

## Texting is Not a Bane of ELT: A Reflection

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### Introduction

Teaching writing in an undergraduate class at Mekelle University, I once instructed students to write a well-developed paragraph, and I came across a paragraph written with all kinds of unusual abbreviations, punctuation, capitalization and spelling. Looking at the paragraph, at first, I was a bit irritated, but I decided to carry on reading. The incident, however, caused me to ponder and marked the inception of my concern about the effects of texting on students' writing skill. Since then, I have been sharing ideas with my colleagues who have had similar experiences and expressed their beliefs that texting is negatively affecting students' language learning in general and writing skills in particular. I have also heard some parents expressing worries that their children's writing skill has been decimated by text messaging. However, is texting really a bane or a boon to ELT? I began looking into this matter very closely (at least at a theoretical level) for I wanted to know whether it is really harming or supporting the development of students' writing skill. Hence, this paper is a reflection on this endeavour.

Recently, Ethiopian students have been immersing themselves in text messaging as they acquire and use mobile phones and become exposed to the Internet. Text messaging is the practice whereby users of mobile and other electronic devices exchange brief written messages via networks. The act of sending a text message is termed "texting", and the sender is also called a "texter" (Ross, 2004). Texting involves the use of pictograms and logograms in addition to words. Words might be either shortened through the use of symbols or symbols whose names sound like a syllable of the word are used (Ross, 2004). Put simply, a text may consist of words or an alphanumeric combination. For example, texting "you" could be represented as "u"; "to be" as "2b"; and "laughing out loud" as "lol". So with all these kinds of unusual features what would be the impact of texting on students' writing skill?

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## **Texting in ELT**

The effect of texting on language has generated a great deal of debate. While some educators and parents think that it is one of the drawbacks of technology because of its possible negative impact on writing skills of students, others contend that it rather enhances students' written communication skills, and therefore it is beneficial. If I were to make myself a member of one of these polarities, I personally support the second argument that texting is good for EFL writing skills development. Let me outline the debate first and then forward my reasons for supporting the idea that texting is a boon.

Individuals in the first camp base their argument on the fact that for the sake of brevity, concision, and economy, texting ignores essential aspects of writing such as grammar, syntax, and mechanics: spelling, punctuation and capitalization, and introduces new features which are unacceptable in standard English. Educators, parents and many others claim that these features are infiltrating in students' formal writing and express fears about the possible negative effects of these non-standard forms on traditional literacy skills (Huang, 2008). Studies (e.g., Geertsema, Hyman and Deventer, 2011; Tayebnik and Puteh, 2012) witnessed that a significant amount of teachers and students perceive that texting is negatively impacting formal writing. Evidently, several people blamed textism and described it as an ongoing attack of technology on formal written English (Lee, 2002), as a type of vandalism that is gradually destroying the language (Humphrys, 2007), and as the origin of language corruption and spelling poverty of youth writing (Vosloo, 2009).

The renowned linguist, David Crystal, and some on the other side think conversely that text messaging does not really pose a threat as many fear it can. They hold the belief that the more students write in whichever medium, the more they improve their writing skills. In his book, *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*, Crystal (2008) rebuts the widely held view that texting and its abundant use of abbreviations and slang can negatively influence student language and literacy. His claim was based on six main points; that: (1) less than 10% of the words are abbreviated in a typical text message; (2) abbreviating is not a new language phenomenon rather it has been in use for decades; (3) it is not mainly children who text; adults more likely do so; (4) students do not habitually use abbreviations in their homework and examinations; (5) texting cannot be a cause of bad spelling because one must first know spelling to text; (6) since texting

provides people with the chance of engaging with the language through reading and writing, it rather improves pupils' literacy.

Convinced by the aforementioned repudiations of the urban legends people hold, I tend to agree with what Crystal (2008, p. 91) says: "The best texters are best spellers and the more you text the more your reading and writing scores." It is plausible to make some possible explanations for the positive relationship between texting and spelling ability. For instance, the relative freedom of spelling allowed in texting may raise students' overall enjoyment of writing. Although this enjoyment may not convert directly into formal writing tasks, engagement with texting is likely to maximize exposure to writing. What is more, many text messages have a high phonological basis (Thurlow and Brown, 2003), and the flexibility to play with word sounds and spellings may benefit students to understand and apply the grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules needed for conventional spelling proficiency (Plester and Wood, 2009). Hence, it can have a potential application in teaching vocabulary and phonological awareness. In addition, the role of practice is obvious as an important factor that enables students to learn language skills better and faster. Students who are texting frequently are engaged in a lot of practice in writing since texting is, in essence, writing in a newer medium. Thus, students should be encouraged to have that devotion to practice, which might be a way to help them build their writing skills.

Moreover, as witnessed by Crystal (2008), the main development of ELT curriculum over the past two decades or so has been to consider the notion of "appropriateness" of language. It is replacing the old orthodoxy (correct-incorrect kind of conception) of language with a more sophisticated conception that every style of language has its purpose. Accordingly, we teachers need to teach varied styles of writing and gear our students' focus towards evaluating what the purposes of certain language style are. For instance, to make students become cautious about appropriateness, one can engage students in activities like converting a piece of an essay to text message and vice versa and ask them to identify what does not work.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, digital communication is here to stay, and so rather than deploring students' texting, teachers have to play a positive role in leveraging this new form of written communication thrive and assist the development of students' skills in writing. Thus, I would like to posit that

text messaging in itself can be a good platform for learning English. However, if it slips into formal writing in few cases, I recommend that teachers must be vigilant and clarify the distinctions between texting and formal writing. I believe, it can be controlled if teachers (together with parents who are capable of helping their children's learning at home) take the responsibility to teach how language is used in different mediums, tell them that it is unacceptable to write using texting language in the academic arena and make them diligent in proofreading and revising to eliminate textisms in their draft papers.

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