ENGLISH IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA

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Abstract*: The fact that we are surrounded by the electronic media has become a vivid reality. Using English in E-mails, SMS and other types of text messages brought a huge chance in the vocabulary of the language mentioned above.*

Reading electronic media is a widespread habit in youths circle from Romania and other countries. These youths tend to create their own vocabulary – a special writing that uses abbreviations and neologisms in order to enable a faster communication.

The high usage of electronic media highlights a new and interesting aspect: the educational potential it could have on the Romanian English learners. This educational potential of electronic media shows us, the teachers, once again, that a language updates itself all the time – now is doing so more quickly than ever.

Key words: *electronic media, educational potential, abbreviations.*

In a literate society as ours, in which writing is the main vehicle of cultural transmission, and where behaviour is regulated through written documents such as laws and scriptures, the written word acquires great prestige. 'A society's language comes to be equated with its written forms, and grammars are based on the analysis of written texts' (SWAN, 2005:40).

We live in a century where the key word is 'information'. Throughout human history the major way in which any language has been used was in conversation, usually between two or more people. In order to receive and send information, people have invented and used different ways – beginning with the ancient methods: sending someone with the message; or as we all read in books or seen in movies – training pigeons to deliver information.

Nowadays, the methods of transmitting information have drastically changed – becoming faster and easier. Even one of the many definitions of language is pretty much related to hi-technology, relating the language itself to a computer. 'A language is like a computer program plus a set of computer files where words and meanings are stored, but the program and the files are located in our brains. Communication with the computer consists of input via the keyboard and output via the screen'. (BLAKE, 2008: 2) In other words, language serves to exchange and accumulate information, having a pervasive function of maintaining both the cohesion and harmony between people.

The hi-tech technology enables us to communicate: to send or receive thoughts, opinions, orders or work correspondence in a matter of seconds. In fact, the very purpose of this technology was to increase the speed by which information travels. When I speak here about hi-tech technology I refer to everything that is comprised in this domain, from: the cell-phone, talk-back radio, video-conferencing, the fax the computer.

Each of these items has special programs that help us in having 'a virtual talk' with each other. As Marshall McLuhan pointed out in 1962 –'the medium is the message. The methods by which we communicate not only affect the way we speak and write, but may also influence the way we think and act' (RUSSELL, 2002: 192)'.

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In 1992, some of the best known telephone engineers of the EU set up a form of radio communication which is called Global System for Mobile Communication – the abbreviation for this is GSM. In order to enable users to communicate with the Internet via their phones, or to communicate between each other via cell-phones, they created a facility to send bits of text. In this way, the Short Message Service – SMS was born, opening a new era in communication and in language usage.

Some of the leaders of International Cell- phones companies believe that text – messaging is part of an epoch-making shift in the way we communicate with one another. We are practically moving from a verbal to a visual culture. Today, one can text from a mobile phone using a special texting register full of abbreviations. We can also have conversations by on-line e-mail or via chat rooms, where an oral style is committed to writing.

At that time, even the inventors of this system could not predict the impact of this method on the world's population. Like the e-mail, text messaging has a strong influence on how we communicate, presenting many advantages like: it's cheap, it's simple, it's convenient, it's discreet and the most important advantage – it's very fast.

As English is considered a widespread language, becoming in the last decades a common code of communication between people who come from different cultures, it is obvious that this language is used in all these methods that hi-technology comprises. We often see, in text messages which are written in English, notorious cases of 'misspellings, misplaced words and missing punctuation' (RUSSELL, 2002: 192).

These mistakes occur mainly because the writer wants to send his message as soon as possible, he wants to type as few words possible, creating in this way a coded English language.

This coded language became very popular among teenagers who sometimes have the tendency to use those mistakes even in their literary or official papers. In the article 'Is E-mail Killing Literacy?' by Monica Porter; article which appeared in The Daily Mail – dated 26.10.1999, the author worries about the effects of this new medium.

Monica Porter states 'Aficionados of all things high tech and computerized claim that e-mailing should be regarded as more akin to talking, rather that writing, just as we converse with each other in bursts of informal, unedited speech, they insist, the e-mail should be free and easy, unfettered by grammatical rules' (*The Daily Mail,* 1999:2).

This proposal can seem dangerous especially for us teachers of English who have to teach students the correct grammatical rules. For a teenager is sometimes difficult to cross a line between the English used in school and the one that they use in text messages or any other type of communication.

The new coded English language is of interest for the students, because the abbreviations that it uses are easier memorized. For example, many students have the tendency to write '2u' rather than the correct form' to you' or '4u' than 'for you'. This method is called shortening or abbreviations which represent a way of making new words; for example only older English speakers know that pub is an abbreviation of public house, or that sport comes from disport, fence from defence etc.

Using numbers instead of prepositions became a common method, teenagers considering it 'cool and fun'.

Here are some other examples of abbreviated words used in text messaging:

NO1 – No one
Pls – Please
BCNU – Be seeing you
Fwd - Forward

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RUOK – Are you ok?
Thx – Thanks
2day – Today
2nite – Tonight
L8r – Later
CU – See you
B4 – Before
Gr8 – Great
Msg – Message
F2T – Free to Talk
Wknd - Weekend

As we can notice, these modifications of words and sentences are made on the basis of pronunciation. The fact that students got used to use such short cuts when sending a message, it makes it harder for them to properly write a research paper, a job application or an essay. Not taking into consideration and explaining to our students that this is a wrong alternative of written English can be an error for us the teachers. Students must learn to separate such abbreviations from the correct form of the words or sentences.

Despite those abbreviations mentioned before, teenagers also employ certain signs that describe a feeling: smile, sadness, surprise, wink, anger, etc. Here are some examples:

:-) – smiley face
;-) – winking face
:-0 – surprised face
: -(- sad face
: -? – thinking
X(- angry
: -c – call me.

These signs are mainly used in conversations through yahoo messenger, it is easier to access and send a face that expresses your feelings rather than describe in words exactly what your mood is.

Therefore, we can agree that' language can also be communicated via signs. In modern society we think of sign language as the primary means of communication used by the deaf, but quite a lot of cultures use signs as well as spoken language' (BLAKE, 2008:106).This simple and childish coded language can affect student's vocabulary and also the way he develops his writing skills.

The fact that e-mailing is becoming more and more commonplace, can lead, within a generation, people will no longer be able to write in any other way, bringing also a deterioration of literary skills. This means that some of our students who study English can memorize certain words or phrases from their daily vocabulary even if these prove to be wrong.

In the article 'Joys of Text' taken from the Guardian Weekend, the author emphasizes on the dangers that text messages can have on the literary language.

After I read his article, I understood that the author's main concern was the answer to a relatively intriguing question: Will text messages have any lasting effect on the language?

To support this question, he puts in his article a few examples of the 'new English language': ' Cd vwls dspr frm th lng'ge altgthr? Or could we end up with a two-tier language system, in which everday English wd b abbreviated,+cd includes

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numbers+18rs 2gthr?...It's impossible to know what effect emails and text messages will have on us, but it is clear that they have instigated the biggest boom in'letter' writing for 200 years ; and while we don't yet, have a text-message novel, the tight, subjectless sentences and the reproduced emails in Bridget Jones' [sic] Diary have at least a touch of the digital missives.' (*The Guardian Weekend,* 2000: 1). Therefore, the use of an abbreviated language, a shorter version of the normal and correct one can represent the future of spoken and written English language.

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