Flourishing Creativity & Literacy

The Impact of Texting on Comprehension

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of the effects of texting on English language comprehension. The authors believe that English used in texting causes a lack of comprehension for English speakers, learners, and texters. Wei, Xian-hai and Jiang (2008:3) declare "In Netspeak, there are some newly-created vocabularies, which people cannot comprehend them either from their partial pronunciation or from their figures." Crystal (2007:23) claims; "variation causes problems of comprehension and acceptability. If you speak or write differently from the way I do, we may fail to understand each other." In this paper, the authors conducted a questionnaire at Aligarh Muslim University to ninety respondents from five different Faculties and four different levels. To measure respondents' comprehension of English texting, the authors gave the respondents abbreviations used by texters and asked them to write the full forms of the abbreviations. The authors found that many abbreviations were not understood, which suggested that most of the respondents did not understand and did not use these abbreviations.

Keywords: abbreviation, comprehension, texting, texters, variation

1. Introduction

The advent of modern electronic communication has created a whole new world of information, giving access to unlimited variety of fields. Millions of literate and illiterate people around the world text everywhere. They are either using keyboards or keypads to input data into computers or mobile phones. They text in classrooms, buses, trains, houses and even religious places; while walking, working, sitting, standing, driving, stretching, taking rest and eating. This must have an impact on Standard English and this is what the authors are going to discuss in this paper. In this present paper, the authors will explore how the English used in texting affects the comprehension of English language among speakers and learners of English. In this paper, modern electronic communication refers to the three tools of communication; email, SMS and chat, while texting refers to English used in these three tools of communication. The authors use the term 'texting' throughout this paper to refer to the English used in email, SMS, and chat texts. Texting is also known as MEC English, ICT English, txtng, text messages, short messaging, CMC, textspeak, netspeak, SMSing, netwrite, short email, mobile messaging, chat messaging etc.

2. Review of Literature

Baron (2008: 199) labels texting as a threat. For her, if email more or less entirely replaces the old-fashioned letter, the culture as a whole will end up with a deficit; it will have lost in quality whatever it has gained in quantity. Wei, Xian-hai and Jiang (2008:3) declare; "In Netspeak, there are some newly-created vocabularies, which people cannot comprehend them either from their partial pronunciation or from their figures." Crystal (2007:23) claims; "variation causes problems of comprehension and acceptability. Crystal (2007:23) maintains, "If you speak or write differently from the way I do, we may fail to understand each other". One of the problems of texting, according to Shaw (2008: 48), is "the uncertainty and variation of spelling words: *anything* can appear as *anything, nething, nethin, anyfing, anyfin, nefin, anyting, anytin* or *netin"*. Crystal (2008: 46) has rightly talked about the abbreviated forms which appear in different guises, as he says; "Abbreviated might appear in half a dozen different guises. I have seen *tonight* written as *tnight, tonyt, tonite, tonit, 2nt, 2night, 2nyt, and 2nite,* and there are probably several more variants out there." In this connection, Baron (2008), warns that "unless we learn to regulate our current language use, we will have difficulty understanding each other and the standardized forms of our written language will be lost." (as cited in Maynard, 2010:2). Mphahlele and Mashamaite (2005) report confusion as one of the main problems of texting as the word 'hand', which means the part of body at the end of arms, appears in texting to mean 'have a nice day'; the word 'ATM' which means in Standard English 'automated teller machine' is SMSed to mean 'at the moment'.

According to Choudhury et al. (2007:16) texting may seriously hamper the understanding of the message. Thus, two opposing forces, shorter message length, and semantic ambiguity shape the structure of this compressed non-standard form. Kesseler and Bergs (2003) argue that despite their wide usage, new message types like SMSes and emails still appear unnatural or odd at least to parts of the public. Walker (2010) argues that "society is split between those who embrace technology and those who don't have the skills – or the money – to live in a wired world." Huang (2008:1) argues that texting is "a horrifying language … a nascent dialect of English that subverts letters and numbers, drops consonants, vowels, and punctuation." For him, this makes no distinction between letters and numbers, and people will no longer know how they are really supposed to communicate. Sutherland (2002) makes the interesting observation that the word "text" etymologically originates in Latin for "tissue". "It's writing on Kleenex. One blows, then throws." "Throw" and "blow" metaphorically suggest a lack of ownership. If there is no consistency between texters, or even within a single texter, as Crystal (2008) has rightly pointed out, then who will own and comprehend texting?

