THE EFFECTS OF TEXT MESSAGING ON STUDENTS' ENGLISH IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM REMEDIATION

EBIBI, JOHNSON OJEKA
Department of Arts Education
Faculty of Education
University of Jos

AARON, VERA ANAP
Department of English Faculty of Arts
University of Jos

BAKO, NATI VICTORIA
Department of Arts Education
Faculty of Education
University of Jos

Abstract

The information communication technology (ICT) came in the form of Global System for Mobile communications (GSM) handsets, electronic mails, text message (SMS), chats and the internet. It is a positive development that is meant to enhance our growth and change the way humanity had hitherto perceived and done things. Ironically, text messaging, an aspect of this invention is linguistically being abused by some youths who are regarded as future academics and professionals. The wrong use of text messaging, lack of the knowledge of the contracted forms of English verbs and/or outright refusal to correctly apply the rules have been fingered as some the factors in the declining performance of learners of English

language in Nigeria.. This paper examines text messaging and opinions expressed by language scholars on this issue and suggested measures that will discourage and possibly eliminate this negative trend among youths. The descriptive/historical research design was used to highlight some of these abuses. The use of standard contracted forms of verbs was recommended and a strong appeal for the enforcement of rules governing their usage in both formal and informal contexts by all concerned with the teaching and learning of English, particularly in the classroom context, was made.

Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are often associated with the most sophisticated and expensive computer-based technologies. But ICTs also encompass the more conventional technologies such as radio, television andtelephone technology (United Nations World Youth Report, (UNWYR, 2003) While definitions of ICTs are varied, it might be useful to accept the definition provided by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It states that 'ICTs are basically information-handling tools - a varied set of goods, applications and services that are used to produce, store, process, distribute and exchange information.

Information communication technology (ICT) has brought about a drastic reduction in human labour, introduced the needed relief for human beings and has generally speaking, enhanced the standard of living in developing nations. In specific terms, ICTs have radically transformed virtually all spheres of human endeavours - education, commerce, transportation, security, research, leisure, job search and communication.

For the purpose of this paper, emphasis will be on text messaging which is an aspect of ICTs. According to Uzochukwu, Ekwugha and Okafor (2015), the short messaging service (SMS) is a miniature and abridged style of transmitting writtez information. The authors explain that text messaging as a form of communication involves communicating through a

composed message or a piece of information typed using the phone's alphabetical keys which is then sent to the intended recipient who reads the visual written message or information. Scholars argue that this form of communication has systematically revolutionalized human communication system the world over and has systematically transformed written communication (Atanda & Umar, 2006; Oluga & Babalola, 2013).

The users of SMS have evolved a "language of their own" based on alternatives so they can 'say' more in less time. It is an informal communication with which they understand and communicate with each other. This feature of text messaging has become a global phenomenon as it cuts across young people in most countries of the world. It should also be noted that text messaging/e-mail is used extensively in e-learning at the university level (Uzochukwu, Ekwugha & Okafor, 2015).

This style of communication became prominent in Nigeria with the introduction of the mobile phones (handsets/GSM). This SMS style of communication is used for different communication purposes such as exchanging information on events; invitation to religious, social, political, academic meetings, making business contacts and sending goodwill messages, among others (Taiwo, 2009:102).

Unfortunately, the language of text messaging has crept into formal use of English language expressions. Some learners of English are using e-mails, chats, text messaging to introduce ungrammatical expressions in formal contexts such as tests and examinations. Consequently, such speakers of English introduce Contractions in every English word they write or speak. It is worthy of note to observe that such unconventional contractions are gradually being used by learners in writing internal and external examinations (West African Examinations Councils Chief Examiners Report, 2009). Ebibi (2010) notes that the wrong use of contractions in verbs feature prominently not only in the writings of students of tertiary institutions but also in those of postgraduate students of universities.

This linguistic aberration which is highly prevalent in text messaging

using GSM handsets, electronic mails otherwise called e-mail and chats on the internet is gradually being introduced into official academic activities such as assignment, tests, projects and even examinations by a large number of learners in Nigeria.

The obnoxious and unhealthy development (use of these unconventional forms of contractions in all the elements of English sentences) has made teachers of English, parents and other stakeholders in the education of the Nigerian child to express concerns that students' writing skills stand the risk of being sacrificed on the altar of text messaging (Dansieh, 2011:222). Considering the important role and functions of English as a language of government, commerce, judiciary, administration, media, education, among others in Nigeria, this issue needs not be overlooked.

It is a norm in English to use contractions especially in some verb forms, but these contractions have contexts of usage which must be adhered to by any speaker or learner who wants to communicate intelligibly in English. Besides, it is not all elements of the English language sentence that carry contraction(s). At this juncture, it is necessary to point out some examples of these linguistic abuses in the writing of even university students. They include:

(1) "1hv dropt ur buk on d shelve" in place of I have dropped your book on the shelve.

(2) "Am in a mtg. pls call me ltr" in place of, I am or I'm in a meeting; please call me later.

(3) U shldnt do dat 2 ur parents or dnt u wnt 2 come bak. In place of "You should not do that to your parents or don't you want to come back" (Baron, 2000; Coordination level of WAEC marking centre, 2009).

