

SMS LANGUAGE INTERVENTIONS ON STUDENTS' NOTE-TAKING

SKILLS: NEW INSIGHTS FROM DIGITAL LITERACY

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Abstract

The negative influence of SMS style of language on the Standard English language writing skills of students have been at the front burner of academic researches on digital literacy. Findings have revealed that students adopt non-standard usage and contracted forms of English words which characterize this language style in their formal writing. This premise being a fact, however, from every lemon, comes out lemonade. To this effect, this research set out to identify ways this textism can be harnessed to impact the students' study skills and thus improve their reading and learning outcomes. Effective note-taking enhances students listening skills and participation in the learning process. To maximize this benefit, the student would have to multitask and as such needs to use those abbreviations that are familiar to him. The paper then posits that students' habitual use of SMS language; which is characterized by personalized and special abbreviations, can intervene in their note-taking skills. Therefore, it advocates that teachers in teaching note-taking skills should encourage students to incorporate these features in their note-taking to enhance active participation in class and improve their learning outcomes. At the same time, the paper suggests that teachers should constantly remind the students not to use them in their formal writing.

Key terms: Digital literacy, SMS language, Note-taking, Textism, Textese

Introduction

Innovations and developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have continued to generate issues of research concern in the world of the academia. Issues such as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), social media discourses, online teachings, etc., have all contributed to literacy discourse. Such have been of immense concern to the discipline of language because language seems to be at the centre of them all. Diversity in literacy function has heralded such notions as digital literacy, cultural literacy, media literacy and they have given rise to what is referred to today as 'New Literacies'. Of particular concern to this paper is digital literacy.

Digital literacy according to Hague and Payton (2011.21) refer to “the skills, knowledge and understanding that enable critical, creative, discerning and safe practices with digital technologies in all areas of life”. For Njemanze (2014.41) digital literacy is “largely concerned with the production and consumption of verbal and symbolic (written) aspect of screen-based texts”. The above definitions in summary make reference to the fact that digital literacy refers to knowledge of the use of digital technologies such as mobile phones and computers to carry out verbal, signs and written communication. As a matter of fact, this can be a working definition for this paper. This working definition draws its support from merchant (2007.121) who defined digital literacy as the “study of written or symbolic representation that is mediated by new technology”. It also important to point here that digital literacy has gone beyond being able to operate a computer or any other digital/technological tools. It has being made functional. It is about effective communication. It is about communicative competence. Just as Hague and Payton would say, digital literacy is “about collaborating, staying safe, cultural and social awareness and understanding, communicating effectively, being creative”, (2011.21) To further elucidate the concept of digital literacy, the above authors listed these components of digital literacy in a diagram which this paper takes to be vital to its argument. They include: functional skills, creativity, critical thinking, and evaluation, cultural and social understanding, and the ability to find and select information, effective communication, e-safety and collaboration.

Digital literacy will continue to generate sound academic discourses because the evolution of ICT has permeated virtually every aspect of human existence. Atkins (2018) would say that “many aspects of living and working now involve the use of technology and this trend will continue to grow”. Njemanze (2014.42) also stated that “with these digital tools, there is a broader range of social situations which has increased the capacity of individuals to rebuild the communication styles within their environment”. She also opined that “this has further created new possibilities and innovations for new autonomy and identities”. From Njemanze’s perspective, this paper ascribes SMS language, textual language and ‘textisms’ to these new possibilities, innovation as well as autonomy. As a

matter of fact, the concern of this paper is on the influence of SMS language on literacy skills, and essentially on the English language skills.

With the evolution of these digital technologies, concerns have been raised about their influence on literacy skills, Standard English language skills to be precise. Text Message, Short Message Service (SMS) and ‘textisms’ are the most popular means of written communication using mobile phones. Zahid & Mahmood (2013) defined text message/texting as “the procedure of transferring short messages generally 160 lettering from a cellular phone”(2). For this study SMS will be defined as a means of communication that is mostly characterized by abbreviations, symbols and emoticons, and non-standard forms of language through which information is disseminated amongst participants using mobile phones. The use of SMS has given rise to these new identities which have characterized language use. It has invented specific register as well as style in the English Language which sometimes are in disagreement with the standard usage. Chantal, Dijk, Merel, Witteloostuijn and Elma (2016) confirmed that when sending text messages on their mobile phones to friends, children often use a special type of register called textese which allow the omission of words and the use of ‘textisms’ – non-standard written language such as ‘4ever’ (forever). These authors captured this in their definition of ‘textisms’ which they posit are “variants of language use such as the use of abbreviated words as well as non-standard forms of words”. (Crystal 2008; Plester & Wood, 2009). All these have contributed in no small way to academic researches on digital literacy from the language point of view.

