Technology and new language trends: the role of the ESL teacher

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Abstract

Technology is pervasive. It is an important source of entertainment and communication. The stylistic norms of communication held through the various means available today seem to deviate from the traditional and standard forms, especially among young people. This communicative transaction that takes place through different forms of computer mediated formats and text-based interactions has been identified as Computer-Mediated Communication. What are the implications of these new linguistic trends? What is the role of language teachers in the face of this viral linguistic mutation? This paper aims at answering these interrogatives under the perspective of sociolinguistics and through a field study.

Keywords: technology and communication, language transformation, sociolinguistics, electronic literacy.

Resumen

La tecnología es omnipresente. Es una fuente importante de entretenimiento y comunicación. Las normas estilísticas de la comunicación que se establece a través de los diferentes medios disponibles hoy en día parecen diferir de las formas tradicionales y estándares, especialmente entre los jóvenes. Este intercambio comunicativo que se lleva a cabo a través de diferentes formatos mediados por computadora y de las interacciones por mensajes de texto ha sido identificado como Comunicación Mediada por Computadora (Computer-Mediated Communication). ¿Cuáles son las implicaciones de estas nuevas tendencias lingüísticas? ¿Cuál es el papel de los profesores de idiomas ante esta mutación lingüística viral? Este documento tiene como objetivo responder a estas interrogantes desde la perspectiva de la sociolingüística y con el apoyo de un estudio de campo.

Descriptores: tecnología y comunicación, transformación lingüística, sociolingüística, alfabetismo electrónico.

Introduction

Technology is pervasive; it has made its way into people’s daily life. It is present in homes, supermarkets, banks, schools, etc. provoking an impact on everyday activities. Through the years, technology has become faster, smaller, more affordable, and therefore, more accessible to the

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public in general. One of the most wide spreading contributions of technology is the Internet. It has come into many homes changing the way people communicate, study, work, entertain and even socialize. Latin America has not been an exception to this trend. In June, 2010, ComScore reported that the amount of people using the Internet in Latin America had expanded 23% in regard to the year 2009. It is believed that this phenomenon will continue rising as the access to the Internet keeps expanding in this region of the world (Fosk, 2010).

Technology is found in every corner from movies to games to music videos; it is an important source of entertainment. The Internet provides a great opportunity for entertainment because people can watch videos, download music, chat with friends, or read information that interests them. In addition, technology serves a major purpose which is communication. ComScore reports that 75% of Web users in Latin America have used it for entertainment purposes, mostly searching for music, movies, TV, multimedia, entertainment news and humor. Even so, Latin Americans prefer to use the Internet for communication and connection purposes. Some of the most frequent tasks performed while online are emailing, instant messaging (IM), social networking, blogging, participating in forums or chatting (Fosk, 2010).

This background of the impact that the Internet has had in Latin America, for communication purposes raises interest as to the role this could play in the English learning classroom. The EFL students at Universidad Nacional, Pérez Zeledón campus, especially those of the English associate program, typically end up filling customer service positions, where computer-mediated communication (CMC) is not only required as a skill but usually becomes their livelihood. For them, consequently, mastering ‘Textspeak’ or ‘net lingo’ related to their jobs is paramount.

What are the implications of this new linguistic trend? Does this new hi-tech lingo spell the end of language as we know it? What is the role of language teachers in the face of this viral
linguistic mutation? This paper aims at answering these interrogatives. For such purpose, a field study was conducted among EFL teachers and students at Universidad Nacional, Pérez Zeledón campus regarding their perception of CMC. The data gathered through the questionnaires analyze the implications of text-based CMC in the students’ use of language. The survey also examines the teachers’ and students’ opinions about whether or not Textspeak should be included in the curricula. It is necessary to point out that both teachers and students were inquired about their texting and online chatting habits regardless of the language used, i.e., English or Spanish. This research tries to shed some light into this new language trend, which is an unstoppable reality, and the effort to maintain standard language use in EFL classrooms and other non-informal contexts.

**Computer-Mediated Communication**

Modern technology has facilitated communication between individuals. The action of communicating with other human beings via a computer is referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC). According to Herring (1996), this phenomenon has extended rapidly in recent years among millions of people that regularly use different forms of computer-mediated formats by gaining access to the global network, the Internet (p.1). CMC has evolved to include not only text-based interactions, but also audiovisual interactions or a combination of both.

