

Reading extension – the dangers of netspeak

In the main text, “Is netspeak harming the English language?”, the author generally argues that netspeak is doing more good than harm for language skills. The article quotes linguists who claim that young people today are more involved with writing than previous generations, and thus may have better literacy skills. A closer look at the actual writing practices of teens, however, reveals that there are reasons to suspect that netspeak and the latest online writing trends may not be so beneficial after all.

Firstly, quantity does not always lead to quality. In regards to text messages, most of the language used is extremely simple. Take a look at a typical texting exchange (translation provided in brackets):

- W R U? (Where are you?)
- Home. Zup? (I’m at home. What’s up?)
- Zip. C U 2nite? (Nothing. See you tonight?)
- :) (Yes.)
- Cool. Cya (That’s cool. See you later.)
- L8r (See you later.)

This is what most texting consists of: small exchanges which sound more like spoken language than traditional written language. Are we really to believe that the average teenager sending out dozens of these kinds of messages a day is actually improving their writing skills?

What about blogs and emails? That’s “real” writing, right? Though it may be true that young people are writing a lot these days, the quality of most blog and email writing is not particularly good. Most writing on the Net is between friends who share a great deal of background knowledge. This enables writers to communicate with little or no regard for grammar, organization, and clarity. Writing without reflection or feedback from readers may allow someone to write more fluently, but the quality of their writing is unlikely to improve.

Debatable it may be as to whether young people are reading more or less than previous generations, but what about the quality of what they read? Reading can help to develop a person’s sense of what constitutes good writing, but readers must be reading the right thing. If the bulk of teens’ reading material is amateur blog entries, forum posts, and text messages filled with errors, the benefits are largely lost. Poor models of written language can, rather, reinforce bad writing habits.

Some defenders of netspeak claim that children learn the standard form of writing in schools, regardless of what happens outside the classroom. There may be some truth in this, but how much teaching time is used up breaking all the bad habits caused by netspeak? Teaching writing skills was challenging enough before the age of the Internet, so we should not underestimate the negative impact of netspeak as we enter an age where communication skills via writing are more important than ever.

Clearly, the jury is still out in regards to netspeak's effect on literacy skills in English, or in any other language for that matter. The linguists in the main text may have made some valid points, but at this stage it is premature to state with confidence that netspeak is helping language more than it is hurting it – indeed, the reverse seems far more likely.

1 Read the text and complete the table. Then talk to a partner.

Claim in the main text	Counter response in this text	Your own opinion
Young people are reading and writing more than ever before. This will result in good literacy skills.		
Students can learn proper writing skills in the classroom.		

2 Complete the sentences with the words in the box.

bulk	clarity	fluent	literacy	premature
quote	reflection	state	suspect	valid

- a** Don't talk to me during the test. The teacher might _____ that we are cheating.
- b** In your paper, you should _____ clearly all the main points of your argument.
- c** Our teacher can _____ hundreds of lines from Shakespeare plays perfectly.
- d** Many scientists believe global warming is man made, but a few think this is a _____ judgment at this point.
- e** I don't think having a mild cold is a _____ reason for missing the final test.
- f** What your essay lacks is _____. I'm just not sure what you are trying to argue.
- g** His English grammar is a bit weak, but his speaking is quite _____.
- h** Although some young adults like boy bands, the _____ of their fans are teenage girls.
- i** At first I thought I was right, but on further _____, I realize that I was wrong.
- j** Having _____ skills is good, but what good are they if you rarely ever read or write?