

Flipping the Switch: Code-Switching from Text Speak to Standard English

Drawing on Wheeler and Swords's work on code-switching, the author suggests methods for making secondary students more aware of their use of texting language in school writing and less formal contexts.

I

am five years older than my brother, and that five years represents an even longer gap in terms of digital divide. When I was entering col-

lege, and the Internet and email were making their way to college campuses, my brother was an impressionable preteen. As a self-proclaimed “digital pioneer,” during his high school years my brother regularly used Instant Messenger (IM) programs and the World Wide Web (WWW), tools that did not enter my daily repertoire until I was well into navigating the professional world. When text messaging became the new form of communication, I

asked him to explain it to me, and I added a text plan to my cell phone to more easily communicate with him and with colleagues and friends from his digital generation. At that time I, an English teacher by trade, felt compelled to eschew the abbreviated language of text speak. I felt that succumbing to the shortened “u” for “you” and writing in fragmented, seemingly unintelli-

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However, I quickly realized that most texters, and especially those who were sitting in my classroom as students, did not view text speak as a demon sent to destroy Standard English. Rather, these students—who are 10, 15, or even 20 years younger than I am—are truly *digital natives* who are

fluent in the language that rules computers, video games, and the Internet (Prensky). They write, and perhaps even think, in this alternate speech.

Is Text Speak a Problem?

Because digital language represents such a large part of the primary discourse of today’s adolescents (Prensky), it is not surprising that the style of electronic communication is “seeping into their schoolwork” (Lewin, par. 1). According to a recent study published by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, in partnership with the College Board’s National Commission on Writing, “the vast majority of teens have eagerly embraced written communication with their peers as they share messages on their social network pages, in emails and instant messages online, and through fast-paced thumb choreography on their cell phones” (Lenhart et al. i). The transfer of the informal, and seemingly abbreviated, style used in these contexts to their schoolwork, however, worries educators and parents alike. The report indicates that “a considerable number of educators and children’s advocates . . . are concerned that the quality of writing by young Americans is being degraded by their electronic communication” (i).

In a recent article that appeared in the *New York Times*, Richard Sterling, former director of the National Writing Project, suggests that “this is not a worrying issue at all” (qtd. in Lewin, par. 3). He asserts that the text speak that is increasingly entering students’ academic writing need not be seen as problematic. This contention has given pause to teachers; in fact, his prediction that “capitalization

will disappear” (Lewin, par. 5) sparked a passionate discussion among teacher consultants affiliated with the National Writing Project site at Rutgers University. From the comment of one teacher who felt “somewhat rattled” to the response from another, who wrote her message with playful use of capital letters (NWP Consultants), it is clear that teachers, and particularly teachers of writing, are reacting to the invasion of e-language into academic work.

Though Sterling’s unconventional remarks certainly prompt debate, perhaps it is best to take his comments in light of a wider issue. What happens when students bring informal language into the classroom? Is text speak truly a problem, or is its occurrence, as Sterling suggests, an opportunity to teach students about the nature of language?

Researchers Rebecca S. Wheeler and Rachael Swords contend that “we make a lot of assumptions about the nature of language. . . . We assume that Standard English is Right with a capital R, and that anything else is improper, bad, incorrect, and fractured” (5). Their book *Code-Switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms* outlines a plan that builds on students’ existing knowledge by contrasting their home language, or the language they use unconsciously, with the Standard English that is appropriate in school. Their argument centers on the idea that a student’s primary discourse might be different from academic language; however, this difference does not make the student’s language deficient. The authors suggest that teaching students to navigate between home and school discourses, a task they call code-switching, privileges both languages.

Authors such as Wheeler and Swords have helped me to think about the nature of language, and each semester students in my English education courses consider, challenge, and debate traditional notions of acceptable language use. Our discussions about primary and secondary discourses often lead us to the somewhat ubiquitous text speak in the lives of adolescents today. Instant messaging programs, cell phone text messaging, and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook provide venues for communication that have become commonplace. As the Pew study documents, students are using these technologies, and they are becoming, or perhaps have already become, fluent in the language associated with them. As digital

natives who have had access to computer technology all of their lives, they often demonstrate in these arenas proficiencies that the adults in their lives lack. Perhaps teachers and parents should not look at this language as deficient; rather, we should embrace students’ existing knowledge, as Wheeler and Swords suggest, and teach them to negotiate the technology-driven discourse within the confines of school language. Using text speak as an example of code-switching may acknowledge the legitimacy of the language while bringing its use to the conscious level, where students can choose to use it or not, depending on the context.

