

The Desirability of Short Message Service (SMS) Technology in Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The evolution of handheld portable devices, such as mobile phone and wireless technology has resulted in radical changes in people's lifestyles around the world, including learning. Mobile phone which houses the short message service (SMS) is the most widely used technology in the world and the closest to the language learners. This paper therefore takes a look at how SMS technology can be a language teaching and learning potential the earlier negative findings notwithstanding. As many educational institutions today suffer from cuts in contact hours, large class size, insufficient and lack of qualified language teachers, the SMS technology offers a way of counteracting these constraints by making the language learning process interesting and student-centred. The paper observes that courtesy of the SMS students are now engaging in reading and writing more than ever before and that educators can harness the technology to help students learn school-related content such as sparking students' thinking processes, note-taking, comprehension of materials presented through an audio system, summary writing, vocabulary development and audience analysis in writing. The paper however recommends that educators should be skillful and sensitive in exploiting this language teaching and learning phenomenon.

Key words: SMS, text message, textese, textisms, textspeak, text messaging.

Introduction

The short message service (SMS) was developed within the mobile phone industry in the early 1990's, but did not become popular until about 1998 (Crystal 2001). SMS, as defined within the GSM digital mobile phone standard, is a service which enables its users to send short text messages from one mobile phone to another, or to a mobile phone through the internet (Hard af Segerstad, 2002). Thurlow and Poff (2009) define text messaging as brief-typed messages using the SMS of mobile cell phones, PDAs (personal digital assistants), smart phones or web browsers. Fortunecity (2000) sees SMS as a communication protocol, allowing the interchange of short text messages (of up to 160 characters including spaces) between mobile telephone services. Fortunecity reports that text messaging was introduced in 1995 as a way of allowing phone networks to communicate important service messages to their subscribers.

Communication through SMS is one mode of communication referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC). Crystal identifies the two types of computer-mediated communication- the synchronous CMC, whereby the communication occurs "in real time", such as Real Time Chat and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and asynchronous CMC, whereby communication occurs "in postponed time". The latter type does not require the participants to be online or to be available at the same time or place in order to receive and send the messages. Short message service (SMS) is transforming the way people interact with each other. SMS is a means of sending and receiving text messages of up to 160 characters between two or more mobile phones or between a mobile phone and a software application. SMS messages can be sent on a one-to-one basis or on a one-to-many or broadcast basis (Worsfold, 2007).) The initial growth of text messaging was slow with customers in 1995 sending an average of 0.4 messages per GSM customer per month. Today, text messaging is the most widely used mobile data service, with 74% of all mobile phone users worldwide or 2.4 billion out of 3.3 billion phone subscribers at the end of 2007 being active users of short message service (Wikipedia, 2010).

A lot of researches have addressed the role of texting as a social communicative resource in people's daily lives. Tanakinjal, Hanudin, Lajuni, and Jeto (2007) in Thurlow and Poff (2009) opine that 32% of adults in Malaysia cannot use their mobile phones without texting. Leung (2007) reports that Hong Kong students regard texting as a status symbol and young adults with lower social skills in Hong Kong and Japan prefer

texting to voice communication. Leung says results from a random sample of 532 college students showed that students who made the heaviest use of SMS were motivated by its convenience, low cost and utility for coordinating events. Ahonen and Moore (2009) state that in most parts of Africa and many parts of Asia and Latin America where internet connection, personal computers, landlines are not always available, mobile phone SMS is widely used. Here in Nigeria, the mobile phone has become a powerful tool for communication across the country and SMS has found relevance in almost every sphere of social life. Lin (2005) gives several reasons for the use of SMS as follows:

- i. SMS is more indirect and will reduce embarrassment.
- ii. It is less disturbing than phone calls.
- iii. There is no need to make call for trivial things.
- iv. It is fun.
- v. It is romantic.
- vi. It leaves something for future pleasurable remembrance.
- vii. One is more certain that the other person will receive the message.
- viii. One can ask the other person to send information to one to note down, e.g., when you do not have a pen to note down some information during a call.
- ix. One can reach the other party around the clock.

