Affecting Texting: How to Benefit Students Through Techspeak

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Teens today are constantly “plugged in,” whether it be to a computer, tablet, or phone. The popularity of these items gave birth to a convenient form of communication called textisms. Textisms, a nonstandard form of English, has become an everyday form of communication for today's children to college students alike, and it has created a source of worry for educators who are concerned that using textisms hinders these young persons' communication skills. Common concerns include incorrect spelling, pronoun and verb usage and agreement, sentence structure, and punctuation found in students' writing. Studies done about the effects textisms have on grammar are also far from helpful: some of these studies have found evidence that textisms do negatively effect grammar while others' results prove that textisms have no negative effects on grammar, and, in fact, aid in the proper use of spelling and language on top of sparking students' creative energies. Even though there is a strong possibility that textisms do have negative effects on grammar usage, modern educators should realize the important place textisms hold in teens' culture, both as a form of expression and of communication. Because textisms both streamline and degrade the English language, educators should apply translation exercises in their classrooms to acknowledge the importance of textisms as a form of communication while also underlining the essential nature of good communication skills.

The issue of texting is expansive, reaching from the dangerous act of texting while driving to the effects of texting on socialization, the psychological effects it has on teens, and the addiction issues of texting; however, in this paper, the focus will be the effects of texting on language skills, a source of concern among today's educators. Since texting and social networking have become popular forms of communication and socialization for teens, they have developed this “new language” of textisms to communicate within the small word limits of texts
and status updates, and this form of communication has gotten to the point where students will send approximately 4,000 textism-laden text messages a month (Trubek 49). Textisms have become an important, time-consuming part of students' lives. For example, even if it only takes a teen one minute to send a text message, the average 4,000 text messages a month total sixty-six and one-half hours a month. The sixty-six and one-half hours total one-eleventh of a day, including time spent sleeping. Because teens text so ferociously, the topic of textisms' effects on literacy should be carefully considered.

Textisms hold cultural significance to children and young adults because they offer a form of communication free from educational restrictions. To take away this expanding creation of the youths is to deprive them of their art form, their voice, and their individuality. In Steve Vosloo's article “The effects of texting on literacy: Modern scourge or opportunity?” David Crystal, renowned linguist from the University of Wales, is quoted to have said that when children use abbreviations in texting, “they are using them in new, playful and imaginative ways that benefit literacy” (Vosloo 4). By creating this written form of communication, texters have used critical thought and creative invention: textisms have to be both practical and appropriate. This same article also quotes U. S. sixth grade teacher Trish Fogarty, who states that, “When my children are writing first drafts, I don't care how they spell anything, as long as they are writing. If this lingo gets their thoughts and ideas onto paper quicker, the more power to them” (5). To this professor, textisms give her students the ability to free write a rough draft without the self-editing that stems the flow of ideas. Even though correct grammar and spelling matter in subsequent drafts, they are overlooked here. To both of these educators, inventing and being creative with language is more important in the first stages of writing than correct grammar and
usage---these come later. First, good ideas need to find their way onto the page.

To view textisms in a different cultural setting, imagine them as just one more alteration of English out of many that have been constructed over the ages. Jonathon Green observes in his article “Language: Intrtxtlty,” that textisms can be compared to other transitions in the English language, such as the examples of slang English (some dating back to the 1800s), Pig Latin, and Citizens' Band radio language used in Britain in the 1980s (125). These dialects of the English language formed either by the invention of technology and/or the limits of social communications. And, if the sophisticated, formal uses of English have survived all of these changes, what is keeping them from surviving textisms? Literature has and can survive slang; literature can even thrive on it. Walt Whitman, James Dickey, and Allen Ginsberg are all poets featured in the Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume E, and they are also all poets who pushed the definitions of poetry and literature in general by making up words, bending sentence structure, and forgoing or bending punctuation.

In fact, slang even existed in Shakespeare's time; his plays are riddled with it. For instance, in Hamlet, Shakespeare uses the slang connotations for words to communicate the complex psychological dissonance the protagonist Hamlet suffers. Devastated because of his mother's immediate remarriage to his father's killer, Hamlet's lost faith in his mother expands to include all women, including his love Ophelia. Blinded by this disillusion, and other disillusions of the value and loyalty of humans in general, Hamlet urges Ophelia, “Get thee to a nunnery” (Hamlet 3.1). According to Stephen Greenblatt in the introduction of Hamlet in The Norton Shakespeare: Essential Plays, this statement literally denotes Hamlet's desire that Ophelia not become the mother of more sinners; however, “nunnery” was also Elizabethan slang for
“brothel” (1073). The added connotations slang has brought to Hamlet's plead displays the faith Hamlet has lost in woman's virtue because of his mother's seeming betrayal of his father. Without the use of slang, Shakespeare would not have been able to relate to each of these psychological anxieties in one word, and the implications would not have been as centered and impacting. By using so-called degraded English, Shakespeare was able to strengthen the portrayal of his most popular protagonist. If Shakespeare's legendary poetry can survive and even strengthen itself by using slang, then complex, poetic literature of the future can still be written even with the advent of textisms.

