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Michael S. Nuzzo

Cedarville University, michaelsnuzzo@cedarville.edu

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From Textbook Tradition to Time-Saving Textese

Michael Nuzzo

Our day-to-day interactions are quickly progressing from textbook tradition and to time-cutting textese. People are communicating more than ever by phone. Many people have been and are being drawn towards the language of textese. Text messages are typically comprised of abbreviated words and phrases, lack of punctuation, and emoticons. Emoticons are symbolic representations of faces which are usually constructed from typed characters to produce a visual image. These emoticons, “incorrect” spellings, and abbreviations are called “textisms.” Textisms make up the language of textese. The main idea behind the language of textese is to provide a means of communication that can be written and understood by almost everyone, but is also quick to compose. To allow everyone be able to easily and efficiently use textese, there are little to no rules associated with it. The only “rule” is, the reader must be able to understand what is trying to be communicated by the author. But, the author is also trying to save as much time as possible while writing. Usually, a balance of these two seemingly opposite goals, is achieved by utilizing emoticons, creating phonetically correct words, and/or omitting some letters in words or abbreviating common phrases.

Some say that texting is too random and unruly, and is causing an overall decline in the literacy of children and adults alike, while others believe that instant messaging may actually help improve literacy ability. Studies show that due to many other factors in an individual’s life, texting is mostly a reflection of one’s literacy ability, but at times, may also support the growth of literacy creativity. Of course, as every person is an individual with different personalities and learning styles, texting and instant messaging will have slightly different effects on each individual’s literacy ability. Many diverse studies have been completed regarding the effects, if any, texting and instant messaging have on one’s literacy, and although there are slight

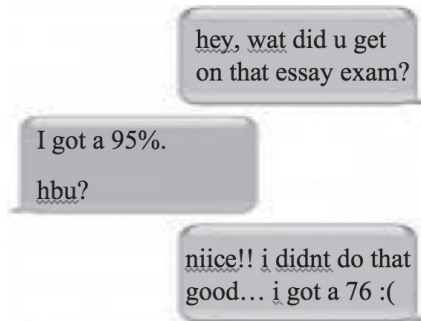
variations in results, there are some common themes that surface. Texting and instant messaging is a reflection of the literacy ability in adults, and has an overall positive effect on children's literacy. A "positive effect" simply means that there is some sort of effect from texting that is beneficial to one's literacy, whereas a "negative effect" would be an effect that is detrimental to someone's literacy.

Texting has an assumed negative effect on literacy. Many people believe that texting and instant messaging do not have a beneficial place in the world of literacy, but many of them either do not have sufficient evidence, or the evidence they do have is outdated. There is a significantly larger amount of evidence to support the idea that texting has a positive to no effect on literacy, than there is for a negative effect. This does not mean that the data to support a negative correlation is illogical or absurd, but that there is simply more evidence to suggest a positive correlation. L. Verheijen completed the course English Language and Culture at the Radboud University Nijmegen with his/her first thesis "The Development of Syntactic Structures in Advanced Dutch EFL Writing", and graduated summa cum laude with a second thesis, "The Language of Quoting in Academic Writing". He/She now works as a Ph.D. student at the Department of Dutch Language and the Research Centre for Language Studies. Verheijen conducts research under Professor Dr. Wilbert Spooren, on modern communication methods such as texting (Radboud University, 2013). In one of his/her publications, Verheijen discusses a large variety of studies conducted on the effects of texting and textese on literacy. He/



emoticons

she presents five studies concluding a positive effect, nine mixed or inconclusive results, but only two that found a negative effect (Verheijen, 2013, p. 588-595). Often, because technology evolves so rapidly, data and results become outdated and no longer significant.



Text Messaging

For example, according to K. Bostley, the author of the article “Is Texting Hurting Us Academically?” texting originally had a character limit of only 160 words per text. This would encourage the use of shortened phrases and words, and consequently, could cause a decline in literacy. Even though this information may have been relevant a few years ago, this data would now be considered outdated and no longer valid, because the majority of today’s phones have an extremely large to no character limit for texting and instant messaging. Result relativity and quantity is an important factor to be considered, but does this mean that we should conservatively limit ourselves and our children from texting and instant messaging? Will textese actually decrease our literacy and ultimately make us less functional in society? The answer is not as black and white as one might expect.

