

Chapter XXXII

Children's Text Messaging and Traditional Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The authors present three investigations into pre-teen children's text message language and measures of their standard literacy abilities. The children translated sentences, from standard English into text, and from text into standard English, and wrote text messages appropriate to a set of scenarios. They categorised text abbreviations used and calculated the proportion of abbreviations to total words. The children completed a questionnaire about their mobile phone use. Text messaging facility was positively associated with verbal reasoning, vocabulary, school achievement in English, and reading ability across the three studies. Texting provides opportunity for children to communicate in writing without the constraints of standard English, and we propose that the playful variants on words that they use in texting, and their ability to encode spoken slang graphically, show not a lack of knowledge of English, but a light hearted use of phonological and alphabetic decoding principles that also underpin standard English.

BACKGROUND

Computer mediated communication (CMC) technologies have become a central aspect of modern living, forming a ubiquitous foundation of every-

day interactions. Mobile phones have become such an important tool for both children and adults to communicate and interact, that some 92% of respondents acknowledged their mobile phones as essential to their daily lives (Mobile Life Report

2006). However, whilst the expanding availability and accessibility of these new technologies is clearly apparent, the effects of this significant and universal network infrastructure upon the individuals who readily engage in these technological exchanges are not as clear. Only some aspects have been subject to serious investigation, such as the social relationship functions of perpetual accessibility (e.g. Reid and Reid 2005; Katz and Aakhus 2002), and linguistic aspects (Crystal, 2006a, b; 2008; Ling and Baron, 2007). Questions have been raised about others, for instance, about the effect of text message language on standard literacy, and answered largely through speculation and anecdote (Thurlow, 2006). Detailed, objective answers to this particular question have important implications for young people who stand on a bridge between a paper model of written communication and the growing CMC model. There may also be important implications for children who encounter CMC functions such as text messaging (sometimes referred to as Short Message Service, SMS), as they are also encountering standard written English intensively for the first time. The work we report here begins to investigate the relationship between texting and children's standard literacy.

The fastest growing market of mobile phone users has been reported to be pre-teen children (Davies, 2004) and the Ofcom Media Literacy Audit (2006) of over 1500 UK children between eight and fifteen reported that 49% of 8-11 year olds had their own mobile phone, compared with 82% of 12-15 year olds. Our own research (Plester, Wood and Bell, in 2008) found 78.5% of 11 and 12 year olds had regular or exclusive use of a mobile phone. The younger group in the Ofcom report reported making an average of six calls per week, but sending 16 text messages in the same time span. The older group made an average of nine calls per week, but sent 31 texts. Texting was the primary use of the mobile phones for both groups, with 82% of the younger group texting, and 93% of the older group. In our research, we found 62.7%

used texting as their preferred mobile phone use. Ofcom stated that 15% of 8-11 year olds and 42% of 12-15 year olds reported paying for the use of the phone without parental help, suggesting that the use of the phones was deemed worth the cost. Young people as a group have been defined by others in terms of their computer mediated communication, e.g. "Generation Txt?" (Thurlow, 2003) "The Net Generation" (Rosen 2007) and the youngest as "Digikids" (Marsh 2005).

There has been much media speculation regarding the effect that texting may have upon children's literacy. Many have commented on the unintentional intrusions of abbreviations used in texting in inappropriate contexts, an issue particularly cited in relation to children's school work (BBC, 2005). Thurlow (2006) reported a critical discourse analysis of over 100 media articles focused on texting, drawing out several themes of high profile concern to the journalists. The flavour appeared decidedly negative and often exaggerated, published with little regard to the actual uses of text messaging, and often in the face of evidence to the contrary. We read of reported intrusions of text language forms, or "textisms", in standard English writing, and anecdotes are cited to show other forms of apparent decline in written English, in coursework and examinations (e.g. Associated Press, 2007; Sutherland, 2002).

CMC has been enthusiastically adopted by the educational establishment for use within learning contexts, although much of it is only indirectly concerned with traditional literacy (Leu 2002), and there has been research within those settings to evaluate digital contributions to learning. A range of research designs has been called for (Selwyn 1997), investigating social and qualitative aspects of children's ICT (Information and Communication Technology) experiences in learning. Early studies of e-learning in schools seemed positive (e.g. Kulik and Kulik 1989), but recent analyses are more measured and inconclusive about the effects of educational technology overall (e.g. Abrami et al 2005).

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