

Media Release

Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

Wednesday 18 June 2014

New study challenges myth that texting affects children's grammar and spelling

Researchers have discovered that the use of "textisms" does not appear to negatively impact the development of children's grammar and spelling.

The study, which was carried out by researchers at the University of Tasmania and Coventry University UK and published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, shows that children and young people's tendency to make grammatical mistakes while texting does not negatively influence performance on grammar and spelling tests over the course of a year.

The researchers analysed the relationship between text messages sent by primary school, high school and university students, and their performance on formal tests of grammar and spelling.

This was repeated one year later to see how texting had affected the development of their language skills over time.

There was no evidence that grammatical violations made whilst texting was related to children's understanding of written and spoken grammar at either time. The results even showed that primary school children's use of deliberately ungrammatical word forms (e.g. "they is" rather than "they are") at the beginning of the project were positively linked to spelling ability 12 months later.

Similarly, high school children's use of ungrammatical word forms and omission of punctuation and capitalisation were all positively associated with growth in the children's spelling ability over the course of a year.

Clare Wood, Professor of Psychology in Education at Coventry University's Centre for Research in Psychology, Behaviour and Achievement, said:

"Our previous work has shown that the reason we see positive associations between use of texting slang and spelling outcomes is because many of the most commonly used forms of text abbreviation are phonetically based.

“So when children are playing with these creative representations of language they have to use and rehearse their understanding of letter-sound correspondences: a skill which is taught formally as phonics in primary classrooms,” Prof Wood said.

“So texting can offer children the chance to practice their understanding of how sounds and print relate to each other.”

The only participants to show evidence of negative relationships between grammatical violations made when texting and levels of grammatical understanding were young adults.

The tendency to omit punctuation and capitalisation in text messages was linked to lower performance on the standardised test of grammatical understanding and a specially constructed measure of sensitivity to grammar in written words taken 12 months later. However, the researchers concluded that these links were weak and could be explained by individual differences in the participants’ general ability levels.

The researchers identified several factors which explain why young people continue to use textisms, including their desire to display emotion while texting, time constraints and the importance the writer attaches to using standard English when texting.

Dr Nenagh Kemp, Senior Lecturer in Psychology (School of Medicine) at the University of Tasmania, said many parents, teachers, and even students themselves feel concerned that constant exposure to the language of digital communication might be negatively affecting young people’s formal skills in spelling and grammar.

“The use of unconventional writing styles in digital messages can reflect a lack of care or a lack of knowledge, but it can also represent a playful exploration of the uses of written language,” Dr Kemp said.

“It’s important to consider the potential risks as well as the potential benefits of the widespread use of digital communication. But our current evidence suggests that exposure to the often casual, abbreviated, and even ungrammatical writing style of digital messages does not have a negative impact on young people’s conventional spelling and grammatical skills.”

The researchers still urge teachers to continue teaching their students about the conventional rules of formal written grammar, while making them aware of contexts where it is essential to apply these conventions, and when they can be relaxed.

The research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

University of Tasmania
Private Bag 95
Hobart TAS 7001
T 03 6226 2999
media.office@utas.edu.au