Romiszowski and Mason have defined CMC as “the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunications systems that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages” (cited in Jonassen:1996, p. 398). Even though this definition concerns CMC as a process that takes place on the Internet, not all CMC is internet-based. Nguyen (2008) explains that CMC can be perceived as a technological tool that provides a medium for communication between individuals, and it can also be understood as a
communication process where the socio-cultural and historical background of human factors play a very important role.

CMC differentiates from traditional face-to-face (FTF) in form and not function. Nguyen (2008) explains the technological, socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics. Technologically it permits online participants to communicate regardless of time and spatial containments. Socio-culturally it is impersonal because the visual and audio cues that are given during FTF conversations are not possible in CMC conversations; instead the speakers must focus more on the topic discussed. And linguistically, CMC has been said to have its own language (p. 25).

Since the launching of SMS (short message service) in 1995 to modern Web-based CMC systems such as email, IM, Internet relay chat (IRC), among others, a global phenomenon has occurred linguistically. The written language commonly used in synchronous and asynchronous communication systems is characterized by the use of shortening strategies. Crystal (2004) has referred to this as “Netspeak” or “Textspeak”. Moreover, Crystal (2006) explains that CMC is fundamentally different from spoken and written language, but it shares or combines some of their features. CMC conversations can be typed, but it offers real-time communication similar to oral language. Murray (2000) explains that CMC language has a simplified register consisting of abbreviations, typos, and deletion of subject pronouns, determiners and auxiliaries in order to reduce typing time; likewise, Smith (2003) adds the use of symbols and emoticons to express emotion to these features (cited in Nguyen: 2008, p. 26).

Stylistic Norms

Text-based interactions through different means of electronic communication have developed its own style. The stylistic norms of communication held through the various means available to the public today seem to deviate from the traditional and standard forms. Crystal (2005) remarks “The Internet has permitted language to evolve a new medium of communication,
different in fundamental respects from traditional conversation speech and from writing” (p.1). Even though people are writing to each other in order to carry out a conversation, they use text shortcuts (abbreviations or acronyms) to save time, emoticons to represent emotions like in FTF conversations, and they sometimes omit capitalization and punctuation. When text speaking users tend to write as they would speak, they worry less about the written form. In fact, the deviations are such that a study carried out by Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 60% of teenagers do not consider their text-based interactions to be writing (2008, p. 24).

Textspeak has made its way into the culture. Instead of diminishing, it continues to expand and present new and creative ways to facilitate communication tailoring language to meet society’s needs. Bernstein (cited in Wardhaugh, 2000) regards language as something which both influences culture and is influenced by culture, with the second influence stronger than the first (p.328). It is becoming more and more evident that language will suffer dramatic changes because of technology and the new trends among young people. Young people have been labeled as the ones responsible for making changes in written language when text speaking, but they are not the only ones. The influence has spread to older age groups as well. It is inevitable that Textspeak has weaved its way into culture and language.

From online chatting to text messaging, the new generations show a creative and resourceful use of language, characterized by a mixture of pictograms, logograms, abbreviations, symbols and wordplay. In an article published in *Crónicas emigrantes*, a Colombian online newspaper, Sandra Mercedes claims that young people, especially ages 13 to 24, have so much to write in so many social networks and cutting edge cell phones that they are adopting a new writing style for Spanish, maybe out of slackness, or some other unknown reason. Originally it was believed that the language was used in this form because of the limited character space, but recent studies show that this is not the case. Authors have come to agree that the spelling,
capitalization, punctuation, and grammar that characterize text-based interactions are used as a way to speed up the writing process since the availability of commonly used shortenings make the message understandable; but most importantly, the distinctive features are used as extra-linguistic motivation such as playing with language to appear clever and ‘cool’, and for peer affiliation (Crystal, 2008, Jones & Schieffelin, 2009, Bieswanger, n.d).

The results from the survey conducted with EFL teachers and students support these reasons. A majority of the participants in the study said that they use abbreviations, initialisms, emoticons, among other strategies, because they make communication faster, easier, and less boring. Also, they prefer this lingo because it is ‘cool’ and it distinguishes them from other technology users—say their parents. Finegan and Besnier (1989) maintain that “people who speak with one another tend to speak like one another” (p.383), which means that “[t]he more people interact with one another, the more alike their language will become or remain” (p.384). The need for peer affiliation is greater as an adolescent. Becoming linguistically alike not only results from FTF contact, but also through CMC, for much of the interaction today occurs via technology. Evidently, this new linguistic trend could be referred to as a ‘teenage high-tech jargon’; however, texting and chatting have made their way into older age groups. As a token, the teachers in the survey, almost entirely, admitted to using the same Internet language when text speaking. However, it is worth noting that none of them surpass 38 years of age. In the English-speaking world, “[t]exting is so popular that it has given the English language the verb text that was included in the OED [Oxford English Dictionary] in 2004” (Bieswanger, n.d.). These facts say a lot about the influence of this activity in modern society.