A “Flip the Switch” Classroom Activity

Wheeler and Swords suggest that *contrastive analysis* will “help students uncover the systematic and detailed contrasts between the grammar of their home language and the grammar of the school dialect as a tool for learning [Standard English] more effectively” (27). The first step in this process allows students to distinguish between *informal* and *formal* patterns of language. Wheeler and Swords discuss several activities that might introduce students to the concept of formality and that will eventually lead students to conscious code-switching. Inspired by their work, my graduate students and I have adapted their activities into a Flip the Switch (Wheeler and Swords 58) lesson that serves to introduce the study of language by asking students to consider their language use and to identify the differences between informal and formal

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English. Though Wheeler and Swords focus such lessons on culturally defined instances in which students demonstrate language patterns that confuse or conflate informal and formal English, we have expanded successfully this idea to the social adaptation of language into text speak.

To begin the Flip the Switch lesson, teachers ask students to identify settings in which they communicate (e.g., school, church, playground) or individuals with whom they converse (e.g., parents, friends, teachers). After the class has created a comprehensive list of these settings, the teacher, with

student input, selects four distinct communication situations. The four categories might include classroom with teacher, MySpace with friend, lunchroom with friend, at home with parent.

Beginning with the first category, the class translates a teacher-created sentence into each of the four settings. For example, the teacher might offer the following: “Hello. How is your day?”

Students identify which, if any, of the categories best fits this utterance. In this case, they might list it under “classroom with teacher.” Then the class translates it into the other situations. For instance, the same utterance in the lunchroom might become, “Yo, what’s up?” At home students might say to a parent, “Hi, Mom, how’s your day going?” Inevitably, when students translate the sentence for a digital communication, they will use text speak, such as, “Hey . . . how r u?”

Once the translations have been written for students to see, the teacher can guide a discussion about the similarities and differences among them. Students might note the more formal tone taken in the classroom and the informal tone used among friends. They might argue that they would use the same language with their parents as with their friends, and this debate will open other points of discussion about contextual use of language.

After the whole-class discussion, the teacher divides students into groups of three to four to conduct the activity again. Each group creates one utterance that might be used in

one of the social situations and then translates it to the other three settings. They can share these sentences with the entire class by writing them on the board under the appropriate categories for the rest of the class to see.

A final step to the activity is to have individual students write a sentence in the

appropriate language of one of the categories. As individuals read their sentences aloud, the teacher calls on the rest of the class to “flip the switch” to the other categories. The teacher should increase the pace of calling for students to “flip the switch” as the activity continues, helping them to quickly, yet consciously, code-switch.

Blurring the Lines: Contexts of Language Use

Typically, both in the graduate classes where I conduct the activity as an example and in the adolescent classrooms where my students experiment with the activity, students are engaged and interested in seeing how their language changes from one situation to another. As students reflect in their notebooks on what it means to “flip the switch,” they begin to develop a conscious awareness of the language they use.

This type of activity introduces the idea to students that language varies by context, and it will help them to see that what is appropriate in one setting may not be appropriate in another. In technology-driven classrooms, however, this line can become blurred. In an online discussion forum, high school English teacher Valerie Mattessich wrote the following post:

I am starting reading-response blogs with my students and am torn between allowing them to use text-speak on their blogs, which will maximize authenticity, and requiring proper capitalization and punctuation, which will make me feel better as an English teacher but may ruin the whole point of blogging for them. Thoughts anyone?

The dilemma inherent in her post captures the feelings of many English teachers who understand that the language that students use in digital settings is different from that required in school. The pull between authentic writing and standard conventions is strong, and the conflict may best be explored by engaging the students themselves in a discussion about the nature of their writing.

For example, by setting up an online writing task where students are free to choose the code in which they express their thoughts, teachers can collect valuable data about students’ choices. As a high school teacher, I regularly engaged students in online discussion forums, and one of our first activities post-writing was to examine the language used in the forum. We discussed the online atmosphere as an extension of the classroom, and I pointed to examples of students who chose conventions of text speak and those who chose to write solely in Standard English. We discussed how writing in each form might be perceived by readers and debated the acceptable use of text speak in this context. By in-

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viting students to look critically at their writing, I brought the issues of vernacular and standard correctness to the forefront of their thinking, and in the process, I negotiated the appropriate code for their online work. Often students agreed that this online writing should adhere to standard form because of its connection to school. Interestingly, after making this decision students themselves became the police of their writing. Comments such as “Can we please capitalize I?” or “Clean up your grammar” were not uncommon in the posts of my sophomores. Without my involvement, students navigated the language and negotiated the code.

Though students often determined that Standard English should be the goal in their online discussion, students who regularly write in online spaces for pleasure may make the argument that text speak is equally appropriate in an online setting, regardless of the school-based context. Allowing the class to make the decision that text speak is permissible in online contexts related to class work may be somewhat worrisome for a teacher who developed an understanding of computer technology later in life, one who is what Marc Prensky would call a *digital immigrant*. However, doing so will privilege the students’ language, giving it a space within the school curriculum. In turn, the online writing will be more authentic. Similarly, teachers may allow students to use conventions of text speak in their journals, brainstorming, or handwritten rough drafts. The purpose of these tasks is for students to translate thought into writing. Doing so in the code that comes most naturally to them may aid their thinking and ultimately support their writing. Accepting text speak as viable for these types of assignments provides another context in the classroom for students to engage using their primary discourse.

