

In the Classroom

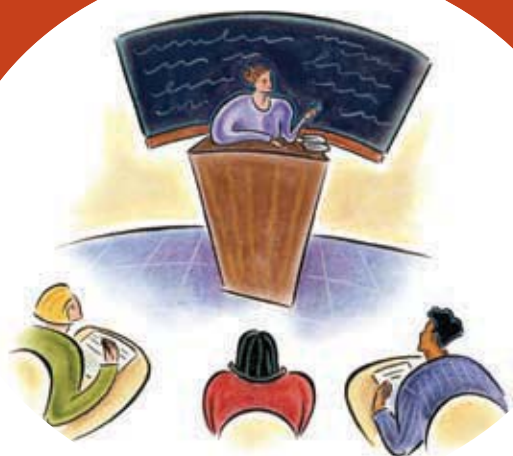
Text Messaging in a Foreign Language

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A decade after electronic writing made its appearance in the classroom, a new language register is being born in which forms are simplified for the purpose of effectiveness. This simplification goes beyond mere grammatical inaccuracies. It is taking the form of simplified syntax and spelling, as it can be observed in the written language of the chats and text messages exchanged by young people.

These linguistic forces are escaping the regulatory reins of the traditional learned authorities, because in cyberspace there is no regulation. Language experts disagree as to the value of the electronic new register. The American writer Tom Wolfe says that SMS (Short Message Service) is the most profound linguistic revolution ever. The Italian writer Umberto Eco warns that the major danger of globalization is that it is pushing us towards a common mega-language. But it may be the linguist Noam Chomsky that most accurately appreciates the challenges of SMS when he states that today's language is no worse than yesterday's, but that it is more practical, like the world we live in. These three authors were quoted in the June 2008 issue of the Spanish magazine *Quo*, under the headline "SMS and Chats are Modifying Our Ways of Communicating. How Will We Be Speaking in the Future?"



As language educators, we must consider whether we are going to try to keep our students away from these new forms of shorthand in the language they are learning—or do we want to adapt to the changing world and create opportunities for our students to communicate in ways they may already be experiencing in their first language?

Clearly, the implications that these new communication methods have in the study of foreign languages are worth discussing. By doing so, we may choose to embrace a new opportunity to communicate and to extend our inherently human intercultural experience. Perhaps language teachers bear the responsibility of presenting their students with all possible registers available in the target language in order to maximize their communication skills—ranging from classic literary works to the simplified syntax of chatting and text messages.

Spanish Texting Rules

As we approached this topic, our first goal was to see how our students of Spanish would react to the opportunity to use SMS in their assignments. To that end, we first located a reliable source of information about the text messaging techniques that young native speakers of Spanish are currently using.

After finding several Internet sites with text message rules and examples (e.g., www.zadorspain.com/spanishblog/?p=112; spanish.about.com/od/writtenspanish/a/sms.htm), we confirmed them with actual Spanish speakers, and thus determined the following guidelines for writing SMS in Spanish:

1. No need to use accent marks. Ex.: "arbol" rather than *árbol*
2. Exclamation and question marks appear only at the end (like in English). Ex.: "Hola!" instead of *¡Hola!*
3. The letters "h" and "e" disappear at the beginning of words. Ex.: "ace frio" means *hace frio* and "studiar" replaces *estudiar*
4. Vowels disappear in most common words. Ex.: "mñn" (*mañana*), "dnd" (*donde*)

5. The whole “name” of the consonant is used as a syllable: “t” (*te*), “m” (*me*), “K” (*ca*). Ex.: “t ablo mñn” for *te hablo mañana*
6. The use of “ch” is replaced by “x” and “ll” by “y.” Ex.: “muxo” (*mucho*); “ayi” (*allí*)
7. Frequently used phrases are shortened. Ex.: “kte?” (*¿qué tal estás?*), “tkr” (*te quiero*)
8. Whenever possible, numbers or math symbols are (loosely) used, be it because of their meaning or sound. Ex.: “x” (*por*); + o - (*más o menos*); “1” (*uno/a*); “salu2” (*saludos*); “A2” (*adios*)
9. The number of letters and most commonly used particles are reduced to the minimum. The multiplying sign “x” is very commonly used to replace the words and syllables *por*, *par*, and *pero*. Ex.: “tb” (*también*), “xa” (*para*), “xo” (*pero*).
10. English abbreviations are accepted. Ex.: “ok” (*vale*), “U” (you: *tú*)
11. Emoticons are the same. Ex.: :-) *contento*, :-D *sonriente*, :-O *asombrado*, etc.

