

**THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGICALLY INDUCED TEXT- MESSAGES
ON THE WRITTEN ENGLISH OF STUDENTS IN FORMAL CONTEXT:
THE CASE OF ABU/SBRS STUDENTS**

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ABSTRACT

Technology is as much a part of our lives today in Nigeria as is communication. The combination of the two has changed the way Nigerian students send and receive messages. While technology has made the whole world smaller and even pedagogy easier, it has also created new set of problems in the teaching and learning of English as a second language thereby compounding the adverse situations that exist. This paper focuses on the effects that the technologically induced text-message has brought to bear in the written English of students. The essays written by students of ABU/SBRS Funtua under examination conditions are the source of data for this study. Findings reveal that, to a very large extent, text items used in informal contexts are beginning to find their way into the formal writing of Nigerian students. The paper advocates for a team and collaborative effort by all teachers irrespective of discipline in checking this menace. It further suggests that all teachers should see themselves first as teachers of English or else in the next few years, the written English of Nigerian students would definitely not withstand the demands of national and international standards for English language usage. This radical approach should also be strengthened by all examination bodies and institutions in Nigeria.

Introduction

The technology age has brought with it many challenges and has made the enormous task of imparting knowledge to the Nigerian students daunting, complex and very tedious. This is coupled with the multilingual nature of the Nigerian environment where teachers are saddled with the responsibility of teaching English as a second or even third language. No wonder every effort made to attain in the classrooms a kind of competence that is very close to the native

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speakers of English remain an illusion. Despite the inherent problems posed on the teaching of English by the diverse mother-tongues that exist in Nigeria, and the general adverse situations associated with the teaching profession, Nigerian teachers of English are still expected to adopt a result oriented copiest strategy that will guarantee effective teaching and learning of English in Nigeria in the 21st century.

While these adverse situations thrive, the Nigerian trendy teachers of English adopt teaching materials and several methodologies to facilitate effective communicative English language teaching and learning. The situation today is compounded and made worse by the incursion of the properties of the technologically induced text messages into the formal writing of Nigerian students. The questions are:

- Does the language of text messages have impact on the written English of Nigerian students?
- What steps should an English teacher take to help these students or should he be indifferent?
- Should there be collaborative efforts from teachers of other subjects in stamping this tide?

Texting is a startling recent phenomenon in Nigeria that has assumed an alarming patronage even at the expense of conventional writing. It is a method of communication allowing cellular or mobile users to exchange brief notes, typically one hundred and sixty characters in length maximum. Mobile operators dedicate part of their network for storage and delivering of text messages. The popularity of text messaging is remarkable considering that the service was developed by operators in the early 1990s as something of an after thought. The first text message was sent in December 1992 in the united-kingdom (source: mobile Data Associated). A major factor in the take off of text messaging was that it was free when prepaid phones were introduced in Nigeria. Even now that text messages attract charges, they are still cheaper compared to the mobile phone calls.

Written English in this paper refers to English language as used in writing especially in a formal context. This involves in the most part, English language as used in school's tests, assignments and most especially in an examination condition at all levels in Nigerian schools. Writing obviously is one of the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Teachers of English are expected to develop these skills in the students at an equal level. This brings to bear the centrality of writing in any academic context.

Writing to students must be taken seriously because the feedback on their learning assessment of what they have learnt cannot be mediated in any form better than writing. This makes the acquisition of writing skill primary to guarantee their success at college and even life after school. They simply need to know how to write clearly, analytically and correctly to pass their examinations in school and convey their activities clearly in their chosen careers after school.

The focus of this paper is on writing as a component of English language course as is taught in Ahmadu Bello University School of Basic and Remedial Studies. This school is a pre-degree training institution and not a remedial school like the name connotes. The school primarily prepares Nigerian students of Northern extraction for the challenges of university because of the glaring continues decline in education in the Northern states. Ahmadu Bello University has reintroduced this school to play a leading role in arresting the current decline in education and to prepare its catchment area, the country and possibly Africa to occupy a place of pride in the 21st century world where knowledge, science and technology reign. Since English is the language of education in Nigeria, the management of the school in their wisdom made English a compulsory course for all students in the school even though the school is science based. The written English of the students in this school forms the basis for analysis in this paper.

Texting: A Conceptual Explication

Texting first and foremost must be recognized and acknowledged as one of the attacks of technology on writing that has come to stay. It has achieved so much increasing prevalence in our society today especially among the youth that educators have started noticing them and exploring their impact on students writing. While there is supporting evidence to suggest that this product of technology has a great influence on the social development of youths, an even more pertinent issue for classroom teachers is the effects this has on the academic development of students.

Texting is actually a term used to refer to the exchange of brief and short written messages between mobile phones using same or different networks. The most common term for this is (SMS) short message service. The act of texting is also extended to include messages containing images, video or sound content. The presence of different networks in Nigeria and the availability of different cheap phones have enhanced the ability of students to own one or several phones for the purpose of communication.