The emergence of SMS has generated a real debate among researchers as to whether to consider it a written or spoken form of language. Baron (2000) refers to it as an emerging language, a centaur, part speech, part writing. Nagalingam (n.d) considers it as a hybrid of both the spoken and written discourse. Crystal (2001) suggests that it is more than just a hybrid of speech and writing. He argues that although it displays properties of both media, it holds features that neither one of these media has. He therefore suggests that it must be seen as a new form of communication which he refers to as a "third medium." Others like Robert Beard, Professor emeritus of Linguistics at Bucknell University, USA, and Peter Fernandez, Professor of Information Technology at the Asian Institute of Management, Philippines, describe SMS as a "new kind of slang, a written slang which has never been heard of before". Furlough (2003) opines that computer-mediated discourse (CMD), e.g., SMS, creates an image of a new, distinctive variety with status and material substance of a language because it has the following characteristics:

- (i) Bilingualism, e.g., most texters are, in essence, bilinguals;
- (ii) Fluency, e.g., thousands of teens are fluent in another language;
- (iii) Codification, e.g., the creation of the world's text messaging dictionary;
- (iv) Diffusion e.g., text chats have started to bleed over into aspects of life;
- (v) Official recognition, e.g., words from text messages find their way into the English language dictionary.

Akeredolu-Ale (2012) opines that the use of textspeak in formal setting is getting to a ridiculous extent and textspeak is beginning to appear in application letters. It has been observed that about half of all curriculum vitae received by recruitment consultants contain spelling or grammatical errors in the nature of textspeak. Candidates aged between 21 and 25 are guilty of these mistakes. Thus, Adenike et al (2012) observed that if necessary machineries are not put in place on time to check this sudden way of spelling and writing words, it will become part of the growing population which will eventually mar the learners' writing skills. However, contrary to these concerns, much of the available research appears to paint a quite different picture. Some studies have found that today's teens are reading and writing more than any other generation because they engage in many different forms of written communication besides texting to include blogging and emailing (Baggott, 2006). The available research is beginning to show that the use of text messaging is helping more than hurting because students are now engaging in reading and writing more than ever before. Furthermore, SMS users must have a "critical understanding of the uses and characteristics of Standard English".

Awonusi (2004) argues that the new linguistic forms, coinages and spelling innovations in text messaging have emerged as a variety of English that is situational distinctive and context sensitive- a style that is dependent on the speech event and as a discourse, because it is based on a particular linguistic domain and at the same time explicates different relationships between interlocutors. In text messaging, what matters is not that it conforms to grammatical rules, but the fact that it communicates and is recognized by its receivers as coherent.

A number of studies have been carried out on the role of SMS technology on language. For instance, Nagalingam's (n.d) study centred on the analysis of the hearing impaired SMS communication and founded that the ability to communicate through SMS text messages has transformed the lives of the deaf, especially, the young, by overcoming geographical and language barriers that make them feel isolated. The deaf can now communicate with any other person by just sending SMS text messages. Nagalingam argues that SMS has also revolutionized the employment prospects of the deaf as they can take on jobs that require them to be 'on call'.

SMS'S POSITIVE IMPACT ON LANGUGAGE

Moreover, researchers like (Crystal, 2001; Cameron, 1995; Lewis, 2008; Adgar, 2003 cited by Hack (2005); and Sheidlower, 2002, cited by Hauck (2003), contend that SMS text messaging has positive impact on English language. For instance, Crystal believes that sending frequent texts can actually help children to read and write because of the abbreviations used. According to him, "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". Crystal (2007) describes texting as light- hearted use of language. He sees this form of language use as lucid and free from the heavy constraints of standard language. He argues that experimentation may enhance the development of key skills involved in the acquisition of literacy and that texting sees children explicitly demonstrating an understanding of how words can be manipulated, segmented and blended to allow for succinct and successful communication.

Vamhagen argues that the results of their study should ease some concerns and even open up discussion on how SMS language can be embraced within an educational or academic context. He opines that:

if you want students to think very precisely and concisely and be able to express themselves, it might be interesting to have them create instant messages with ideas, may be allow them opportunities to use more of this new dialect in brief reports or fun activities.