One worrisome thing is that rather than restrict these localized or group expressions to such informal setting/groups, a great many of the students occasionally use them even in serious academic work such as assignments, tests and even examinations (Ebibi, 2010).

According to Uzochukwu, Ekwugha and Okafor (2015), this form of communication oftentimes disregards the basic rules of English grammar especially

among youths and this has raised a major worry for the society in recent times. The author opined that SMS communication is gradually taking over written communication and indirectly jeopardizing students' usage of the standard English language in their academic writings.

In its preview, the University of Alabama Computers and Applied Technology Program (UACATP) (2009) asserted that:

Even though text messaging has brought a great deal of convenience, quickness, and a new language to our society, however, many problems have arisen with the development and prevalence of text messaging as well.

The foregoing reinforces the concerns expressed by many scholars that in spite of the merits of text messaging, it is assaulting children's grammar among other problems. Some teachers also believe that certain wrong contractions used in text messages assault written English. This is because some students write formal papers using poor punctuation and inappropriate contractions they carry over from text messaging (UACATP, 2009; Maples, 2009). Students sometimes do not realize they use text lingo/jargon in their academic writing. Many language experts have proved that internet actually has an impact on English. Baron (2000) finds that abbreviations such as:

C U 18r for "see you later", and 101 for "laughing out loud" came into use in chat groups on the internet. According to him, 'I have also heard of people mimicking: a c, a u, l, 8 and r with their fingers to "spell C U 18r" when leaving their friends'.

Baron further explains that this clearly shows that internet/text message has had an impact on students' usage of English language and their everyday behaviour with regards to grammar and vocabulary. One might say that e-mail is closer to speech than conventional writing. The message tends to be extremely informal including clipped words (such as prob. for problem), simplified spelling (for instance thru for through) and the use of words like nope or yep.

Similarly, Blake, Emily, Leckington and Morris (2011) conducted a research on some of the effects and potential problems arising from the use of this text

messaging. A survey of students and instructors at Lane Community College found that 70% of those surveyed believed that texting had harmful effects on students' writing skills. Suffice it to say that some of the questions included in the survey and the responses are worrisome thus some of them have been highlighted below:

Lane Community College Instructor Survey

Figure 3

Question # 1

Have you noticed an increase in the use of "text language" in assignments that have been turned in to you in the last couple of years? 81 % said Yes; 19% said No

Question #2

Would you say that greater than 5% of assignments turned in to you are affected by students' use of" text language"?

67% saidYes: 33%saidN0

Question #3

Do you have trouble reading student's emails because of their use of "text language"? 30% said Yes; 70% said No

Question #4

Do you think that texting has negative effects on student's writing skills?

78% said Yes; 22% said No

Question #5

Have you texted while you were driving a vehicle in the last month?

30% said Yes; said No.

This study takes a look at some of the effects and potential problems arising from the use of text messaging. The result of the data analyzed indicated that text messaging has negative impact on students' writing and literacy because the survey of students and instructors revealed that 70% of those surveyed believe that texting has harmful effects on students ' writing skills.

When taken as a whole, this study clearly indicates affirmation of the concern that text messaging is bad for literacy. The result of the survey further implies that while governments, parents and other stakeholders in education are

working round the clock spending huge resources to promote literacy, some learners are deliberately or inadvertently working to frustrate these efforts because both students and instructors believe that texting has negative effects on students' grammar and writing skills, with instructors believing that it does somewhat more harm to the students than good.

Scholars still insist that SMS language has seemingly destroyed the way school children read, think, and write the conventional English language. O'Connor (2005:2) reports that the more students use tools like instant messaging, the less they are able to separate formal and informal English. Lenhart (2012), agrees with this point as he says 'with the advent of information communication technology, many are concerned about the social ramifications that texting or text messaging holds, particularly on younger generations. He stresses that between teenagers and their friends, cell-phone texting has become the preferred channel of basic communication. In other words, it is becoming more common for children at younger ages to communicate with their friends via text messaging as opposed to phone conversations, face-to-face interaction, ignoring writing.

Consequently, many students feel that they can use both "text language" and proper English, switching from one to another depending upon what they are doing or who they are talking to (Blake, Emily, Leckington & Morris (2011) Stout, (2011).

It is for this reason that this paper examines the effect of text messages on students' English in Nigeria and proffers remedial activities that may control or eliminate the trend.

While it is permissible in English language and some other languages for speakers to use certain abbreviations and contractions to facilitate certain activities such as taking notes at given speeds, this liberty should be limited to given contexts the use of some linguistic conventions by employing symbols that cannot be decoded thereby not communicating entirely. From the foregoing, students' adequate knowledge of contracted forms of English verbs is imperative.