One vital point to bring out here is that while researchers are exposing the infiltration of these abbreviations and non-standard forms on the English Language, it is also good to examine the prospects in the students’ mastery of these forms. To this effect, the use of these abbreviations brings to the fore their usefulness in note-taking. Given that for every academic activity, students are required to take notes, therefore, Akere (1993:4) advocates the “use of abbreviations in notes e.g. common ones, specialized ones and even personal abbreviations that are consistent and easily understood by you”. SMS language is characterized by these personalized abbreviations, specialized ones, which are peculiar

to text messaging. This means that students can use some of these SMS language to improve on their note taking skills.

Quite a good number of researches have been done to emphasize the importance of effective note-taking while listening to a lecture. They all explored the various benefits of it to academic learning which will be explored in the course of this paper. A good number of empirical studies have also been done to emphasize the negative influence of SMS usage on standard language forms. However fewer researches have looked the possibility of SMS language impacting positively on the skills of note- taking by students.

It is a common saying that when life throws you a lemon, you should make lemonade out of it. Digital literacy through SMS language has indeed thrown many lemons to Standard English language in the form of non-standard use of abbreviations. It is possible that teachers of the language can make lemonade out of this by encouraging students to harness such in their note-taking. The act of taking notes during a lecture may not be an easy task for a student because he struggles to understand the teacher and takes note at the same time. It means he would need to multi-task, that is, listen and write at the same time. The use of SMS language becomes very helpful at this time point. The significance of this study lies in the fact that students would be able to keep up with the pace of teaching if they are encouraged to use these familiar symbols in taking their notes. More so, when they expand these abbreviations during note making, they reinforce their learning through reading. It is also significant because it would re-direct research lights on new ways of viewing the notion of SMS language.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the connection between note-taking, reading and digital literacy. The main objective of this study is to advocate that teachers of higher institution should encourage the students' note-taking skills using SMS language features.

Theoretical Perspectives

The concept of Literacy has transcended its traditional notion to include the understanding and effective use of information, media and technology (Stephen. S. Spengler, 2015). The nature of SMS language which has emerged as a 21st of century style of coded language used in its written communication led to the development of new theoretical perspectives and concepts. It has heralded changes which should be accommodated. In response to this, the perspective of this research will be anchored on the New Media Consortium (2005.13) concept of Five Strategic Priorities for creating change to enable 21st Century literacies to thrive, they include:

- develop a strategic research agenda.
- raise awareness and visibility of the fields.
- make tools for creating and experiencing new media broadly available.
- empower teachers with 21st century literacy skills.
- work as a community.

The first and second of the above strategic approaches to change are the theoretical concepts that will guide this research.

In addition, this research would also draw its strength from the Activity Theory. Njemanze (2014.42) quoting Geisler and Slattery defined Activity theory as a “conceptual system that conceives human behavior as goal driven and mediated by artifacts”. Amongst its basic principles, the following would become the research lens here

- a. Human Behaviour is goal oriented- that is, people engage in activities in order to achieve their target goals.
- b. Human Behaviour develops over-time-activities change overtime; they develop and change with the environment.

The insights in the above principles of activity theory explain the argument in this research. The activity of SMS language (may) also develop into note-taking language

which over time, the students may become so much aware of it that they would know when and when not to use them –human behavior changing and developing over time.

Review of Concepts

For proper conceptualization and contextualization, the basic concepts in the paper such as note-taking, note-taking skills and SMS language shall be reviewed.

SMS Language: The 21st century is pragmatically synonymous with the information age because it is an age that witnessed revolution in computers. This revolution made communication and information dissemination with minimal constraint possible (Tanjong, 2006). The students of tertiary institutions are not left out in this revolution. They use mobile phones for communication through SMS/ text messages. It offers them the opportunity to relate with family and friends within and beyond reach (Haggan, 2007). As a matter of fact, students always engage in this activity every time and everywhere. Some students even send SMS in the class. (Tindell & Bohlander, 2012). In their work, Lewis & Fabos (2005) are of the view that instant messaging was used by 70% of students from age 12-17, replacing E-mails as the most commonly used form of computer communication. In addition to the above authors' statement, this trend has also permeated the university system where the age bracket is beyond seventeen. Texting has become a habit amongst students (Lin and Tong, 2007). It has also been used by them to socialize (Campbell & Kwak, 2010) and to do silent communication (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). The SMS style of language is also being used as a form of exclusion especially amongst teenagers who use specialized SMS language/ codes to exclude their parents from monitoring the content of their conversation.

