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Texting will not make you stupid

SMS language or 'textspeak' is taking a lot of flack for the general misuse of the English language today – both in spelling and grammar. But is it all negative?

People are too quick to blame SMS technology for a rise in incorrect spelling and grammar use, and are failing to see the opportunities that can come from it.

Parents and teachers have been blaming cellphones and SMSes for a 'degradation in the English language' for years now, and they feel this technology is standing in the way of children learning proper English.

What many parents and teachers don't take cognisance of, however, is that 'textspeak' serves a very definite purpose within the context of which it is used and is rarely due to laziness, rebellion, or habit. The limited character space offered by a single SMS has brought about a need for acronyms and clever wordplay. The aim of the language is to fit as much information as possible into the restricted space that a single SMS allows for. An SMS constitutes the use of symbolic expression which is forced by the limitations of technology.

SMS language is generally only used when communicating with someone that the sender is close to. This is confirmed by the fact that 65% of all abbreviations in 'textspeak' is used to identify people, such as 'u', 'bf', and 'ppl'. A further 11% is used to identify possessive pronouns such as 'ur'. Ten percent is reserved for amusement or expressions, such as 'lol' and 'haha', further confirming that the context here is very obviously friendly, intimate and casual communication.

Just as children understand the difference between languages, so too do they recognise that certain writing styles are appropriate in their intended contexts only. Older children especially have no problems differentiating the writing style and spelling needed for formalised documents (such as school work) from the much more intimate and informal SMS language.

According to a study done by Kristy (née Freudenberg) Winzker as part of her Master of Philosophy thesis at the University of Stellenbosch entitled '*Investigating the impact of SMS speak on the written work of English first language and English second language high-school learners*' (March 2009), although Grade 11 learners reported using SMS more frequently than Grade 8 learners, they used significantly less SMS language elements in their written work. The study covered the effect of 'textspeak' on written work in terms of spelling errors, lack of punctuation, over-punctuation, leaving out function words, use of abbreviations and acronyms, use of emoticons, rebus writing, shortening of words, use of slang, and use of colloquialisms.

If children are letting this kind of language creep into their school work, they only need be told it is not tolerated and it will not stand in the way of their learning process. Only in situations where 'textspeak' is tolerated in a formal context, or in instances where English is not a person's first language, can this become a real problem.

There have also been instances in the workplace (especially in use over e-mail) where SMS slang is used, but as soon as management indicates that it is not acceptable in a business setting, the 'textspeak' stops.

Generally, business avoids any acronyms or text slang when sending out SMSes to their clients or subscribers. They might compromise on punctuation to optimise SMS space, but the spelling is generally perfect. Words are not often abbreviated unless the acronym is known by the receiver, such as in share prices. In general, though, companies need to be very wary of ambiguity or miscommunication between themselves and the client.

The use of SMS as a communication channel provides a means for anyone to communicate. As 'elitist' as SMS language can be, the SMS channel itself does not keep anyone out of the loop. It enables the hearing impaired to communicate in ways that were not previously open to them.

Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, also initially intended to develop a hearing device for the hearing impaired. Both his wife and mother were hearing impaired. Ironically, the invention of the telephone only contributed to shutting out the deaf from communicating even more.

It has only been since the design of the mobile phone – and more importantly the SMS – that the hearing impaired can now communicate with both hearing and hearing impaired individuals through a telephonic device.

The reality is that SMS language is here to stay, like it or not. As long as there is a need for the SMS, there will be a need for 'texting'.

The answer lies in teaching children from an early age to use language correctly and in the right context. The solution is education.