One major issue of the debate about textisms' effects on grammar and communication is the concern that textisms streamline the English language by excluding descriptive words and complicated sentence structures. On one hand, this simplification of English has been seen positively because it promotes effective, to-the-point communication. David Crystal states that texting promotes the important skill of summarizing, the ability to communicate only the important facts of a message (4). In the fast-paced workforce of our age, the ability to communicate quickly and effectively is a major advantage. The faster information travels among coworkers, the more quickly tasks can be accomplished. Summarizing is, therefore, an essential career skill. Because text messages are limited in the number of characters that can be used, texters are prompted to say as much as they can in as little words as possible, and they are also forced to leave out extraneous or unnecessary detail, just as professors and teachers bid students to do in their school essays. Also, texting has a place in the business world because it offers a fast, effective way for colleagues to share information and reminders. Instead of leaving a message with the phone number and/or email address of a client that needs to be contacted,
professionals can send a text message that has all the information copied into text. That way, there will be no mistaken numbers or letters, and the receiver will not have to listen to the message numerous times to copy down the needed information. The Business 2 Community article “How to Communicate Effectively . . . Despite Technology,” Jenny Poore acknowledges that, “Being 'connected' is a necessary evil in both our personal and professional live” (par. 6). By this, Poore refers to an inevitable truth: whether accepting, supportive, or against the overwhelming use of modern technology, it is a necessary form of communication in today's world. Companies can take advantage of this version of streamlined English to promote effective communication between coworkers. Taken appropriately, and in the correct time and place, this change in English communication can be helpful.

Others believe that this simplification of language will weaken students' ability to accurately and deeply analyze complex writings and thoughts because they will be unpracticed in writing and reading complicated ideas. In other words, while these students are practicing summarizing, texting offers no exercise for the composition of formal thought, and those opposing texting believe that texters, because they do not continually practice formal writing, are weakening their skills in comprehending and composing formal writing. The educators that believe texting negatively simplifies English are concerned that the more students text, the less capable they will be at communicating eloquently in English. Many images, comics, and articles have expressed these sentiments. Examples include James E. Courter's “Teaching Taco Bell's Canon,” which narrated college students' humorous misspelling of common words; the “Your E-Card image from someecards.com that compares bad grammar to bad hygiene, as well as the other images in Suzanne Klein's Write Steps article; and Carl Azuz's article “Talk Texting, which
offers both students' and educator's negative views of technology on communication. All of these source provide either personal testimonies or strong, impactful argument to persuade audiences to believe that textisms have harmed students' ability to understand English. For a more critical, analytical examination to this viewpoint, in “Twitter vs. Free Thought,” Dawn Ruth envisions a future when texting has diluted English to the point that people cannot communicate well enough to protect their rights and share their ideas, comparing this possible future to George Orwell's 1984—a future that would follow Courter's constructed future for his students. Ruth writes, “The resistance I encounter trying to teach 'critical thinking skills' to college level freshmen and sophomores also leads to musing about Orwell's warnings” (Ruth 2). Ruth draws on literature and the importance of critical thought in an adult member of a community to argue her point that her students are losing an important skill set.

However, while students should focus on understanding and writing complex thoughts and ideas, the use of the simple, to-the-point communication of texting finds its place in everyday communication of simple ideas and instructions. In the business world, both Standard English and abbreviated textism English have a place. For proposals and letters, employees are required to use Standard English. Text messaging offers a fast, effective way for colleagues to share information and reminders. A reminder, such as “Board Meeting @ 9am,” is waiting to be received the next time the receiver picks up his or her cellphone. There is also no need to excuse oneself to take a call in the middle of a meeting. Through these uses, texting can businesses faster and more efficient. So, while textisms simplify English to its necessities, this is not necessarily a bad thing if it is used in the appropriate context and more complex forms of English are not ignored. Textisms teach students how to simplify English and summarize ideas, which
can be useful in the correct circumstances. Both forms of English have their places. As long as the correct form of English is used in the appropriate setting, students will learn how to analyze complex thoughts while at the same time utilizing their skills in summarizing.

As well as its effects on the complexity of English, texting is also argued to degrade the proper use of grammar; however, study results are inconclusive. Because of the differences in study results, professors should not make strong, one-sided opinions on the effects of textisms on students. Evidence shows the effects of textisms are varied and questionable. Some of these studies have found that texting does negatively affect grammar usage while other studies have found that texting actually aids in grammar usage. In a study done by doctoral candidate Drew Cingel and Shyam Sundar titled “Texting, Techspeak, and Teens: The Relationship Between Text Messages and English Grammar Skills,” that focused on the grade level, number of texts sent, adaption of language, and number of text messages received by each of the two hundred and twenty-eight 13-17 year old students, a significant correlation between texting and poor grammar skills, such as usage of homophones, punctuation, spelling, and language structure, was found (11).