3. Methods

3.1 Subjects Selection

This paper was particularly intended to measure the respondents' familiarity and comprehension of texting. To conduct the study and achieve its objectives, a convenient sample was selected. This sample consisted of ninety AMU participants who were enrolled at Aligarh Muslim University, India. They were grouped according to their levels: Plus Two, Bachelor, Master and PhD. The subjects were supposed to be equally distributed across all the levels of education, i.e. the same number from each level of education. However, this was not possible because some faculties did not have Plus Two level. Hence, only 15 respondents were taken from Faculty of Social Science and 15 respondents from Faculty of Engineering and Technology, while 25 respondents were taken from all other Faculties which have Plus Two levels, i.e. 25 respondents from Faculty of Arts, 25 respondents from Faculty of Science and 25 respondents from Faculty of Commerce. The following table shows the distribution of the subjects of the study:

Table 1. The distribution of the subjects of the study

Level of Education / Faculty	Plus Two	Bachelor	Master	PhD	Total
Arts	5	5	5	5	20
Social Science	-	5	5	5	15
Engineering and Technology	-	5	5	5	15
Science	5	5	5	5	20
Commerce	5	5	5	5	20
Total	15	25	25	25	90

The Plus Two level in India refers to a pre-bachelor course which covers the span from Intermediate and Higher Secondary. The researcher selected this group because they are almost younger than other levels of this study.

3.2 Data Collection

In this paper, the authors gave to the respondents questionnaire in text forms like "ILNY" and asked them to write their Standard forms which is "I love New York". They were asked to write the Standard forms of 35 short forms (see Appendix) that are commonly used among internet users with the directive as follows: "Please write the standard/full form of the following. Please include the appropriate capitalization and punctuation, and spell out all words". An example was given to make it clear. Most of these 35 short forms were given in contexts because some of the items, if not given in proper context, could get interpreted in a different way by texters. The short forms were carefully picked to achieve the aims of this particular test. They included varieties of short forms used by internet users such as single letters which represented full words, numbers which represented words or parts of words, a group of letters which stood for words, or a group of words. The full forms given by the participants were counted on each participant's page. They were grouped as 'comprehended by respondents', 'not comprehended', 'repetition of the same short form' and 'missing'. The items of the 'not comprehended' group were further subcategorized into the variations given by the participants. The questionnaire was evaluated by experts of designing and experts of statistical analysis before its final distribution. The questionnaire that is described here was the final version after edition and correction. The completed questionnaires were transferred to a text file and then imported to SPSS, version 16.0, for analysis.

4. Linguistic Analysis of Texting

This part includes the analysis and interpretations of the data collected from AMU participants. As mentioned above, the respondents were ninety. They had to translate the ten items from texting forms to Standard English. As mentioned above, this paper aimed at examining the respondents' comprehension and familiarity of texting. The authors gave the respondents texting forms like" ILNY" and asked them to write their standard forms which is "I love New York".

The texting items were categorized in the following way: 'Comprehended by the respondents', 'Not comprehended by the respondents', 'repetition of the same short form' and 'missing'. The following table shows the statistics of the categories of this study.

Table 2. The statistics of the categories of fill-in-blank questionnaire across levels

