

Netiquette rules: Avoiding online communication breakdowns and misunderstandings

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The present article is the third of a series of articles on Computer-Assisted Language Learning (i.e., CALL), to appear in each issue of *Roshd FLT* magazine. In the first two articles, some important theoretical issues of CALL were discussed, and various useful CALL communities and online journals were introduced. In the current article, the commonly-accepted rules of online behavior, called Netiquette, will be discussed at some length. The issues of copyright and plagiarizing online are also briefly introduced.

Acceptable online behavior: the rules of Netiquette

As social human beings, we are generally aware that each community has its norms of (un)acceptable behavior, and that there is a certain popular etiquette which regulates how people in a particular community interact with each other. And of course, as language teachers, we even teach our students that “violations of cultural norms of appropriateness ... often lead to sociopragmatic failure, breakdowns in communication, and ... stereotyping” (Hinkel, 1999, p. 2). You may be unaware, however, that there are also some very specific norms for *online* social behavior, dubbed *Netiquette*. Netiquette refers to the collective rules of cyberspace etiquette, or Internet etiquette (Shea, 1994). Unfortunately, research suggests that the majority of Iranian language teachers are not yet aware of such rules and that, ironically, they are sometimes themselves the cause of stereotyping and communication breakdowns in cyberspace (Farshadnia, 2010).

It is true that many of our students will never live in an English speaking country (which is why it used to be so hard to convince many of them that they will really, truly need English someday and that they should study it)! Yet today most of them are using the Internet, at least

occasionally, whether for their studies, or entertainment, or both. Many are already being regularly exposed to English in one form or another via the Internet, and are likely to be active cybercitizens of the future, communicating on the Net with people from all over the globe, often in English. (It remains difficult to convince some of them to study English, however!) Obviously, they need to be equipped with an understanding of acceptable online behavior, as well as a good command of English.

They deserve to know, for instance, that using ALL CAPS (i.e., all capital letters) on the Internet is generally considered yelling and is rude. Or that emails with empty subject lines or very general subject lines (such as “Hi” or “Salam”) are very often ignored, since such emails are similar in appearance to many spam messages (i.e., electronic junk mail). In fact, these messages will often be automatically filtered directly into the recipient’s “spam box” without the recipient even noticing them.

Respecting other people’s right to privacy is also important on the Internet. Never forward an email from one friend to another using the *To:* or *Cc:* options, unless you are absolutely sure they already have one another’s email addresses or do not mind sharing their email address. Use the *Bcc:* (i.e., blind carbon copy) option, instead. Forwarding an interesting email message to all your friends using the *To:* or *Cc:* options is similar to publishing your private phone book! Many of your friends would not appreciate your sharing their email addresses with strangers any more than they would approve of your giving their phone numbers to complete strangers.

Another Netiquette guideline that our students need to be taught is that sending off emails without first checking them for English/typing mistakes is considered careless and a waste of other people’s time. Sadly, the less formal language of many online environments often misleads people to thinking that sloppy English containing spelling/grammatical/typing mistakes is no longer a problem on the Internet. On the contrary, I would argue that in some ways it is even more important online than it would be in a f2f (i.e., face-to-face) situation, since very often the recipient of your email is someone whom you have never met before and whose only impression of you is formed through your email. In effect, you are what your *email* is!

If we think of it like that, we will realize how important it can be to spend a few more minutes on our emails before sending them off into cyberspace. For example, you can first type your letters into a word processor, such as Microsoft Word, and spell- and grammar-check them before copy/pasting them into your email. The good news is that nowadays many email service providers already have built-in spell-checkers and grammar-checkers, which can make your job easier. The bad news is that these checkers do themselves occasionally make mistakes, like underlining a new word which is not in their dictionaries, etc, so you need to exert your own judgment, as well.