Another study that rendered negative results was done by N. Kemp and C. Bushnell of the University of Tasmania School of Psychology, which found that even though all eighty-six 10-12 year old students scored within average ranges, the non-texting students did score slightly higher on spelling and reading literacy tests than the texting students (5). While the results of Cingel's study did have noticeable results, Kemp and Bushnell's did not, even though both studies did find negative results. From these studies, it could also be inferred that texting affects children of different ages in different ways. The subjects of Cingel's study were teenagers, and
of a much larger range, than the preteens of Kemp and Bushnell's study. And, in each study, students were not shown to be strongly impacted by textism use; the negative results were either marginal or still within average ranges. Therefore, if textisms are harming students, they are still only affecting students slightly.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, other studies have concluded that grammar is aided by textism use; however, these effects are also marginal and inconclusive. As a result, professors should not heavily promote the use of textisms in classes based on these studies. A study of sixty-three 10-12 year old children in the UK quoted in Steve Vosloo's Shuttleworth foundation article found no negative connection between texting and grammar/spelling; in fact, this study showed that students who texted had much greater phonological awareness (Vosloo 3). The article “Txting 2 Lrn” mentions research done by student Veenal Raval for a dissertation at the City University in London that students are able to “code-switch” between textisms and standard English (50). According to this study, students are able to differentiate between English used in school assignments and that used for technological communication with friends. Also, David Crystal wrote in his article “The Joy of Txt” that, “The more you text, the better your literacy scores are: that's actually what the research is now showing over and over again. Texting is good for your education, not bad” (3). Crystal goes on to say that the debate over textisms is based on a urban mythology that is not based on facts. Coming from a prominent linguist who has devoted his life to the study of the English languages, these statements have acquired a respectable weight; however, Cingel's and Kemp and Bushnell's studies would disagree with Crystal. Because the results of these tests are so varied, it can at least be assumed that textism use affects people differently depending on age, addiction, study habits and other hobbies/interests. Despite
whether one does or does not believe textisms harm English communication skills, because of texting's popularity, a positive action should be taken to ensure the English language's continued fluency and promote all of its beneficial aspects.

To respond to the wide spectrum of effects that textisms can have on grammar, teachers and educators should take the precautionary measure of using textism translation exercises for each larger work handled in literature or English classes; these steps not only aid students in distinguishing between textism English and standard English, but also treat textisms in a light that gains teachers respect from students and allows educators to develop, instead of hinder, critical thought. A number of scholarly articles, including “Txting 2 Lrn” and “The effects of texting on literacy: Modern scourge or opportunity?” offer the solution of translation exercises. In “Txting 2 Learn,” Anne Trubek offers the idea of an exercise where students write text messages historical or fictional characters would send, such as Abraham Lincoln and Romeo from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (51). According to Trubek, this exercise would enhance critical thinking about a character or person's motivation, desires, and situation; therefore, making up texts from historical or fictional characters would enhance overall understanding of history or literature. In “The effects of texting on literacy: Modern scourge or opportunity?” Steve Vosloo cites Inez Brown, an eleventh grade teacher who proposes translating the literature itself, such a Shakespeare or Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, into textisms; by doing so, students can prove that they understand the contexts and are able to repeat them using vastly different language (Vosloo 5). This exercise would parallel the weekly analytical responses college students write for their literature courses. In both cases, students must analyze and summarize the passages that they have read, being careful to include all the major points. Another type of
textism exercise strengthens idea development. Steve Vosloo also comments that translating MySpace pages and blogs from textisms into standard and formal English would benefit students' literacy in the opposite way; this exercise would strengthen the ability to edit, develop ideas, and expound on vocabulary and form (5). By using these helpful exercises, educators can benefit from a popular form of communication while sparking their students' imaginations. Recognizing both the good and the bad in textism use will protect students' literacy no matter how they may be affected by textisms.

Because texting has become so engrained in the coming generation of children and teens, educators will find it much easier to take advantage of the possible learning opportunities textisms have to offer instead of boycotting this medium altogether. Whether one views texting as a help or as a hindrance to communication skills, it is still having an effect on English. But because these changes are, for the time being, marginal, attempting to redirect the changes textisms are making in the English language and focusing the energy going into textisms will be simpler than stopping these effects altogether. Texting is a vital part of the culture of the upcoming generation, and it is full of promise, that if utilized appropriately, will bring surprisingly rich results. As David Crystal related, “I am fascinated by it, for it is the latest manifestation of the human ability--- and young human ability, at that--- to be linguistically creative” (82). Textisms are simply a medium of communication. The “good” and “bad” of texting comes from the texter. Because of the possibilities of textisms, educators should teach their students to be responsible texters and give this form of communication the spark to unleash its potential.
Works Cited


