

## **How *YOU* Say and Write it; How *I* Say and Write It Using Technology to Teaching Writing for Global Communication**

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One day I came across the comic strip, For Better or Worse (Johnston 2003) that dealt with a daughter insulting her mother because she was technologically “impaired.” It initiated thoughts of how technological communication, particularly e-mail and text messaging on phones is changing language—changing it for the worse. As I watch the deterioration of language in my classroom, I’m thinking more and more that they are victims of a changing world and many don’t realize it’s even happening. This deterioration is warping communication not only in the classroom, but with some educated colleagues as well; witnessed through an e-mail that began “how r u . . . .”

### **Devolution of Language**

In a fast-paced world, people seem to be looking for a faster way to communicate. Trying to teach formal writing in business letters and memos seems to be getting more difficult. Students who once asked, “Why should I write when I can call?”, are being replaced by students who ask, “Why should I write formally, when I can e-mail?”! This became even clearer when I asked a colleague if I should send a letter or memo to the Director of Human Resources in order to compliment one of the secretaries for doing an outstanding job beyond that of her job description. I wanted a record of the communication in her personnel folder. My colleague responded that I should e-mail the Director since she never reads “hard copy”.

### **Technology’s Effect on Communication**

While we may not think of the telegraph or television as being part of a national communication system, those inventions created change in the way people communicated in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Perhaps the Internet should be hailed as the first instance of a true global communication system which would involve a revamping and/or displacing a national system into an international communication system in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This change in communications over the last three centuries alters physical, symbolic, and media ecologies (Carey 1998).

The fast-paced world also is the shrinking world of global communications. Today’s (and tomorrow’s) technology allows us to do business or chat with colleagues and friends anywhere in the world. The low cost and ease of use of e-mail, cell phones, instant messaging, and the Internet help to promote this type of communication. Today’s salesperson is a far cry from the drummer

who carried his sample case from company to company trying to make a sale. The speed with which information can flow between buyer and seller makes today's accountant stop and ponder the expense of an actual sales call versus an e-sales call.

For example, at this moment many companies are restricting any travel to Hong Kong due to the outbreak of SARS (Bradsher 2003). However, many U.S. companies rely on Hong Kong manufacturers to stay in business. The buying trip that previously involved actually going to Hong Kong and meeting with the manufacturer can now be done using two-way audio/video from the comfort of your home or office—without the possibility of communicable diseases spreading.

Yet, something is lost in the change from in-person to electronic selling. Both parties now have limited time and resources with which to establish their business relationship. Time needed to haggle over pricing or explain unique terms or ideas may not be available. The personal touch of closing the deal with a handshake or bow may be lost. Poor connections or rudimentary equipment may doom the transaction.

The clash of culture and technology is illustrated by the case of an American firm investing in videoconferencing facilities for use in its Thailand subsidiary. Planners thought this would increase productivity by eliminating the need for remote site managers to spend an entire day traveling to attend a meeting in Bangkok. Soon the American director of the Bangkok office found that the managers were staging videoconferences for his benefit and secretly meeting face-to-face afterwards as they still wanted to be able to meet in person to gauge the reaction of others (Gundling 1999).

### **The Personal Touch**

Building trust in relationships can become hindered though electronic communications. Although technology has opened the global market, verbal messages, tone, body language, and gestures is lost. These non-verbal clues are often helpful, since this is as much a part of the language as the written word. In addition, psychological distance is reduced between people who work together. E-mail or text/instant messaging has replaced walking down the hall to speak to someone. Today's workers sit side-by-side in their cubicles yet communicate via e-mail.

A recent editorial by Renee A. James coins the word "typediss" to describe the practice of typing and communicating with someone else simultaneously. It's hearing that tap-tap-tap as you converse on the telephone—the person on the other end is multi-tasking (James 2003).

I'm certainly not negating the benefit of the speed of e-mail and text messaging—we certainly are living in an instant-feedback world—I'm just worried about the sanctity of language. Since every other person one sees is talking on a cell phone or e-mailing a friend, this trend of short-cutting language is seeping into the more normal, refined world of language. Making the switch between the undisciplined habits among youth from the mall to the classroom is only going to become more difficult—if I'm seeing it in class writing, other teachers must be also. Whether it's students writing or speaking, the change has arrived.

In Speech classes, it takes days for me to clarify the difference between informal and formal speech. Students argue and say there's no difference; "Dat's how dey tawk on TV", and "Dat's how me an my friends tawk" pervades our class discussion. Foreign students look blankly at me, when students slaughter their speech with idiomatic, cliché speech. They want to know why they haven't learned this English yet (Cheney 2001). This linguistic decay now invades my writing classes; "This is how my friends write it" is not the discussion.

Let's face it, technological communication is on the rise. According to the Cellular Telecommunications Internet Association, in June 2001, 30 million text messages were sent in the U.S.; by June 2002, that number increased by nearly 1 billion. In Germany, 10 billion text messages are sent each month (Holmes 2003). What will June 2003 bring?

