



# **The effects of texting on literacy: Modern scourge or opportunity?**

By Steve Vosloo ([steve.vosloo@shuttleworthfoundation.org](mailto:steve.vosloo@shuttleworthfoundation.org))

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## **Introduction: Texting, a modern scourge?**

Texting refers to the use of abbreviations and other techniques to craft SMS and instant messages. Texting does not always follow the standard rules of English grammar, nor usual word spellings. It is so pervasive that some regard it as an emergent language register in its own right. This is largely due to the proliferation of mobile phones as well as internet-based instant messaging (IM).

For a number of years teachers and parents have blamed texting for two ills: the corruption of language and the degradation in spelling of youth writing. Since 2003 (Brown-Owens, Eason & Lader), complaints of textisms creeping into formal school register language have been raised from around the world. In a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 64 percent of US teens admitted that some form of texting has crept into their academic writing (Lenhart et al., 2008). Even in South Africa (SA), many teachers lament the problem of text creep in South African schools. It appears as if learners are not able to use appropriate language in different contexts: their informal textisms appear in formal writing assignments.

In general, texting has provoked a very strong, negative response from teachers, parents and language experts. It has been described as the “continuing assault of technology on formal written English” (Lee, 2002), and the work of “vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago ... pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary” (Humphrys, 2007).

Is there any good to come from this modern scourge? In the evolution of language, are we witnessing a major change akin to that brought about by Geoffrey Chaucer, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century author who wrote in vernacular English language, rather than French or Latin?

To answer these questions, this short paper explores the issue of texting, first by defining literacy, then describing the empirical research available on the effects of texting on youth literacy, which underpin the positive perspectives a number of linguists ascribe to texting. Examples of positive interventions – in classroom and informal learning contexts – that leverage the popularity of texting are outlined. Finally, research questions regarding texting in the South African context are offered.

### **An expanded definition of literacy**

Texting is the written *lingua franca* of many youth today. In SA, MXit is a popular mobile instant messaging service that claims 10 million registered users – many under the age of 18 – who send over 250 million messages daily (Stemmet, 2009). But, according to the Pew study, the digital age presents a paradox: while teenagers are writing more than ever (in texts, IMs, emails, blog posts, etc.), most do not think of their electronic communications as real writing (Lenhart et al., 2008). A number of reasons exist for this, but one of which is the way they perceive literacy.

Literacy today refers to more than reading and writing printed language. Plester, Wood and Joshi (2009) think of it as the “ability to decode information in various orthographic formats, including digital media, to make meaning from it, and to encode information into those formats to communicate ideas to others.”

When considering the increasingly digital lives of young people – who have been referred to as “generation text” (Thurlow, 2003) and the “thumb tribes” (Butgereit, 2008) – taking a broader view of literacy is crucial in their education, formally in classroom settings and informally in home and public settings. Further, leveraging the extensive reading and writing that happens – in the form of texting – holds potential for literacy development.

## **Effects of texting on literacy**

According to Wood, Plester and Bowyer (2008), despite the popular view that texting is responsible for linguistic deterioration, the “impact of children’s use of textisms on their reading and writing development is not well understood” – largely due to a lack of empirical research. Up until this time, the limited research conducted on texting has either focused on the language of texts, or the uses to which texting has been put, rather than linking SMS language with other literacy measures (Thurlow & Poff, 2009).

In order to fill the research gap, Plester, Wood and Joshi (2009) explored the relationship, in 10- to 12-year-old children in the UK, between the usage of textisms and school literacy attainment. The following was found:

- There was no association between overall textism use and the children's spelling scores. Based on earlier studies, there is little evidence that using text language damages pre-teen standard English ability.
- There was a strong association between textism use and phonological awareness (e.g. “2nite” sounds the same as “tonight”).

The research did not consider, however, the effects of socio-economic status, parental education or cultural values on the outcomes. Further, at the time the researchers acknowledged that it was impossible to conclude that experience and skill with texting actively contributed to children’s word reading ability. It is possible that children who are comfortable with writing – those with good literacy skills – will be experimental and use textisms more than other children.