Crystal (2008) posits that texting has added a new dimension to language use. To facilitate speed of response to messages as well as make use of the little provided space, students devise their own language style in texting. Rosen, Lim, Carrier and Cheever (2011) are also of the opinion that students abbreviate through the dropping of letters and combination of letters with symbols because they need to maximize the space provided for them. Some of these contracted forms of SMS language include: D (the), U (you), B4 (before), L8r (later), Lv or Luv (love), Ur (your), Approx (approximate), Lib (library),

ASAP (as soon as possible), R (are), 2 (to), Y (why), Btw (between or by the way), Blc or Bcoz (because), Lol (laughing out loud), N/A (not applicable or not available), OTOH (on the other hand), POV (point of view), TBC (to be continued or to be confirmed), TQ or 10Q (thank you), 2moro(tomorrow), 2nite (tonight), BTAM (be that as it may), GR8 (great), KPC (keeping parents clueless), P911 (parent alert),PAL (parents are listening), PAW or 9 (parents are watching), LOL (laughing out loud or lots of laughter), RU (are you), XOXOXOX (hugs, kisses), AAF(as a matter of fact), AAR (at any rate), ABT (about), ACK (acknowledge), ADDY (address), APP (application or appreciate), ATM (at the moment), BB (big brother), BDAY (birthday), BF/BFF (best friend/best friend forever), CIAO (good bye), ENOF or ENUF (enough), etc. It is worthy to note that it is characteristic to write these abbreviations/SMS language in the uppercase, More so, in defense of SMS language, Crystal (2008) still has it that texting as a 21st century phenomenon is characterized by its distinct graphology that is rich in shortened forms and deviant spelling. These forms make the language use to be distinct. Just like every other register in English language, they belong to the one called ‘textese’. There are even compiled list of them and their interpretation for easy access and, such can also serve as the dictionary of SMS language or textese.

Furthermore, Craig (2003) discovered meta-linguistics as part of the gains of SMS language/texting. Meta-linguistics accounts for the skill of understanding language and culture. Craig therefore observed that when students subconsciously use SMS language in form of slang and phonetic replacements, they increase their knowledge of meta-linguistics. Njemanze (2012:20) in her research discovered that “the use of SMS language is more convenient, cheap and allows for creativity”. It is used for quick responses to communications.

This paper also points out researches that have explored the negative influence of SMS language on their standard usage of English Language. For instance Data integrated from research by Rafi (2009) demonstrated the infiltration of orthographic and syntactic regulations especially with particular reference to phonics. Examples include the use of ‘4’ for four & for ‘bc’ & ‘bcz’ for because e.t.c. In addition Koross and Kipkenda (2016:10) did a survey study of the impact of SMS texting style of communication on

Kenya University Students. They discovered that ‘Kenyan’(sic) University students who are used to condensing their text messages will also apply this condensing to their written assignment.

Academic debates for and against SMS language have heralded three schools of thought. Just like the proverbial three blind men who described the elephants from the particular side each touched, each of these schools have their views. These distinct views are based on their research findings. As recorded by Lima (2002), the first school is of the research finding that students tend to sacrifice the essential mechanics of writing such as grammar, punctuation, capitalization, on the altar of the quest for concision, brevity and economy. Another school of thought with Crystal, (2018) at the fore front does not believe in the first school, rather, to them, “text messaging does not really pose a threat as many fear it does. The more students write, the more they improve upon their writing skills. Therefore, its increased use rather enhances the literacy of the user, especially the youth instead of harming it”.

However, the third school of thought do not see any negative or positive effect in it, rather, they said the problem is only on its misuse whose negative impact can be seen on the writing skills of the students. This third school seems to indirectly corroborate the stand of the first school. In as much as this paper is aware of the implications of the use of the non-standard form in the standard writing, however, it wishes to strongly agree with the second school. This school spear-headed by the linguist – David Crystal believes that SMS style of language enhances literacy especially amongst tertiary education. The frequent use of concise and contracted forms enhances the students’ note-taking skill which is essential for their academic learning. It improves their writing speed as they are able to keep up with the lecturers own speed of teaching.