Many linguists, both local and foreign, have done tremendous works in the area of contracted forms of the English verb. For instance, Quirk and Leech (1989) tabulated the acceptable contracted verb forms while discussing the primary and modal auxiliaries as follows:

		NON-NEGATIVE	UN CONTRACTED NEGATIVE	CONTRACTED NEGATIVE
Base		be		
Present	I st person			
	3 person Singular	is, 's	is not, 'not	is't
	2n person, 1 st and 3rd Person plural	are, 're	are not,	aren 't
Past	1 st and 3r Person Singular	was	was not	wasn't
	2n person, 1 st and 3rd Person plural	were	were not	weren't
-ing form		being	not being	
-ed participle		be		

Note

(a) Aren't is widely used in BrE, but there is no generally acceptable contracted formfor am not in declarative sentences. Ain 't is substandard in BrE and is so considered by many in AmE; as well as serving as a contracted am not; it is used alsofor isn 't, are't, hasn 't, and haven 't.

The modal auxiliaries are the following:

NON NEGATIVE	UNCONTRACTED NEGATIVE	CONTRACTED NEGATIVE

Can	Cannot, can not	
Could	Could not	Couldn
May	May not	Mightn
Might	Might not	Mightn
Shall	Shall not	Shan 't
Should	Should not	Shouldn
Will, '11	Will not, 'Il not	Won
Wouldn	Would not, 'd not	Wouldn
Must	Must not	Mustn 't
Ought to	Ought not to	Oughtn to
Used to	Used not to	Usedn to
		Didn use to
Need	Need not	Needn
Dare	Dare not	Daren 't

NOTE

(a) Mayn 'tis restricted to BrE, where it is rare.

(b) Shan 'tis rare in AmE

(c) Ought regularly has the to-infinitive, but AmE occasionally has the bare infinitive in negative sentences and in questions (although should is commoner in both cases): you oughtn't smoke so much; ought you smoke so much? Ought regularly has the to-infinitive, but AmE occasionally has the bare infinitive in negative sentences and in questions (although should is commoner in both cases): you oughtn't smoke so much; ought you smoke so much? (Quirk & Leech, 1989). Ebibi (2010) undertook a study aimed at evaluating the use of contracted forms by final year English students of the University of Jos and found that a very high percentage of the population often uses contractions in formal or official writings such as tests, official school assignments, homework and even examinations. The author posited that the trend is a worrisome development which is completely unacceptable because whereas the students claimed they knew the contexts in which contractions are used, they still use them in official contexts such as tests, homework and examinations as well as other serious academic work. Ebibi

added that it is a contradiction that these students use these informal expressions to discuss with their superiors even when the situation demands that they use formal language. As a result of these findings, the study advocated that language teachers at all levels should consider themselves agents of change through which this disturbing trend could be eliminated.

Conclusion

Data from the above survey showed some correlation to the points of view that instructors have a great role to play if this trend must be reversed. Both the participants in the research and the instructors agree that students may need more instruction on code-switching, especially early in their education to effect a change.

This change has become more urgent given the rate at which it is spreading and the moral burden it places on teachers as academic role models. Fullan (1993) avers that moral purpose and change agent, at first glance, appear to be strange bed fellows but on closer examination they are natural allies. He maintained that: more directly, moral purpose-or making a difference-concerns bringing about improvements. Moral purpose keeps teachers close to the needs of children and youth; change agent causes them to develop better strategies for accomplishing their moral goals (p.2).

The implication of this is that if teacher must effect the needed change in this emerging drift from the norms of language use, then they must consider it beyond mere expression of concern to making concerted efforts that will not only reduce but completely get rid of this wrong use of text message by learners (youths). One of the ways to curb this problem is through basic methodology of re-writing formal and informal writing conventions. Emphasis on classroom writing assignments should be made compulsory and appropriately rewarded. Writing tasks must be specific and pre-writing strategies should focus on the form and function of writing. If tasks are constant, the practice factor will be adhered to.

Language teachers should emphasize the need for students to apply the knowledge of grammatical rules to their daily activities which may be formal or

informal. This would prevent students from applying informal expressions used in text messages in formal contexts. Besides, teachers should penalize students who intentionally or inadvertently use contracted verb forms out of contexts and reward those who use the language correctly. This will motivate other learners to use language appropriately and correctly too.

Uzochukwu, Ekwugha and Okafor (2015), suggest that teachers should monitor and educate students on the need to avoid their abuse and intrusion of the SMS language into formal writings while students should not feel overwhelmed by the social relevance of text messaging but should rather aim at attaining mastery of and communicability in the target language because bastardization of a language cannot enhance its development.

Furthermore, students should be exposed to more interactive activities such as inter- and intra-departmental and university seminars, debates and quizzes to reinforce the language learnt in class. This will not only improve their use of English but will also keep them off their cell phones and thus reduce the frequency with which they use these appliances. Studies have shown that exposure to literature increases the knowledge of all language skills as it extends linguistic knowledge (Povey, 1972) and it also facilitates the acquisition of the four language skills. Students should therefore be exposed to intensive and extensive reading of literature and literary works.

As remedies to this development, Odey, Ndobo and Floribert (2014), recommend that students be more and more sensitized on the need to avoid SMS language in formal contexts of communication not only in examination but also through special programmes conceived for such an objective. They further suggest that adequate time should be given to students in exam situations as some of the cases of 'unauthorised' use of SMS language often stem from the fact that students do not 1 have ample time to answer questions.

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