

## **SHORT MESSAGE SERVICE (SMS) TEXTING LANGUAGE AMONG STUDENTS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The use of the Short Messaging Service (SMS) of mobile or smart phones among youths in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria for communication is almost becoming a universal habit. The reasons for the ascendancy of this new telephone writing style in recent times are obvious: it is quick, it does not adhere to the rules of English grammar, it is relatively cheap, more convenient, and allows for flexibility and creativity. Unfortunately, the addictive tendencies that go with this widely accepted writing style among the teeming population has raised and is still raising a lot of concerns among educators based on the possible infiltration or interference of this writing style with British English (BrE) constructions among students in their formal writings. Therefore, this paper x-rays the uses and implications of the Short Message Service (SMS) texting language on learners of English Language in Nigeria. The study contends that the use of SMS texting is in itself not harmful. However, caution must be exercised in encouraging students in its use particularly in ensuring that the basic rules of grammar, punctuations, concord and others are strictly followed in formal writings.

**Keywords:** Short Messaging Service, Texting Language, English Language, Mobile Phones.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The school is a formal organization established for the teaching and learning of reading, writing, numeracy and communicative skills. In this wise, The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (2013) in the National Policy of Education recognizes English Language as a compulsory cross-cutting subject along with other subjects namely: general Mathematics, Trade/Entrepreneurship subject and Civic Education. Therefore, the language has remained a medium of instruction for all subjects from basic levels to tertiary level in Nigeria and other countries in the West-African sub-region. Consequently, English language has remained the official language of communication and instruction for all subjects from basic to tertiary levels in Nigeria and many other countries. It is a core subject that must be offered and passed (with a minimum of a Credit) at the junior and senior secondary school levels as a prerequisite for admission to study any course in higher institutions. The knowledge of English language at all levels of education helps in understanding other subjects taught at school except for French, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa language.

In spite of the laudable importance and use of English Language as a medium of instruction and language of communication in the wider society of Nigeria, it has been noted that English Language competence of the Nigerian secondary school students has been on a steady decline over the years (Fakeye, 2012). The general weak command of people in the use of this important language also reflects in the day-to-day use of the language among people of

diverse age groups and socio-economic status. Unfortunately, this decline is quite noticeable in the mass failure of students in English language in public examinations. For instance, the chief examiner for 2007 May/June West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) reported poor performance of students in English language. Fakeye (2012) adduced that the report had it that students failed because of the following deficiencies such as weakness in skills of writing, construction of loose sentences, transliteration from the mother tongue and abuse of the basic rules of grammar. Very many candidates scored zero under mechanical accuracy aspect of the essay. Candidate's errors were listed under wrong spellings, wrong usage of concord, tense usage and wrong construction of verb.

These unwholesome situation remained the same in 2009 as 356,981 (25.9 %) of the 1,373,009 candidates that sat for WASSCE made distinctions and credit grades. In 2010, the percentage of students who made distinctions and credit grades in English dropped to 24.9% because only 337,071 made credit and distinctions grades out of 1,351,557 candidates that sat for the examination. The chief examiner's report for 2009 showed that failure of the subject was due to the following problems: spelling errors, ignorance of the proper use of punctuation marks, ignorance of the proper use of capital letters and small letters. Others are ignorance of the difference between the present and past tenses, inability to re-state the ideas of a passage in different words and expressions and the inability to identify parts of speech and their functions in sentences (Fakeye, 2012).

The foregoing remark by the chief examiner suggests that spelling errors, ignorance of the proper use of punctuation marks, and ignorance of the proper use of capital and small letters can be attributed to various limiting factors that students often hold tightly to over the years. These limiting factors include but are not limited to use of slangy languages, Pidgin English and even the recent Short Message Service (SMS) texting language style that unconsciously interferes with ones spellings in formal writings.

### **Short Message Service (SMS) texting language**

Short Messaging Service (SMS) texting is a practice that involves the sending of messages through the Short Messaging Service (SMS) of a mobile phone using abbreviated words and sentences shortened into alpha-numeric formats. It is a general term that is used to refer to the short written messages usually sent through phone and other portable devices via a telecommunication network. SMS according to Oladoye (2011) was first used in December 1992 by a 22-year old named Neil Papworth. He says that the concept of SMS was developed by Friedhelm Hillebrand, Bernard Ghillebaert and Oculy Silaban in 1984, in the Franco-German GSM cooperation. Since the invention, the mobile telephone has been the latest way to communicate quickly.