An important point to bear in mind when you are communicating online is that nowadays people are being bombarded with new online tools, connections, etc, and so they are often already suffering from information overload (Mason & Rennie, 2008). Most people are already struggling to keep up with the various online tools, websites, etc. they are using every day, often simultaneously! Many people feel an almost obsessive need to constantly check their email, Twitter, Facebook, favorite news websites, etc, and spend more hours online than they can often afford. In addition, more and more daily activities demand an online presence. Time is becoming an increasingly precious commodity, and deserves to be respected. People have less time to spend on each individual email, which is why careless emails which contain many mistakes are often ignored. The same is true about very long email messages, especially when the recipient is a stranger. Even worse than being ignored, such emails often create a negative impression not always easily overcome, and can lead to the communication breakdowns and cultural stereotyping mentioned earlier.

For similar reasons, our college and university students should definitely be taught that sending requests for books, articles, help on their theses, or replies to academic questions that they could have answered themselves with a little more effort (perhaps by merely reading a few books or even consulting their own Iranian professors) is not likely to make them popular, and will very likely help to strengthen the impression that Iranians are always ungracious receivers on the Internet, and have nothing to share except their personal and academic problems! Unfortunately, this is a common failing among some Iranians, whose frequent unreasonable petitions have given their fellow citizens a bad name in certain academic circles. As



practitioners of CALL, we need both to be aware of such rules *ourselves*, and to teach them to *our students*, especially if we are encouraging them to use the Internet for their classes.

Task 1: Do you know of any other Netiquette rules not mentioned so far? Which Netiquette rules would you consider teaching first to your students, and why?

Mailing lists and Netiquette

Obviously, not all Netiquette rules apply equally to the various existing online venues. For instance, a chat room is usually less strict in applying some of the rules of Netiquette, although the basics are, of course, the same. On the other hand, mailing lists, and especially academic mailing lists, can be considered more stringent in the observance of Netiquette rules. An electronic mailing list (often referred to as a *listserv*) is a kind of online group that one can join, in which any email which a member sends is automatically received by all the other members. Mailing lists are very good places for academic discussions; some CALL-related mailing lists and online communities of practice were mentioned in the previous issue (Marandi, 2011), such as the Webhead mailing list, etc. Further examples of mailing lists relevant to our profession are: TESL-L (in which teaching ESL/EFL is discussed), LTEST-L (which is an academic mailing list devoted to language testing issues), and TESLCA-L (which is devoted to computer-assisted language learning).

There are many Netiquette rules which apply more particularly to mailing lists, and as teachers and academics, we need to be aware of them. For example, consider the following:

-  It is better to briefly introduce yourself the first time you are sending an email to the list.
-  It is considered bad manners to send an unsolicited attachment to a mailing list, as they both take up a lot of space and can contain viruses, worms, etc, which could infect the recipient's computer.

- ✚ Sending a personal message/reply to a member via the mailing list is considered to be careless of other people's time and unprofessional. In such cases it is preferable to email the other person privately and off the list.
- ✚ When replying to an email on the list, you are advised to always be courteous and to avoid *flaming* (i.e., sending hostile messages) or replying to flames, especially since the lack of facial expressions and body gestures can lead to misunderstandings. On the other hand, a judicious use of emoticons (i.e., smiley faces, etc.) is advisable when necessary, and can help make up for the deficiency of paralinguistic features and kinesics on the Net.
- ✚ It is considered good manners to always add a signature to your emails, indicating who you are and which institute/country/community you belong to; this helps others relate to you and to recognize you as a legitimate member of the community.
- ✚ If you are sending similar messages to more than one mailing list—for example, an announcement—and you know that some people will therefore be receiving your message more than once, you are expected to head your email with an apology for “cross-posting.”
- ✚ When replying to a message on a mailing list, delete the extra parts of the previous message you are replying to, and keep only those parts which you are explicitly replying/referring to. This makes it easier for others to follow the discussion without being distracted by extra clutter, especially if they are following the discussions on the mailing list website, as a threaded post.
- ✚ Never share someone's private message to you with the members of a mailing list without first obtaining that person's explicit permission, even if s/he is also a member of the list and her/his personal communication is of an academic nature and related to the discussion.
- ✚ Be careful not to mistakenly send emails related to subscribing to the list (i.e., requesting membership), unsubscribing, accessing message history, message digests, etc, to the mailing list email address. Such “commands” require a totally different email address (and, in fact, a totally different syntax), and are usually

provided in the welcome message you receive on becoming a member of the mailing list.

