

EXPLORING SMS (SHORT MESSAGE SERVICE) AS LANGUAGE VARIATIONS: A REFLECTION ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE USERS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study was conducted to explore reflections on short message service (SMS) as language variation which has attracted attention of countless people in the global village. This study found out how language used in SMS bringing new set of written communication being beneficial in their academic or social life, especially writing, or how people are learning language and using habits. Sample of the current study were 100 university graduates (male and female) who were mobile phone users and were communicating through SMS rather than making telephone calls or sending full text to their fellows, teachers and friends, to know that to what extent SMS is improving their second language learning habits. How they are using and creating new formats of writing for economy of space and time. The quantitative data were qualitatively described and was found out that short message service brought a good deal of variations for the respondents unconsciously in respect of their target language and producing habits. The spelling, grammar and syntactic systems of English language were considered difficult but SMS habits facilitated the respondents because regular use of sending text messages through mobile. Hence, the study suggests that adults studying at universities are second language learners of English language should try to avoid using SMS language variety as this habit might distort the L2 structure and may affect their learning of L2 as pure language.

Keywords: Short Message Service (SMS), English, linguistic systems

1 Introduction

Mobile use is rapidly increasing in Pakistan. According to a calculation there are 111,126,434 users as recorded by Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) in October 2011 which makes 65% of the total population. Whereas in June 2011, this number was 108,894,518 in with a density of 64.8% (The Express: Tribune). Based on the research by Barkhuus (2005), most of the young people like to send SMS because of the shortness of its messages, it removes shyness and using it is an opposite social behavior. Meanwhile, another study by Mante and Pires (2002) in Netherlands described that one of the factors which caused SMS so popular among adults was SMS package per day or per week that is comparatively cheaper than a phone call.

Because of the economy of time and space, Mobile users try to write their statements with minimal words (Bodomo, 2009; Balakrishnan & Yeow, 2008; Segerstad, 2005). Bodomo anticipated that for SMS language, “words, phrases and sentences should be coded with as few symbols as possible without giving up comprehensibility” (Bodomo, 2009, p. 113). But with the elevated popularity of SMS habits, researchers are made to think because of the impact of SMS language on a person’s writing skills (Bodomo, 2009; Freudenberg, 2009; Mphahlele & Mashamaite, 2005; Hamzah *et al*, 2009). In Pakistani context, generally speaking, students’ community which has been seen as frequent users of mobile phones sending messages through mobile phones. The excessive use of mobile phones particularly has not only raised some concerns for the teaching community but engaged

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students learning English language directly or indirectly for which much hard work has been done to improve its teaching so that students may enhance their knowledge in English, both oral and written.

It is undeniable the fact that using messaging has negative impact on the users' speech and writing and if the users (adults) are engaged in excessive use of mobiles without taking into consideration its impact on the learning of spelling, grammar and syntax of the foreign language, their learning habits would be distorted. This qualitative study has been conducted to know that to what extent university graduates think that through mobile phones they are not getting negative impacts on their writing skill of English and how the users of mobile have unconsciously developed a new variety of language which helping them to save time and space.

2 Review of Related Literature

Writing texts refers to the sending of short messages among mobile phone users using the Short Message Service (SMS), a attribute of most mobile phones since the late 1990s. In much of the European literature into texting, the term SMS is also applied to explain both the medium and the messages (Kasesniemi & Rautianen, 2002). And various terms are utilized to depict the language of texting: *textese*, *phone shorthand* (Sutherland 2002), *Txt* (Shortis, 2007a,b), *texting* (Crystal, 2008), *SMS communication* (Hard af Segersteg, 2002).

Texting is going to be a kind of ritual in the daily life of people regardless of their profession rather this habit has more frequently developed among adults particularly among university and college students. The use of SMS is of miscellaneous nature and writing in SMS is not limited to any specific socio-economic, educational or religious aspect. Writers and researchers may have their own opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of SMS usage. For example „vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago,,(according to John Humphreys, writing in the *Daily Mail*) but rebutted by Crystal (2008).

But second language learners in Pakistanis, are deeply influenced by SMS form of language due to the use of abbreviations in messages instead of full text. It has been noticed that despite 65 years efforts English language for Pakistan students still form hurdles when language proficiency is measured because of new type of language usage taking place when SMS are becoming part of the language as Bodomo reports (2009) that new communication technologies not only produce new forms and uses of language, but also new forms of literacy which are connected with the introduction and uses of new technologies. For instance, Vodacom dictionary possesses some newly invented words which express different emotions and feelings, etc.