Sutherland (2002), for example, finds the language used in texting as “dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness”, and even concludes that language of texting is

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“penmanship for illiterates”. Poor punctuation, bad grammar and improper abbreviations are evidently obvious in the language of text messages but to say that the language of texting is unimaginative” is being very unfair and unacceptable as the creativity in it makes it the latest manifestation of the human ability to adapt language to suit the demands of diverse settings. Texting is a wonderful innovation in language use that is commendable but the inability of the students to switch off this informal habit in formal context is what has attracted so much attention. Burlow (2005), Opposes the views of Sutherland (2002) by asserting that the language of text messages is “communicatively adept” having “linguistic creativity” and a “robust sense of play.” This is to a large extent acceptable but context plays an important role in the realization of meaning and students must learn how to switch from a formal context to an informal context or vice-versa to communicate appropriately.

Lee (2002) appreciates the language of text messages also. He believes that text messages can be potential learning tools in the hand of teachers. He opines that the language of texting can be harnessed by educators to help students learn school related contents. This he further says “could spark thinking process” in as much as this paper does not object to text speak, there must be that consciousness of its context – when it is appropriate than making it a habit or the only way of using language especially in writing. This is so because text messaging from its history was never originally envisioned as a means of communication between individuals. Crystal (2008) supports the view of Lee (2002). He says that texting “is a new genre. It began to be used in poetry very early on, in the Guardian’s text-messaging poetry competitions. It was only a matter of time before a texting poet arrived on the scene, text-message stories – even novels are also already being circulated” text messages places premium on space and the creativity in its word formation accounts for its uniqueness. No wonder Crystal concludes with “I am fascinated by it,... in Text speak, we are seeing, in a small way, language in evolution”.

This paper does not in any way attempt to condemn this new genre rather it attempts to raise an alarm of the impending implications that this incursion is likely to bring into the teaching and learning of English especially in Nigerian where English is taught as a second language.

Data Collection and Analysis

The mid-sessional English language examination of the School of Basic and Remedial Studies Funtua 2008/009 forms the main data for this paper. Two hundred essays and letters written during the examination were marked and the data was collected from them. The fact that the essays and letters were written

under an examination condition makes the context and exercise very formal. The data were analysed using descriptive statistical tools such as frequency counts and percentage for each of the text-speak properties identified in the essays and letters.

Presentation of Data and Discussion

The following are the properties of the technologically induced text-message that were identified in the student's scripts. The data are presented in four tables. The first presents the prepositionally based text items, the second presents the nominally based text items, the third presents the text items based on other parts of speech while the last table presents the summary of all the identified text items in percentages.

Table 1: **Prepositionally Based Text Items**

S/No	Text item	Variants	Conventional standard	Frequency	%
1	Abt	bout	about	13	72.22
2	@	nil	at	2	11.11
3	Thru	tru	through	2	11.11
4	Ova	nil	over	1	5.56
				Total 18	100

This table presents the items in five columns: the text items, the variants where they exit, their conventional standard, the frequencies and their percentages. The preposition "about" occurred the most in the data. The contraction associated with texting is obvious in the above except in the case of "at" where there is a complete change and use of a symbol.

Table 2: **Nominally Based Text Items**

S/No	Text item	Variants	Conventional standard	Frequency	%
5	No	num/numba	Number	4	19.05
6	Rgds	nil	Regards	2	9.52
7	tym	taim	Time	1	4.76
8	wknd	wkend	weekend	4	19.05
9	hop	op	Hope	7	33.33
10	luv	Lov/lv	Love	3	14.29
				Total 21	100

This table presents text items that are nominal in form with other variants that are also unique and special because of the contraction and the creativity like the case of "tym and taim" The text items are written the way the words are pronounced

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and not according to the conventions of the language. The text item 'hop' in this table occurred the most in the data as most students had the expression 'hop u ar doing fine?' in the letters the wrote for examination.

Table 3: Texts Items Based On Other Parts Of Speech

S/No	Text, item	Variants	Convention al standard	Part of speech	Frequency	%
11	bcos	Coz, bcoz, b/c	because	conjunction	11	7.24
12	&	nd, n	and	conjunction	71	46.72
13	dat	dt	that	demonstrative	19	12.50
14	vry	veri	very	adverb	3	1.97
15	lndaful	nil	wonderful	adjective	1	0.66
16	fyn	nil	fine	adjective	1	0.66
17	yung	yng	young	adjective	2	1.31
18	rite	nil	write	verb	4	2.63
19	i.e	nil	that is	-	07	4.60
20	bin	nil	been, being	Aux. verb	19	12.50
21	ur	u're, a, ar	you are	-	1	0.68
22	howz	hwz, howz	how is	-	3	1.97
23	txs	tanks, tanks,tx	thanks	verb	4	2.63
24	lyk	like	like	verb	1	0.66
25	ok	nil	okey	interjection	4	2.63
26	anoda	nil	another	pronoun	1	0.66
					Total 152	100

This third table presents text items based on other parts of speech other than the nouns and prepositions. One common feature that cuts across the tables is the level of contraction of words that exit in these text items and the ability to create a prototype kind of words that can contend with space, time and money in the case of text-messages. The very presence of these items in formal context depicts the possible difficulty involved in switching from informal habits to the formal ones especially in formal situation like examination by most students. Of all the text items, the symbol of conjunction (and) ranks the highest in terms of occurrence. This is because the symbol is common and is used also in different contexts.

