Case 11

Text Messaging and its Effects on Teens' Grammar

Background Information
“TIYO TXTng = Gd 4 or NME of GRMR?” If you cannot understand the previous statement, then you most likely have not been exposed to the language of text messaging. Who are the creators of this language? The answer is today’s teenagers. The translation for the opening sentence is, “In your opinion, is texting good for or the enemy of grammar?” Text messaging has surely given our society a quick means through which to communicate, taking out the need for capitalization, punctuation, the use and knowledge of sentence structure and the detail that make good statements great. Some educators suggest that this new age form of messaging may be hindering today’s teens’ abilities to apply grammar correctly in their writing and social skills. Others, however, take pride in the notion that teenagers are essentially creating their own language of the twenty-first century and see no effect on their students’ writing skills. Edutopia, an educational website, conducted an online poll regarding this issue of text messaging vs. grammar. Out of 293 votes, 193 votes (47%) chose “Yes, I believe students are carrying over the writing habits they pick up through text messaging into school assignments.” 98 votes (33%) chose “No, I believe students can write one way to their friends and another way in class. They can keep the two methods separate.” 55 votes (19%) chose “Maybe. Although text messaging may have some impact on how students write, I don't think it's a significant problem.” (Ring, 2009). Wat do u tnk? (What do you think?) The Sacramento News published an article in April of 2008 about a study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and the National Commission on Writing regarding text messaging and its affect on teens’ schoolwork. The study concludes, “A national telephone poll of 700 youths ages 12 to 17 and

their parents found that 64 percent of teens admit that the breezy shortcuts and symbols commonly used in text messaging have appeared in their school assignments.” One teacher in the article states, “When informal language does pop up in papers, I definitely am going to correct it,’ she said. ‘But it’s part of our job as teachers to help students move in and out of formal and informal language.’” This teacher is very correct; in Alabama as well as other states across the United States, one of the standards for teachers of English Language Arts is to educate students on the difference of and appropriate use of formal and informal language (Hubert, 2008). A news station, KHQA, recently did a piece on text messaging in which several English teachers and one assistant principal/former English Department Chair were interviewed about the text messaging issue as it pertains to grammar. One of the interviewees commented that the notion that students are having a problem with the use of formal versus informal language is not new; it is one that has been around before email came along with students not knowing to use “I” in a paper or third person point of view. Instead, the interviewee noted, interestingly, that the problem with text messaging in association with grammar is the lack of depth in student’s writing. Supporting details and descriptive phrases are key to well-written responses, essays, and formal papers. Since a sentence can be stated in one sentence that may contain only five words and “get the job done” in a text message, students are tending to think that shortened answers will also “get the job done” in the classroom. For many courses and especially English, shortened answers and choppy sentences will certainly not suffice (Mapes, 2009). Overall, it really is no surprise that text messaging is leaking into students’ schoolwork because teenagers are generally known in our society as constant texters. In fact, teens in the United States (ages 13 to 17) statistically, according to phone bills, have the highest levels of text messaging, sending and receiving an average of about 1800 text messages per month (Neilsen 2008). Many teens, though, go above and beyond the average of text messaging among our youth today. One online article featured a thirteen-year-old girl who text messaged 14,528 text messages in a single month. Her father noted that the online AT&T statement ran 440 pages long (Mah, 2009). When calculating the amount of hours in a single month, just think about the astronomical amount that this girl is texting per minute. Imagine what this California girl’s teachers are probably seeing in her schoolwork.

Preview

Text messaging has brought a great deal of convenience, quickness, and a new language to our society. Technology is the mark of our innovative world today. Many benefits have emerged from text messaging. However, many problems have risen with the development and prevalence of text messaging as well. Texting while driving, more parts of a phone bill, lack of substantive

communication, dinner table distractions at family meals, and possibly a decline in the grammar and writing skills of our students are some of the negative aspects of text messaging. Personally, I like text messaging, but as an English teacher, I do worry about its effects on teens’ ability to write.

The Case – Carol and Chase
Carol and Chase are two students that attend the same high school and are in the same English class, but they would not consider themselves friends, as they hang out with other groups outside of school. Carol’s parents have a limited plan on their phone bill and currently cannot afford unlimited text messaging and therefore do not use it too often. Carol’s best friends also live in her neighborhood, and usually, she talks with them in person, not over text messaging. Occasionally, Carol may text one of her friends to see where they are, but as mentioned earlier, she cannot text very much due to her family’s phone/text plan. At school, Carol is a very good student and Science is her favorite subject but she enjoys English too. Chase’s family, on the other hand, has unlimited text messaging, and he uses it quite frequently. In fact, his phone bill states that he texts about 3500 messages a month.

In their ninth grade English class, Carol, Chase, and their peers had to write a formal paper. After the paper was finished, Mrs. Diego, the English teacher, assigned the students into pairs for peer-reviewing. Carol was paired up with Chase. The two traded papers and Carol noticed some oddities in some of the sentences Chase wrote. However, she did not want to anger Chase so she kept quiet. When Mrs. Diego read Chases’ paper, she found something that she has seen in several of her students over the past few years. Only about two or three sentences in the entire paper had an instance of informal use of text language in it, such as “b/c” or “cuz” for because. However, the paper is fraught with short, choppy sentences that give no depth and explanation to the given topic. Carol’s paper was not perfect, for English is not her best subject and she is certainly not comfortable with writing. However, Carol tried her best, and when she made a main idea statement in a paragraph, she supported that statement with supporting facts, details, and descriptions. While Carol may not be any smarter than Chase, her grade on her paper is certainly higher.

Discussion Questions
1. Why do you think that Carol made a higher grade than Chase?
2. How much could text messaging have really affected Chase’s writing skills?
3. Was Chase’s paper probably due to laziness or his frequent exposure to text language?
4. Do you have any experience with text messaging? If so, do you use text language?
5. If teenagers text so often now, will they be able to differentiate between formal and informal language properly when they become adults?
6. TCHRS: Hw mne of u fnd dat yr studnts r “sneaking” txt abbrevs n2 their 4mal rymn or r gyng shrt resp n yr classes? (How many of you find that your students are “sneaking” text abbreviations into their formal writing or are giving short responses in your classes?)
Links
Lingo2word – Translates the lingo of text messages into plain English and vice versa

Resources