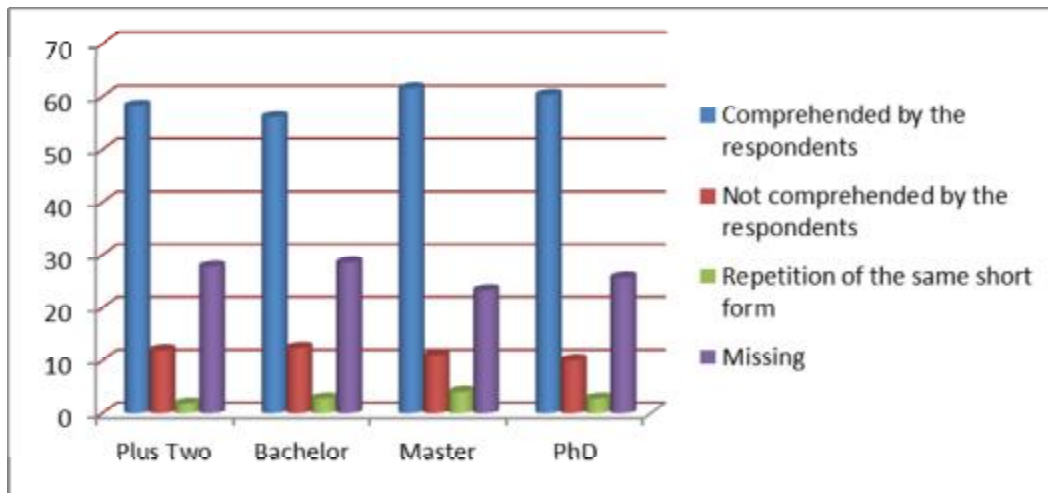| Level		Comprehended by the respondents	Not comprehended by the respondents	Repetition of the same short form	Missing
Plus Two	Mean	20.4000	4.2000	.6667	9.7333
	Sum	306.00	63.00	10.00	146.00
	% of Total Sum	16.4%	17.3%	10.4%	17.7%
Bachelor	Mean	19.6400	4.3600	1.0000	10.0000
	Sum	491.00	109.00	25.00	250.00
	% of Total Sum	26.3%	29.9%	26.0%	30.3%
Master	Mean	21.5600	3.8400	1.4400	8.1600
	Sum	539.00	96.00	36.00	204.00
	% of Total Sum	28.9%	26.3%	37.5%	24.7%
PhD	Mean	21.1200	3.8800	1.0000	9.0000
	Sum	528.00	97.00	25.00	225.00
	% of Total Sum	28.3%	26.6%	26.0%	27.3%
Total	Mean	20.7111	4.0556	1.0667	9.1667
	Sum	1864.00	365.00	96.00	825.00
	% of Total	59.17	11.59	3.05	26.19

Figure 1. The use of short forms among texters across the levels of education (in percentages)

As shown in table (2) and graph (1), out of the short forms given, 59.17% were comprehended by the respondents, 11.59% were not comprehended by the respondents, 3.05% were repeated, i.e. the same short forms were written as they were, and 26.19% were missed.

Table 3. The ANOVA test in the categories of fill-in-blank test

Category	Sig. (P-Value)
Comprehended by the respondents	.269
Not comprehended by the respondents	.846
Repetition of the same short forms	.579
Missing	.385

As shown in table (3) above, there was no significant difference between the level groups in any of the categories of the test.

4.1 The variations which were given by the respondents

Table 4. The variations of the short form *wr* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
wr	With respect	2
	Where	2

wr (were)
The abbreviation **wr** that stands for **were** offered two variations. Two of the respondents wrote that **wr** stood for **where** and two wrote that **wr** stood for **with respect**.

Table 5.The variations of the short form *CWOT* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
CWOT	caught	5
	quiet	1
	cute	1
	somewhat	2
	kuwait	1
	see what	4
	short	1
	come with our tour	1
	coming	2
	completely out of station	1
	covered	1
	quite	1

CWOT (complete waste of time)
This abbreviation was given to the respondents in a context, but no one of the respondents wrote its standard form. Some of them repeated the same short form or left it blank. The short form **CWOT** offered twelve variations in interpretation. Five respondents wrote that **CWOT** stood for **caught**, one wrote that it represented **quiet**, one wrote **cute**, two wrote **somewhat**, one wrote **Kuwait**, four wrote **see what**, one wrote **short,** one wrote **come with our tour,** two wrote **coming,** one wrote **completely out of station,** one wrote **covered** and one wrote **quite**.

Table 6. The variation of the short form *b4* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
B4	but	1

B4 (before)
Almost all of the respondents comprehended this abbreviation, as they wrote that it meant **before**. Only one of the respondents wrote **but**.

Table 7. The variations of the short form *NY* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
NY	any	4
	and why	1
	nice	2
	near	1
	Norway	1
	night	1
	new year	2

NY (New York)
Some respondents knew that **NY** stood for **New York**. The abbreviation **NY** offered seven variations in interpretation. Four respondents wrote that **NY** stood for **any**, one wrote that it represented **and why,** two wrote **nice**, one wrote **near**, one wrote **Norway**, one wrote **night** and two wrote **new year.**

Table 8. The variations of the short form *2C* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
2C	twice	1
	took	1
	to come	1

2C (to see)
Almost all of the respondents understood this abbreviation, as they wrote that **2C** stood for **to see**. Only one of the respondents wrote **twice,** one wrote **took** and one wrote **to come**.

