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## Linguistic Netiquette as Viewed from the EFL Classroom

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*Computer-mediated communication (CMC) via the Internet is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool of teaching English as a second or foreign language. A relaxed, informal, uninhibited environment of virtual interaction in CMC has made it particularly attractive for communicants with limited social skills and language proficiency. While the benefits of CMC for learning English have been widely reported, exposure of many linguistically “immature” CMC users to non-standard peculiarities of the new, electronic discourse perpetuated in CMC has not yet attracted the deserved attention of the TEFL community. This paper analyzes the linguistic conventions of electronic discourse and the way they are regulated by the rules of appropriate communicative behavior on the Net, or netiquette. It seeks to provide the rationale for the need to include electronic discourse related netiquette into EFL teaching conducted by means of CMC.*

### Introduction

The dramatic development of computer technologies in the second half of the twentieth century has radically changed the nature of modern communication. The Internet is probably the most revolutionary among numerous innovations the domain of communication has seen lately. Since the 1990s, the Internet has become the dominant medium of various forms of mass communication, increasingly prevailing over the telephone exchange and practically obliterating traditional letter writing. Currently, the number of Internet users is estimated to be 1.1 billion worldwide, so, according to one study from the first quarter of 2006, every sixth person on the earth uses the Net (*About Computing and Technology*, 2006).

Today, the Internet has become the major means of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is conducted in different formats, such as electronic mail (e-mail), newsgroups, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Multiple Users Domains (MUDs), the World Wide Web, and other CMC devices. With the new dimensions of information exchange and communication that the Internet provides, it is only natural that education, and language teaching in particular, has immediately endorsed it. The secure, uninhibited, interactive learning environment of CMC has made it a powerful tool for cross-cultural communication and learning foreign languages. Netiquette, or Network Etiquette, which stipulates rules for communication via the Internet, is more and more recognized by educators as an indispensable component of students' initiation into effective use of CMC. However, with the corpus of Netiquette rules still being quite controversial and the role of the teacher as its guardian still not clearly defined, it is not surprising that non-native speakers often succumb to the seeming freedom and anarchy of electronic medium. The purpose of this article is to explore the role of netiquette in regulating the linguistic peculiarities of electronic discourse and the extent to which these issues should be addressed in the EFL classroom.

### Electronic Discourse and Its Linguistic Peculiarities

The novel phenomenon of electronic discourse is currently an object of vigorous research and heated discussion in various areas of scientific inquiry. Though generally recognized as the language employed in interactive electronic communication, electronic discourse still lacks the clear definition of its linguistic status. Besides a more accepted notion of a “discourse,” it is also termed as a “hybrid,” “a new computer style,” a “genre,” a “form of interactive electronic communication” and the like. The obvious reason for this disparity lies in the dual nature of CMC, which effectively employs and merges the properties of oral and written communication. With messages written and read on the computer screen, electronic communication is basically asynchronous in nature, which “promotes reflection and deliberation” characteristic of the written speech (Austin, 1997:160). However, the spontaneity, frequency of message exchange and overall verbal behavior of the participants fit into the characteristics of oral communication. This duality of nature of electronic discourse is vividly reflected in such its aliases as “conversational writing,” “writing that reads like conversation” (Davis & Brewer, 1997), “pseudo-oral communication” (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996), “written speech or spoken writing” (Jonsson, 1998), and the like. While both oral and written modes of speech possess their distinct traits, naturally occurring texts, in fact, indicate that “features in both written and spoken discourse do overlap and do not fall into neat categories. The standard view is that there are no absolute differences between spoken and written texts; they form a continuum and not the opposites of a rigid dichotomy” (Muniandy, 2003). Analysis of contextual and linguistic characteristics of electronic discourse leads most of the researchers to envisioning the position of the new medium right in the middle of this continuum. Indeed, synchronous and spontaneous exchange of messages, as in IRC and MUDs, converts electronic communication into a dialogue performed, however, in a written mode. The absence of the direct auditory interaction between the participants of communication which distinguishes this dialogue from a “normal” oral interchange is substituted in electronic discourse with ingenious refurbishing of the whole arsenal of linguistic devices of the written mode and effective utilization of the technological potential of the new electronic medium of communication.