- ✚ Do not send irrelevant, off-topic messages to the mailing list, even if you find them interesting or important. A mailing list devoted to language testing, for example, is obviously not the place to post a question about CALL. Also, an academic list is not the place to post a message asking if anybody knows of a good job, or to send your CV, or to ask people to reply to your thesis questionnaire! (Believe it or not, I have seen instances of all three of the latter examples—unfortunately, all sent by Iranians to international academic mailing lists!)
- ✚ Remember that academic mailing lists are mainly for academic discussions, and should be used only sparingly for academic *announcements*. This means that while it is okay and even desirable to use the mailing list to inform the members of an upcoming conference or speech, such messages should not dominate the list and relegate the academic discussions to the background.

Task 2: Now that you are more familiar with Netiquette rules, take a moment to review your own online behavior. See if you can recall any instances of flouting Netiquette rules, either by yourself or by others.

The rules listed above are only a few examples of Netiquette and, in fact, whole books have been written on this topic (Shea, 1994). The links below are good starting points for those interested in learning more about such rules:

<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/book/index.html>

http://www.livinginternet.com/i/ia_nq.htm

Task 3: Netiquette “rules” have been devised by people with cultures different from ours. Are there any Netiquette rules which you disagree with? Are there any which do not exist that you think should be added? Give your reasons for your choices.

Copyright, copyleft, and plagiarism on the Net

A different concern but one with equal potential for misunderstandings is the issue of copy/pasting and plagiarizing on the Internet. Those of us who intend to be active global cybercitizens should be aware that copyright limitations do not apply merely to books and software, but can equally apply to online photos, websites, video clips, etc. Very often those of us who are new to using the Internet make use of such online materials very freely, without gaining the permission of copyright holders, or acknowledging that we are using materials created and uploaded to the Internet by others. At worst, this can be a serious legal offence, and at best indicates an inattention to other people’s rights and efforts. Unfortunately, many people are totally unaware of this and seem to think that whatever is accessible on the Internet can be used and distributed without limitations. However, it is part of our duty as CALL teachers to teach our students how to use such tools/materials without abusing them.

First, our students need to be aware that even online materials can be copyrighted, so they should take care to check before, for example, using somebody else’s online pictures. This is not always easy to ascertain, but usually copyrighted materials are indicated. And even when you are using something which is not copyrighted, it is considered a matter of ethics to indicate that you have borrowed the sound file, video clip, text, picture, etc. from somebody else’s webpage, and to provide a link to the original.

It is often the case that people who find something interesting on the Internet and want to share it with others will copy the whole or part of the website text, and paste it into their weblogs, for example. Remember that this is considered plagiarizing, and is totally unacceptable. Similarly to writing, say, an academic article, any use of other people’s words on the Net also needs to be either paraphrased or put within quotation marks, and in any case the source needs to be mentioned. Usually the URL (i.e., the website address) as well as the date of access is mentioned, especially in academic research reports and articles. (If you are indeed

writing an article and have made use of materials taken from the Internet, see the APA style manual (American Psychological Association, 2001) for information on how to cite online sources in your reference list and within the article itself.)

Sharing and networking is an important part of today's online life, which has led some people to come up with alternatives to copyright laws. These alternatives are less restrictive than copyright laws, but still retain certain rights for the owner of the text, software, work, photo, etc. One example is copyleft, which has actually been around for quite some years now ("Copyleft," 2011), but is still so unknown to many people that even the Microsoft Word software on my computer does not recognize it and has underlined it as a typing mistake! Another interesting option is using the Creative Commons licenses, which allow the user to determine exactly which rights s/he wants to retain. In other words, Creative Commons licenses allow users to determine the degrees and types of restrictions they want to impose on others in using their works.

Exactly how does that work? You are familiar with the copyright sign (i.e., ©), obviously, but how familiar are you with the following symbols?



Or how about this one:



Interesting, aren't they? I'll explain what they are in the next issue. ;-)

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