Table 9. The variation of the short form *GF* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
Gf	grandfather	3

GF (girlfriend)
Almost all of the respondents understood this abbreviation, as they wrote that **GF** meant **girlfriend**. Only three of the respondents wrote **grandfather**.

Table 10. The variations of the short form *thr* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
Thr	there	21
	other	1

thr (their)
Some of the respondents comprehended the full form of this abbreviation, as they wrote that **thr** stood for **their**. 21 of the respondents wrote **there** which is similar to **their** in spoken form and one wrote **other**.

Table 11. The variation of the emoticon :-**@** as given by the respondents

Emoticon	variations given by respondents	Count
:-@	other	1
	at	5
	at the rate of	6
	small	1
	adult	1
	and	1

:-@ (screaming)
The emoticon **:-@** which stands for **screaming** offered six variations in interpretation. One respondent wrote that **:-@** stood for **other,** five wrote **at,** six wrote **at the rate of**, one wrote **small**, one wrote **adult** and one wrote **and**.

Table 12. The variation of the short form *FTF* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
FTF	fit and fine	3
	for the fall	2
	fifty	2
	fighting	1
	five to fifteen	1

FTF (Face to Face)
None of the respondents understood what **FTF** stood for. Most of them just tried to write its full form by understanding the meaning or by understanding the spoken form. All the respondents failed to get the intended full form by guessing the intended form from the context or from its spoken form. Some respondents repeated the same short form or left it blank. The abbreviation **FTF** offered five variations in interpretation. Three respondents wrote that **FTF** stood for **fit and fine**, two wrote that it represented **for the fall**, two wrote **fifty**, one wrote **fighting** and one wrote **five to fifteen**.

Table 13. The variation of the short form *ILNY* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
ILNY	if New York	1
	I only	2
	I will new	1
	only	1
	I living in New York	2
	I love new year	1

ILNY (I love New York)
The respondents offered six variations of the short form **ILNY**. One respondent wrote that **ILNY** stands for **If New York**, two wrote that it represents **I only**, one wrote **I will new**, and one wrote **only**, two wrote **I living in New York** and one wrote **I love new year**.

Table 14. The variation of the short form *gr8* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
gr8	grow at	1

gr8 (great)

Almost all of the respondents understood that the abbreviation **gr8** stood for **great**. Only one of the respondents wrote **grow at** which was really meaningless.

Table 15. The variation of the short form *plc* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
Plc	pleasure	3

plc (place)

Almost all of the respondents comprehended the full form of the abbreviation **plc**, as they wrote that it meant **place**. Three of the respondents wrote **pleasure**. They understood it as "it is a great pleasure" instead of "it is a great **place**".

Table 16. The variation of the emoticon *2b* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
2b	to bother	1

2b (to be)

Almost all the respondents comprehended the full form of the abbreviation '**2b**', as they wrote that it meant **to be**. Only one of the respondents wrote **to bother**.

Table 17. The variation of the short form *tht* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
tht	what	2
	this	1

tht (that)

Almost all the respondents translated the abbreviation '**tht**' correctly. They wrote that '**tht**' stood for **that**. Only two of the respondents wrote **what** and one wrote **this**.

Table 18. The variation of the short form *th* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
th	something	2
	truth	2
	there	2
	that	2
	this	3
	so	2

th (the)

The abbreviation **th** offered six variations in interpretation. Two respondents wrote that **th** stood for **something**, two wrote that it represents **truth,** two wrote **there,** two wrote **that**, three wrote **this** and two wrote **so**.

Table 19. The variation of the short form *lyk* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
lyk	look	2

lyk (like)

Almost all the respondents had no difficulty in understanding this abbreviation, as they wrote that it meant **like**. Only two of the respondents wrote **look.**

Table 20. The variation of the short form *ttyl* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
ttyl	Title	19
	Total	2
	Totally	6
	Till	2
	try till	1
	Telephone	1
	Style	5
	Tell	1

ttyl (talk to you later)

The abbreviation '**ttyl**' offered eight variations. Nineteen respondents wrote that **ttyl** stood for **title**, two wrote that it represents **total,** six wrote **totally**, two wrote **till**, one wrote **try till**, one wrote **telephone**, five wrote **style** and one wrote **tell.**

Table 21. The variation of the short form *y* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
Y	yes	12
	you	1
	bye	2
	yea	1

y (why)

The abbreviation offered four variations. Twelve respondents wrote that '**y**' stood for **yes**, one wrote that it represents **you,** two wrote **bye**, one wrote **yea**.

