

# Teaching Social Media Language

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## Abstract

Young people spend a significant proportion of their time communicating online, yet the stylized language used on social media is rarely studied in the EFL classroom. This paper outlines a method to address the issue by teaching students to understand the abbreviations and netspeak used online. The process gives learners a toolkit to assimilate novel internet lexis on an enduring basis. The students gain practice decoding, creating, and using netspeak, with a range of activities that consider the appropriate tone for each context. The method gradually builds students' confidence and competence. Thus, learners can become more comfortable using social media platforms as an integral part of their language learning.

**Keywords:** abbreviations, netspeak, register, social media

Social media has become an indispensable tool for many people. This phenomenon is especially true for teenagers and young people; a survey published on *Statistica* (2020) found that 46 percent of people in Japan aged between 17 to 19 years old spent between one to three hours per day on social media. The finding illustrates that the internet is a space where a substantial volume of young people's communications occurs. Therefore, young people need to understand how the English language is used online to communicate effectively with peers in English.

The internet has its own language, in part driven by the applications' affordances - their possibilities or limitations. For instance, *Twitter* has a 280-character limit, and thus long-form content is not possible on the platform. This design feature has the effect of prioritizing short, snappy messages that circumvent the character limit with abbreviations and referential forms of communication like hashtags, images, and video clips. *Twitter* is just one example of the many ways online communications are shaped by the underlying architecture and design of the platforms. The issue is compounded further by the very nature of mediated communication on smartphones, tablets, and computers, which adds another layer of protocols to the picture. The ability to understand and employ these affordances successfully is defined as *digital literacy*. Jones and Hafner (2012) describe these digital literacies in detail, citing skills such as the ability to navigate (online worlds/linked text), evaluate mass information, and create multi-modal documents of words, graphics, audio and video. The most relevant of these aptitudes for language learning is the multi-modal documents such as *YouTube*, *Twitter* and *TikTok* posts that often use highly abbreviated and stylized forms of language. Therefore, students must become competent in this style of English to communicate effectively online. Moreover, given that the evidence suggests young people spend so much time on the internet, these skills are especially pertinent for the younger generation.

The abbreviated and non-standard forms of English used online could be seen as inappropriate for the classroom, as they degenerate the language and diminish students'

ability to speak and write correctly. However, there is another view, based on the sociocultural model of orthography as described by Sebba (2007), who argues that spellings are not stable or neutral instruments but that they have always shown some degree of variation, flexibility, and development. Consider the difference between British and American spellings or archaic versions of words such as *old*, previously spelt as *olde* or *auld*, to give a few prominent examples of these processes. Furthermore, according to this outlook, abbreviations and respellings are principled and meaningful. Consequently, they convey additional or alternative meanings that could not be transmitted through the conventional spellings; for example, according to *Urban Dictionary* (n.d.), an online listing of slang definitions posted by users, *phat* is defined as, 1. Cool, 2. Pretty Hot And Tempting, whereas the more conventional spelling refers to oil or body fat (Marriam Webster, n.d.). In addition to semantic meaning, particular words and phrases create associative meanings around tone, relevance and even the character of those using the terms. For example, take acronyms such as OMG, LOL, YOLO or FOMO. These abbreviations can often be used in spoken interactions, where the benefit of abbreviating is questionable, and deployment is more of a stylistic choice. Furthermore, the use or misuse of one of these terms can communicate social prestige or conversely ineptitude. This observation is demonstrated in the *Urban Dictionary* (n.d) entries for *YOLO*, variously described in the following ways: "The dumbass's excuse for something stupid that they did...An overused acronym for 'You only live once '...A term people should have stopped using last year." Therefore, it is essential that young learners understand the necessity of netspeak but also the risks of incorrect usage.

### **Purpose**

This paper describes a method for increasing students' understanding of the alternative meanings in the respellings and netspeak found on the internet. Therefore, assisting learners in using terms suitably and thus transitioning more smoothly from the classroom to authentic social media communications. Moreover, students gain practice varying their communication style for the context of each activity. Thus, gaining a greater understanding of the levels of formality in English and the appropriateness of different styles for varying situations. In sum, the specific goal of the method is to give students an understanding of netspeak/abbreviations in (online) English to create a toolkit to decode and deploy terms in the appropriate tone for the situation.

### **Procedure**

The method listed below could be suitable for both secondary and tertiary level students, with due consideration for their ability with appropriate amendments where applicable. The activities described have been employed with numerous classes of first-year English majors containing 15 – 25 members. All the students in the classes use iPads and have access to Wi-Fi. The technology is expedient, as many activities use shared *Google* documents formatted to resemble *Twitter*. However, these documents could be recreated as paper worksheets without losing the central point of the tasks. At the same time, valuable online resources such as *Urban Dictionary* (n.d.) could be accessed via students' smartphones. These netspeak/abbreviation lessons take around four or five 90-minute classes to teach and have previously formed a section within a wider social media unit. The broader unit is not essential to understanding the netspeak section; however, it does give context and greater depth to the learning. The netspeak learning can be divided into

six steps, which are detailed below.

