

The Effects of Text Messaging on Students' Literacy

I cannot seem to walk across my university's campus without seeing at least one person glued to the phone screen typing away as fast as they can. Most people have probably texted on their phones at least once. The Centre of Science Education at Sheffield University found that about ninety percent of the youth have cell phones, and that ninety- six percent of this group uses them to text (Plester, Wood, Bell 137). Americans tend to use their mobile devices to text more than to make calls (Cingel and Sundar 305). Texting is reported as the most preferred communication style (Cingel and Sundar 306). The introduction of mobile phones and texting has greatly impacted the way in which people communicate (Kemp and Bushnell 18). People no longer have to make phone calls to keep in touch with friends and family, they can now type a short message stating whatever they need to say.

Text messaging has grown in popularity ever since the very first text was sent in the year 1993 by a student who was working for the Nokia Corporation (Drouin and Davis 49). Teenagers have reported an average of receiving 46.03 and sending 45.11 messages in a day (Cingel and Sundar 310). In another study, ninety percent of students in seventh to twelfth grade reported sending eleven texts per week (Kemp and Bushnell 18). Texting is thought to have possibly negative and positive effects on students' literacy. When asked their opinion, educators said that they believe that texting has a negative effect on students' writing skills (Verheijen 595). This belief may be a result of teachers having mentioned receiving work that contained textisms (Powell and Dixon 58). The issue of texting having effects on literacy has received media attention over the years. While it is commonly assumed that textisms have negative effects on student literacy, some studies suggest that they may also have positive effects depending on the situation in which they are used.

Although much of the media attention that has been directed at the effects of texting has been negative, some studies argue that texting may actually have a positive effect on the literacy skills of students. In one study, results showed that the more abbreviated words that were used, the higher verbal reasoning scores tended to be, which points to a clear positive correlation between textism use and verbal reasoning (Plester, Wood, Bell 139-140). Another study that was conducted using British children suggests that more proficient literacy skills was associated to deciphering textisms, which supports the idea that using textisms are driving development of literacy skills (Kemp and Bushnell 20, 23). A textism or textese is “a largely sound- based or phonological, form of spelling that can reduce the time and cost of texting” (Kemp and Bushnell 18). Textisms are often associated with acronyms, emoticons, and the removal of excess parts of spelling and grammar (Drouin and Davis 50).

In an article written by Powell and Dixon, it was observed that exposure to textisms had a positive effect on spelling (62). During this study, participants were given two spelling tests. One was administered before the exposure to textisms and the other was given following a period of time of reading textisms (Powell and Dixon 60). It was observed that the scores for the second test were higher after participants were exposed to textisms (Powell and Dixon 61). A study that was mentioned in the article by Kemp and Busnell found that participants were not any quicker at composing messages than conventional English communications (18). During this study, participants were asked to take a literacy test and to take part in the textism portion as well. Participants read out loud two text messages and wrote out two as well. During the writing phase, the participants typed out two spoken messages (Kemp and Bushnell 21). The results from the literacy test showed that those who indicated that they did not text had slightly better performances than those that did text (Kemp and Bushnell 22). This suggests that using

textisms does not necessarily have a negative effect on literacy skills; but rather those that use textisms, only use them for speed in communication.

Higher quality literacy skills were related to greater textese reading speed and accuracy (Kemp and Bushnell 18). Children who were writing and decoding text messages tend to have skills associated with greater literacy and vocabulary awareness (Verheijen 589). It was observed that different uses of abbreviation show an understanding of language phonemes (Verheijen 586). In a literacy assessment it appeared that the effects of seeing textisms seem to be just as effective to seeing correct spellings of words before taking a spelling test (Powell and Dixon 64). There is a possibility that textisms may help to improve student literacy (Powell and Dixon 58). This can be inferred from the idea that texting gives children more chances to practice language skills (Verheijen 586). Writing about the possible benefits of student texting, Lee, Bell, O'Conner and Helderma suggest that texting may be beneficial because it "gets children writing" (qtd.in Plester, Wood, Bell 138).