Table 22. The variation of the short form *IMHO* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
IMHO	I am hand of	3
	I am honoured	2
	I am	11
	I am honest	1
	I may	1
	I am who	3
	I am Mohd.	3

IMHO (In my humble opinion)

The abbreviation **IMHO** offered seven variations in interpretation. Three respondents wrote that **IMHO** stood for **I am hand of**, two wrote that it represents **I am honoured,** eleven wrote **I am**, one wrote **I am honest**, one wrote **I may**, three wrote **I am who** and three wrote **I am Mohd**.

Table 23. The variation of the short form *gr8* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
gr8	grow at	1
	graduate	2

gr8 (great)

Almost all the respondents comprehended the full form of the abbreviation '**gr8**', as the overwhelming majority of them wrote that it meant **great**. One wrote that **gr8** stood for **grow at** and two of the respondents wrote **graduate**.

Table 24. The variation of the short form *brb* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
brb	brother	4
	bihar board	1
	bribe	11
	Brave	6
	Barber	2

brb (be right back)

The abbreviation **brb** offered five variations in interpretation. Four respondents wrote that **brb** stood for **brother**, one wrote that it represents **Bihar Board,** eleven wrote **bribe**, six wrote **brave** and two wrote **barber**.

Table 25. The variation of the short form *btw* as given by the respondents

short form	variations given by respondents	Count
btw	Between	68
	but way	1

btw (by the way)

The abbreviation **btw** offered two variations. Sixty eight respondents wrote that '**btw'** stood for **between** and one wrote that it represents **but way.**

Table 26. The variation of the short form *lol* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
lol	loly pop	1
	lovely	1
	loyal	3
	boys	1
	loll	1
	laughter of laughter	1
	friend	1
	loveable	2
	one zero one	1
	Kidding	2
	one by one	1
	less of luck	1

lol (laugh out loud/ lots of love)

The abbreviation '**lol**' offered twelve variations in interpretation. One respondent wrote that **lol** stood for **loly pop**, one wrote that it represents **lovely,** three wrote **loyal**, one wrote **boys**, one wrote **loll**, one wrote **laughter of laughter**, one wrote **friend,** two wrote **loveable,** one wrote **one zero one,** two wrote **kidding,** one wrote **one by one** and one wrote **less of luck**.

Table 27. The variation of the short form *aslmh?* as given by the respondents

Short Form	variations given by respondents	Count
aslmh?	Assalamalaikom	54

aslmh? (age, sex, location, music and hobbies?)

Most of the respondents interpreted '**aslmh?**' as **assalamalaikom** which is Muslim's salutation as almost all the respondents were Muslims.

4.2 The Comprehended Short Forms

The short forms such as '**summr**', '**hols**', '**2go2**', '**bro**', the digit '**3**', etc. were not misunderstood, but there were some respondents who repeated the same short forms or left them blank.

5. Interpretation

From the linguistic analysis of texting, it was found out that texting creates lack of comprehension for the respondents. Wei, Xian-hai, and Jiang (2008: 3) found that "In Netspeak, there are some newly-created vocabularies, which people cannot comprehend them either from their partial pronunciation or from their figures." (Crystal 2007:23) claims "variation causes problems of comprehension and acceptability. If you speak or write differently from the way I do, we may fail to understand each other." The important factor regarding abbreviations is that people interpret abbreviations differently. In one geographical area, or within one group of people, the abbreviation **gf** could mean "girlfriend", and in another area it could mean "grandfather". In a third area it could mean something entirely different.

The abbreviations that seem to be relatively frequently used in text messaging were the ones that were interpreted in the same way by most of the respondents. Less established abbreviations within the language of text messaging, such as **CWOT** and **FTF**, etc. opened for different interpretations, and will most probably lead to misunderstandings in many cases if they are used. Many abbreviations were not understood, which suggests that most of the respondents do not understand and do not use these abbreviations.