In a study by Nenagh Kemp (cited in Wikipedia 2009) on SMS which she titled *textese*, students were asked to compose messages both in proper English and in text message form and then she compared the two messages. Her findings showed that although there were significant differences between the ways of writing, the students were not losing their ability to write and spell English words correctly. She therefore concluded that using text shorthand can make messages slightly easier and faster to type in, especially when using the arduous process of cycling through groups of three letters with each number key. The only disadvantage, she opines, is that most people actually take longer time to read and comprehend what has been written.

Another study was conducted in 2010 at Coventry University and published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*. The researchers studied children between 10 and 12 years and actually found that using textese (SMS) helped children develop reading and writing abilities. The lead researcher, Dr Beverly Plester, said that children clearly recognized the difference between textisms and proper language, and understood the contexts under which it is correct and valid to use them. He argues that texting helped to increase exposure of children to the written language and to have fun with language so that it actually improved their ability to write and comprehend language. He, therefore, concluded that what we think of as misspellings don't really break the rules of language and that children have a sophisticated understanding of the appropriate use of words.

The controversy surrounding the impact of SMS on language notwithstanding, the technology can be a desirable vehicle in language teaching and learning. As any linguist knows, language is not a static thing. Change and development is the one constant in life, and the changing sounds and phrases of a language are merely reflections of the changes in a particular society. Text messaging can be a fun and playful way to communicate – the important thing to remember for education is teaching children how to employ different ways of communication. Writing an essay and writing a text are different things; children can learn both.

SMS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Language teachers should recognize that a new form of communication is taking place in the linguistic sphere, which should pose new opportunities for teaching and learning. In fact, language scholars have started exploiting the opportunities offered by the SMS technology. For instance, Karres, a teacher shows students how English has evolved since Shakespeare's time using SMS lingo as an example of today's speech (Lee, 2002). It is also observed that text messaging, just like other popular technologies, can be a potential learning tool. It can be harnessed by educators to help students learn school-related content. Lee (2002) stresses that, teachers who encourage students to use messaging shorthand spark their thinking processes.

Vosloo (2009) also reports that some teachers are using the quick, free-flowing writing style of texting to spark their learner's thinking processes. For instance, 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 on paper quicker, the more power to them". She does, however, expect her learners to switch to Standard English during editing and revising. Vosloo also adds that there is nothing new about the guiding and correcting role that teachers play as they teach context-appropriate behavior (speaking, writing, and socially interacting). He continues that, "teachers have always corrected learners when they use slang in conversation or poor grammar and misspellings in their written works. When textisms appear in formal assignments, it provides an opportunity to have conversation with learners about context".

Other activities that could be introduced into learner's own texting styles, according to Bernard (2008), include getting them to translate text-drenched pieces, e.g., a MySpace page, into Standard English, or translating passages from classic literature into text message. The latter exercise, according to Bernard, 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".

Richard Sterling (2008), an Executive Director Emeritus of the National Writing Project and Adjunct Professor at the University of California, believes that these innovative approaches to texting that get learners writing more, or summarizing, are very beneficial. His point of view is as follows:

the answer is not that 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 sufficient amount of writing going on.

O'Connor (2005) sees SMS as a potential learning tool which can be harnessed by educators to help students to learn school-related content. O'Connor stresses that there is need to educate learners about what constitutes correct language, and to know when a particular type of language is appropriate in a particular context. Teachers need to emphasize to students the concept of audience. Students need to also understand that "who one is writing for affects the way in which one writes".

Furthermore, the study by Mahmoud (2013) which investigated the effect of using English short messaging service (SMS) on the development of the foundation year students' speaking and writing skills at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) opined that Short Messages can be of great importance to English language teaching in particular and to languages in general. Written and oral tests developed by the researcher were used to measure such development. Findings showed that students who practiced SMS with their teacher noticeably improved their writing and speaking performance. He however warned that it can be destructive if not controlled and left to accept make up words, choppy lingo, sloppy spelling and grammatical errors to get a quick and short message across.

Al-Qomoul (2011) in Mahmoud (2013) investigated the effect of using English Short Message Service (SMS) on the development of the first year students' spoken and written communicative skills in Tafila Technical University. The findings of the study show that the students who use SMS in their

communication with their colleagues, friends and families improved greatly in both oral and written skills. The researcher recommended that students use English SMS in their communication. Jacob (2011) cited by Mahmoud (2013) also conducted a study to investigate the effect of using mobile phone short message service (SMS) on note-taking and comprehension of materials presented through an audio system. The results of the study concluded that SMS style of writing improves students' note-taking competence as well as comprehension.

