

# IM, SMS, CMC, ESL and Other Acronyms That Should be Used Together: Reviewing the feasibility of using Instant Messaging to Teach English

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The commercial advent of the Internet and proliferation of cell phones in the last decade has seen technologies like instant messaging (IM), text messaging (TM ) and short messaging service (SMS) grow in popularity in our society; particularly among adolescents and teens (O'Connor, "Instant Messaging"). While the academic community is largely divided on the effects of using messaging technology in the native English speaker classroom, some English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors are using chat programs to great success in their classrooms. But even with the success of such programs overseas and on college campuses here in the states, America has been slow to pick-up on using Computer Mediated Composition (CMC) methods like chat to develop ESL skills. This is partially because many instructors in native English classrooms already believe texting to be harmful to "Standard English," but mostly it is because the technology needed for these programs to work, namely computers, "are, like other goods and services in [the American] economy, available to those with money, and not available to those without money" (Moran 2006).

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## **DRAWING A DIGITAL LINE IN THE SAND**

Instant Messaging (IM) is a type of synchronized "chat" that allows a computer user to have a real time, typed "conversation" with one or more people ("buddies") using the internet (O'Connor, "Instant Messaging"). IM differs from Short Message Service (SMS) in two ways: (1) the type of technology used to communicate: SMS is a type of "chat" used primarily on cellular phones, while IM is done using a connection to the internet; and (2) in the way the individuals communicate: SMS is transmitted cell-phone to cell-phone, while IM is done in a "chat room" (Baron, "Language" 13-15). Because SMS technically does not qualify as computer mediated communication (CMC) unless it is sent—or received—on a computer, for the purposes of this analysis, I will focus primarily on IM and "texting" on computers. Both IM and SMS use their own vernacular

or slang, which fall into four basic categories: acronyms, abbreviations, phonetic replacements and inanities (Craig, 120).

The acronyms used in IM are composed in the same basic way as they exist anywhere else, using the first letter of every important letter within a phrase. Abbreviations range in style and structure, ranging from vowel-drop shortenings, where ppl = people, to more drastic reductions where “cuz” or “b/c” can both mean “because” (Craig, 120). Phonetic replacements are similar in structure to the rebus, where a letter or numerical digit can replace a phonetic sound within a word. The most common instances would be the substitution of 8 for the sound “ate,” or 4 replaces “fore” (Appendix 7, OED 1681-1682); it then follows that late becomes L8, and before becomes B4. Additionally, a single letter or number can be used to replace an entire word, provided the pronunciation of the letter provides the same effect as saying the original word (U = you, R = are). Finally, there are instances of “inanity,” or nonsensical words or substitutions that seem to have no real basis from the previous three categories. These can be sarcastic uses of typing errors, like “teh” for “the,” or typing a “1” amongst exclamation points as a method of exaggeration (ie: OMG!!!1!!one!), or adding a “z” on the end of an abbreviation for emphasis.

Common IM/SMS acronyms or abbreviations:

@	at
B	be
B4	before
BRB	be right back
C	see
CU	see you
CUL8R	see you later
F2F	face to face
GR8	great
IC	I see
IMHO	in my honest opinion
J/K	just kidding
L8R	later
LOL	laughing out loud
NE1	anyone
NO1	no one
OIC	oh, I see
PLS	please
RU	are you
SPK	speak
TX	thanks
WAN2	want to
WKND	weekend
YR	your
1	one
2	to, too
2DAY	today
2NITE	tonight
3SUM	threesome
4	for

Adapted from “Appendix 7” of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary

English and composition instructors decry these conventions as sloppy at best, and lazy at worst. While they may have no beef in general with their students using text language, they do take exception when their students use it within their schoolwork; “they should know where to draw the line between formal writing and conversational writing” (Lee, “Nu Shortcuts”). And though they may be the most outspoken (and apparently newsworthy group), instructors are not the only ones who harbor “fear for the effects of instant messaging,” as noted figures like the Librarian of Congress weigh in on the issue with equal distain for the phenomena (Craig, 122). But linguistics experts like

David Craig and Naomi Baron point out that one of the “most prominent components of instant messaging,” phonetic replacement, is nothing more than a type of wordplay<sup>1</sup> that has special importance to linguistic development (Craig, 123).