While the detailed analysis of electronic discourse is beyond the objectives of this article, some of its discursive characteristics and the distinctive linguistic behavior they generate directly relate to the foreign language teaching and therefore need to be addressed in this paper. It should be noted, first of all, that the conversational nature of CMC is manifested foremost in its immediacy and spontaneity, typical of oral interaction. Whether synchronously or asynchronously, the communicants take turns in writing and aim at quick exchange of usually short and informal messages. “Economy of writing” (Goodman & Graddol, 1996:120), whether driven by financial considerations of being online or the need to have a turn in the quickly progressing discussion, is one of the most prominent characteristics of electronic discourse. Combined with certain “linguistic relaxation,” or casual language usage, more appropriate for oral than written speech, economy of writing leads to the extremely active and diverse abbreviation, curtailed syntax, non-normative use of upper and lower case letters and overall tolerance towards grammatical and spelling mistakes. Another prominent discursive feature of electronic communication is the need to render semiotically intonation, emphasis, mood and other prosodic attributes of the utterance, as well as certain nonverbal behavior of the sender. This is achieved by non-standard upper- and lower-case writing and the use of emoticons, or various combinations of keyboard signs: e.g., :- ) stands for “smile,” :-O for “surprise, shock,” :-\* for “kiss” etc.

These unique linguistic traits of electronic discourse manifest its spoken, oral nature and form its distinct verbal culture. The innovative speech presents considerable deviation from (if not overt violation of) normative language usage and can cause certain communication problems, such as lack of comprehensibility, exclusion, flaming, etc. In order to ensure meaningful interaction and to keep

interlocutors within the reasonable boundaries of polite and mutually respectful communication certain rules and conventions have evolved over the time. These regulations comprise netiquette (and its IRC-related variant, called chatiquette), which, as the author of this article contends, should be addressed in EFL curriculum.

### Netiquette

The concept of netiquette is quite new and has developed over the last decade with realization of the various consequences of the unlimited, uncontrolled freedom of expression CMC allows. Currently, netiquette comprises an immense set of different recommendations, from ideological and social norms of a “politically correct” message to linguistic rules, regulating electronic discourse. Since English is the dominant language of Internet communication (Goodman & Graddol, 1996), it is understandable that a more or less elaborate form of netiquette has been developed so far only for e-mail English.

The sites dedicated to netiquette are numerous and range from comprehensive compilations, such as the American Psychological Association’s and the Oxford University Computing Services’ netiquettes, to different sets of rules made up by different organizations and individuals. More thorough netiquettes advocate principles of cultural relativity (awareness of ethnic, gender, racial, religious and other socio-cultural implications of correspondence), mutual courtesy, consistency in the sender’s and recipient’s identification (personal and company’s names), appropriateness of greeting and closure of the message, etc. Professional compilations attempt at regulating formal, business e-mail correspondence to ensure its efficiency, political correctness and professionalism. There are some periodical electronic bulletins, which inform subscribers of new developments in professional CMC and ways of troubleshooting certain problems of e-mail. They also suggest some common rules of electronic discourse, which in business correspondence require standard, normative use of capital and lower case letters and mandatory spell-check and prohibit the use of emoticons: “Don’t use “smileys.” ...The meaning of your words should be contained within the words themselves, and not need additional explanation with funny faces” (*Business Netiquette International*, 2002). Together with some organizations’ requirements to use letterheads and formal language for email correspondence, as in traditional mail, these rules, however reasonable they may seem, definitely disregard the dynamics of the medium (Jonsson, 1998).

