



Intrusions of Textism into Students' Formal Writing: Reality or Myth?

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Abstract – It is claimed by the media that the expansion of *Instant Messaging* (IM) in recent years affected the quality of formal writing and there are intrusions into such writings (Grace, Kemp, Martin, & Parrila, 2015). The current study examined six articles published in scientific journals in 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2015 on textism (e.g. *gr8* for “great”) to see if there have been any changes in the results of the studies on the quality of writing under the influence of textism in native and non-native groups during the last 6 years. The population in all three studies has been young adults between 18 to 29 years old, male and female. The studies are done through writing tests in academic institutions and schools. Synchronization of the findings over time is important as it can show that if, with the expansion of social media and increasing number of messaging applications, there has been any significant increase in the textism intrusion or not. The content analysis and statistical comparison are used as the methods to compare the studies' results and to form an armchair study to validate the effects of the textism on formal writing. Based on the chronological and synthesized results, it was found ultimately that in the native group there is not any significant difference between the results over the synchronized time and the media claims are not true, while the non-native learners of English have shown negative intrusions.

Keywords: formal writing, instant messaging, sociolinguistics, student writings, textism

Introduction

Textism refers to the text abbreviations commonly used in the Net speak communities (e.g. 2 for *to* or *gr8* for *great*) such as chat rooms and social media websites. It is claimed by the media that the expansion of *Instant Messaging* (IM) and therefore textism in recent years affected the quality of formal writing and there are intrusions into such writings (Grace, et al, 2015). The current study examined **six** articles published in the scientific journals in 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2015 to see if there have been any changes in the results of the studies on the quality of writing under the influence of textism during the last 6 years. The population in all six studies has been native and non-native young adults and the studies are done through writing tests in academic institutions and universities. Such synchronization is important as it can show that if with the expansion of social media and increasing number of messaging applications, there has been any significant increase in the textism intrusion or not.

Expansion of Social Media

While in the years 2000-2001, there were only two famous online chat services namely Yahoo and MSN, the number of the social media and instant messaging applications no longer can be counted in 2015. Twitter, Facebook, Skype, Whatsapp, Viber and many more applications claim that each has millions of active users. Their users are from children to elders in different age categories. Moreover, availability of the social media and instant messaging applications in the mobile and smart phones and

tablets has created a revolution that can affect the language and learning in various ways, negatively or positively. With the occurrence of this revolution, a chronological study can show important results concerning the effects of such a vast expansion of social media usage on the quality of the students' writings.

Studies on the Relation between Textism and Literacy

Therefore, language scholars did not neglect the phenomenon of social media and instant messaging. In 2007, Massengill Shaw, Carlson and Waxman, 2007 studied 86 young native adults (18-25 years old) to find any relation between textism and spelling in USA and they found no correlation between the textism and spelling ability in the students. This result may put the minds of the parents in the peace for a short time but the revolutionary trend of social media was still adding to the anxieties.

As a result, several other scholars in the coming years continued to study the effects of the textism on literacy. These scholars studied various aspects of literacy in different age categories. The succeeding studies categorised the students into four groups of *children*, *adolescents*, *late adolescents*, and *young adults*. They also covered *reading*, *writing* and *spelling* among other literacy skills. While some of them found negative or neutral results, there were some conflicting findings as well. At the same time, scholars working in the domain of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) and also ESL (English as a second language) studied the effects of the social media, text messaging and instant messaging on the students' language abilities. They found conflicting results comprising of positive and negative findings. Some studies found that the students' proficiency is improved with usage of the social media, while few studies also showed intrusions of the textism into the EFL/ESL students.

The Rational for Selection of Studies

As outlined above, different studies can be found on the effects of textism on the students' literacy skills, from children to young adults and different skills namely reading and writing among others such as morphological and phonological awareness of the students. Studies have also covered both native and non-native groups. Some scholars have also analysed the tendencies by self-reporting and studying the psychological aspects of using social media.