Pialot (2005) has it that the average writing speed of a student is 0.3 to 0.4 words per second, compared to the higher speed of the lecturer which is around 2 to 3 words per second. If this be the case, students need to strategize to keep up with this pace. They need to make use of a lot of abbreviations to achieve this. At this juncture, this paper briefly examines the concept of note-taking.

Note-Taking:

Effective note-taking while listening to a lecture is one of the skills for students to acquire in order to attain academic excellence. As a matter of fact, there seems to be a strong academic connection between note-taking, listening, reading and digital literacy. For a student to effectively take notes during lectures, he must engage in active listening. During this process, important points are captured using abbreviations, signs and symbols in order to keep up with the pace of the teaching. Most of these abbreviations are laced with features of SMS language, which is digital literacy.

In addition, the process of taking notes seldom ends there. Often times, it is followed by note making. While note-taking majorly involves writing vital points in a listening situation, note making is done in a reading context which includes expanding the jotted notes, just as Nnamani & Ononiwu (2016:51) said that “while N-taking enhances listening concentration, N-making enhances comprehension of what one has read in a textbook”. Certainly, notes taken during lectures which are laced with abbreviations can also be expanded during note-making with the aid of textbooks. In a nutshell, a student who has actively listened during a lecture and has taken notes using abbreviations (SMS language) expands the abbreviations in note-making with the help of a textbook (reading). Pialot, et al (2005) views note-taking as a collection of information that is gotten from a single or multiple sources used to maintain memory and aid us to engage our events and activities. A cursory look at this definition reveals the fact that note-taking is analyzed beyond classroom level. It is also used to engage our activities. In other words, our activities ranging from lecture, meetings, conferences, to-do-lists and memos are instances where notes are taken. To buttress the above points, Nnamani & Ononiwu (2016.5) opine that “notes are taken when listening to a lecture, public speech, legal proceedings, a discussion, and reading”. This is to say that note-taking goes beyond listening to a lecture. As a matter of fact, it involves taking note even during research for assignments term paper, seminar presentations as well as personal studies. The abbreviations (SMS language) used in note taking are expanded during note making. In carrying out this expansion, students re-enforce their knowledge and use of the standard form of writing

Be it notes taken from lectures (Kiewra 2002) or that taken from reading (Rahmani & Sadeghi, 2011), (Chang & Ku, 2014), the fact remains that note-taking practice is one of the necessary skills for students' academic success. Therefore, it should be built into their activities. It is pertinent to note that from a practical perspective, note-taking skills instructions are often not given adequate pedagogical attention as these researchers (Dunkel & Davy 1989; Piaolt, Barbier & Roussey, 2018) posit. More so, some teachers go as far as dictating notes for the students. This will only make them passive listeners in class, by so doing they would only depend on the teachers' dictation instead of taking notes during teaching.

At the time of teaching note-taking skills therefore, teachers should encourage the students to use SMS language to record their notes. They are at home with the use of these 'textese'. And thus will effortlessly apply them to use. Besides, just as Gonzalez (2018) stated, "Getting trained in specific note-taking strategies can significantly improve the quality of notes and amount of material they remember later". Consequently, "Concentrating on the note-taking either from reading or from lectures" (Adetugbo, 1996-78), the art should take cognizance of these methods of note taking viz-a-viz the outlining method, the sentence method and the Cornell method (Hayati & Jalilifar, 2009; Nnamdi & Ononiwu, 2006. 54, the center for Academic Achievement, and 2005). Jalilifar (2009) in the appraisal of the effect of Cornell method of note-taking on the listening efficiency of the students discovered that those who were taught the method performed better than those who were not.

Harnessing The Prospects of Digital Literacy Especially the Use of SMS Language on Note-Taking, the Following Benefits Can Be Derived:

a. Learning Re-Enforcement:

The more students take note, the more they are able to remember what they were taught. Gonzalez (2018) has it that the quantity of notes taken by students reflects how much information they are able to retain. The speed in taking any quantity of notes depends on the student's ability to keep up with the pace of the teaching. And to do this, the use of abbreviations becomes handy. Re-iterating, Gonzalez

(2018) posits that “having the information stored in a new place gives students the opportunity to re-visit it later and reinforce the learning that happened the first time around”. The above assertion buttresses the view of this study. The prospects of textism can be harnessed when student are encouraged to make use of the abbreviations in SMS languages which they seem to be familiar with to take notes during lectures. The students love for this form of language use will definitely motivate them to adopt it.

