be removed. Therefore, it is important that the references must also be checked for these issues.

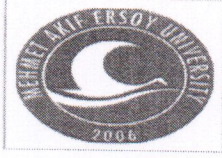
Taking into account all of the above, the presented work does meet the formal criteria for a doctoral dissertation in terms of scope, structure, and the use of sources, though some minor changes are due.

### **3.2. Methodology**

The dissertation reports upon an experimental study which included pre and posttest stages, the pre-course and post-course questionnaires, and class tests and assignments. The pre and post tests were used to determine the linguistic and cognitive development of EAP, adult learners and to determine whether the treatments would lead to any statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups. The questionnaires were used to determine any change in EAP participants' perceptions and writing capabilities after they were exposed to SNSs in EAP writing. Detailed statistical analyses were conducted to achieve the stated objectives in the dissertation.

The differences were examined in various ways. For example, in order to test the hypothesis whether the difference in posttest scores of the experimental and control group learners was statistically significant, the General linear Model for repeated measures was used to calculate the differences. The statistical analyses were conducted with the

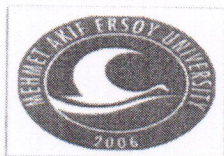
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confidence level set at 0.05. The results were also supported with figures in the form of box plots as visual representations, clearly indicating the mean values of the test scores of the experimental and the control group participant Learners' perceptions of the use of SNSs in EAP writing courses were provided as results of the McNemar test.

The methodology of the study deserves great praise, conducting an experimental study and at the same time collecting qualitative data on learners' and educators' perceptions and determining the possible existing changes. All of these were accomplished with not even minor faults and the study produced fairly promising results: "use of social network sites along with the in-class instruction improves the academic English writing competencies as well as develops the cognitive and linguistics capabilities of EAP learners and educators". This was evidenced in a statistically significant difference in the group score change from pre to posttest stages. Moreover, it was also determined that the learners held positive, immediate and longitudinal perceptions of the use of SNSs in academic writing and that the participants viewed SNS as a beneficial and complimentary language acquisition tool enabling them to acquire the target knowledge at their own convenience.

The only reservation as far as the methodology of the study is concerned refers to the pre and posttest used in the study. These tests were reported to be the test developed and executed for the purpose of obtaining results for the study and to have encompassed a varied range of writing tasks and activities that were developed independently by the author or sourced from a range of websites and books. As such, these tasks and activities could have been piloted with a group of learners with similar characteristics to the ones in the current study, as the reliability analysis of the findings could greatly contribute to the study.



### **3.3. Technical aspects (language, formatting, and references)**

It seems that the dissertation has been prepared and formatted carefully considering the technical aspects and its layout is good. It is also due to note that the author displays full language control and precision, and the dissertation maintains consistency of fonts, heading, and examples.

The references and in-text citations are precise in terms of the spelling of authors' names. However, the only area in which some improvement might be needed is the formatting of in-text citations. As mentioned earlier, in in-text citations, we never use '&' in the main text unless we provide the surnames in parentheses. This issue must be thoroughly checked throughout the dissertation. Another issue is with the content of the references. The last edition of APA (sixth edition) requires the use of DOI numbers if they exist. However, the dissertation seems to ignore this requirement. Therefore, it is important that the references must also be checked for this issue.

### **4. Overall evaluation: positive**

I hereby state that the aims set in the dissertation have been fully accomplished. As a result of properly prepared, administered and reported experimental research undertaken within the suitable context and by using the suitable data collection and analysis tools, Syed Adnan Zafar did prove that use of social network sites along with the instruction provided in the class improved academic English writing skills in addition to cognitive and linguistics abilities of EAP learners.

In spite of several drawbacks and shortcomings highlighted in the previous sections of the current review, mainly in terms of discussion on methodology and the selection of

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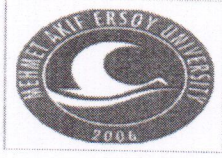


testing tools, my evaluation of Syed Adnan Zafar's dissertation is positive as fully conforming to the criteria set for the doctoral dissertations by the relevant Act and I approve of moving on to further steps of the doctoral procedure.

Burdur, Turkey, 20.11.2018

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