Linguists maintain that “discourse on the Internet... actually has more in common with writing than with speech... complete with its own lexicon, graphology, grammar, and usage conditions” (Baron, “Language” 23). While it may be true that some of the linguistic conventions of IM are finding their way into traditional “off-line writing,” the effect is not as harmful as the English teachers, librarians and politicians would have the public think (24). In fact, when used as a “bridge” to teach American Standard English (ASE), IM can be a valuable tool, allowing students to write their ideas more quickly when brainstorming (Lee, “Nu Shortcuts”) or even glean meaning from the unfamiliar language of Shakespeare (“Teacher”, 2004). Having students translate thought from their native literacy to a target literacy helps them better understand both literacies by negotiating meaning between them (Tudini 142).

The detractors of IM do not understand the concept of *multiple literacies*. In their mind, there is *a limited amount* of literacy available to a student, and *either* IM or academic literacy will win out in a person, but there is no way for both to work cooperatively (125). This assumption is false, as it does not take into account the large set of literacies a person can possess, ranging from formal to informal and mainstream to sub-cultural. The idea of mono-literacy is built upon the belief that there exists a “true and singular, correct English literacy,” which dismisses languages like IM as “trite, damaging, or worse” (128) or “an assault of technology on formal written English” (Lee, “Nu Shortcuts”). Much like stating the language of African-Americans is “nonstandard English” and failing to take into account the huge cultural and historic underpinnings of the language (Hilliard 94), treating IM language as something to “overcome” instead of the “larger arc of language evolution” (Lee, “Nu Shortcuts”) trivializes the student’s language of choice, and alienates them.

## USING THE TOOLS OF THE ENEMY

Human linguistic exchange is shaped not just by modality and technology, but also by linguistic and cultural diversity (Baron, “Language” 7). When choosing how to communicate across some of the 5000 languages that exist in the world, one must choose from four options:

1. **remaining monolingual** (not communicating across the boundaries)
2. **multilingualism** (learning the language of another community)
3. **creating a contact language** (like creole or pidgin)
4. **adoption of a lingua franca** (a common language that may be the native language of one community, and a modified secondary language of the other).

With the passage of the national “No Child Left Behind” act, the trend in schools today is to promote a monolingual learning environment, even for those students who may be learning English as a second language (Hendricks, “No benefit”). This practice has been highly debated, with opponents of “English immersion” pointing out the high success rates of dual-language programs throughout the country and mourning the loss of the student’s mother-tongue. In an interview with the San Antonio Express News, the director of the dual-language program of Hildago, Texas remarked, “the students often lose their Spanish...[dual-language instruction] is the best way to teach them English and preserve their Spanish” (LaCoste-Caputo, “No-excuses”).

Using IM to help students learn English not only promotes multilingualism, it establishes the IM language as a *lingua franca*<sup>2</sup> for students conversing across cultures and languages. ESL students conversing with native speakers find themselves negotiating meaning of various terms as they “chat” with each other.

...language learning goes beyond ‘what’ the individual produces (e.g., input and output) and focuses on ‘how’ the individual interacts with others through a joint activity (e.g. collaborative online exchange). The process of negotiation encompasses their inter-relationship between two parties whose actions are influenced by their intentions, goals and learning conditions. (Lee, “Learners’ Perspective” 84).

Studies have noticed that during their negotiation of language, students use various conventions to ensure mutual comprehension, such as clarification checks, confirmation

checks, requests for help, and self corrections, much as they would do if there were speaking face-to-face (Kern, et. al. 245).

Thus,

...[chatting] provides a bridge to face-to-face interactions...synchronous CMC presented discourse functions 'similar to the types of interactional modifications found in face-to-face conversations that are deemed necessary for second language acquisition (Vincenza 82).

The majority of these negotiations are lexical in nature, rather than syntactic—focusing on the meaning of the language rather than simply the grammar (Kern, et. al 245). Using the chat program gives the language learners opportunities for informal conversational practice and instead of promoting accuracy, promotes fluency (Murray 193). Using the IM language is not a detriment in this instance—it helps the students learn oral skill in a language without physically talking with another person. In fact, by using a language rich in phonetic substitution, the learner acquires an understanding not only of the spoken language, but also of the conventions of the written language.

The advantage of using a chat program instead of simply having face-to-face conversation is the ease which the conversations can be saved and studied. Students, who are still learning how to use the language effectively, can study the chat logs; helping them learn “to analyze difficult grammatical and syntactical features of the target language, develop communication strategies for coping with...synchronous discussion, and reflect on how particular words can trigger cultural misunderstandings” (Kern, et. al. 246). Having the chat logs in front of them allows the students to better self-correct without the possibility of embarrassment of making similar mistakes when conversing with an actual person. The anonymity of the network empowers the student to participate more fully in the conversation, mistakes and all, which may not happen in real life (Fitze 69).