Other, less demanding sets of netiquette rules do take the conventions of the new discourse into account and teach them to their targeted audiences (either general users or specific groups, such as children, students, teachers, etc.) in order to maintain socially acceptable communicative behavior. Some of netiquettes advocate the use of semiotic signs for rendering emphasis, emotions, and tone of the message to avoid rude behavior and misinterpretation of messages. A few others, on the contrary, advise against emoticons, as some writers may use them to ameliorate otherwise rude and inappropriate messages. Most of the less formal netiquettes suggest mixed letter case usage as writing in upper case “sounds” like shouting and in lower case only seems too informal. A few recommend using the spell-check, as “spelling mistakes tend to be rude rather than an exception” and present a sender as an “immature beginner” (*RFC:1855*, 1995). Still fewer address the problem of excessive use of abbreviations; others, on the contrary, provide their own recommended lists of “accepted” abbreviations though the criteria of some selections seem quite arbitrary. For instance, the netiquette for librarians considers as “accepted” such abbreviations, as *TANSTAAFL* “There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch,” *GOK* “God only knows,” *RTM* “Read the manual” and its variant “with added emphasis” *RTFM* (*BCK2Skol*, 1999). It is not difficult to guess how emphasis is expressed in the last coinage, rather it is problematic to accept that such abbreviations comprise the “Net-Lingo” (ibid.) of the librarians.

Thus, at present the corpus of netiquette rules is obviously quite nebulous and controversial. As it is stated in the netiquette compiled by RUN (Responsible Use of Network) Workgroup, it “does not specify an Internet standard of any kind” (*RFC:1855*, 1995), and that is because there is no such standard. As the Internet is not managed by any single authority, contends E. Jonsson, “there is no single authority that watches over Internet conduct” (1998). For this reason, it is a naturally evolving phenomenon, where some contributors of the process advocate the discursive behavior that others prohibit. “Academic research has not caught up with its task of adequately defining the norms which govern the use of this new medium, and it has so far provided no clear answer to the question of whether a stylistic protocol exists for the writing of email messages” (Gains, 1999:82). So is it possible and necessary to teach EFL students something that is still in the making? Our answer to this question is “yes,” and there are certain reasons for this opinion.

### **Rationale For Teaching Netiquette In EFL Classroom**

Over the past ten years, computer mediated communication has become a global phenomenon, spanning over countries’ borders and ethnic, cultural, and language barriers. With more than twenty percent of the world population involved in CMC (*About Computing and Technology*, 2006), the most common language of which is English, it is safe to estimate that a considerable number of communicants are non-native speakers of English. The scholars reasonably predict that with computer literacy quickly spreading over in the countries of the Third World, non-native users of English, involved in various forms of CMC, “will soon outnumber native users” (Li Lan: 2000).

The enormous potential of the Internet for language teaching and learning is now widely recognized, with many teachers of EFL endorsing the comprehensive exposure of their students to unlimited resources which the new computer technologies and the Internet provide for research, learning and communication. The latter is particularly welcome in the area of teaching English as a second or foreign language where CMC is viewed as the only opportunity for many learners to have an authentic language practice (Chun, 1994).

The benefits of CMC for learners of English are presented in numerous publications. Educators (Warschauer, 1995; Mynard, 2006; Belisle, 1996, and others) contend that communication by means of computer provides uninhibited, comfortable environment where lack of face-to-face contact allows the communicants not to display their real identity and interact as equals irrespective of age, nationality, gender or social status. The students are more motivated to maintain e-mail correspondence rather than traditional pen-pal exchange because it is quicker, cheaper and more interactive. According to Warschauer (1995), e-mail provides students with an excellent opportunity for real communication, makes it possible to learn independently, at their own pace and to communicate their individual ideas, emotions and opinions, which builds in many ways into enhancing learner autonomy, essential for the successful lifelong learning of an individual (Mynard, 2006). Another factor that fuels students’ motivation is the novelty of experience (Warschauer, 1995; Skinner & Austin, 1999). Also, Belisle regards students’ use of e-mail as mastering of the new medium of electronic communication, which is going to be essential for everyone in the near future (1996).