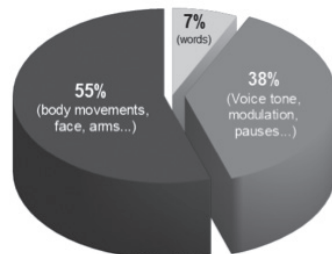
Instant messaging effects literacy differently for every person. There are many different factors in life that determine our literacy ability, such as, parental relationships, schooling opportunities, racial influences, and class of wealth. For example, an individual who is living in an impoverished area with high-school educated adults, will have different opportunities as compared to someone who has been raised with wealth and lives in communities where higher-education is expected. This is not to say one situation will produce a better individual than the other, but simply that there will be different opportunities for different people. Similarly, studies have shown that adults’ literacy is affected by texting differently than children’s literacy (Grace, Kemp, Martin, & Parrila, 2014). For children, textism use can encourage creative thought, and in adults,

textism use is a direct reflection of one's literacy ability.

N. Kemp is a senior lecturer in psychology for the University of Tasmania in Australia. He/She participates in researching acquisition, development, and use of spoken and written language with A. Grace. Kemp also maintains the position of associate editor for the *Journal of Research in Reading* (University of Tasmania, 2005). F. Martin and R. Parrila are both professors of psychology at the University of Newcastle, Australia and University of Alberta, Canada, respectively. Martin has completed a Ph.D. in Visual Processes in Dyslexia, and currently conducts research in the area of Word Recognition and, specifically, Phonological Processes in Reading Development (University of Newcastle, 2012). Parrila has earned a Ph.D. from University of Alberta with a specialization in Learning and Development, and currently researches a variety of linguistic factors, such as Reading Acquisition and different types of dyslexia (University of Alberta, n.d.).

In studies completed by Grace, Kemp, Martin, and Parrila, the pattern appeared that textese use can actually encourage creative thought in those who are younger than 18 years old. According to them, higher literacy skill has been consistently and positively linked to a higher use of textisms (Grace et al., 2014, p. 868). This can be logically explained. When a child attempts to express emotion through written language, he/she must figure out how to convey emotion to the reader without being able to use facial expression, voice tones, eye contact, or gestures. Dr. Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at University of California, Los Angeles, has completed a study in which he learned that communication is 93% non-verbal. This statistic has been widely accepted and is well known in the world of communication.

If communication is 93% non-verbal, then expressing emotion and the correct message, is a difficult task for texting. When children morph words into textese, they are engaging in a written language that was created for simplicity. This requires the child to utilize a new way of thinking to express



a desired tone or emotion. The child may choose to use emoticons to show how the writers face would look, or stretch out vowels to mimic how someone might express sarcasm. Because textese has no real restrictions or rules, some textisms may have never been encountered before. Consequently, the child must creatively figure out a way to manipulate letters and words to express emotion to, but without confusing, the reader. This process requires creative stimulation of brain which could easily carry over to literacy, problem-solving, and other creative aspects of life.

Some may argue that because of all the short-hand textese that is used in instant messaging, children are inclined to use textese in school and daily communication. To address these concerns, D. Wray conducted a study in which he received 27 volunteer teachers to participate in a questionnaire. D. Wray is a Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, and has published over 50 books pertaining to different aspects of literacy in his/her ten years of teaching (Green, 2014). Out of the teachers presented in Wray's study, the majority of these teachers claimed that they, personally, did not see a negative effect on their students' literacy from texting. One teacher said, "...even as children they are aware that text abbreviated language isn't the way to write in their school work. I haven't ever seen it come up in their literacy." (Wray, 2015, p. 275) The first-hand experiences of these teachers, combined with the many more positively linked studies referenced by L. Verheijen, indicate that although there seems to be a logical train of thought for both opposing viewpoints, there is a lack of statistical evidence for texting being negatively linked to children's literacy. Since children are likely to develop better creativity and problem-solving from the use of textese, would adults have similar results?