As can be observed, the logic behind these rules is the same that guides the simplified syntax and spelling used in English text messages. Our question was: Would our students need these Spanish text messaging rules in order for them to write text messages in Spanish, or would they be able to devise their own rules by applying English text messaging simplification rules to the target language? Would their incomplete knowledge of Spanish prevent them from applying those rules?

Exploring SMS in Language Class

In order to answer our questions, we used two Spanish classes at the Intermediate level in a Midwestern university. We gave the above list of Spanish text messaging rules to only one of the classes and not to the other. We thought it would be interesting to see if the students without the Spanish list of rules would use text messaging techniques similar to those used by native speakers or if instead they would devise their own abbreviations in order to comply with the character number limitation.

Ideally, communication would have been through cell phones, which is the context where text messaging happens. However, some students did not have text messaging capabilities or complained about using up their minutes for class assignments. So we resorted to implementing the activity using the chat tool on Blackboard. To make the experience more similar to that of cell phone text messaging, we gave students a limited amount of characters per message so they would be forced to use as many abbreviations as possible. The assignments and instructions for the exchanges were posted on Blackboard. The assignments consisted of having a total of seven weekly conversations on the following topics (taken from the syllabus): art, movies, clothing, cooking, travel, literature,

and music. The format of the assignments was that of information gap activities. Here is an example:

Student 1

You and your friend want to go together to a movie this weekend. Decide which movie to go see (you’d like to see *The Golden Compass* but are open to suggestions) and when, according to your respective schedules.

Your weekend schedule:

Viernes, 6:00–8:00 p.m.: Opera (Figaro). Libre después de las 8:00 p.m.

Sábado por la mañana: Ir al gimnasio y después almuerzo con los amigos. Por la tarde, libre hasta las 7:00 p.m. Después, fiesta en casa de amigos.

Domingo por la mañana: Relajarme en casa. Libre toda la tarde.

Movie schedule:

The Golden Compass:

Viernes 6:40 p.m., 8:30 p.m., y 11:00 p.m.

Sábado: 4:00 p.m.

Domingo: 4:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., y 9:00 p.m.

Student 2

You and your friend want to go together to a movie this weekend. Decide which movie to go see (you’d like to see *National Treasure* but are open to suggestions) and when, according to your respective schedules.

Your weekend schedule:

Viernes: 6:00–8:00 p.m.: Cita con entrenador personal en el gimnasio. Cena con amigos después de las 8:00 p.m.

Sábado por la mañana: Peluquería a las 10:30 a.m., y almuerzo con amigos a las 12:00 p.m. Por la tarde, estudiar para el midterm hasta las 7:00 pm. Después, fiesta en casa de Bill.

Domingo por la mañana: brunch con la familia. Seguir estudiando para el midterm toda la tarde.

Movie schedule:

National Treasure, *Book of Secrets*:

Viernes 5:45 p.m., 7:00 p.m., 9:45 p.m.

Sábado 5:45 p.m., 7:00 p.m., 9:45 p.m.

Domingo 5:45 p.m., 7:00 p.m., 9:45 p.m.

Using the Rules

The results showed that the students who had access to the Spanish rules were able to apply them successfully in their text messaging conversations. Some examples:

Topic: Movies

	Actual text	Spanish meaning	English translation
Student 1:	T kirs ir al cine cnmgo sta nche?	¿Tú quieres ir al cine conmigo esta noche?	Do you want to come to the movies with me tonight?
Student 2:	No, tngo much trea, mñn?	No, tengo mucha tarea, ¿mañana?	No, I have much homework, tomorrow?
St. 1:	Si, sta bn. Cl plcla kirs ver?	Sí, está bien. ¿Cuál película quieres ver?	Yes, which movie do you want to see?
St. 2:	“Cloverfield” mra bn, pnsas tb?	“Cloverfield” mira (sic) bien, ¿piensas también?	“Cloverfield” looks good, do you think so?
St. 1:	Si, kiro verlo, cndo kirs ir?	Sí, quiero verlo, ¿cuándo quieres ir?	Yes, I want to see it, when do you want to go?
St. 2:	9:30 sta bn xa mi	9:30 está bien para mí.	9:30 is good for me.