The key these studies and experiments is the interaction of non-native with native language speakers. The negotiation of meaning, and learning to self-correct can only be done when a non-native speaker is attempting to converse with a native speaker in their own language or with another language learner who is more fluent than they. Students who are at a higher level (or are a native speaker) “help those who are less proficient by creating a zone of proximal development<sup>3</sup> (ZPD)...in collaboration with more capable

:)	=	smile
:(	=	frown
;-)	=	wink
:-P	=	tongue out
:-D	=	laughing
:-[	=	embarrassed
:-\	=	undecided
:-O	=	surprised
:-x	=	kiss
8-)	=	cool
:-!	=	foot in mouth
0:-)	=	innocent
:’-(	=	crying
:-X	=	secret

Examples of emoticons

peers” (Vandergriff 111). Through the process of social engagement, learners collaboratively work with each other to achieve a high level of performance (Lee, “Learners’ Perspective” 84). While it is not possible to use a keyboard to take advantage of certain social aspects of face-to-face interaction, such as non-verbal cues (gestures, facial expressions) and vocal intonation (sarcasm) when using traditional CMC (84), IM language allows the use of *emoticons*<sup>4</sup> to show emotion and vocal context. The “smileys” serve as an indicator of mood and context in the same way non-verbal cues like smiling or vocal pitch would in a face-to-face conversation (Lee, “Nu Shortcuts”). Because there is no master lexicon of emoticons, the participants of the conversation may again have to negotiate meaning of the particular set of symbol’s meaning (Baron, “Language” 22). It is possible for the emoticon, :-p, to mean both “silly” or “sarcastic,” much in the same way as the facial expression does. Meaning will have to be interpreted by the reader (21). This is, of course, unimportant to learning the grammatical conventions of a language, but is invaluable when improving the fluency of a language learner.

The role of the instructor in these IM sessions becomes paramount to the success of the sessions. The instructor, in order to facilitate this type of social constructivist<sup>5</sup> learning (Kaufman 304), shifts out of the “omniscient informant” role and focuses on structuring, juxtaposing, interpreting, and reflecting on intercultural experiences (Kern, et. al. 249). Rather than simply supplying a topic for discussion (Lee, “Learners’ Perspective” 87), the instructor acts as a guide to interpreting the linking *structure* (institutional affordances/constraints) and *agency* (language learning and use) in their students interactions (Kern, et. al. 250). When misunderstandings occur, students tend to revert back to a task-based approach to their assignments, which does not facilitate fluency as quickly or as well as a joint-development of a topic (252). An instructor who takes an active role in helping the students understand their conversations can in turn help them avoid these kinds of pitfalls while still promoting language fluency overall. Secondary to this is choosing a program for the students to use. Certain programs can

actually hinder student's communication and learning. Time and institutional constraints can lead to moments of "missed communication" (moments of miscommunication, disengagement, or missed opportunities for intercultural learning) between students of varying language skills and cultures (252). Delayed responses, server outages, and a lack of social consequences for dropping specified topics all hinder both the fluency and cultural development of the students (253).

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## ACROSS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Various studies evaluating the effectiveness of using CMC and IM in ESL classrooms have shown using IM has great promise for second language acquisition. Students who use IM to improve their fluency in English have great praise for their experiences despite the learners' language proficiency, computer skills, and age differences affecting the quality of their online negotiation and motivation toward networked collaborative interaction (NCI) (Lee, "Learner's Perspective" 83). What these studies do not address is the availability of the various programs and hardware necessary to implement these programs.

Two of the studies, use the collaborative learning software Blackboard (Lee, "Learners' Perspective" 85; Fitze, 73), while another related study uses Daedalus, a comparable program (Baron, "Instant Messaging"). This program offers various tools for computer mediated communication, including a chat program. What the authors of the study fail to mention is the hefty \$55,000 price tag for the program, along with the \$5000 per server cost for installation (Rutgers, "Report"). Other studies advocate the use of IM at home using programs that are "free" and online, but do not explain how the students are to have free access to the internet. There is a hole in their vision—for while they advocate the technology they do not explain how the students become computer literate enough to use these programs (Bruce 225).

A more careful examination reveals that in acquiring a second literacy students must have access to technology—be it IM, SMS or CMC—there must be a third literacy: computer literacy.