A relationship is suggested between literacy and texting because texting uses abbreviations, which depends on phonological awareness (Plester, Wood, Bell 138). Texting has been found to be heavily linked to phonological awareness in students (Powell and Dixon 59). Textisms make writing more efficient (Kemp and Bushnell 19). As time progresses, textisms may no longer be thought of as incorrect. This is attributed to the idea that our language is constantly changing (Verheijen 587). Those students that participated in a survey conducted by Lenhart said that they consider texting as an informal writing style, similar to phone calls and hallway salutations (Cingel and Sundar 307).

Even with some results that texting may indeed have a positive effect on the literacy skills of students, there is also evidence that points to there being negative effects for this action

as well. On average, eighty two percent of twelve to fifteen year olds and forty nine percent of eight to eleven year olds have a cell (Plester, Wood, Bell 137). The adolescents mainly used their phones for texting. When talking to friends, they seem to ignore punctuation and capitalization concepts while texting (Cingel and Sundar 306). A study was set up in which participants were placed in a normal classroom setting so that the experimenters could gather data on the effects of cell phone use on the classroom experience. In a survey taken before the study, participants expected to lose thirty percent on an assessment if they were texting, and surprisingly enough they did perform very closely to what they had predicted. Students agreed on the survey using phones are distracting, but that they continue to use cell phones in class (Chacon et. al 323). Students also predicted that they would score better if they were not texting (Chacon et. al 326).

In the study, the participants were given a passage to read. Reading the passage took much longer for those that engaged in texting while trying to read (Chacon et. al 324). There were instances of documented distraction from phones ringing, texting, or instant messaging (Chacon et.al 323). Participants were given an assessment on the material that they were supposed to have read. Students that texted scored lower than the control group students who did not text (Chacon et. al 325). There was a twenty seven percent decline when participants texted as opposed to the non-texting group (Chacon et.al 328). It was determined that there the time spent texting was negatively correlated to quiz scores (Chacon et. al 328). Results support the idea of negative effects of texting in a classroom setting (Chacon et. al 328). This information seems to suggest that the presence of texting in the classroom is not conducive to learning the material that is presented to students. The results from this experiment also suggests that texting in itself may not be the reason for lower scores on literacy test. It may be that the

time and place that a person chooses to text message may be part of the problem. The ringing of phone during the study may have distracted the other students and in turn, made them perform poorer on the test as well as those who were texting during the study. Results from this particular study suggest that there should be more studies done on the distraction of students due to texting as opposed to the current studies that only focus on the nature of texting itself. Perhaps after more studies like this are conducted, methods can be developed that may possibly lower the amount of distractions in the classroom.

Texting continues to have an impact in the education department and the literacy skills of students. There has been an increasing amount of instances where students have turned in work with texteses included (Verheijen 587). It has been observed that using phonetic language has negative effects on literacy (Plester, Wood, Bell 137). In a study, participants were asked to transcribe back and forth between Standard English and textisms. Mistakes made in transcription to English encompassed missed words, punctuation, untranslated textisms, and misspellings (Plester et al. 139). It was also observed that those who texted more often, tend to have worse results in non-verbal measures (Plester, Wood, Bell 140). Some students do not seem to be able to alternate between textspeak and normal English in a classroom setting. Adaptations, abbreviations, letter omissions, and homophones tend to negatively predict grammar scores (Cingel and Sundar 316). This may be a reason why educators have a negative outlook on student testing habits.

Those that reported sending more than three texts a day tended to score lower on literacy tests than those that did not (Plester, Wood, Bell 143). It was also observed that high texters scored lower on verbal and non-verbal reasoning than non-texters and low texters (Plester, Wood, Bell 140). Results from studies suggested an overall negative effect on texting on literacy

test results (Verheijen 595). It has been suggested that students are not distinguishing between informal and formal contexts, and are using textese at the wrong times (Verheijen 587). The general message that the media sends about the effects of texting tend to be rather negative overall. Thurlow is quoted saying that texting “signals the slow death of language” and is “a threat to social progress” (qtd. in Verheijen 586). It was discovered during a study that participants took longer and made more errors when they had to read textese messages as opposed to reading Standard English (Kemp and Bushnell 18).