### ***Definitions - context & register***

The first stage highlights the fact that individuals' communication styles vary depending on intention, context and method of communication. There are several frameworks to explain this concept, such as *genre*, *style* or *language varieties*. However, *register* was chosen as perhaps the most efficient model for students to grasp the idea. Formally, according to Martin Joos' model (1962), register has five levels: frozen/static (e.g., religious texts), formal, consultative (e.g., teacher/student or doctor/patient), casual and intimate. It could be argued that the categories are invalid, unjustified, or simply out of date, but as a framing for students, it is very intuitive and easy to understand. For these classes, it is only necessary to explain the concept of register in as much as it could apply to social media, in contrast to a more formal situation or mode of communication. Students are shown the slide in Figure 1 to introduce the idea of register.

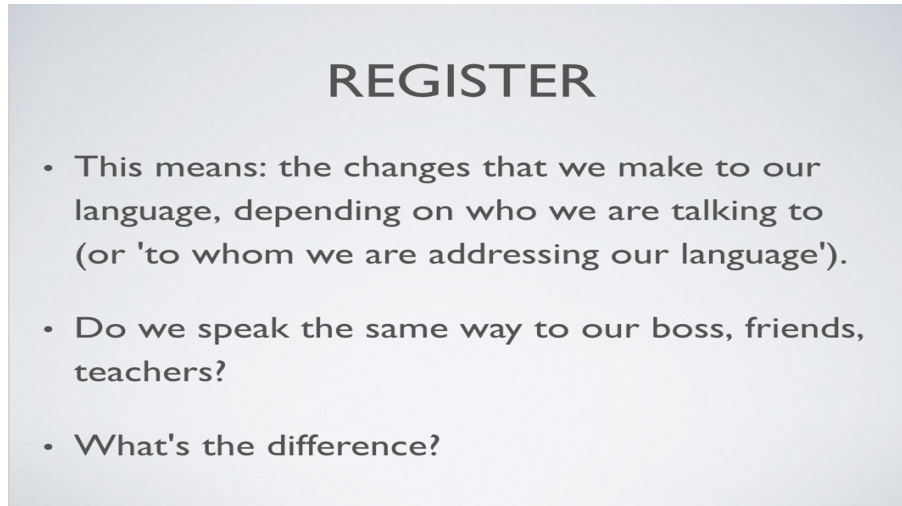
Figure 1  
*An inappropriately formal tweet*



The class are asked to consider whether there are any errors contained within the message in Figure 1. In most cases, students immediately realize that the tone is inappropriately formal. At this point, learners are given a brief explanation of register to structure and contextualize the observation. The class are shown the simplified definition with related questions, as shown in Figure 2. Students document their questions, and these are reviewed together as a class. This sequence is intended to raise students' awareness of the unconscious or unthinking choices made when communicating in varied situations. The foregrounding of these selections should help students in the following phases of learning when they attempt to apply these kinds of choices more consciously.

Figure 2

*A slide that defines register and asks students to think about the context of communications*



***Decode - abbreviations (on social media)***

The students are placed into small groups of three or four. Each group is given a shared *Google* document containing a list of abbreviations commonly used in netspeak and social media, shown in Figure 3. Learners are given around 10 minutes to decipher the meanings of the abbreviations. Students are not permitted to research the answers, which means they should attempt to decode the unfamiliar abbreviations. This requirement is crucial, as students must cultivate the ability to understand new social media language as it is encountered.

The activity is reviewed, with each group asked to explain three or four answers to the class, thereby giving all the students speaking and listening opportunities. As this is conducted, each group can keep a tally of correct answers, which can earn class points; this is a system where points are accumulated for good work. These points can contribute to students' class participation grades, and feed into their overall semester grades.