Computer literacy narrowly defined is essential for competence in the other literacies...this assumption [that learners are computer literate] is flawed...even in nations with high technology uptake, access may be limited for a variety of reasons, such as socioeconomic class or cultural usage patterns. (Murray 190)

The fact is that limited computer literacy skills have a significant impact on student perceptions, perseverance and success with online learning (195), and though CMC provides learners with opportunities to advance fluency, ultimately students must still have access to computers in some form in order for these kinds of programs to be successful. Charles Moran explains that,

...it is widely understood among us that the over-riding factor in determining who gets access and who does not is wealth: the per-capita funding of a given school, college, or university, and the income-level of the student's family/caregivers, determine the likelihood that a given student will have access, at school and/or at home, to emerging technologies (Moran 206).

In order for technology to aid in the instruction of our students, the students must have access to the technology. But the students who are most in need of help, those who could most benefit from this kind of exposure to new ideas and practices, are often the ones who will likely never have access to them. The pedagogical uses of technology need to be addressed in the context of the relationship between socio-economic class and access to technology, which in the case of minorities in America, often go hand-in-hand.

Schools that have large quantities of English Language Learners (ELLs) are more likely to be found in the poorer districts or schools within the district. Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in low-income, non-White, and language minority students in U.S. public schools (Bartolomé 167), and though the nation's school population is made up of about 40% minority children, almost 90% of teachers are White. The majority of these teachers come from white-lower-middle and middle-class homes, where there is abundant access to computers both at school and in the home (168). These instructors, who are largely mono-lingual, are not only ill-prepared to deal with having ELL students

in their classes; they similarly do not understand why these (and other minority students) do not do well on computers.

Some believe that the minorities are responsible for their own disadvantages (169), or simply follow the rhetoric of the studies they have been exposed to. Rather, they have looked at the ways in which poor people use the computers they do have and have decided that they use them poorly (Moran 206). In addition to overcoming their prejudices about language issues—believing erroneously in the purity of American Standard English—instructors must also overcome their unwitting complicity in widening the digital divide<sup>6</sup> between the *haves* and *have nots* (214).

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## CONCLUSION

Technology is not just a bundle of wires and silicon with a program for a brain—it is an expression of ideologies, cultural norms, and the value system of a society (Bruce 225). When a student uses technology to communicate and form language, they are also forming their own cultural ideas and values that go with that language. Whether they are using IM language, Spanish, or African-American English, all these literacies should be viewed as valid by their instructors, or they will alienate their students. What is important when considering literacy in the classroom is not the whether a student’s method of expression is something to be “overcome,” but whether it is appropriate for the discourse at hand. IM language is—largely—inappropriate for academic discourse, but it can serve as a valuable bridge for students who may otherwise feel to self-conscious to express themselves in an ESL environment. Provided the school-district has the money to implement these kinds of programs, IM can be a valuable tool when teaching English to our students.

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## NOTES and DEFINITIONS

- <sup>1</sup> *Wordplay* is a type of “language play” young children use as they develop and learn how words string together to express ideas. These kinds of games develop *metalinguistics awareness*, or the ability to “step back” and use words to analyze how language works (Craig 124). Thus replacing certain phonemes within a word in IM leads to clever phrases like “cul8r” for “see you later,” a construct which allows users to increase their subconscious knowledge of metalinguistics.
- <sup>2</sup> *Lingua Franca* is an auxiliary language, generally of a hybrid and partially developed nature, which is employed over an extensive area by people speaking different and mutually unintelligible tongues in order to communicate with one another. Such a language frequently is used primarily for commercial purposes. (Columbia, “Lingua Franca”)
- <sup>3</sup> *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* is defined as ‘the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vandergriff 111)
- <sup>4</sup> *Emoticons* are small graphical renderings composed of ASCII characters, which substitute for facial expressions and body language. These are seen as most useful and appealing in an online world, where curt or hastily written exchanges can easily offend without proper vocal context. (Hale 69)
- <sup>5</sup> *Social Constructivism* is defined as a theory of learning, whereby children’s thinking and meaning-making is socially constructed and emerges out of their social interactions with their environment. Children’s learning is *facilitated* by parents, peers, teachers, and others around them in the community (Kaufman 304).
- <sup>6</sup> *Digital Divide* is defined as the gap created by technology between the rich and poor. It is believed that technology is helping to widen the distance between those with access to technology and money, and those with none (Warshauer 11).

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