However, the aim of the current study is to find similar studies as if they are replicated in different years. The other aim of this study is to depict a short but concise picture of what different scholars have found in both native and non-native groups and compare their results. Therefore, six studies are selected with a high rate of similarities in different aspects. The studies under the review are similar in their participants, gender distribution and the writing skill as their focus. They had young native adults at university level as their participants with a very similar distribution of males and females in these studies. They have also focused on the writing and spelling abilities among the other literacy skills. These studies have also used methodologies that are similar to some extent.

Methodology

The content analysis and statistical comparison are used as the methodology to compare the results of these studies. The sections related to the participants, instruments and methodologies and results in the articles were extracted and they were compared qualitatively and quantitatively to form an armchair study that increases the awareness about the effects of the textism on formal writing.

The Studies on Native Group

The first study is done by Michelle Drouin and Claire Davis in Indiana University, USA. The report of their study is published by Routledge in 2009 under the title "*R u texting? Is the Use of Text Speaking Hurting Your Literacy?*" (Study A). The second study is carried out in California State University (USA) by Larry D. Rosen et al. Their paper entitled "*The Relationship Between Textism and Formal and Informal Writing Among Young Adults*" (Study B) is published by SAGE in 2010. The last study is a more recent one and it is published in 2015 by SAGE under the title "*Undergraduates' Attitudes to Text Messaging Language Use and Intrusions of Textisms into Formal Writing*" (Study C) by Abbie Grace et al. in three universities in Australia and Canada.

In what follows, the major parts of these three articles are analyzed and a comparison is made to find out the changes in the results. The three papers presented have almost similar scopes so they can show the detailed changes in the results over the time.

Participants in the Native Studies

The participants in the first study (A) were 80 college students from a mid-western university and they were enrolled in a psychology class. They were 24 males and 56 females and their mean age was 21.8 with the range of 18–48.

The second study (B) was conducted in two study groups. In the first part of it, 1,319 participants took part including students 18- to 25-year-olds of whom 38% were males and 62% were females. In its second part, 1,226 participants participated they comprised 18- to 25-year-olds with a distribution of 43% males, and 57% females.

Eighty-six Australian students (73% female), mean age 23.3 years and 150 Canadian students (77% female), mean age 22.5 years participated in the last study (C). They were first-year psychology and educational psychology undergraduates from two similar urban universities, one in South Eastern Australia and one in Western Canada. Table 1 provides a detailed comparison between the participants in three studies.

Table 1: Comparison of the participants in the studies A, B and C

Study	Year	Total	Group 1	Group 2	Male	Female	Age	Country
A	2009	80	-	-	24 (30%)	56 (70%)	18-48	USA
B	2010	2,545	1,319	1,226	(1) 38% (2) 43%	(1) 62% (2) 57%	18-25	USA
C	2015	236	86	150	(1) 27% (2) 23%	(1) 73% (2) 77%	(1) 23.3 (2) 22.5	(1) Australia (2) Canada

As can be seen in Table 1, the population in three studies are native English speakers with a similar mean age. Moreover, the mean age of the participants also match, although the first study included elder ages as well. It will not affect the current study, as its population is the lowest among the others. The similarity of participants in terms of their age, native language and distribution of the female and male confirms the validity of their comparison in the current study. The following section continues with evaluation and comparison of the measures, procedures and methodologies used to carry out the studies.

Measures and Methodologies in Native Studies

The researchers in Study A used three tools to collect their data. They have designed three standard measures based on Woodcock Johnson III scheme (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001) to test the reading and spelling skills of the participants. Then they have used a survey to receive the participants’ “opinions about the appropriateness of text speak in formal and informal communication and whether or not the use of text speak may have a positive or negative effect on memory of standard English” (Drouin, M. & Davis, C. 2009).

In Study B, the scholars have used four measures to evaluate the writing skills of the respondents and their usage of communication tools. They came up with a detailed scoring rubric for writing skill. This scoring rubric measures the writing scale in levels from score 1 *incompetence* (lowest score) to level 6 that is *superior* and it is the highest score.

One questionnaire is the tool that is used by the scholars in Study C to evaluate the formal writing capabilities of the participants. They used 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all appropriate* and 5 = *entirely appropriate*) to measure the responses. Table 2 summarized the measures, tools and methods used by different researchers in three studies subject of the current review.

