

## Are text messages killing grammar and spelling?

### **Introduction**

Today's learners are using English in a wide range of contexts; they are sending text messages to their friends from their cell phones, they are using internet messenger services such as Yahoo messenger for instant online chat, they are sending emails rather than writing letters, they are writing blogs rather than traditional diaries.

In the past, their exposure to spoken English was limited to hearing their highly educated teacher and the especially recorded tapes of dialogues and reading texts from their textbooks. Today, because of new communications technologies, they can watch international news broadcasts such as CNN, watch Hollywood classics on satellite movie channels, listen to the latest pop music on MTV and hear commentaries in English on international sports events on many sports channels.

In the past, through lessons and textbooks, learners were only exposed to a restricted (and rather artificial) form of English which we imagined was spoken in polite, well-educated, middle class and middle-aged English sitting rooms. They heard 'standard English', the English of grammar books, not the English of real life. Today, our learners are exposed to a much wider variety of different Englishes. They read and hear teenage English, sports English, rap English, London English, New York English, New Delhi English. They still read English from *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, but they also read English from the *Daily Mirror*, *Woman's Own*, *Sixteen*, *Newsweek*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Viz*.

### **Just one English?**

Of course, examinations provide a powerful motivation for all English language teaching and learning. Students need to learn the style of English which will be appropriate and acceptable in the examinations they will take. But is the examination the only reason for learning English? We also want our students to learn to communicate in a wide variety of situations and a broad spectrum of people including both native speakers and non-native speakers. We want our students to pass their examinations and pursue their academic careers, but we also want them to be successful in business and to be able to pursue their cultural, sporting and commercial interests through English.

The *Grammar of Spoken and Written English* examined the differences between four different genres of English: Academic English, Journalistic English, Spoken English and the English of Fiction. This important piece of academic research demonstrated clearly, for the first time, the 'rules' of English vary considerably from one genre to another.

Today, we cannot continue to teach our students just one English – the English of examinations.

### **Does 'bad' English damage our learners?**

The first thing we must recognize is the enormous learning benefit students gain from their increased use and exposure to English outside the classroom. When students are exposed to English, their brains are processing the language in order to decode the messages. When they are producing messages in English, their brain are processing language in order to encode messages. Since the communication in chat rooms and through SMS text messages is highly personal, the learners are strongly motivated to use language effectively to communicate their ideas.



But we need to recognise that the conventions of spelling, punctuation and sentence construction used in chat rooms and SMS messages are not the same as the conventions expected in academic essays and language examinations.

Let's look at some of these conventions in greater detail.

CN U C ME SAT? = Can you see me on Saturday?

Firstly we notice the dropping of vowels in order to shorten words. We see the use of single letters to represent words. We can also see the dropping of prepositions and the abbreviation of long words like Saturday.

BRB = Be right back

LOL = Laugh out loud./ Lots of love.

Then we see the use of abbreviations for frequently used phrases.

Does the regular use of these non-standard conventions damage our students' ability to use the standard language conventions expected in examinations?

I think we must recognize that potentially there is a real possibility of damage if we do not accept that this is a valid use of language which is being used for real communication. If students are regularly in the habit of dropping prepositions, omitting punctuation and abbreviating words, they will tend to do this in their school work.

I think that we need to think carefully about our attitude to this non-standard language. If we reject it totally by saying "This is not real English", we will be giving the message that this language is unsuitable for real communication. The experience of our learners demonstrates that this non-standard language can be used for real communication.

The message we must present to students is that this non-standard language is perfectly acceptable for use in text messages and in chat rooms but school work, formal letters, business communication and examinations require conventional language.

## ***What should we do?***

We said above that we should not restrict our students to just one form of English. If we accept that the non-standard language used in text messages and chat rooms (Let's call it 'webspeak') is a widely used form of English, then we can teach students to 'translate' from webspeak into conventional English.

Encourage students to write their text messages and then beside the message to write the translation into conventional English.

Students should already be learning about the linguistic differences between their mother tongue and English. They should be developing greater sensitivity to how different languages work. If we recognise that webspeak is 'just another language' then students can benefit from studying and understanding the conventions of webspeak.

## ***Conclusions***

We should welcome the fact that our students are using so much English outside the classroom. We should not see webspeak as being dangerous or bad. However, we should see webspeak as an opportunity to raise our students' awareness of different linguistic conventions that operate in different situations and contexts. They already learn the differences between formal and informal letters. Learning when and when not to use webspeak is an extension of the same idea.