Often, one can understand what is intended by looking at the context, but the texts are often sent without much context because some people abbreviate almost every word, and do not make the messages long. Though the authors in this paper gave the respondents text forms in a context to write their full or standard form, it was found that the context did not help the respondents to comprehend the intended meaning. Ali, Hasnain and Beg (2011) argue that the context does not always help in understanding texting language which an author /writer intends to convey. The short form **CWOT** for example, opened for different interpretations which show how much confusion this language creates. The twelve variations offered by the respondents have some meanings. They were not written randomly. Most of the respondents have their own meanings and they translated texting according to their guessing and not according to the given context. They tried to translate the short form **CWOT** and fail to get the intended meaning. Those who wrote that **CWOT** stands for **quiet**, **cute**,(in) **Kuwait, short, coming, completely out of station, quite** and **covered,** have something right. They

understood it as "my summer holidays were **quiet** or **cute** or (in) **Kuwait** or **short** or **coming** or **completely out of station** or **quite** or **covered**". They created a new context which is grammatically correct and sometimes contextually correct, but not the one which is intended. Fifteen respondents looked at **CWOT** as one word, two translated it as four words: one translated it as **come with our tour** and one looked at it as **completely out of station**. Four looked at it as two words which is **see what**. Others repeated the same short form or left it blank. If we look at **completely out of station,** we will find a cultural explanation, as Indians always say **out of station** for someone who is outside the city or state. Those who wrote that **CWOT** stands for **see what**, **somewhat**, **caught** went only by the spoken form and that is why we cannot find any meaning in them. The one who wrote **come with our tour** tried to go by spoken form and meaning, but he could not get the intended meaning.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

The authors found that many abbreviations were not understood, which suggests that most of the respondents did not understand and did not use these abbreviations. In cases where the respondents took a guess at what the abbreviation could mean, their interpretation was an indication of how much texting creates confusion for speakers and learners of English language. The authors also found that most of the respondents interpreted the well-established abbreviations within the language of text messaging in more or less the same way, and the abbreviations that are coming into more use opened for different interpretations by most of the respondents of the five Faculties.

There are certain measures to be adapted in order to minimize the negative effects of texting that the authors described above**.** The authors and those who are raising the alarm strongly believe that email, SMS, and chat are distorting and destroying Standard English language. This warning should not go unheard. Realistic methods should be found to deal with the issue in a way that can make the intelligibility, status, consideration, and value of Standard English survive among the English speakers, students and texters.

Ali (2012) argue that email, SMS and chat could also be useful tools to teach standard English. As they have become global ways of communication, they might be exploited in teaching Standard English and making the acquisition of Standard English more accessible for everyone using email, SMS and chat. He maintains as texting is inevitable and there is no way to stop it completely, methods and measures should be created to make students differentiate between the standard and non-standard English and separate them accordingly. The differences between Standard English and non-standard English should be shown especially to the young people and school students where the major complaints are raised. Longman (2006, 2) argues that; "the message we must present to students is that this non-standard is perfectly acceptable for use in text messages and in chat rooms but school work, formal letters, business communication and examinations require conventional language." The authors recommend that texting should be confined to its own communication context. In other words, the students must be aware of where and when texting can be used and where and when it cannot be used. Nadler-Nir, R. (2008) suggests that "we need to accept it [texting] and seek for solutions to the complaints that it is invading the standard written language use"**.** (as cited in Barasa and Mous 2009).

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Appendix
Questionnaire

Dear Respondent,
This questionnaire is intended to measure your familiarity and comprehension of texting. You are kindly requested to fill up the following questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire will only be used for research purposes and kept confidential. Your participation would be greatly appreciated.
Thanks

Part I
General Information

Faculty:	Arts		Social Sciences		Engineering and Technology		Science		Commerce	
Educational Level:	Plus Two		Bachelor		Master		Ph D			

Part II
Please write the full form of the following as in the example given. Please include the appropriate capitalization, punctuation, and spell out all words.

I h8 txtng (I hate texting).

1) My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :-@ kids FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc
....
....
....
2) 2b or nt 2b.... tht is th ? ………..………………………….
3)lyk..
4) ttyl……...
5) y …………………………………………………………………………………………….……
6) IMHO U R GR8...
7) brb...
8) btw…………….....................…………………………………….……………….
9) lol ……………………………………………………………………………….……………….
10) aslmh?……………...……….……………………..