Table 4: Summary of Parts Of Speech Based Text Items

Parts of speech	Frequency	%
nouns	21	10.60
pronouns	1	0.50
Verbs	39	19.70
adverbs	3	1.52
adjectives	4	2.02
prepositions	18	9.10
conjunctions	82	41.41
interjections	4	2.02
others	26	13.13
Total	198	100%

The above presents a summary of the text items according to their occurrence in percentages. The conjunctions have the largest percentage of occurrence followed by the verbs. It is obvious from the data that the problem is beyond that of spelling of words and text items can be created from all the parts of speech. It is also difficult to explain why serious minded students could write essays and letters in examination context using the above items. The items are very similar to the items used in text-messages because of the distinctive graphology which is characterized by rebus abbreviation. A total of 26 text items were identified in the 200 scripts marked with some variants for some of the elements with (&) ranking the highest with a total of 71 occurrences. This could be attributed to consistent use of text messages and laziness on the part of the students. It is not in any way a show of creativity as these students have failed to understand where and when the use of text-message items is appropriate. These text items are completely unacceptable in formal context like examination. The same is also true of formal writing, it is appropriate in an official document such as a school term paper but would be inappropriate in chat rooms or in text-messages. The data also shows that writing is actually the worst neglected language skill of the four. This is partly because the teachers are lazy at giving writing assignments after teaching because of the marking involved or students are not effectively motivated to write.

This is so because if teachers teach writing, supervise effectively and mark, these items would have been noticed and corrected even before examination. One other most significant inference from the findings is that since this is the situation in English language than it must be worst in other subject areas other than English where there is no emphasis on expression and mechanical accuracy. There is then the need for urgent action to salvage the situation before it escalates.

Halting the Properties of Text-Speak in Formal Writing

Writing is an accurate representation of ideas and ability to write and communicate in good English. To be able to progress beyond this point, the students must learn to communicate effectively in writing. The gains of writing are manifested in all subject areas across the curriculum. Even though Crystal (2008) thinks that the properties of text-speak in formal writing “are minor trends” and “part of the novelty of the medium” they ought to be halted as part of the task of developing in students a sense of linguistic correctness and appropriateness. Better still, the language of text messages could be included in the English language syllabus and efforts should also be made to standardize the graphology of this language.

Many Nigerian teachers do not like to teach writing, some emphasize the other language skills at the expense of writing. This could be because of their ignorance of how to teach writing or their unwillingness to mark written class work. By writing, they think it is mere handwriting and filling in words in the blanks of workbooks. They are of the opinion that handwriting should not be considered as an antedate, because lacking this skill would be an acrid sacrifice in the digital age. In as much as this opinion is commendable, writing still transcends this. It includes creating meaningful texts such as stories, descriptions, invitations and informative pieces appropriate and conventionally acceptable expressions.

Teachers of English should not be indifferent to students’ poor language use and any form of inappropriateness in writing. This is in view of the fact that students will need writing skills not just to succeed in their academic pursuit, but also in any chosen career they might engage in after graduation. Hence, the need to help students switch off their informal habits in formal context. This can be attained by consistent motivational writing exercises and providing feedback through diligent marking. There should also be a team and collaboration effort between teachers of English and teachers of other subjects in halting this tide. All teachers should see themselves first as teachers of English before anything else.

Nothing indeed in language teaching is quite simple. There are times during communicative activities when teachers may want to offer correction or suggest alternatives because the students’ communication is at risk or because this might be just the right moment to draw the students’ attention to a problem. There is therefore the need for teachers to be sensitive – when responding to errors or students excesses. Students should be seen as providing feedback, helping that reshaping process rather than telling students off because they are wrong.

Teachers are puzzled why students go on making the same mistakes even when such mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them. There is the need for patience and determination. Students need constant and consistent exposure to the target language with emphasis on the four basic language skills; Reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Attending professional conferences, meetings and workshops on the language of electronic text messages will allow teachers to be better informed about the latest developments in the field. Teachers should be encouraged to take part in investigative workshops, engage in constructive debates about current issues of this nature in theory and practice of teaching. Teachers can even 'network' with other members of the teaching profession teaching English as a foreign language as regards this issue and best of all, teachers will learn that other teachers from different places, different countries and systems even, share similar problems and are themselves searching for solutions.

Conclusion

The essence of communicative language teaching is to facilitate appropriate language use in formal and informal contexts. The teachers must engage the students the more – the large classes notwithstanding and guide them in their learning processes, on the basis of activities. This will excite the students with time and motivate them to explore the learning of the language. Consistent practice should be reinvigorated in the teaching of English in Nigeria as the students use of English today has drastically dwindled while its teaching has broadened. Striving towards more refined writing skills which includes ; letters, memos, circulars and notices; articles in newspapers and magazines; speeches, reports, minutes, contract documents and essays should be the goal as venturing into the world without full communicative competence especially in writing is indeed a great risk.

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