Baron (2008) in Aziz et al (2013) contends that the use of SMS language manifests creative use of letters, punctuation, numbers and it increases phonetic awareness in children. It is also observed that different people have their own unique texting styles. Moreover, different messages use different patterns and styles due to their Communicative function. Some are relational and some, informational which requires a change in register. Baron observes that as far as children can distinguish between formal and informal language, SMS language does not affect their literacy.

SMS in Higher Education

Lomine and Buckingham (2009) suggest that SMS can be used in higher in the following three basic ways:

- (i) Direct teaching
Interactions: asking questions or sharing views/information (tutor to students, students to tutor, students to students) -- before/during/after class
Learning activities (e.g. quiz questions, instructions, even mini theoretical input)
Tasks for consolidation, suggestions for revision
- (ii) Teaching-related
Personalised support
Motivational messages sent to students
Feedback on lectures, ideas or projects
Alerts to check email (with longer message) or to visit webpages (newsfeed)
- (iii) Contact and communication
Timely information: Reminders of key dates, homework, preparation, deadlines
Cancelled/rescheduled classes (or change of room, late arrival etc)
Update (on marking, assignments available for collection etc)
Overdue library books

SMS can also be used in note taking during lectures, seminars, symposia, workshops and conferences. This enables the students or participants to have access to comprehensive and accurate information conveyed in the speech situation.

It should be noted that language is dynamic and changes constantly so teachers often make use of the different changes that occur. For example, teachers may allow students to begin by transforming the language of the classics to every day lingo; they can use the SMS format to reinforce the idea that audience is one of the most important components in writing by having students write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, then writing the same message using SMS. This also serves to demonstrate the idea of appropriateness. The most important thing is for teachers to provide students with real life reading and writing opportunities. Students' vocabulary can be reinforced by texting the vocabulary words and having students review them. The skill of circular writing using text messaging can be accomplished by having students create a story by having them text message one or two sentences at a time then sending to the student next to them who creates another sentence until the story is completed.

SMS IN SUMMARY WRITING

Summarization is a complex task in which students are required to use their prior knowledge to perform cognitive processes on the information that is read. Williams (2012) reported how text message was used to teach summary writing as follows. Beginning with a paragraph from the textbook, the instructor and students read and discussed the paragraph. The instructor modeled how to write down only the main ideas and supporting information by "thinking aloud" five sample paragraphs and having individual students to do similar "think aloud." Next, the instructor modeled how to produce a summary of one of the five paragraphs using the following checklist: (1) Have I found the overall idea that the paragraph or group of paragraphs is about? (2) Have I found the most important information that tells more about the overall idea? (3) Have I used any information that is not directly about the overall idea? (4) Have I used any

information more than once? Afterwards, the instructor composed a summary of the sample paragraph in text messaging format using text speak or text language. The message was sent to each cooperative group. A discussion of the summary statement and the text message sent occurred and students were given the opportunity to make comments and ask questions for clarity. Next, each cooperative group summarized the remaining four paragraphs and sent the instructor summaries via text messaging using text speak or text language as well. During the second half of the class session, individual students practiced summarizing single paragraphs while the instructor provided individual and class feedback. After the summarization instruction, students' production of summaries improved greatly.

SMS IN TEACHING VOCABULARY

Teaching vocabulary has occupied much space in the research of the last decade as vocabulary is the most important component of teaching and learning languages especially in relation to communication.. Motlebzadah (2011) in Mamoud (2013) investigated the effect of SMS on the retention of collocations among Iranian lower intermediate EFL learners. To do this, forty university students were assigned into experimental and control groups. The participants received English collocations as well as definitions and example sentences on paper or through SMS messages in a scheduled pattern of delivery twice a week during five weeks. Students were compared at the end of the study.