Even with all the possibly negative effects that texting can possibly have on their literacy, children still continue to text. There are a variety of reasons for why people choose to use textisms in their messages and correspondences. Textisms are used as shortcuts to make messages shorter since there is usually a cap on the amount of characters that a phone is programmed to allow in a text message (Verheijen 583). Since textese is mostly sound based, or phonological, they are often used as a way to save time and money (Kemp and Bushnell 19). By using textisms, the person may feel like they are considered “cool” by their peers (Verheijen 583). They are more likely to use this form of writing in times where speed is needed (Cingel and Sundar 309). This is an example of how children are more likely to use methods that they see as helpful (Cingel and Sundar 308). The youth are likely to use textspeak when interacting with friends (Cingel and Sundar 307). Many students have confessed to using mobile phones for social networking as well, which may also be an instance where textisms are being used (Chacon 323). As the years have gone by, the amount of seven to ten year olds that own a cell phone has doubled (Plester, Wood, Bell 137). By using textisms, poor spellers may use textisms as a way to hide their weakness (Kemp and Bushnell 19). This can help them to hide a weakness that they may have so they may better blend in with their desired social crowd.

Almost every scholarly source that I have come across during the course of my research has mentioned in the discussion section that there is a need for further research on this topic. Drouin and Davis mention in their discussion section that long term studies should be conducted on the same group of individuals for at least a few years (64). They argued that it would be more beneficial to conduct a long term study over several years to get a better idea of the effects of texting on literacy in the long run. By conducting a study in this manner, it may be easier to observe if texting over the years has any effect on whether participants are able to remember how to spell certain words that they may not use on an everyday basis (Drouin and Davis 64). A study that spans several years would have the potential to present more concrete evidence that could either support or negate that notion that texting has negative effects on literacy.

I believed before actually beginning my research that texting may have had a negative effect on my personal literacy skills since I have been exposed to texting more often over the recent years. I had also believed that my personal involvement in texting my friends who use textisms may have played a negative role as well. With all of the information that has been gathered from all of the studies and presented in this essay, it seems like there are some conflicting results. Some studies suggest that participating in text messaging has a negative effect on ones literacy skills, while others suggest that texting does not have any effect. After reviewing the information, I am under the impression that the act of texting in itself may not affect literacy skills; but rather when and where a person chooses to text may be the reason. The study that was conducted in a classroom setting with documented distractions from texting and phone ringing influenced my opinions the most. After reviewing this information, I agree with the idea that a person may not have to actually be texting for it to have an effect on their literacy and comprehension. Instead, the person only has to be distracted long enough to not pay

attention to the information that is being presented. The distraction itself has the potential to keep a student from learning in a classroom setting. I have been in similar situations where I was either distracted in a class by someone texting or by a phone ringing during instructional time. After reviewing the information presented in the studies that I reviewed, it seems that there are not enough concrete findings that are able to suggest without any doubt that texting does have a negative effect on texting. I believe that with more long term studies that it can be more possible to come to a more concrete conclusion on whether texting in itself is having a negative effect on literacy skills.

Texting has become any every day task that many teenagers engage in on a day to day basis. Many of those text messages that are sent often contain textisms. The use of textisms is starting to become more accepted among the younger generation. There have been suggestions from both media sources and educators that texting may have a negative effect on the literacy skills of students. Perhaps that biggest problem is that students do not distinguish between times when they need to write formally without using textisms, and when they are writing informally and the use of textisms is acceptable. With more long term studies on the same group of individuals, it may be possible for researchers to determine if the use of textisms does indeed have negative effects on literacy. With long term studies, it may be possible to see if individuals carry the textisms that they use in their personal correspondences into their formal writing in a workplace environment. Until the time that concrete results are acquired to suggest that texting has deleterious effects, it may be wise to encourage students to lessen their use of textisms, and to instead use proper grammar and spelling while they are using texting as a form of communication.

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