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Table. 2 Vodacom SMS dictionary

WORDS IN FULL ABBREVIATIONS OR SMS	WORDS IN FULL ABBREVIATIONS OR SMS
As far as I remember	AFAIR
Love	LUV
Thanks	THNX
Today	2day
Before	B4
Have a nice day	HAND
See you	C U
SWYO	So what's your problem?
At	@
Tears in my eyes	TIME
Sealed with a kiss	SWAK
Keep it simple, stupid	KISS
Such a laugh	SAL
At a moment	ATM
Parents are watching	PAW
Random act of kindness	RAK
Please reply	RSVP
Second	SEC
You're on your own	YOYO
As soon as possible	ASAP
Hugs and kisses	HAK

Besides, it is suitable to judge that everyday using of SMS through Mobiles has also put impacts on second language learners and language learning habits of such learners are very much influenced so far as second language spellings, grammar, syntax, social relationships, etc are concerned. Many researchers have adopted this issue. Some of their main studies contain, a change in the perception of time and space (Fortunati, 2002), lack of face-to-face interaction (Thompson & Cupples, 2008), the maintenance of relationships, social absences, and social dependency (Reid & Reid, 2007).

On the other hand, it has also been recommended that using of cell phones has had serious repercussions on social relationships, grammar, and increased social anxiety (Tully, 2003). First face to face contact was decreased by dint of the using Mobiles and gradually users got wear away with this as well. For example, In 2002 80% of all users of Mobiles in the United States were „Talkers“, however by 2006 that number came down to almost half, dropping to only 42%, with the other 58% being senders“ (Fernando 2007).

Language (English) proficiency for Pakistani adult learners already have revealed a big challenge and almost all governments have been struggling hard to better the quality of language teaching and learning from early grades to graduation level. As illustrated by Vecchio and Guerrero (1995) who described language proficiency in this manner: “...what it means to know a language goes beyond simplistic views of good pronunciation, “correct” grammar, and even mastery of rules of politeness. Knowing a language and knowing how to use a language involves mastery and control of a large number of interdependent components and elements that interact with one another and that are affected

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by the nature of the situation in which communication takes place” (p 34).

After having quoted above researchers it may be appropriate to say that second language learners like Pakistanis must not take risk is using such language items free from spelling, grammar or syntactic rules which the users use in academic life and cut sorry figure. Even in other countries it is observed that efforts are made to determine modalities regarding a language. For instance, in Pretoria CCSSO (Council of Chief State School Officers) elaborates modalities in this manner:

1. *Reading* – the ability to comprehend and interpret text at the age and grade-appropriate level.
2. *Listening* – the ability to understand the language of the teacher and instruction, comprehend and extract information, and follow the instructional discourse through which teachers provide information.
3. *Writing* – the ability to produce written text with content and format fulfilling classroom assignments at the age and grade-appropriate level.
4. *Speaking* – the ability to use oral language appropriately and effectively in learning activities (such as peer tutoring, collaborative learning activities, and question/answer sessions) within the classroom and in social interactions within the school (1992, p 7).

But despite all efforts above modalities are soon forgotten when language without spelling, grammar or syntactic considerations is used. For example below given are some examples taken from daily life of the users related to language/s usages:

Table 3

Language used in SMS	Intended language
I wna infrm da techr z nt cm 2dy	I want to inform that the teacher will not come today
e hrdli cr abt sch mtrs	He hardly cares about such matters.
Ppl wnts brd n btr n nthn els	People want bread and butter and nothing else
Hi gt my bks rtn 2dy	Hi. Get my books returned today
Mi hrt lip up in exm	My heart leaps up in exams
Gys n gls dnt ms da lctr ov sikolgy n strdy	Guys and girls don't miss the lecture of Psychology on Saturday
Y du da politcns fite n tv prgrms	Why do the politicians fight on T.V programs?
Da entr worlds a stg n mn z jst an actr	The entire world is a stage and man is just an Actor.
Lstn ap 2mro a jna n tk ur lptp frm mi	Listen you come tomorrow and take your laptop.
Inrtctr sd jety huy lites off kr dna	The instructor said that get the lights off when you leave.
Lev t fr 2mro	Leave it for tomorrow

