OMG! Iz Txt Spk Wrecking Our Language?

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ABSTRACT

Language, generally, is one form of communication tool that is constantly changing and evolving. New electronic media like e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, personal web pages and blogs have created multiple forms of communication styles for various purposes and audiences. English language, commonly labeled as the international lingua franca, is also not immune to this change. With this evolution, people are changing the way they communicate with each other. Due to the excessive use of mobile phones and internet, people – unintentionally -are more prone to use the short message service (SMS) lingo in their communication. Students, being teenagers, are the most affected party. Several studies revealed that text speak affects students' writing skill, while some claimed that this new communication style does not give any impact on students' literary performances.Therefore, this paper aims to look into the overview of the use of text speak among teenagers and its influence on students' writing skills.

Keywords: *text speak, SMS lingo, abbreviations*

Introduction

Our language, as well as the way we communicate with one another, both in real and virtual worlds, is changing due to the evolution of phatic communication through the use of Short Message Service (*SMS*) and Instant Messaging (*IM*) (*Social media harms*, 2009). What is phatic communication? How does this type of communication affect the language we use in our everyday communication? Nordquist (n.d.) authenticated the definition of phatic communication as small talk, either in verbal or non-verbal forms:

> …the nonreferential use of language to share feelings or establish a mood of sociability rather than to communicate information or ideas; ritualized formulas intended to attract attention of the listener or prolong communication. The term phatic communication was coined by British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in his essay "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages (1923) (para.1-2).

Few examples of phatic communication include "what's up", "whatcha doin'?" and "how ya doin'?" and most of the time, these questions do not really require answers as they function as small talks.

Since the nature of the communication itself is informal, added with the increasing prevalence of current *SMS* and Internet chat room environment, texters and chatters are prone to the unintentional use of textism in their communication which later becomes a habit every time they virtually interact with each other.Several concerns have been raised in conjunction with this situation. Scholars are concerned that the use of textism will pose a threat, especially on young students; that it will eventually dominate the way people use the language to communicate. The characteristics of SMS lingo that favour abbreviations and short forms could hamper the written language and later create a new literary form that is full with cute emoticons as well as ever-changing and confusing abbreviations. Therefore, it is the researchers' intention to look at the overview of the use of textism among teenagers and its influence on student's writing skills.

The Rise of Text Messaging System

The fast-paced evolution of communication technology has made instant messaging (IM) and text messaging to become more prevalent in today's society, particularly among the Generation Y, also known as Millennial Generation. Malaney (2003) found that the Millennials are avid users of technology than people from other

generations as97.9% of the students surveyed owned a computer and 95.3% of them had access of Internet at home and used the Internet as their primary news source (as cited in Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008). Having born in 1980's and grew up in the era of technological advancement, they are known as being tech-savvy. Kane (n.d.) posited that "this generation prefers to communicate through e-mail and text messaging rather than face-to-face contact and prefers webinars and online technology to traditional lecture-based presentations" (Kane, n.d, para.3). With these traits and the growing popularity and advancing functionality of technology, mobile devices, in particular, have become one of the most must-have gadgets especially among the teenagers. Furthermore, the advancement of *SMS* features in recently designed smartphones has further made this application a new way of life.

What is *SMS* lingo? Generally, *SMS* can be defined as "the ability to send and receive short alphanumeric messages to and from mobile phones" (Latisha, Nazira & Norizul, 2007). It is also referred to texting, sending text messages or text messaging. Shazia, Maria, Muhammad and Priya (2013) posited that "SMS language is a term for the abbreviations and rebus-like slang most commonly used due to the essential pithiness of mobile phone text messaging etiquette" (p.12884). Since text messaging involves prompt responses, texters are more prone to opt for abbreviation, as well as to ignore punctuation and correct grammar - which requires them to spend more time pressing the keypad to construct complete sentences – as long as they get their messages across (Shazia et al., 2013). This is because early *SMS* application can only permit 160-character limit per message; therefore, texters need to save the space. Lee (2005) confirmed this by adding:

Because of the limited message lengths and tiny user interface of mobile phones, SMS users commonly make extensive use of abbreviations and shortforms, particularly the use of numbers for words (for example, "4" in place of the word "for"), and the omission of vowels, as in the phrase "txt msg" which actually stands for "text message" (p.1).

Therefore, it could be said that the use of abbreviation, omitted punctuation, ignored grammar, deleted vowels and substituted letters to represent whole words are the characteristics of *SMS* lingo, or also known as text speak. This type of language is very popular especially among the students, who are part of Generation Y, and this phenomenon has concerned school authorities particularly academicians, since text speak influences the language learning process.

The Influence of Textism on Students' Writing Skills

Technology comes not without consequences. As far as young student's writing skill is concerned, text messaging – a fruit of communicative technology – through mobile phones, email or social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter does negatively affect the writing skills of the youngsters. SMSs sent using text speak are short; hence, texters are using an abbreviated language learned and understood by fellow text users. For instance, "see you tonight" is texted as "c u 2nite", "got to go" is "gtg" or "no problem at all" will be "NPAA." Using this abbreviated language over time can affect writing and English linguistic skills.

A study done by Turner (2009, as cited in Lingwall, 2010) showed that a "frequent use of socially interactive technologies (including text messaging and instant messaging) was consistently associated with the use of particularly informal written communication techniques, along with formatting problems, nonstandard orthography, and grammatical errors". This causes deterioration of college students' writing skills which finally leads to lower grades and low quality graduates. In addition, Knudson et al. (2008) shows that high school students find it difficult to produce quality writing for university level coursework. The students' writings need a lot of correction which burdens both the students and the lecturers who need to spend more time to help improve the quality of the written works.