Textspeak represents in the opinion of some adults, especially those who defend the purity and chastity of our language, a deterioration of the Standard forms they learned. Lee (2002) has described it as the “continuing assault of technology in formal written English” (cited in Vosloo,
This concern arises because text speaking has found its way into students’ formal writing. In the survey conducted to EFL teachers, 44.4% seem to think that this linguistic trend reflects a decay of the standard language learned in school because it is becoming an unconscious habit among youngsters and thus fail to use the correct linguistic forms in formal contexts. Regarding students, 55.5% seem to agree that the new generations will have more problems with the grammar and all the four skills because they are not practicing what they learned in school.

On the other hand, there are others who think that text speaking is not degrading the standard linguistic forms, 66.6% teachers and 44.4% students claim that there are specific contexts for its use. In the teachers’ opinion, these new linguistic forms enrich the language, and they do not see the connection with formal education. And students commented that these linguistic trends are just variations of the standard; not used in formal situations.

**Implications of new linguistic trends**

As the Internet has made its way into everyday life it has evolved from a medium that processes and displays information to a communication medium. This has been greatly accelerated by the use of different CMC systems because it permits language students to have contact with other speakers anywhere in the world. Just as the use of the Internet has varied through the years, so have the implications for educators in language classrooms. Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) state that:

> Therefore, whereas previously educators considered how to use information technology in order to teach language, it is now essential also to consider how to teach language so that learners can make effective use of information technology. Working toward both these objectives, rather than just the first one, is what distinguishes an electronic literacy approach to network-based language teaching. (p. 172)
The radical impact that CMC has in everyday life implies that language learning and teaching must change the concept of literacy. As electronic technology becomes more advanced and accessible, language teachers and students need to achieve electronic literacy, this means being able to communicate with others during fluid forms of information transfer such as email, IM, chat rooms, SMS, IRC, or discussion lists (listserv, web-based forums, bulletin board systems, electronic mailing lists).

The increasingly digital lives of young people, who Thurlow (2003) has labeled “generation text” and who Butgereit (2009) refers to as the “thumb tribes” (both cited in Vosloo 2009), call for a broader view of literacy and suggest the need to redesign the curricula which could leverage the extensive reading and writing that occurs. In this regards, 66,7% surveyed teachers believe that Textspeak should be taught to language learners because it is part of the everyday language of native speakers. In their opinion, students would be communicatively disabled if they did not catch up with this trend; it is their right to know. Besides, students find it fun, and it is up to the teachers to guide them in the learning of these forms, especially when the opportunity can be taken to teach about the differences between standard forms and slang. The same number of students supports this proposal, and one even commented that slang is not an evil thing; it’s just a ‘cool’ way to express oneself.

Those who oppose to the changes in the curricula argue that this variety is something that students will eventually learn by themselves because it is a cultural trend based on social interaction with native or bilingual speakers. One of the respondents thinks that although it should not be taught, it must not be forbidden either; Textspeak is going to be used whether teachers like it or not. As for the students, 33,3% respondents reject the possibility of being taught this style reasoning that in the professional field people do not use slang. Teachers are
supposed to teach formal language; otherwise, students would not need teachers, they could instead be educated by social networks such as Facebook®.

The concept of audience has been addressed by many authors including Roschke (2008) and Vosloo (2009) and basically implies knowing under what circumstances one style or another is appropriate. Vosloo (2009) says, “When textisms appear in formal assignments, it provides an opportunity to have the conversation with learners about context.” Roschke weighs the importance of audience in written conversation and proclaims that this fact “should make language preservationists breathe a sigh of relief.” An approximate 60% of the surveyed teachers and students reject the idea that Textspeak could represent the beginning of the end of language as we know it. They emphasize the distinct settings for either style, formal and informal.

Nonetheless, an atmosphere of gloom does surround almost half of the respondents, who seem to think that this linguistic trend reflects a decay of the standard language. Whether it is an unconscious or conscious habit among youngsters is still uncertain. Yet, some of the respondents believe that it is a conscious choice made by young people in order to attract attention or to express their freedom or rebelliousness, just like they have done before with other choices. They insist that formal ways are being forgotten and are falling into disuse, especially because it is a trend that starts in elementary school. All in all, the rapid changes in communication technology and their consequential linguistic adaptations require an open mind from educators who should seek for spaces to improve their teaching techniques while continue to focus on the learner.