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Tri to rich erli b4 othrs plz	Try to reach early before others please
Its rly tribl t acpt whts goin n plticl wld n our Cntry	It's really terrible to accept what's going on in the political world in our country
Tl to hm I vl b lt	Tell him I will be late.
Uni lf gtn tuf n tufr dy bi dy	University life is getting tougher and tougher day by day
Jb wo aa laye thn lemi kw hs pln	When he comes let me know about his plan
Clsc mvcs r exlnt bt nw 1ns r dzlin	Classic movies are excellent but new ones are Dazzling
O sr g papr esy bnye ga	Sir! Please set easy paper.
Sb larkiyan or larky sn lo tht techr sd no chtin n exm	Listen all girls and boys that teacher has said "No cheating in exam".
Hry up v r gtn lt	Hurry up! We are getting late.

As (Omar, 2012) says that it is worth emphasizing that the use or overuse of abbreviations, acronyms, linguistic short-cuts, capitalization and punctuation should be based on the relationship of the sender and receiver of the message. Which is not primarily considered in our context and SMS language is used without such liabilities. The above reflected text messages seem to be uttered as spoken English or mixture of Urdu and English and the same foot prints are sometimes followed when the students are exposed to writing. Crystal (2006) says that electronic discourse, such as that used in e-mails, text messages, or Internet chat rooms, often resembles writing that reads as if it were being spoken. Some researchers have termed this form of language "written speech" or "spoken writing".

But ideas are expressed in a logical, linear fashion, and linear narrative forms govern most traditional writing (Gibson, 1996). And in light of the words of Graham and Perin strong writing practice combined with consistent feedback is the key to developing student skills and achievement (Graham & Perin, 2007). Further, a common concern is also the fact that the use of communication technology may be linked to attention problems in children and adolescents, which in turn may have a negative impact on learning (Espinosa *et al*, 2006). But there is counter opinion against such impact of SMS on students' grammar, etc.

All students need to do, they claim, is learn the basics in English class and they will be able to distinguish between "slang, texting lingo and correct English" (Russell, 2010). But (Dansieh, 2011) says that text messaging mostly involves the use of pictograms and logograms. Words are either shortened through the use of symbols to represent the word, or using symbols whose names sound like a syllable of the word. A text may consist of words or an alphanumeric combination. Similarly some teachers were of the view that abbreviations used in text messaging was negatively affecting written English, reporting that papers had been written without due regard to proper punctuation, good grammar, and standard abbreviations, other educators felt that the more you got students to write, the better (O'Connor, 2005).

3 Study Design and Questions

This is a quantitative as well as qualitative study conducted on 100 university graduates (male and female) spread over the span of 3 months but presented both qualitative and quantitatively. Hence, a

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questionnaire was administered on the subjects and a general discussion was held on their responses for two times with a gap of three months. In the discussion the subjects also shared some text messages, reflected in table no. 3. Considering the same following research questions has been designed:

- Do the adults, university graduates, over use texting/messaging through mobile phones, and does this texting affect their second language learning systems such as spelling, grammar and syntax, etc.?

4 Findings and Discussion

A questionnaire was used to collect the data. Data were collected at the start and end of this study. The responses collected at the beginning of the study are presented in Table No 4.

Table No 4 Responses at the start of the study

Sr. No	Question	SA	A	UD	DA	SD
1	Do you use mobile phone frequently?	92	1	1	3	3
2	Do you prefer texting to phone call for	88	2	3	5	2
3	Do you prefer shortened words in texting to full	93	1	1	4	1
4	Do you find shortened words are time saving and comfortable medium for contact?	95	1	2	1	1
5	Do you use shortened words other than given in SMS	93	1	1	3	2
6	Do you think shortened words sometimes get original spellings skipped from your mind when you are to use them for academic purposes?	95	1	1	1	2
7	Do you think you find yourself engaged in using such language which is linguistically inappropriate because of the over use of SMS?	89	2	2	3	4
8	Do you think over use of SMS/texting does not pave way to improve speaking skill of English?	70	10	5	5	10
9	Do you think texting hampers learning of the grammar of second language, i.e., English?	78	2	5	12	8
10	Do you think others systems of second language are affected by the over use of SMS?	80	5	3	12	10
11	Do you think sentence construction is affected because of the use of texting in which it mostly not considered?	82	5	3	5	5
12	Do you think spellings, grammar and sentence structure of the second language, English, could be improved if not written in shortened words?	83	3	4	7	3