In 2008, Wood, Plester and Bowyer began a cross-lagged longitudinal study with 63 children aged 8-12 years to further understand the texting-literacy relationship. Again, the initial results indicate that use of textisms is positively related to the development of subsequent reading and phonological awareness. This study measured for direction of association, with the results suggesting that “the previously observed positive associations between literacy and textism use are attributable to textism use driving (either directly or indirectly) reading attainment, rather than literacy attainment leading to an increased likelihood of textism use when constructing text messages.” In other words: “It is not simply the case that 'good readers are good textism users'.” The study will continue in 2009.

## **The positive side of texting**

Recognising that many, if not most, textisms are some form of phonetic abbreviation, Plester, Wood and Joshi (2009) argue that to produce and read such abbreviations requires, in the texter, a level of phonological awareness (and orthographic awareness). While spelled incorrectly in a conventional sense, many textisms are phonologically acceptable forms of written English. Decades of research has demonstrated a consistent association between different forms of

phonological awareness and reading attainment.

David Crystal, honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, believes that sending frequent texts can actually help children to read and write because of the abbreviations used. “People have always used abbreviations ... They do not actually use that many in texts but when they do they are using them in new, playful and imaginative ways that benefit literacy” (Leake, 2008).

Crystal (2008) believes that the widespread concern about the impact of texting on children’s literacy is unfounded. The brevity of the text style, and the 160 character constraint of an SMS, requires the author to write economically, inventively and playfully – doing this is good practice when learning to read and write. Wood, Plester and Bowyer (2008) concur that “when texting, the children have the freedom to ‘play’ with the construction of language that they are learning about at school, and are creative in their use of it. They also have regular engagement with it.” Plester, Wood and Joshi (2009) believe that any engagement with the written word (as opposed to the spoken word) – including reading and writing textisms in digital form on mobile phones – is beneficial for children.

Wood, Plester and Bowyer (2008) posit that “children’s use of this technology appears to have a positive impact on their developing literacy, as it provides children with an additional resource for learning about and experimenting with letter-sound correspondences and language, and for reading and ‘decoding’ text.” They conclude that “If our children are showing difficulties with reading and spelling attainment, it would seem that this is in spite of the contribution of textism use, not because of it.”

## **Constructive approaches to texting**

While the evidence may suggest otherwise, in most classrooms texting is still seen as a problem, a subversion to the development of reading and writing skills. However, some language teachers are refusing to ban mobile phones and texting, and are trying to leverage the affordances that they present. They recognise that “a new form of communication is taking hold in the linguistic sphere, which means new challenges for teaching and learning -- but also new opportunities” (Bernard, 2008). Below are examples of how the issue of texting can be used for good in the language classroom.

### ***Evolution of language***

Language changes constantly. To illustrate this point, at the beginning of each school year Cindi Rigsbee, a sixth- and seventh-grade reading-resource teacher in the USA, shows her learners texts from Old English, Middle English, contemporary English from the time of *Jane Eyre*, and a MySpace page. Throughout the year, Rigsbee often refers back to this lesson to remind her learners of the different forms of writing (Bernard, 2008). Other teachers have contrasted IM lingo with Shakespeare to demonstrate how English has evolved (Lee, 2002).

### ***Teaching about audience***

There is a need to educate learners about what constitutes correct language, and to know when different types of language are appropriate in different contexts. Now, more than ever, teachers

need to “emphasize to students the concept of audience. Students need to understand ... that who one is writing for affects the way in which one writes” (O’Connor, 2005).

Leila Christenberry, former president of the National Council of Teachers of English and a university English professor, says that “it’s not that there’s never a place for this sort of thing, but it’s the difference between how you would dress to go out on Saturday night versus how you dress when you do yard work” (Friess, 2003).

There is nothing new about the guiding and correcting role that teachers play, as they teach context-appropriate behaviour (speaking, writing, socially interacting). Teachers have always corrected learners when they use slang in conversation or poor grammar and misspellings in written work.

When textisms appear in formal assignments, it provides an opportunity to have the conversation with learners about context. Kathleen Yancey, president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English and an English professor at Florida State University, says that “if you take an approach that views all of these forms of writing as legitimate forms, and you talk about how they are both similar and different across media, I think you are more likely to have students use the correct form for the correct audience. If you talk about texting as this bane that goes on outside of school, I don’t think that’s good teaching.”

### ***Increased writing***

Some teachers are using the quick, free-flowing writing style of texting to spark their learners’ thinking processes. Trisha Fogarty, a sixth-grade teacher in the USA says: “When my children are writing first drafts, I don’t care how they spell anything, as long as they are writing. If this lingo gets their thoughts and ideas onto paper quicker, the more power to them” (Lee, 2002). She does, however, expect her learners to switch to standard English during editing and revising.