Figure 3

*A worksheet containing the netspeak abbreviations used for the activity*

Group 6		
	Abbreviation	Meaning
1.	GR8	
2.	B4	
3.	ur	
4.	2DAY	
5.	FB	
6.	LOL	
7.	OMG	
8.	PLS or PLZ	
9.	CU	
10.	BTW	
11.	Geez	
12.	Noob	
13.	tbh	
14.	FOMO	
15.	YOLO	

***Explain - rules for abbreviations (on social media)***

Students are initially asked how they attempted to infer the meanings of the unknown abbreviations in the previous activity. The answers tend to attribute their solutions to intuition, guesswork or vague associations. So, when students are informed that these kinds of abbreviations and respellings have patterns that can be grouped into 'rules', they are often surprised. However, the ease and interest with which young learners digest these rules seem at odds with this lack of awareness. One speculative hypothesis is that students have accumulated an implicit or intuitive understanding of these underlying patterns. The assumption would need to be tested empirically, but it has been an interesting observation, nonetheless. To conclude this step, the rules of abbreviating are introduced to students, with the following slide, shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

*A slide showing the conventions used to abbreviate words in English*

- Ways to Abbreviate or Rewrite

1. First letter from each word - LOL, YOLO
2. Phonetic spelling (spell as it sounds) – wimmin, fone
  - a. Substitute a number for sound (syllable) - 4u, GR8
  - b. Substitute a letter for sound (syllable) – cu, b4
  - c. Eye dialect (simpler but unusual) - phat, cuz, luv, bigga, woz, wuz
3. Consonant Writing (remove vowels) – pls, Bldg, Rd
4. Clipping - demo, phone, k (ok)
5. Online styles - flickr / witr, iPhone, aLtErNaTiNg cApS

Figure 4 is a list adapted from Jones and Hafner (2012, p67) and Shortis (2007, p25). As a result of the simplifications and refinements, most of the items are straightforward for the students to understand. *Eye dialect*, however, is more complex, as it is less intuitive and not particularly clearly defined in the literature. These kinds of abbreviations could be described as ‘appealing to the eye’, ‘striking’ or ‘noticeable’. Some patterns that seem evident are as follows: the use of *z* for *s* or *a* instead of *er* and a general tendency for more phonetic-style shortening of words. In addition, the category of *internet styles* could also be confusing. This grouping amalgamates several observations described in the literature. The common thread appears to be the unconventional use of punctuation and form (colors, font and symbols, for example). In essence, the categories of *eye dialect* and *internet styles* are somewhat fuzzy and nebulous. Consequently, students are given a variety of examples to help them build their understanding implicitly through exposure rather than directing them with strict definitions and categorizations. Returning to the general picture, the students now have the concept of register and the rules of rewriting/abbreviating. Hence, they are ready to move to the next step and start creating and decoding abbreviations by themselves.

***Create – new abbreviations (for social media)***

Students are placed into small groups and asked to create five original abbreviations using the recently learned rules. The students use a single shared *Google* document, which the whole class can edit simultaneously, as shown in Figure 5. When each group has completed their five abbreviations, students from other groups try to decipher the meanings and accrue points for each correct answer. Two methods have been trialed for this activity: a reaction quiz using a buzzer or hand raise and a paper quiz where groups solve each other’s abbreviations in a document within a set time. A brief evaluation of

each is given in the following sections.

Figure 5

*The worksheet used for the student abbreviation and quiz activity*

## Student Abbreviations

- Please create 5 original abbreviations with your group
- Then, we will have a quiz
- Captains, please lead your quiz
- One of the group members, please write the answer in your table after each question has been answered

Group 1

	Abb	Answers
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Group 2

	Abb	Answers
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Group 3

	Abb	Answers
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Group 4

	Abb	Answers
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Points

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4



#### *Option 1 - The reaction quiz*

Each section of the quiz is led by the team who created the abbreviations. This method gives students speaking and listening practice and builds leadership, management, and organization skills. This option is competitive and engaging, but it could be protracted if not managed attentively, as there are numerous answers to review. One mitigating option is to cut the number of examples to three or four per group, giving a shorter, more dynamic quiz. However, the opposing point of this approach is the reduction in the amount of practice the students receive.

#### *Option 2 - The paper quiz*

Each group is assigned another groups' abbreviations to solve; for example, group 1 solves the abbreviations created by group 2 while group 2 attempts those of group 3. This option allows students time to consider the answers at a more deliberative pace than the reaction quiz, giving students a chance to deploy the abbreviation rules carefully. However, the downside is that the direct exposure to examples is reduced compared to the other method. In addition, the review section of this approach could be uninspiring if it were simply a matter of reading through the answers. To enliven the review, the unanswered abbreviations can be given to the class as a reaction quiz for bonus points. The competition increases student engagement and keeps learners alert and focused. Thus, overall, option 2, with the addition of this short reaction quiz, has proved the most effective method, with the best balance of enjoyment and educational value for the students.

#### *A homework option*

A homework activity can be included where students harvest netspeak from their favorite celebrities' social media accounts to add to a set in the *Quizlet* vocabulary application. Students are first asked to decode the meaning of their terms by themselves and then verify their efforts using *Urban Dictionary* (n.d.). The *Quizlet* application also has several games, which can be used as warm-up activities to add motivation and enjoyment to students' learning in future classes. Finally, the *Quizlet* netspeak set can be used for a class vocabulary quiz. The advantage of this homework activity is that it exposes students to actual social media language 'in the wild' and gives them many more examples, which are not necessarily limited to abbreviations or respellings.