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13	Do you think over use of texting badly affects writing skill?	90	2	1	1	6
14	Do you find difficulty in using English in the exams?	93	1	2	2	2
15	Do you think writing full worded language than SMS can improve language skills especially	88	3	5	2	2

Strongly Agree(SA), Agree (A), Undecided(UD), Disagree(DA), Strongly disagree(SD)

Table No. 5 *Responses after three months*

Sr. No	Question	SA	A	UD	DA	SD
1	Do you use mobile phone frequently?	94	1	1	2	2
2	Do you prefer texting instead to phone call for	84	2	5	5	4
3	Do you prefer shortened words in texting to full text/words/sentences?	95	1	1	2	1
4	Do you find shortened words are time saving and comfortable medium for contact?	93	1	2	2	2
5	Do you use shortened words other than given in SMS dictionary?	94	1	1	2	2
6	Do you think shortened words sometimes get original spellings skipped from your mind when you are to use them for academic	96	1	1	1	1
7	Do you think you find yourself engaged in using such language which is linguistically inappropriate because of the over use of SMS?	92	2	2	2	2
8	Do you think over use of SMS/texting does not pave way to improve speaking skill of English?	80	5	5	5	5
9	Do you think texting hampers learning of the grammar of second language, i.e., English?	84	2	2	6	6
10	Do you think others systems of second language are affected by the over use of SMS?	90	2	2	4	2
11	Do you think sentence construction is affected because of the use of texting in which it is mostly not considered?	88	3	3	3	3

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12	Do you think spellings, grammar and sentence structure of the second language, English, could be improved if not written in shortened words?	90	1	2	4	3
13	Do you think over use of texting badly affects writing skill?	92	1	1	1	5
14	Do you find difficulty in using English in the Do you think writing full worded language	94	1	2	2	1
15	than SMS can improve language skills especially speech and	90	3	3	2	2

It is interesting to note that a majority of subjects' responses are almost similar which they gave in at the first time of the administration of the questionnaire that most of them are mobile users and are in frequent use of SMS. Table No. 2 of the study enables us to know the type of language or language items the students use. It also sometimes includes some expressions of the first language. It has been observed that students do know about the impacts of SMS on the learning habits of the foreign/second language but despite this reality they use SMS to the maximum extent without considering the mutating impact of SMS on the learning of language systems like spellings, grammar, sentence structure/syntax, etc.

For example, a majority prefers texting to phone call for making contact with your acquaintances but at the same time the same majority thinks that writing full worded language than SMS can improve language skills especially speech and writing. It is important to write that unconsciously students are involved in the over use of texting and at the time of consciousness much has already happened to learning skills especially writing. Again, it is interesting to know that respondents think sentence construction is affected because of the use of texting in which it is mostly not considered. Despite this consciousness the subjects are engaged texting as second language users which they need both in social and academic life for professional growth. For instance, in table no.2 it reflects that users are least bothered about spellings, grammar or sentence structure/syntax and frequent use of texting is mutating language learning habits in such way that it is revealed on them when they are to produce writing and have prove their skill in academic exams and commit all types of errors related to spellings, grammar, sounds, semantic and syntax, etc., as the respondents have said that over use of texting in shortened words affects writing skill which is key to pass academic exams. And being second language learners they need to manifest imparted language rules in academic life but are sacrificed for the sake texting which may suit native speakers who don't have language learning problems like the Pakistanis for whom English language remains a challenge throughout their academic career. The respondents also claim that for the improvement of syntax they need to use full text by observing grammatical and other rules but short cut in the form of texting is ruining their skill. In the light of above discussion the following implications are made:

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Latest technology and its use is the prerogative of every individual but for second language learners like Pakistanis its use may be determined by the user by considering its impact on language skills.
2. University graduates, who are found as frequent users of mobile phones, must try to avoid the use of such shortened words in texting which are not recommended in SMS

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dictionary.

3. If the self-created shortened words are used in texting they must contain at least syntactical rules so that other systems of the foreign/second language may not be harmed for the sake of one benefit.
4. It is indeed a challenge for teachers/instructors at university level to take up such issues in the classrooms so that graduates may be able to know the actual need of SMS in academic and social life.
5. Students must also be told about the disadvantages of the over use of texting without observing language rules.
6. Students must bear in mind that the academic and social lives of second language learners is entirely different from the native speakers who learn acquire English as mother tongue and their language learning habits are not affected the way texting could affect second language learners". Hence, a rational approach may be followed to avoid academic loss which second language learners may face in academic life.

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