Table 2: Comparison of the procedures and methods in the studies A, B and C

Study	Tool 1	Tool 2	Tool 3	Tool 4	Methodology	
A	Two (2) standard reading measures	One (1) standard spelling measure	Survey	-	Woodcock Johnson III Test and Likert scale response format.	
B	Reported use of communication tools	Formal writing sample	Informal writing sample	Reported general daily use of textisms.	Writing sample scoring rubric	
C	One (1) questionnaire	-	-	-	5-point scale	Likert

The comparison and evaluation of the methods applied in the studies showed that they are consistent in terms of the scoring with two of them adhering to Likert scale and the other one has used a somehow similar scoring rubric. The similarity of the characteristics of the participants and also the tools and the measures applied to evaluate the samples in these studies can confirm the validity of the results in synchronized way. The following section presents the results obtained in three studies and it provides the answer to the QAs in the current study to see whether the textism is manifested more in the students formal writing over the years or otherwise.

Comparison of the Results in Native Group

The first study (A) has found that it is unlikely that the text speak abbreviation could lead to a deterioration of the students' performance in the literacy test. It also found that even the evaluation of the translations of textism into Standard English did not show any decline in the performance. Moreover, it found that the data did not show any negative relationship between texting and literacy, although the participants in the study reported that they thought using text speak makes it difficult to remember Standard English spelling.

Meanwhile, 1 year later when the IM applications were more popular, Study B found that there is a difference in the relationship between writing and textisms for formal versus informal writing. It also showed that there is a negative impact in writing a formal letter but a positive relationship with informal writing which means that the study could not find any intrusion from the textism into the students' formal writing and if there is any impact, it is only in the informal writings.

Three years later, when there were numerous IM applications around and with giant expansion of social media, Study C still supports the results found in the previous studies. It showed that using Textism in text messages or any other form of computer-mediated communication such as social media has not undermined university students' writing ability. Table 3 gives the summary of the results in three studies.

Table 3: Comparison of the results in the studies A, B and C

Study	Year	Result 1	Result 2	Result 3
A	2009	No deterioration of writing performance	No decline in Standard English performance	No negative relationships between texting and literacy
B	2010	Differences in formal versus informal writing.	Negative impact in writing a formal letter	Positive relationship with informal writing.
C	2015	Not undermined students' writing ability.	-	-

The Studies on Non-native Group

Like the native group, the non-native learners of English have been subject of various studies, though their focal point has not been on the intrusion of the textism into students' formal writing. In many of

these studies, social media, texting and instant messages are seen as a learning aid in the context of learning English as a foreign or second language. Such studies have analysed the role of social media in the expansion of the learners' vocabulary size and their writing and speaking abilities. However, there are several studies that focussed on the effects of textism on the learners' writings. As the number of such studies in non-native group is limited, the selected studies for this review do not cover a vast population in different countries where English is taught as a second or foreign language. Nevertheless, their vital elements such as their population and the studied skills are similar to the studies in the native group.

The first study is done by Shafie, Darus and Osman in 2010. Their study entitled "*SMS language and college writing: the languages of the college texters*" is published by International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (Study D). The next study is carried out by Tayebinik and Puteh, 2012. Their article with the title "*Txt msg n English Language Literacy*" is published by Science Direct (Study E). The last study is the most recent one and it is published in 2015. The title of the study is "*Netspeak and a Breach of Formality: Informalization and Fossilization of Errors in Writing among ESL and EFL Learners*" and it is done by Shaari and Bataineh, 2015 (Study F). A summary of the population in these studies and their evaluated skills are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of the participants in the studies D, E and F

Study	Year	Skill(s)	Total	Male	Female	Age	Country
D	2010	Writing and spelling	264	94 (35%)	170 (65%)	18-22	Malaysia
E	2012	Writing and Speaking	40	11 (27%)	29 (73%)	20-23	Malaysia
F	2015	Writing	300	unspecified	unspecified	22-29	(150)Malaysia (150) Jordan

As table 4 shows, there is a fair distribution of the male and female learners in two studies while Study F did not specify the gender of its participants. Such fair distribution matches the native studies. Age-wise, the participants are also similar to the native group and they comprised of 18 to 29 year old university students. The comparison also shows that the writing skill has been the focus of these studies among other skills.