### **A Look at the Technology**

The number one selling speech recognition software, Dragon NaturallySpeaking allows users to select their preferred language or accent for use with the program (Scansoft 2003). IBM's speech recognition software is available for speakers of many languages. The software is able to be used on PCs and MACs as well as notebook/laptop/tablets (IBM ViaVoice 2003).

The installation of speech recognition software is also available for handheld computers (pocket PCs or Ipags). A new development allows the user of IBM ViaVoice, in addition to being able to dictate to the handheld computer, to also use the handheld computer for translation. The user purchases additional modules that perform translation to/from English, Spanish, French, German, and Italian. The translation can be accomplished by speaking to the handheld and viewing the translation on the screen. Or, the user can speak or write to the handheld and have the translated words "spoken" back to aid in pronunciation (IBM Via Voice 2003).

A sampling of the range of languages/accent available with speech recognition and translation software is: Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Français, Deutsch, Italiano, Español, UK English, English, Português, Indian English, Australian English, SE Asian English (IBM ViaVoice 2003, Scansoft 2003, Speaking Solutions, Inc. 2003 ).

A prepackaged feature of Office XP allows users (who have the proper language dictionaries installed) to translate while working in the software. More lengthy or complex translations can be done using the Microsoft web site which is partnered with Browne Global Solutions, a professional translation service (Microsoft 2003). Other such web sites exist for free translation services, such as Babel Fish, or fee-based services (Babel 2003). Microsoft cautions users that important documents, such as legal documents, should be reviewed by a professional translator; the computer software cannot always capture the context of the message for accurate translation (Microsoft 2003).

### **Intercultural Implications**

As this linguistic abyss continues, global communication will also have a breakdown. When American e-mail is read in Japan, and is translated, the Japanese will soon be asking if there is a new language in America, because they will have no idea what we're talking about.

While translation software and professionals will ease global communications, the value of translating in context and of using localization when translating may mean the difference of being understood (Gundling 1999; Flint, Lord van Slyke, Starke-Meyerring, & Thompson 1999).

Grundling posits that the higher level of rapport of communicators the lower the level of context required (Grundling 1999). This restates the high-tech, high-touch movement in business in the 1970s.

Another option is to utilize native and non-native students in the classroom to explore cultural and communication differences (Cheney 2001). Something most people view as straightforward, a business letter, has significant differences amongst different cultures (dos Santos 2002). Exploring the similarities and difference of a culture's communication style can decrease the level of ethnocentricity when communicating.

When combining communication and technology, consider these factors: Availability of technology, user skills, cultural variables, level of rapport, importance of the message, ways to build context, regular patterns, language modification, time differences, and user choices/preferences (Gundling 1999).

While we Americans think that the cell phone has revolutionized our lives, both personal and business, other countries have already taken the technology to the next step. Imagine standing in front of a vending machine in Singapore and dialing your cell phone to make a selection (Beaubrun & Pierre 2001); now imagine the Singapore traveler in the U.S. trying to do the same. Many cultures are adopting the idea that an electronic device should be useful for more than one task, and, subsequently, many people have adapted their way of life to using that electronic technology. Conversely, others (both in the U.S. and abroad) have little access to technology due to economic or geographic concerns and cannot become players in this new e-tools arena (Beaubrun & Pierre 2001).

### **E-lingo**

Remember being a child and writing SWAK on the back on an envelope and thinking no one else would be able to decode your mysterious message. Are we really that old!

Let's take a look at some of the current trends in abbreviations:

AFAIK	As far as I know	LOL	laugh out loud
B/W	Between	SOL	sooner or later/sadly out of luck
B4	Before	TIA	thanks in advance
BBL	Be back later	TMI	too much information
BRB	Be right back	TTFN	Ta-ta for now
BTW	By the way	TTYL	talk to you later
FYI	for your information	TTYL	talk to you later
G2G	got to go	TTYS	talk to you soon
IMHO	In my humble opinion	UR	you are
		WL	Will

If your friend doesn't understand your cryptic message, it's simple; he or she merely says "W" (What?) or "PXT" (please explain that). Many of these phrases are uniquely North American; how will the communication be understood by the receiver in China? Poland? Soon society may have to start thinking of communications technology as one of the new world languages.

The old theory of "if you can't beat them, join them" is displayed in the classrooms of a middle school in New York's Chinatown. Instructor's realized that students were using the tools and e-lingo of instant/text messaging, chat rooms, and e-mail as a means not only to communicate but to also establish cultural identities. Teachers realized they had to work from within the student's frame of reference to connect their school print-based literacy initiatives to their chat room conversations and other electronic communication (Albright & Purohit, 2001).

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Maybe I should just be happy that people are writing and accept the advance of new technology in communication. I'm not a linguistic purist, I just long for the good old days.

After all, as with changes in language and technology in the past:

- ☞ Many kids will tire of it.
- ☞ The trend will pass.
- ☞ Maybe it encourages people to write.
- ☞ It's easier for people to communicate.

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