There is one more feature of CMC, which bears particular attraction for non-native speakers of English, but which the advocates of CMC in language teaching do not emphasize. It is its tolerance towards spelling and grammar mistakes and freedom of expression and experimenting with the language. Non-native speakers, similar to all new users of the Internet, or “newbies,” as they are called, are particularly susceptible to the lures of linguistic relaxation and economy of writing and tend to overuse the linguistic means of these discursive drives of the electronic communication. Jonsson (1998) remarks, that new users

of the Internet make the most mistakes in their CMC writing, such as overuse of abbreviations, which she attributes to the initial enthusiasm of neophytes, a sentiment definitely shared by non-native speakers as well. All novices, irrespective of the level of their language competence, tune well into appreciation of linguistic discursive innovations, which help them, like it is common for experienced communicators as well, overcome the inability to convey social, emotional and linguistic cues in an apparently oral situation (Jonsson, 1998). But in case of the non-native speakers, this appreciation is most likely enhanced by the limited typing skills and lower level of overall language aptitude, for which economy of writing and communicative relaxation are definitely the discursive “blessings.”

There is one more peculiarity of verbal behavior in CMC, which can account for the excessive adherence of non-native speakers to the divergent linguistic usages developed in electronic discourse. In their study of students’ writing behavior in an asynchronous mainframe conference, Davis and Brewer (1997) have noticed a powerful presence of “emulation,” the term they use for repetition and imitation of discourse patternings (p. 154). Emulation, in their perspective, is more complex than repetition, as it is above the lexical level and involves “the selection and appropriation of larger patterns” (p. 26). In Davis and Brewer’s study, students repeated key words, phrases, grammatical structures, and discourse strategies from their reading and each other’s writing. Researchers believe that subjects’ efforts to emulate each other’s rhetorical and discursive strategies were an adjustment to the new medium (p. 31). Fine-tuning to the conventions of the new discourse, which has been found typical for the native speakers, is equally relevant for non-native users, for whom the imitation routines are even more important, as the latter are explicit and provide “a high degree of scaffolding for the novice” (Ochs, 1992, quoted by Davis & Brewer, 1997:155).

In view of the above-mentioned characteristics of the EFL learners as participants of CMC, we contend that as long as CMC is used in teaching English as a foreign language, these issues should be addressed in the EFL classroom. Besides the general guidelines of the appropriate use of the medium and introduction to the ethical norms of electronic communication, which are included in the most of netiquette compilations, teachers of EFL need to explain to their students the linguistic conventions of electronic discourse and the communicative effects of their correct or inappropriate usage.

Our survey of numerous publications on the use of CMC in teaching foreign languages indicates that instruction about the ethics of electronic communication is normally given in the classroom. But apart from a more heightened emphasis on cultural awareness, the netiquette presented in the EFL context is basically the same as can be found in innumerable compilations on the Net: attention is paid to technicalities of writing in different formats of CMC and to basic ethical considerations of socially accepted behavior. Language peculiarities of electronic discourse, however, and the relevant netiquette regulations are generally either not acknowledged or intentionally neglected. Moreover, in her extensive review of different inter-cultural CMC projects used in teaching foreign languages, her own study included, R. Al-Jarf (2006) states that increase in language usage and enhanced language skills reported by most of the projects have been achieved to a certain degree due to “a warm and secure learning environment” where instructors encouraged students “to communicate and interact and not to worry about spelling, grammatical, punctuation and capitalization mistakes. They did not correct anything that the students posted” (Al-Jarf, 2006).

There is, however, a different stance with regards to linguistic peculiarities of electronic discourse and aspects of netiquette that should be taught at school. Even though the CMC is perceived as an independent and uninhibited activity in which learners are involved as individuals, the role of the teacher still stays in the scenario. As a facilitator and monitor of the process, at least at its initial stage, the teacher, first of all, is to ensure the understanding between the writer and the receiver (Belisle, 1996). This understanding can be hampered if inappropriate language usage distorts either the content or the affective connotation of the

message. Before the initiation of CMC as a classroom or extracurricular activity the students should not be only taught the basic technical and communicational rules, that govern the medium, but also made aware of that side of netiquette which assures “the appropriate way of writing” (Krajka, 2001).