Maryam and Marlia (2012) in their analysis on the effects of abbreviations or textism on students' writing skills have revealed that it affects university students' formal writing, grammar, speaking and vocabulary. In a semi-structured interview involving forty Malaysian university students, the researchers found that the respondents admitted to sorting to abbreviated words like 'n' for and '2' for two, 'am reading' for I am reading in their formal writing and 'ASAP' for as soon as possible in speaking. It proves that textism among youngsters does not only give impact to their writing, as the other language skills also suffer

from grammatical, structural and vocabulary errors caused by the abbreviated words used in text messaging. Other researchers also admitted the impact text messaging poses on language skills. Lee (2002, as cited in Maryam and Marlia, 2012) called "… textism as an ongoing attack of technology on formal written English" while Humphrys said textism is "pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences and raping our vocabulary" (2007, ibid, p.2). Tabuashvili (2012) further supported this argument by adding:

> Some English authors believe that abbreviations and short text messages pose a threat to the "purity" of the English language. In certain cases, communication is complicated by the fact, that some abbreviations can be understood differently by a reader. For example, *lol* has three distinct meanings: *lots of love, laughing out loud* and *little old lady*. Therefore, the meaning of *lol* can be concretized according to the context in which it is used. The opponents of abbreviations and short text messages claim, that SMS pollutes the language and causes students' growing laziness. Moreover, its frequent usage results in growing unawareness of proper punctuation, grammar and spelling (para.5).

Rosen, Chang, Erwin, Carrier and Cheever (2010) in two studies involving 718 young adults (between 18 to 25 years old), revealed that the participants sent a mean of 588.69 test messages per month. The participants generally employed what the researchers called as "linguistics textisms" (p.425) such as the use of acronyms (LOL for 'laugh out loud'), lowercase (i instead of the upper-cased pronoun 'I'), removal of apostrophes from contractions (dont for 'don't') and shortening of words (u instead of 'you'). Rosen et al (2010) also revealed the use of "contextual textisms" among the participants (p.426) which were, the insertion of emoticons and smilies ('☺') to reflect their good feeling), application of certain characters to reflect emotional states (::hug::) and the use of capital letters to signify their strong feeling (I AM ANGRY). It was also found that the participants reported with more use of textisms produced a lower quality of formal writing when asked to write a complaint letter. In addition, the results reported that "one in four did use between two and three textisms in their writing samples" (Rosen et al, 2010, p.436), proving the negative influence daily textisms might have on users' writings.

However, Johnson (2005) provided a contrasting argument when she pointed that:

> College students today do not seem to have a problem code switching from "IM lingo" to formal Standard English. This is because college students today did not grow up with instant messaging; IM was just beginning when these students entered high school. Therefore, when college students sit down to type a formal assignment, like a paper, they are able to code-switch from IM language to Standard English (pp. 2-3).

The speculation that the use of text speaks affect students' writing abilities is also counterclaimed by a research conducted in 2004 at the Department of Communication and Science at the City University in London, by a speech and language therapist, Veenal Raval:

> The aim of his research was to test how the writing skills of students who text differ from those who do not, as a response to the increasing concern about the harmful impact of mobile phones on students' writing. Raval's quasi experiment consisted of participants aged 11-12. They were divided into a group that texted, and one that did not. Both groups had to undergo the same test held under formal conditions in a classroom. The students were given a written test, containing two exercises designed to be similar to what they would normally text about, for example what they had done the day before. The findings showed no outstanding difference between the two groups. Both made some grammatical and spelling errors, however there were no signs of Textspeak in the students' tests. Although the pupils that texted were found to write significantly less than those who did not, the content and quality of spelling was virtually the same.32 The use of fewer words is noteworthy but since the quality of content remains the same it suggests that texters express themselves in a more concise and focused manner. Texting may have improved the students' expressiveness, but it did not overall transform their register to a more informal version than the register of their peers (as cited in Yun, 2011, pp.13-14).

Conclusion

In conclusion, previous studies on the impact of textisms and students' writing skills have shown that daily textisms do negatively affect the quality of their skills (Turner, 2009 as cited in Lingwall, 2010, Maryam & Marlia, 2012, Tabuashvili, 2012, Rosen et al, 2010 etc). They lead to the production of lower quality writings with grammatical, vocabulary and structural errors – all of which might hinder effective learning of standard language skills particularly writing. However, despite the widespread concern over the idea that students' writing will be affected by the SMS lingo, or text speak, there are also studies which show that texting somehow is not the sole factor of students' deteriorating writing abilities (Johnson, 2005; Raval, 2004; Yun, 2011). Therefore, it could be said that although textism may have become today's lifestyle among the teenagers and may have negatively affected students' writing skill, students generally code switch when they have to do academic writing pieces. Somehow, the use of code switching, adapted by multi- language speakers allows text speak and academic English to be treated as two different languages. Hence, it could be concluded that students' academic English writing abilities does not totally suffer from the existence of *SMS* lingo, but it illustrates that the English language has an ability to effectively adapt the evolution of its speakers. Nevertheless, very few researches have been done to investigate the potential influence of texting on students' writing skill; therefore, it is hoped that more and more researches will be done in near future to further examine this phenomenon.

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