Another example is offered by Robyn Jackson, a high school English teacher who has “organised an online chat room where some Gaithersburg High students meet once a week to discuss literature and writing. The students are allowed to use Internet speak in the chat room that would never be allowed in formal writing, but the online conversations are vigorous and intelligent” (Helderman, 2003, cited in O’Connor, 2005.)

Other activities that tap into learners’ own texting styles include getting them to translate text-drenched pieces, e.g. a MySpace page, into standard English, or translating passages from classic literature into text speak. The latter exercise allows learners to “demonstrate their comprehension of the writing and to create a form of multilingual focus, similar to how learning a foreign language tends to enhance a student’s understanding of his or her native tongue” (Bernard, 2008).

Eleventh-grade English teacher, Inez Brown, managed to marry texting and Shakespeare. She asked her learners to summarise – in the form of SMSs – passages from Richard III to succinctly demonstrate their comprehension of the text (Bernard, 2008).

Richard Sterling, executive director emeritus of the National Writing Project and adjunct professor

at the University of California's Berkeley Graduate School of Education, believes that these innovative approaches to texting that get learners writing more, or summarising, is very beneficial. His point of view is as follows: "The answer is not, 'We should ban texting.' That's absurd, and also impossible. It's much more about giving students an opportunity to write so extensively and so often that their writing develops. Those errors will disappear if there's a sufficient amount of writing going on" (Bernard, 2008).

### ***Tapping into the social nature of texting***

Rebecca Black, assistant professor at the University of California's Irvine School of Education, studied the reading, writing and reviewing that happens spontaneously on fan fiction websites. Fan fiction is fiction about characters or settings that is written by fans of the original work, rather than by the original creators (Wikipedia, n.d.). Fan fiction sites provide valuable scaffolding for the development of literacy skills (Black, 2005).

While fan fiction is not usually in the text register, there are important parallels to be drawn with the social nature of texting. Based on her study, Black (2005) explains that reading and writing are not discrete skills that can be learned independently of social interaction, or within a vertical subject area such as the English language. Instead, the learning of these skills is heavily embedded in specific social contexts. Fan fiction sites support the intrinsic socialness of young people (think about the popularity of MySpace and Facebook) in the context of reading, writing and reviewing original fiction.

Digital communications allow learners to instantaneously communicate and collaborate with peers. Given the literacy development possible with fan fiction, the social nature of texting could be explored as a way to achieve the same benefits. Sterling claims that "it's the social nature of texting that is increasing interest for teens ... And learning is often best done in social and collaborative ways" (Bernard, 2008).

It is necessary to explore all avenues that increase youth exposure to text and attempt to frame the creation and consumption of content as a social exercise, using the technology that is in the hands of the youth.

### **More research needed**

The high prevalence of texting in SA demands further investigation, especially given the need to improve the low literacy levels found across so many different languages. Research is needed to add clarity to the issue of texting and literacy in SA (the South African demographic is different from the UK, after all) to inform educationists and policy-makers. The research findings will be important because in SA we face the same dilemma as in the USA: "[H]ow to help educators adapt literacy education to the reality that instant messaging is the dominant mode of written communication in the lives of many American teenagers" (Brown-Owens, Eason & Lader, 2003).

If texting has no detrimental effect on spelling, and actually improves literacy development, then the role of mobile-based texting is significant for education in SA. Opportunities exist to use texting to teach about the evolution of language and writing for an audience, to increase the amount of writing learners do, and for leveraging the social nature of literacy development.

Questions for related research in SA include:

- Can mobile phones be used as platforms for exposing learners to the written word (even in the text register), and encourage them to read, write and discuss literature?
- What is the effect of texting on learners who do not have a good English language foundation? Are the same results found as those in the UK when the sample is comprised of learners with low literacy/language attainment, as in SA?
- What is the effect of texting in a language that is not a learner's mother-tongue on that learner's literacy development? If both the mother-tongue and the second language are used in texts, does texting affect the development of either language in any way?

Clearly there is not enough research to answer these important questions. The one thing that is known for sure, is that texting is not going to go away. It is vital to explore the opportunities for mobile-assisted literacy development, as well as understand and manage the risks.

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