Conclusion

The statistics obtained from the survey support the idea that Textspeak does not represent a threat to the standard and follow in Crystal’s view (2008) of the positive side of texting. Crystal
believes that the inventiveness and economy of texting are useful tools when learning how to read and write. This effectively applies to language learners who see in Textspeak a fun side to learning. Teachers can take advantage of this trend to accelerate second and foreign language learning. For instance, in phonetics, students can experiment with letter-sound correspondence as in the pairs BC=busy, cu=see you, and letter/number-sound correspondence as in l8er=later and 4ever=forever or 2l84u=too late for you. From a mere linguistic point of view, the playfulness and creativity with which young people communicate add lexical wealth to the language and promote assertive communication through practical techniques. It follows that teachers should procure to be updated with the changes promoted by this technological era instead of being afraid to experiment with the benefits that it could bring.

Based on the growing rate of CMC use and accessibility provided in the past twenty years, it can be foreseen that people will continue communicating through this means, thus making it necessary to develop linguistic skills that correspond to the digital era. Focusing specifically on the writing skill, changes are to be expected in order to practice effective written communication and to learn how to use successful pragmatic strategies in various circumstances of CMC.

**Bibliographical References**


About the authors

Ms. Araya holds a Master’s degree in Translation Spanish-English from Universidad Nacional in Costa Rica. She also completed her B.A. in Literature and Linguistics and the licenciate program in Translation Spanish-English also at Universidad Nacional. She has taught for 15 years and since 1999 she has been working as an English professor at Universidad Nacional, Pérez Zeledón campus. She has done research in translation, literature and English teaching, and in the last two years she has been a member of the jury for the national essay contest sponsored by CIENTEC (Costa Rican Science and Technology Committee).

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Annex 1

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL
RESEARCH: Technology and new language trends: the role of the ESL teacher
RESEARCHERS: M.A. Jacqueline Araya Ríos
M.Sc. Beatriz Gamboa Sánchez

Questionnaire for Teachers

The following questionnaire is part of a study being conducted by two professors of the English Department at Universidad Nacional. It is aimed at gathering data to identify the opinion of EFL professors regarding the use of ‘Textspeak.’ Any information you provide will be used for academic purposes only. Thank you for your cooperation.

Part I: Personal information

1. Gender:     Male ☐  Female ☐     2. Teaching experience: ____ years
3. Degree: ____________________________________________________________

Part II: Questions

1.  Are you familiar with the terms ‘chat slang,’ ‘high-tech lingo,’ ‘sms jargon,’ or ‘Textspeak?’ Provide a brief definition (say what you think the terms refer to).

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2.  When you text or chat, do you use cues other than words, say, for example, pictograms, logograms, abbreviations, symbols and acronyms? If yes, explain why you use them and provide some examples of the cues you use. If not, explain why.

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3. Do you think these new language trends represent a deterioration of the Standard forms taught in formal education? Explain your answer.

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4. Are these new language trends the beginning of the end of language as we know it?

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5. Should ‘Textspeak’ be taught and used in the EFL classroom in informal contexts? Or, on the contrary, do you think teachers should forbid and discourage its use? Explain.

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Annex 2

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL
RESEARCH: Technology and new language trends: the role of the ESL teacher
RESEARCHERS: M.A. Jacqueline Araya Ríos
M.Sc. Beatriz Gamboa Sánchez

Questionnaire for Students

The following questionnaire is part of a study being conducted by two professors of the English Department at Universidad Nacional. It is aimed at gathering data to identify the opinion of EFL students regarding the use of ‘Textspeak.’ Any information you provide will be used for academic purposes only. Thank you for your cooperation.

Part I: Personal information

1. Gender: Male □ Female □ 2. Year of Birth: ____
3. Level: ____________ 4. Years at this university: ____

Part II: Questions

1. When you text or chat, do you use cues other than words, say, for example, pictograms, logograms, abbreviations, symbols and acronyms? If yes, explain why you use them and provide some examples of the cues you use. If not, explain why.

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2. Do you think these new language trends represent a deterioration of the Standard forms taught in formal education? Explain your answer.

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3. Are these new language trends the beginning of the end of language as we know it?

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4. Should ‘Textspeak’ be taught and used in the EFL classroom in informal contexts? Or, on the contrary, do you think teachers should forbid and discourage its use? Explain.

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