SMS is a generic part of a phone, web or mobile communication system that supports the exchange of short messages between discussants. Dansieh (2011) defined text messaging as the practice whereby users of mobile and portable devices exchange brief written messages via cellular networks. It is used in place of voice calls in circumstances where it may be impossible or inexpedient. Tomita (2009) defined the technology of SMS as a communications protocol used to deliver short text messages, up to 160 characters, via Global Systems for Mobile Communication (GSM) enabled mobile phones.

Uhunmwangho (2009) defined a text message as "any linguistic event, usually a written form of speech that is imbued with meaning". Ong'onda, Matu and Oloo (2011) observed that the

terms 'text messaging' or just 'texting' refers to the brief typed messages sent using the Short Message Service (SMS) of mobile/cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), smart phones or web browsers. The SMS (short message service) is one of the latest and quickest forms of written communication since the invention of mobile phone technology. The effectiveness of this medium of communication depends on the appropriate combination of the alphabets, letters, template pictures and even punctuation marks by one known as 'the sender or texter' to another 'the message recipient'. This communication technique is currently in use in advertisements, newsletters, television and by people on social media.

### **Ascendancy of Short Message Service (SMS) and texting in Nigeria**

The Short Message Service (SMS) became prominent in Nigeria during the introduction and advent of the mobile phones (handsets/GSM) (Njemanze, 2012). The SMS style of communication was 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 (Taiwo, 2009). This style of communication makes extensive use of alpha-numeric phone keys to form designated words without necessarily given attention to the grammatical rules of the English language.

The Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) was formally introduced into the Nigerian telecommunications sphere in 2001 during the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo. Today, with an approximate of over 60 million mobile phone users, text messaging has become a driving force in building social relationships, monitoring political issues and fighting injustice in the Nigerian society. Out rightly, this growing trend is being championed by the younger generations in the country to the extent that they have been labelled 'the thumb tribe' for being skilled in manipulating phone and computer keyboards with their fingers, mainly the thumb (Taiwo, 2010).

Shortly after the advent of GSM and entry of new telecommunication companies into the telecommunication industry, many business men, civil servants, parents, artisans, traders, cattle herdsman and even students found mobile phones services affordable. Consequently, mobile phones became a 'general street madness' and a medium of communication among young and old alike. Many simply preferred to send text messages because of its relative cheaper cost to making a phone call. Aside this fact, it is considered more economical in terms of time, effort and money/airtime resources usage. Also, the flexibility of combining letters and numbers like 'b' and '4', '4' and 'u,' '10' and 'Q', to represent 'before', 'for you' and 'thank you' justifies the reason for the ascendancy of this 21<sup>st</sup> century 'SMS shorthand' among young people. Moreso, some short phrases or statements such as "to whom it may concern" for instance, could be simply written as 'twimc' while "Love you with all my heart" could also be typed as "luwamh."

In Nigeria today, the heavy penetration of social network media such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Twitter, Badoo, and BlackBerry Messenger among others has further contributed in no small measure in promoting the use of SMS texting on smart and portable devices such as Android, IOS phones, I-phones, and Blackberries. This view is supported by Akinlosotu (2016) who accentuated that:

*"In contemporary times, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities has made it possible for a lot of people of similar interest on- water, rail, air and on land, to be online at the same time without*

*physical or direct contact; through the help of the internet and the 'new online commodity' called social network media''(p.2)*

Recently, these ICT devices do not only send letters and numbers as text message but also help to express one's emotions - 'smiley or saddened moods' using template pictures in a short message or chat. Thus, this has led to its wide usage as many use text messages to send invitations to people for an event or social function, services, job interviews, special scheduled meetings and even season greeting messages.

### **Use of SMS texting language among Nigerians**

Thurlow and Poff (2009) compiled three kinds of texting maxims which are brevity and speed; paralinguistic restitution; and phonological approximation. The researchers claim that different methods such as the usage of acronyms, emoticons, letter-number homophones, phonological approximation, non-observation of grammatical rules, multiple punctuation and capitalization have been employed in texting to achieve the three maxims. Similarly, Crystal (2001) pointed out that "the challenge of the small screen size and its limited character space (about 160 characters), as well as the small keypad, has motivated the evolution of an even more abbreviated language than emerged in chat groups and virtual worlds".