Furthermore, the extensive use of these abbreviations will compel the students to want to expand them using their textbooks. This process will definitely initiate reading and in return re-enforce learning.

b. Enhances Speed of Writing:

It has been written in this paper the speed of writing of a student as against that of the lecturer. Therefore, when students are encouraged to take notes using these abbreviations, they are able to record most of the teacher’s point. It is worthy to note that this method will be beneficial even to the students with the least Intelligent Quotient.

c. Encourages Active Participation in Class:

When students are provided with notes, it makes them passive in class. In other words, teachers should encourage their students to take notes in class to encourage active participation. When they are able to note the important points of the teaching, their interest as well as participation in class will improve. They are able to ask constructive questions to enhance their comprehension of the topic.

d. Enhances Listening Skill:

Because students are required to take notes during lectures it makes them to engage in active listening. Research as in Jalilifar (2009) buttresses this fact. Students are not left at the mercy of battling with listening and taking notes at the same time because they possess the required note-taking skill (use of

abbreviation) with which to effectively multi-task. It is also helpful in Test of English as Foreign Language & International English Language Testing System activities to facilitate completing tasks.

e. Aids Memory:

Gonzalez (2018) is of the view that “rather than passively taking information in, the act of encoding the information into words or pictures forms new pathways in the brain which stores it more firmly in long-term memory”. The above means that instead of being passive in class, students who are active by taking-notes always retain whatever information they are able to process and store in their memory. Students are able to recall these important points made by the teacher for exams (Dunkel & Davy, 1989; Carrell et al, 2002). A student who succeeded in taking notes in class and expands it during studies will always remember what he had learnt. Note-taking is an integral aspect of a students learning and this should be encouraged. Gonzalez (2018) still maintains that “if we want our students to remember more of what they learn in our classes, it is better to have them take notes than it is not to have them take notes”.

Adetugbo (1997:78)also has it that “experts tell us that we forget at least half of what we are told within 24 hours of our being told, that it is easier to remember what we have done than what we have been told”

Many researchers have specified the need for note-taking during lectures, TOEFL & IELTS listening tests [Carrell, et al, (2002); Carrell,(2007);Song, (2011)]; Aminifard & Aminifard, (2012). However a few have looked the other way of SMS language as improving the skills of students in note-taking. This research thus adds to this few.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper set out to appraise the connection between SMS language and note-taking in students’ academics. Various notions as well as research opinions in defense and against SMS language were discussed. In addition, the paper discussed note-taking skills bringing to the fore the prospects SMS language has for it. Note-taking is of immense

help to a student's academic learning and research. The SMS language can be viewed from the positive angle of impacting the students' academics. They are very indispensable to note taking and thus are very beneficial to a student's academics. Worthy of note are some of the benefits of note-taking to the students academics listed in this paper which these prospects of SMS language will give. Amongst them are that note-taking enhances listening skill, encourages active participation in class, enhances speed of writing, re-enforces learning, encourages reading and aids memory. In line with the new school of thought who believe in the positive effect of SMS language, this paper posits that students literacy in the use of SMS language can be channeled to their study skills. Given that for every giving academic activity, students need to take notes and also follow the teachers thought process, the task may be difficult. This is why this paper advocates the use of SMS languages which the students are clearly familiar with to take notes. Concerns on the dwindling writing skills of students had already been in existence before the evolution of digital literacy. We should also take cognizance of the fact that we need to adjust to these changes that are technologically driven. This can be given a trial, and with time, students would be able to determine when to use the non-standard form and when not to use it. In view of this, the following **recommendations** are made.

- a. Teachers should enlighten the students more on note-taking skills.
- b. They should encourage them to use the SMS language in note-taking to catch up with their pace of teaching.
- c. Students should be encouraged to expand the contracted forms during their note making. By doing this, they will easily differentiate the forms of usage.
- d. They should be constantly educated on the standard language forms.
- e. The pedagogy of the rules of grammar should be made practical and re-enforced. This will enable students to distinguish clearly between the formal and the informal usages.

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