Tabatabaei and Goojani (2012) in Mamoud (2013) investigated the effectiveness of text messaging on vocabulary learning of EFL learners. The participants in the experimental group were required to send SMSs containing a sentence for each covered word in class while those in the control group wrote some sentences containing the target words to exchange them with their partners and bring their assignment to class. Results of t-test analysis indicated that participants in the experimental group out performed those in the control groups. Haashemi and Azizinezhad (2012) in Mamoud (2013) studied how short message (SMS) can help EFL/ESL students in learning English vocabulary. They guided language learners to integrate mobile technology into their study plan and finally to be flexible in their learning activities. The findings of the various research projects show that SMS-based vocabulary learning can increase EFL/ESL language learners' flexibility and may be highly motivating for them.

The study by Mamoud (2013) showed that prior to using SMS as teaching- learning strategy students in the experimental group were not as good in writing as they were after using SMS on daily basis and receiving immediate feedback from the teacher. The performance of the students in the experimental group improved significantly more than those in the control group.

One of the first projects to use mobile phones in language learning, according to Brown (2001), cited by Chinnery (2006), and was developed by the Stanford learning laboratory. Stanford University Learning Laboratory used integrated mobile phones in a Spanish learning program. The program developed Spanish study programmes utilizing both voice and email with mobile phones. These programmes included vocabulary practice, quizzes, word and phrase translations, and access to live-talking tutors. Their results indicated that mobile phones were effective for quiz delivery if delivered in small chunks; they also indicated that automated voice vocabulary lessons and quizzes had great potential. Their tiny screen sizes were deemed unsuitable for learning new content but effective for review and practice. Thornton and Houser (2003) in Chinnery (2006) also developed several innovative projects using mobile phones to teach English at a Japanese University. One focused on providing vocabulary instruction by SMS. Three times a day, short mini lessons were emailed to students, sent in discrete chunks so as to be easily readable on the tiny screens. Students were tested weekly and compared to groups that received identical lessons via the web and on paper. The results indicated that the SMS students learned over twice the number of vocabulary words as the web students, and that SMS students improved their scores by nearly twice as much as students who had received their lessons on paper. The study also showed that the vast majority of the students preferred the SMS instruction, wished to continue such lessons, and believed it to be a valuable teaching method. Levy and Kennedy (2005) created a similar program for Italian learners in Australia, sending vocabulary words and idioms, definitions, and example sentences via SMS in a spaced and scheduled pattern of delivery, and requesting feedback in the form of quizzes and follow up questions.

Kiernan and Aizawa (2004) cited in Chinnery (2006) set out to study whether or not mobile phones were

useful language learning tools and to explore their use in task-based learning. They argue that second language acquisition is best promoted through the utilization of tasks which require learners to close some sort of gaps, thereby focusing the learner on meaning. In the study, upper and lower level Japanese students were placed in three groups: PC email users, mobile phone email users (SMS), and mobile phone speaking users (due to cost this latter group became face-to-face speaking users). They were pre-tested with three narrative tasks, three invitation tasks, and a repeated post-test. The result showed that while all the face-to-face speaking users completed these tasks in the time provided, only two pairs of PC email users and one pair of mobile phone e-mail users completed the tasks. The face-to-face speaking users had significantly faster performances, and the mobile phone email users had the slowest; however, the latter were not significantly slower than the PC email users. An interesting side note, according to them, was that the fastest mobile phone email (SMS) user had told the entire story in a single text message. In general, fewer words were used by mobile phone email (SMS) users, yet they were able to communicate effectively.

Several free and commercial mobile language learning programmes have recently become available. For instance, the BBC world Service Learning English section offers English lessons through SMS in Francophone West Africa and China (Godwin -Jones, 2005). China's leading media and internet service company, 'Sina' has also included a unique mobile phone service to teach English to over 200 million Chinese mobile phone users (BBC Press Office, 2003).

Conclusion

Using SMS in language learning is one of the best opportunities for language learners to extend and increase their learning outside of their classrooms whenever and wherever they desire. Language learners would be able to extend their learning opportunities and participate in a different type of learning. They are highly motivated to use SMS because they can communicate things they can't communicate through other means and they enjoy the freedom of violating the rules of spelling and grammar constraints. Texting can be used to help build foundational reading skills such as word recognition and phonological awareness. It can be used to generate discussions of formal and informal writing for different tasks, audiences, and purposes, which are necessary skills for meeting college and career readiness standards. Texting is writing, and students who text frequently are engaging in frequent writing. Therefore, educators and technicians at schools and other academic institutions should be very sensitive and skillful in exploiting this phenomenon.

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