The Goal: Language Awareness

Issues of correctness cannot be ignored, and students must be expected to polish drafts of their writing using conventions of Standard English. In their discussion of African American Vernacular, Wheeler and Swords present the “Code-Switching Shopping List” that asks students to examine their writing by searching for the top ten “informal English patterns” and to “code-switch to formal En-

glish” (60). Similar to a traditional writing checklist used for purposes of editing, students account for the errors of Standard English and keep records of their work. Adapting this activity for text speak requires that teachers engage their students in discussion of the conventions of digital writing. These conventions may include abbreviations, phonetic spellings, and nonstandard capitalization and punctuation, to name a few. Working together, students and teachers can create a writing checklist that focuses solely on text speak, and students can work individually or in writing groups to edit papers. (See Figure 1 for a sample checklist.) If students have been asked to consider language throughout the year and have practiced translating from text speak to Standard English, they should be able to easily find these “miscues” (Goodman, qtd. in Jacobs 209) that have entered their formal writing.

The goal of these activities is to “develop metacognitive awareness of how [students] switch language and literacy practices according to context” (Jacobs 208). However, authors Teresa M. Redd and Karen Schuster Webb point out that critics of code-switching practices argue that students are asked only to translate from their primary discourse into the discourse of school and not the other way around. In other words, code-switching is typically “one way,” and informal language is still seen as a “deficiency” (86). To truly privilege the language of digital natives, teachers might ask for reverse translation. In other words, students can rewrite plays or other pieces of literature using text speak. The process of translating Shakespeare, for example, into an IM conversation would make students think critically about language, even as it would allow them to access traditionally difficult texts using their primary discourse of text speak. Their writing would aid in comprehension, and their language may highlight the lasting relevance of Shakespeare’s themes.

Parents and teachers may still question the suitability of text speak in academic settings. Many may argue that aside from its use as authentic dialogue and as a type of shorthand note taking, its

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FIGURE 1. Text Speak Chart

Read your draft closely, looking for any convention of text speak. If you find one of our top five, place a check in the box below and translate the text speak into Standard English in your writing. (You should add additional conventions you find to our list.) Your goal by the end of the year is to have a draft that is free of text speak!

TEXT SPEAK CONVENTIONS	ASSIGNMENT 1	ASSIGNMENT 2	ASSIGNMENT 3	ASSIGNMENT 4
1. Using lowercase i				
2. Using phonetic or shortened spellings (e.g., u, cuz, r)				
3. Omission of end punctuation				
4. Omission of capital letters (e.g., Beginning of sentence, Proper Name)				
5. Omission of apostrophes in contractions (e.g., cant, isnt)				
6.				
7.				

Note: This chart is based on the Shopping List activity designed by Wheeler and Swords. The categories above are based on anecdotal evidence from practicing high school and middle school teachers who suggest that students are using these conventions in their formal writing. The categories may change depending on the conventions of text speak used by the majority of the students in the class.

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appropriateness in school is limited. However, as I personally learned when many of my friends and colleagues commented on my refusal to adapt my digital language as I navigated the new (to me) communication tools of texting and IM, Standard English is not always the acceptable language in the digital world. In fact, using “correct” grammar, spelling, and punctuation set me apart from the community in an uncomfortable way. Text speak allows me to enter this venue and to assimilate effectively. If teachers and parents can acknowledge that text speak is indeed appropriate in the digital world that students navigate daily, then perhaps we can see its use in school as a difference, rather than a deficit, and teach students how to code-switch from this language that has become part of their primary discourse into the more formal language of school and the larger society.

As I was composing the final lines of this article, an IM bubble popped up on my computer screen.

poke

said my brother, who lives 3,000 miles away from me. After exchanging sibling pleasantries, I told him,

funny you poked me
i’m working on an article that mentions you

Our conversation continued.

My brother: do i do something cool in said article

like breathe fire or shoot lasers from my eyes?

Me: hmmm . . . might be able to work that in is texting cool?

My brother: cool?

i don’t really consider it cool or uncool

never really thought about it in the cool context


Me: you are the middle generation between digital natives and digital immigrants

i am a digital immigrant

My brother: i'm a digital pioneer

mostly because the internet really kicked off when i first legally became an adult

We continued our chat, determining that while “digital dinosaur” sounded “fun,” both of us had too much digital knowledge to fit that category. We signed off with promises to hitch our wagons and continue in the pioneer generation.

As I looked back at our conversation, captured conveniently on my computer screen, I noted the lack of capitals and end punctuation, and I flipped to this article, realizing that I myself have developed the ability to code-switch effortlessly between the text speak I use online and the Standard English I use in my academic life. Perhaps this digital immigrant can begin to identify with the digital natives who enter her classroom. And perhaps privileging the language that represents their world outside of school will make teachers like me pioneers in the next generation. 

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