#### ***Transform - a message for social media***


After the practical experience of creating, decoding, and collecting internet style abbreviations and respellings, students consolidate this knowledge by rewriting the inappropriately formal tweet shown in step 1 of the process. The activity is conducted in small groups of three or four, with learners encouraged to write the message as they might for the actual *Twitter* application. The aim is to create a tweet with a mixture of abbreviated text, hashtags, and images to convey an impactful message that could receive *likes* or *retweets* on a social media application. Shown in Figure 6 is an example of the guidance given to students. After completing the activity, students can be given a *Google* form to vote for their favorite tweet, and the members of each group could be given class points according to their groups' ranking in the vote. The competition provides an additional layer of motivation, and when this vote has been employed, students comment on their satisfaction at receiving points from these class ballots.





Figure 6

*The inappropriately formal tweet rewritten more appropriately for Twitter*



 @denver	<p>Hello.</p> <p>I had an absolutely wonderful weekend. I enjoyed a lovely picnic in the park, with my wife. She made scones for dessert and they were absolutely delicious. Furthermore, the weather was splendid. Hope you enjoyed your weekend, too.</p> <p>Regards,</p> <p>Denver</p>
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- Re-write my message
- 280 characters max
- Twitter style
- Use slang, hashtags, pictures
- DO NOT WRITE FORMAL (FULL) SENTENCES
- Check the example below

 @denver	<p>2day, picnic with my luv❤️❤️</p> <p>#bestdayever#fff#l4l#likeforfollow#YOLO</p> 
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***Practice – writing messages for social media***

Students are asked to post a message on a shared *Google* document that is framed as *student Twitter*. They are permitted to post about any topic, as would be the case on the actual *Twitter* application. Teacher examples are placed at the top of the page, and there are spaces for student messages and comments, as shown in the example of Figure 7. Initially, students must post one message and comment on at least five classmates' posts, and the teacher can also comment on students' messages. The posts are reviewed in the next class for noteworthy language, and then students are encouraged to post freely on the document during a limited period set by the teacher. The updates could be maintained throughout the semester or the entire year to practice netspeak and build relationships in

the class. Finally, students are encouraged to follow the *YouTube*, *Twitter*, or *Instagram* accounts of English speakers they admire. Alternatively, learners can find an account to follow based on a hobby or interest. The students now have a deeper understanding of the language they will encounter in those accounts and some tools for decoding it; therefore, they can more confidently engage with social media applications in the English language.

Figure 7

*The formatted Google document used for students to write their tweets*

twitter		
 @denver	OK ppl - write ur text below! 140 characters or less! 😊 U can use pix or <a href="#">links</a> or any stuff u want!	
 @denver	#FlasbackFriday <a href="#">muzik</a> from da past. #theweekend #tbt Comments:	
 @denver	Cute pic for tha day.  Do u luv this little guy? #piggie #cute #adorable Comments:	
 @xxxxxxxx		
 @xxxxxxxx		
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## Conclusion

This process can be a highly motivational journey for many students, as they discover an alternative learning method, removed from textbooks and the usual classroom discussions. The process does not concentrate on any particular topic and so allows students to follow their own interests. Hence, learners are empowered to independently manage this element of their English studies and become more autonomous learners. In addition, this exploration of social media gives young learners access to the kind of

authentic language and cultural knowledge that many crave.

The activities help students to become relatively competent with this kind of language surprisingly quickly. This aptitude may be due to their general enthusiasm for social media or some existing familiarity with English netspeak. The exact reason is unclear; however, what has become apparent is that many students could be guided to attempt more challenging tasks. The levelling-up could be achieved with the utilization of additional examples taken from real social media accounts. In particular, the '*internet styles*' and '*eye dialect*' sections would benefit from additional authentic examples. more activities and more precise definitions to define these kinds of netspeak.

To further increase the authenticity in the learning, a safe and secure incorporation of real social media applications remains the ongoing aspiration for the unit. This vision would have class members interacting with students from diverse countries and cultures on platforms such as *Twitter*. Some students have attempted this independently, using applications such *HelloTalk*, a platform to connect language partners worldwide. These connections have not been discouraged, as many students have found this valuable and enjoyable. However, a vigilant teacher would justly be wary of inviting unvetted language partners into the class activities. A better approach would be to forge connections with partner universities overseas and create online language partner programs that use real social media platforms as the basis for communication. In this way, learners could iteratively employ their netspeak learning, motivated by their desire to communicate and connect authentically across cultures.

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