In a quick 'SMS' survey conducted by Njemanze (2012) among one hundred students in their first year in Federal University of Technology Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, the following messages were randomly selected among students:

<i>Y re u ntcomin 2 schl dis days</i>	- Why are you not coming to school these days?
<i>Swthat, I ms u so dialy</i>	- Sweetheart, I miss you so dearly
<i>I shl be comin 2moro. Ok</i>	- I shall be coming tomorrow ok!
<i>I'l liv 4 skol @ 8.00am I hop U' r goin</i>	- I will leave for school at 8.00am I hope you are going?
<i>I 4got ur Reg No</i>	- I forgot your registration number
<i>Hv a 9yc day</i>	- Have a nice day
<i>I mzcalkulat ddi afeystaday</i>	- I miscalculated their fare yesterday

Educational institutions' authorities use SMS to send academic information to students, lecturers and other staff effectively such as result grades, school events, new lecture schedules and venues, schedule meetings. Political parties use SMS to communicate with their party members and for political campaign, churches use the technology for evangelism, football fans use the technology to share information about match fixtures and scores in matches. SMS can be used by school authorities to contact student's parents it can also be used for contacting/exchanging educational information needs with family and communicating educational issues with lecturers and seeking advice from peers (Nwagwu, 2012).

### **Implications for Writing English Language**

As more and more students worldwide acquire and use mobile phones, the tendency to be taken over by the unrestricted rules of SMS texting increases. This is because short messaging habit is like every other habit, which could become difficult to 'uproot' when it takes some 'deep rooting'. This argument is supported by some parents, students and

educators who express concerns that learners' writing skills stand the risk of being affected by text message writing style. This argument has awakened three main schools of thought which can be described as: the SMS School of negativist, positivist, and neutralist. While some teachers, parents and students stand to think that text messaging exerts some negative influence on students' writing skills; others in the form 'the positivist school,' contend that it enhances writers' communication skills by giving them speed and accuracy with an enhanced ability to 'write more with less'. The third school (the neutralists), consider SMS texting to be neither 'a blessing' nor 'a curse'.

The use of text messaging service for communication among youths, students in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria has almost become a universal habit. The reasons are obvious; it is quick, it does not adhere to the rules of English grammar, it is relatively cheap, more convenient, allows creativity, used in establishing new and re-enforcing old relationships (Njemanze, 2012). This subtle practice among the teeming population is one that has generated and still generating a big deal of debate as some educators consider the SMS messaging style as harmful to students' writing and grammar. This view is supported by Holloway (2011: 10-11) who succinctly expressed discontent with the use of SMS abbreviations by noting that:

*".....writers and language experts have come out against the use of SMS abbreviations. British journalist and broadcaster, John Humphreys has said that texting is "wrecking our language" and has called its users "vandals". Linguistic traditionalists worry that texting will reduce users' ability to write correct English sentences, and will harm their spelling and vocabulary. Because SMS originated from the need to send, very short messages, it discourages complex vocabulary and prevents the creation of longer, more sophisticated phrases".*

On the contrary, Tomita (2009) claimed that most students that engage in SMS text messaging are still able to differentiate between the standard and the non-standard form of writing. He argued that text-messaging tools enhance a workable means of teaching students 21st century skills to enable them communicate efficiently and work as a team. O'Connor (2005) averred that some educators feel that the more you permit students to use SMS, the better they be become. This group of educators contends that texting even provides an opportunity for teachers to teach about how language has evolved from Shakespearean English to Internet English. They argued that text messaging is not just writing anything, but logically constructed tense in alphanumeric writing style. They noted that before students send out text messages, they do some editing in order to format the messages into a limited but precise number of words (Dansih, 2011).

Educators from this 'school of thought' contend that text messaging has no effect on English grammar. In their view, text messaging could be considered as another language. Since learning a new language or slangy words does not necessarily affect a student's ability to use English grammar, text messaging as another language cannot either. They argued that each generation has its own jargon and yet, the English grammar has not changed. Therefore, all that students need to do is learn the basics in English class what the distinctions between slang, texting lingo and Standard English are (Russell, 2010; Dansieh, 2011).

## CONCLUSIONS

The use of SMS texting is in itself not harmful. However, its addictive effects could have serious implication on learning among students. This is because its addictive tendency could



overwhelm learners; making them so used to it that they may no longer realise the need for Standard English constructions even in writings that are supposed to be strictly formal. Although, its inherent benefits cannot be disputed in the facilitation of communication among a wide range of persons. However, caution must be exercised in encouraging students in its use particularly in ensuring that the basic rules of grammar, punctuations, concord and others are strictly followed in formal writings.

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