In this example, student 1 eliminated the vowels in “T” (*tu*), “kirs” (*quieres*), “cnmgo” (*conmigo*) and “nche” (*noche*), replaced “Qu” with “K”, and eliminated the initial “e” from the syllable “es” in “sta” (*esta*) in line 1. In line 3, he also eliminated vowels and used abbreviations like “tb” (*tambien*). In line 5, he continued applying all the above rules.

Student 2 eliminated vowels in “tngo” (*tengo*), “trea” (*tarea*), and “mñn” (*mañana*). In line 4, he also eliminated vowels and used abbreviations such as “bn” (*bien*) and “tb” (*tambien*). In line 6, he also eliminated vowels and used “xa” in place of *para*.

Like these two students, many others who also had access to the rules had no problem applying them during their text message interactions, always without accent marks or upside-down question/exclamation marks (¿/¡), which is also typical of Spanish text messages. Here are some more examples:

Topic: Transportation

Actual text	Spanish meaning	English translation
K clse d transport vmos a usr en Csta Rca?	¿Qué clase de transporte vamos a usar en Costa Rica?	What kind of transportation are we going to use in Costa Rica?

In this case, the student has used the whole name of a consonant as a syllable: “d” (*de*) and “t” (*te*) and replaced the “Qu” with a “K”: “K” (*que*).

Topic: Sports

Actual text	Spanish meaning	English translation
Claro k si, sta bn, xk puedo ir contigo	Claro que sí, está bien, porque puedo ir contigo.	Of course, it's fine, because I can go with you.

In this example, the student replaced the “qu” from *que* with a “K”, eliminated the initial “e” from *esta*, and represented the word *porque* with the diagraph “xk.”

Without the Rules

Students who attempted text messaging in Spanish without access to the list of rules produced slightly different results. They did not use the SMS style required by the task the first time. It was only after the instructor had them redo the assignment insisting that they use SMS style that they started to experiment by applying some English rules with which they were familiar. As a result, some of their simplifications only resembled the Spanish SMS rules, although some others followed the Spanish rules quite closely. Some examples:

Topic: Movies

	Actual text	Spanish meaning	English translation
Student 1:	Hola como stas?	¿Hola, cómo estás?	Hi, how are you?
Student 2:	Bien y tu?	Bien, ¿y tú?	Good, and you?
St. 1:	Bien, k t parece si vamos al cine ste fin d semana	Bien, ¿qué te parece si vamos al cine este fin de semana?	Good, what do you think if go to the movies this weekend?
St. 2:	X supuesto, cual?	Por supuesto, ¿cuál?	Of course, which one?
St. 1:	Me gstria ver "National Treasure". Tu tiens idea d cual ver?	Me gustaría ver "National Treasure." Tú tienes idea de cuál ver?	I'd like to see "National Treasure." Do you have an idea of which one you want to see?
St. 2:	Si, quiero ver "The Golden Compass".	Sí, quiero ver "The Golden / Compass."	Yes, I want to see "The Golden Compass."
St. 1:	Y qndo la pasan?	¿Y cuando la pasan?	And when do they show it?
St. 2:	Vrns 6:40 PM y 8:30 PM, sbd 4:00 PM y dmng 4:00 PM.	Viernes 6:40 p.m. y 8:30 p.m., sábado 4:00 p.m. y domingo 4:00 p.m.	Friday 6:40 p.m. and 8:30 p.m., Saturday 4:00 p.m. and Sunday 4:00 p.m.

In this case, student 1 eliminated the initial "e" from *estás*. In line 3, she replaced the words *qué*, *te*, and *de* with "k", "t" and "d" respectively, and also eliminated the initial "e" from *este*. In line 5, she eliminated two vowels ("u" and "a") from *gustaría*, ("gstria") and one from *tienes* ("tiens"). Finally, in line 7, she abbreviated *cuando* by using "qndo."

Although this student obviously attempted to use SMS style, she did not take advantage of many opportunities to abbreviate her output because she did not have access to the rules. She did not eliminate the "h" in *hola* or the vowels in *como* ("kmo" in Spanish SMS style), *bien* ("bn"), *semana* ("smn"), *quiero* ("kr"), etc. Student 2 only used "x" in place of *por* in line 4, and eliminated the vowels in line 8 ("vrns" in place of *viernes*, "sbd" in place of *sábado* and "dmng" in place of *domingo*. Although this second group did not make as many abbreviations as the first group, when faced with the need to simplify, they made attempts by creating their own rules, or just applying the English SMS rules they already knew.