By the time someone is 18 years or older, their literacy skill is already well established. Because of this, texting will not have the same effect on them as someone younger whose literacy skill may not be as established. Grace, Kemp, Martin, and Parrila noted that "... our [their] results suggest that rather than textism use endangering literacy scores, textism use relies on a range of literacy skills that colour the relationship between textism use and literacy, just as early literacy experiences are related to current literacy skill," (Grace et al., 2014, p. 869). In adults, literacy level is actually reflected through the use of textisms, and not affected by them. It is a direct reflection of many different literacy-influencing factors

present throughout the person's life. When someone writes a book or a paper, the reader observes the author's voice. "Voice" is the style, tone, or feel that impresses itself upon the reader, and is what causes people to have favorite authors. Just like the author's voice controls the feel of the written work, and not the other way around, it would make sense that the texter's voice, or literacy ability, would control the feel of the text; the message does not change the texter's literacy.

Textese has, if any, a positive effect on literacy. According to the teachers interviewed by D. Wray, the students' are smart enough to correctly distinguish when it is and is not appropriate to use textese. Some teachers mentioned that children with a lower literacy level may have more textese appear in their school work, but this is actually another example of textese being a reflection of one's literacy. It would make logical sense that if children are struggling with literacy, they may interject textisms to better express themselves. For example, if a child is unsure of how to spell a word, but his/her brain is used to phonetically sounding out and creating textese, he/she may resort to a phonetic spelling of the word. Although this might seem detrimental, it is actually beneficial. Even though the child may have spelled the word incorrectly, they did not give up. They tried to express their point through use of creativity. I asked a few classmates how they felt texting has affected their literacy. One said that he feels his literacy has been improving because of it. He discussed that texting is almost like writing miniature quick-response essays, and this has improved his communication skills because he must quickly choose words to specifically articulate his responses and ideas. This exercises his vocabulary and quick-thinking which also translates to face-to-face interaction. Another stated that he has always had trouble with spelling. But now, when texting, auto-correct, a program that automatically corrects spelling errors, gives him instant feedback about his spelling. He said that he feels his spelling has improved because of it. Although currently, our standardized languages do not allow textisms to be used, we should still promote the use of texting and instant messaging. We should also encourage the professional world to begin recognizing textese as an appropriate form of communication, as it saves time and is easy to use.

Literacy is affected by so much more than just texting and instant messaging. Grace, Kemp, Martin, and Parrila determined that the use of textisms by an individual is a direct representation of a variety of linguistic, social, and technological factors that were present when the individual was introduced to textese (Grace et al., 2014, p.

871). Others have determined that with children, there is a positive link between textese and literacy. L. Verheijen quotes “experience with textese can reflect or even enhance children’s traditional literacy abilities”, (Verheijen, 2013, p. 590). A. Campbell suggests that because texting and instant messaging are becoming more and more popular, textisms may no longer be thought of as improper in the future (Campbell, 2014, p. 1 & 3). This would mean that being fluent in textese may actually save people the time and frustration they currently experience when dealing with “proper” language. There are around 775 million adults who are not completely literate. This translates to about one in every five adults being illiterate (Statistics on Literacy, n.d.). But even though these people cannot properly read or write, it does not mean they lack revolutionary ideas. Textese can allow lower level literates to freely express their ideas that could progress our world. Texting and instant messaging are mediums we can use to allow more ideas and concepts to shape our society. As technology progresses, more and more people are embracing instant messaging as a new form of communication. They are observing that there could be a linguistic benefit to texting as well as opening new paths to our futures. Texting and instant messaging will be something our children experience. Let us properly use this piece of technology to encourage our youth to be creative in their language and explore new ways of communicating. Communication is the key to success. If we want our children to be successful, if we want our children to be those who propel the world into the future, let us encourage them to explore new options and think outside of the box. They need to have a medium over which to communicate their fresh ideas to peers and like it or not, this medium is changing from text-book tradition to time-saving textese. Will we try to stick to the old ways of “proper” language, or will we embrace the change, and produce new ways for people to more easily communicate and, consequently, open up our world to new ideas and concepts that have never before been heard?

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