Measures and Methodologies in Non-native Studies

The researchers in Study E created a corpus of text messages sent by the students during one semester. Their corpus contained 2,640 genuine text messages written by non-native speakers of English. They have also collected the English class assignment of the same students and compared the writings of the students using Typology of Texted English (Shortis, 2001) as their methodology.

In Study E, the researchers used a semi-structured interview as their instrument. The interviews with length of 10-15 minutes were fully recorded and transcribed. In this qualitative study, the students reported the negative habits that they have developed because of using IM applications.

Finally, in Study F, the instruments were one questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The researchers used an online questionnaire as their survey tool in which the participants have written their sample writings. The semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data on the participants feelings about the Net speak.

Table 5 shows a detailed comparison of the procedures and methods in Studies D, E and F.

Table 5: Comparison of the procedures and methods in the studies D, E and F

Study	Tool 1	Tool 2	Tool 3	Methodology
D	Writing Assignment	Corpus of Students Text Messages	-	Typology of Texted English (Shortis, 2001)
E	Semi-structured interview	Transcription Corpus	Self-reporting	Semi-structured interview
F	Questionnaire with writing samples	Semi-structured interview	Self-reporting	Interlanguage Grammar

As can be seen in Table 5, the methodologies used in the non-native groups are different from the native group. In the native group, the researchers collected their data through sample writing while in the non-native group, semi-structured interviews are also used and less importance is put on the writing samples although it is a crucial factor.

Comparison of the Results in Non-native Group

Study D has revealed that learners can easily distinguish between the formal and informal writing in their essays and most of them have used proper English. They knew that correct spelling is important in formal writing and in examinations, but there have been a large number of spelling errors in their assignments and examinations. Another result has been the intrusion of textism into the writings by students with lower educational achievements.

The results from Study E cover a wide scope of both writing and speaking deficiencies and samples are provided. The participants have admitted that the habit of using textism has intruded their writing and speaking skills. Perhaps the most interesting example of entering textism into learners' speaking skill is the use of *ASAP* for "as soon as possible" in conversation by a non-native speaker of English.

Study F concluded that 46% of their participants admitted that their spelling ability is affected by textism habit in a negative way. Also, 61.3% of the participants reported that they cannot distinguish between formal and informal writing in English.

Findings and Results of the Review

The findings of the current study show that although native speakers of English can easily distinguish between formal and informal writing in English, ESL and EFL learners have difficulty in such differentiation. While the habit of using IM applications in native group did not affect the quality of their writing badly, the non-native group suffered from the textism and their spelling abilities are lowered.

Conclusion

The world has witnessed the expansion of the IM applications and social media in the last 6 years, this expansion brought up the hypothesis that such technologies have negative effects on formal writing. Studies in different years showed conflicting effects, but none of these studies has been synchronized with the expansion of the technologies. Thus, the current study aimed to review the impacts and effects of the textism and net speak abbreviations on the formal writing abilities of the English native speakers and ESL/EFL learners in a time span of around 6 years. In a synchronized and armchair study the participants, methods and results of six previous studies were compared and evaluated to see if the effects of the textism on the students' writing abilities changes over time. It was found that based on the synchronized results in the native group, there is no significant change and all the results are supported and sustained over the time. Almost none of the studies under the this review reported any significant change in the influence of textism on the writing abilities and competency of the native speakers. Only some relations are reported in informal writings by the native students. On the other hand, in the non-native group of English learners, there have been intrusions and deficiencies as a result of textism habit. The learners also encountered problems in distinguishing between formal and informal way of writing in English. Moreover, the scholars recommended that future studies compare

the participants from educated and uneducated groups. The current study showed that there is an immediate need for teachers in ESI/EFL contexts to concentrate more on the differentiation between formal and informal writing systems and increase the students' awareness about the correct spelling.

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