Paying Attention to SMS

Young people in every country use SMS. Why shouldn't educators explore the SMS rules used in other languages so that American students are exposed to and allowed to use them? In French, for example, many rules are very similar to those used in English and Spanish. According to Wikipedia (2009), some of these rules are:

1. Abbreviations: "lgtps" (*logotypes*), "tt" (*tout*), "pr" (*pour*); most of the vowels are eliminated, as are some consonants, but the word remains more or less readable and understandable.
2. Phonetic simplification: "koi", "jamé", "grav", "eske." The syllables need to be pronounced normally in order to reconstruct the original word.

3. Typographical rebus: “2m1” (*demain*); “bi1” (*bien*); “K7” (*cassette*); “koi 2 9” (*quoi de neuf*)
4. Use of very common English words: “today” for *aujourd’hui*, “now” for *maintenant*.
5. The whole “name” of the letter or the number is used as a syllable: “G” for *j’ai*, “C” for *c’est*.

Similar formulas are applied to German SMS (see box for examples). It seems that SMS technique might be an effective additional way for learners of a foreign language to communicate (as measured by how effectively our students were able to complete the tasks using Spanish SMS abbreviations). We can also attest to the level of interest that these assignments spurred in both groups. One student in the “no-rules” group, motivated by the assignment and the need for learning Spanish SMS style abbreviations, went as far as to purchasing a book containing a chapter on Spanish text messaging formulas (*Hide This Spanish Book*, Berlitz Publishing, 2004), which, to his instructor’s delight, he shared with her.

We encourage other teachers to explore this technique in order to incorporate yet another authentic way of communicating in the target language. Rather than seeing SMS as a language-deteriorating influence, we can appreciate the fact that students need to pay attention to the morphology, phonology, and even spelling of a word before creating or applying an intelligible abbreviation. Before transforming a word or expression into SMS style, students need to be aware of the morphological structure of the unit (“kro” = *quiero* versus “krs” = *quieres*); its spelling (“salu2” = *saludos*) and also its pronunciation (“2m1” = “deux + m + un” = *demain*). In that way, students may be forced to perform a more thorough analysis and obtain deeper insights of the language than they would if they were writing using regular writing style.

Incorporating the use of text messaging into the foreign language classroom is an additional way of providing students with real-life, spontaneous communication opportunities, and a rich source of vocabulary and expressions. As mentioned earlier, it is another communication register that is claiming its place in the classroom and can be used by foreign language teachers.

Furthermore, being able to text message foreign language speakers in their own SMS language, reaching beyond the classroom setting to the global community, may contribute to making American students long-life learners and help meet the “Community” goal of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*.

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Some Examples of Text Messaging Abbreviations

In Spanish

Ygo + trde. Kdms a ls 6? (*llego más tarde. ¿quedamos a las 6?* = I’m late, shall we meet at 6:00?)

A dnd kirs ir? (*¿a dónde quieres ir?* = Where do you want to go?)

n se k t abre exo qrs ablr? (*No sé qué te habré hecho. ¿Quieres hablar* = I don’t know what I could have done to you. Do you want to talk?)

yamare oy x ver k pasa (*Llamaré hoy para ver qué pasa* = I’ll call today to see what’s going on)

Bss wps (*besos guapos* = handsome kisses)

Kuentm mñn (*cuéntame mañana* = Tell me about it tomorrow)

S kirs k kdemos + tard yamam. Salu2 (*Si quieres que quedemos más tarde, llámame. Saludos* = Call me if you want to get together later. Greetings)

In French

2m1 (*demain* = tomorrow);

a12c4 (*à un de ces quatre* = to one of these four ones)

bi1 (*bien* = OK, good)

ptdv (*point de vue* = point of view)

lngk pr ordi (*La linguistique pour ordinateur* = linguistics through computer)

K7 (*cassette*)

koi 2 9 (*quoi de neuf* = what’s new?)

In German

3n (*nie, niemals, nirgendwo* = no way, no how)

A3 = (any time, any place, anywhere)

8ung (*Achtung!* = Attention, important message)

AWS (*Auf Wiedersehen!* = Good-bye)

BBB (*Bis bald, Baby* = Bye-bye, baby)

BS (*Bis später* = CU, see you later)

div (*Danke im Voraus* = Thanks in advance)

TABU (*Tausend Bussis* = 1000 kisses)