Analyzing the benefits of “key-pal exchange vs. pen-pal exchange” in EFL teaching, J. Krajka concedes that traditional letter writing did have some advantages since students learned how to write letters in the appropriate manner, with the proper layout and style, and paid ample attention to capitalization and spelling. But then he admits that “nowadays, in the era of e-mail writing, these matters are no longer that important, capitalization is no longer essential, spelling is checked by the programme, and the letter does not look like a traditional letter, so less attention (if any) needs to be paid to its layout” (ibid). A careful consideration, however, of the discursive qualities of CMC language and their relevance to the foreign language acquisition proves that these matters are still important. Capitalization tells a lot about the intonation and tone of the message, while wrong spelling and grammar are perceived as rude behavior. The norms of netiquette are definitely relative in nature, and what is prescribed for formal communication will be completely inappropriate in informal Internet chat. Messages that to middle-aged teachers seem to be ciphered in enigmatic acronymic coinages make perfectly clear sense to their teenaged pupils. Still, it is quite disappointing to feel partially excluded from meaningful communication upon the receipt of such messages as the one the author has got from her student, an enthusiastic researcher of e-mail abbreviations: “... *I really consider the Japanese 2B very different from us but hope U tell me more about it 18R. I/m looking forward to ur reply !! TCOY!!!:-) KIT!!!:-)*”

Another issue that should be considered in teaching the linguistic side of netiquette is the extent of teacher’s interference with individual’s way of conducting his or her correspondence, freedom of expression and authenticity of electronic interaction. Stating the necessity to provide feedback and eliminate mistakes in e-mail exchange, J. Krajka is concerned that the teacher’s acting as a “middleman” would interfere with students’ freedom of expression and might have a deteriorating effect on students’ motivation to write (2001). While this may be true, the consideration that, however, dominates in this dilemma is that CMC is still a learning/teaching experience and as the teacher gradually passes more independence and responsibility in the hands of students, he still should make sure that CMC conducted by students is in line with his teaching goals, with the content of the course, and that it does not evolve the way students want (Nagel, 1999). To avoid “looking over the shoulder” of a student when she is writing two ways of netiquette “troubleshooting” can be suggested - reactive and proactive. Reactive approach is used when students submit the copies of their e-mail production or discussion entries to the teacher, so that the text is “actually the student’s work, but the teacher has also the opportunity to highlight mistakes and provide feedback on the quality of writing” (Krajka, 2001). Another feedback activities may include peer correction or group review projects. But all of these reactive strategies should better be combined with proactive troubleshooting, when students are carefully taught “driving” before being released to the digital highway. As one project on teaching netiquette suggests, coverage of the rules should be followed by students’ evaluation of different scenarios of proper or inadequate behavior in CMC. “Netiquette instruction should begin with education,” this project states, and “we need to model proper netiquette also” (Netiquette, 1997). As a matter of fact, the authors of publication do not practice what they preach, as there are some spelling mistakes in the text, which negatively affect the appreciation of this otherwise thoughtful work.

### Conclusion

Electronic discourse used in different types and formats of computer-mediated communication

conducted in English has distinct linguistic features developed out of the necessity to adjust the means of written medium to the needs of spoken one. The discursive drives of the new language, such as economy of writing, communicative and linguistic relaxation, verbalization of nonverbal behavior, and overall simulation of orality account for such linguistic phenomena perpetuated in CMC as extensive abbreviation, truncated syntax, use of emoticons and keyboard signs, new rules of capitalization and punctuation, etc. To a certain extent, these innovations and their communicative functions are reflected in some of netiquette compilations available in print and on the Net.

This part of netiquette is not, however, addressed properly in EFL teaching, as there is no consensus yet whether CMC conducted in the classroom should be regulated and controlled by the teacher. Still, it must be emphasized that if the comprehensive language competence is the objective of the EFL teaching, than electronic discourse, as an aspect of this competence, should be the subject matter of English language instruction. While there is no comparative study yet on the relationship of linguistic netiquette awareness and foreign language acquisition, one can hardly argue that computer-mediated communication generates new kinds of texts, and it rests with the EFL instructors to teach students to create and evaluate these texts effectively.

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