# R U READY 2 TXT?

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## Introduction

Texting is a form of writing that is still in its development stage, and its development is being driven by forces beyond academic control. Texting, as a genre, is driven by the communication needs of teenage native speakers who possess mobile phones. The entire concept of texting is, therefore, dependent on emerging technology and it is so very new that EFL teachers are forced to play "catch-up". We can only respond to the developments after they have occurred, and then pass on what we have learnt to our L2 learners.

That having been said, it is also possible for us to transfer data from the slightly more mainstream e-mailing to the understanding of texting, and thus familiarize our students with the process. The following paper will explain how I attempted to do this in an Omani, military context.

## Texting in Oman

In 2004, I was approached by the Group Captain in charge of the central Supply Depot of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO), who was concerned about the quality of writing in the e-mails that were being sent from the purchasing sections. The Depot conducted extensive correspondence with a range of international suppliers, but the senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) responsible for this correspondence were effectively untrained in the writing of e-mails.

This was not a particularly difficult task. Kostenbauer (2004) and Tavares (2004) both appear to believe that e-mailing is within the capability of young EFL learners. In the Omani context I was dealing with small groups of senior NCO's who already had considerable competence in English. They already possessed keyboarding skills. All they lacked was awareness that e-mail writing was more than retyping formal business letters on a computer and then pressing SEND.

Accordingly, I designed a short, five hour course which began with commercially available materials regarding netiquette (Mellor and Crampton, 1996; Powell; 2002) and the writing of e-mails (Emmerson; 2004), before moving on to authentic materials culled from the

Supply Depot archives (McBeath 2005). Together, we explored issues like faulty grammar – "the end user want to know"; over familiarity – "Hi there", when addressing a company; "Hi Sir", when addressing an officer; and the perennial problem of the automatic spell check – do you mean "reply" or "replay"?

Eco (2000: 126) has said that "any phenomenon, for it to be understood as a sign of something else, and from a certain point of view, must first of all be perceived." Military personnel will not "perceive" that it is a breach of netiquette to send an e-mail written in upper-case, unless this is explained. It is not a breach of etiquette to write a letter, memo or fax in upper-case, and in military communication, signals are to be written ONLY in upper-case, with paragraphs clearly labeled Alpha, Bravo Charlie etc, and all punctuation marks in parentheses. "Common sense", i.e. writing in only lower-case, does NOT apply to military personnel, because their common sense would suggest that an important or urgent e-mail should follow the conventions of Signal Writing.

Initially, at the very end of the e-mail writing course, I included some work on texting, but this was effectively an additional, bolt-on module that could have been discarded without weakening the core component.

Even so, my interest in texting had been roused by Norbrook's (2003) paper "C U L8R", where phonetic equivalence replaces traditional spelling conventions. This use of English, an almost ludic celebration of the way the language can re-invent itself according to need, has profound implications for all teachers, and in the interest of *future* language developments, I came to believe that it was worthy of greater emphasis.

As the number of e-mail courses that I taught increased, so did the time devoted to texting. We began with an e-mail taken from Medgyes (2002: 74), where the text is such that most of it reads like a conventional, informal letter rather than an e-mail. There are minor changes to standard orthography – Thanx; 4 == for; 2 = to; and the riddle NE1410IS? – Anyone for tennis? As an example, this letter served as an easy introduction to the topic.

We then moved on to a "TXT MSG" displayed on a mobile phone, and taken from Evans (2002; 71). The shorthand text, together with the abbreviations – ravi thnx 4 yr msg im now on train late 4 meet again pls say sorry 4 me c u asap Katie – works as a decoding exercise, but this is still material that is within most students' competence. It can, moreover, be reinforced by Emmerson's (2004: 10-12) exercise on Missing Words and Abbreviations, which covers terms like C = see; yr = your and ASAP = as soon as possible.

The next exercise, taken from Carter and McCarthy (2003/2004: 120-121) is considerably more challenging, and is worth citing in full. It consists of an exchange of text messages, between two students called Viki and Sue:-

Viki:    It's snowing quite strong outside …….be careful.

Sue:    I will, thx.

Viki:    wei, wei…..lei dim ar?

Sue:    ok, la, juz got bk from Amsterdam loh, how r u?

Viki:    ok la. I have 9 tmrw.

Sue:    haha, I have 2-4, sooooooooooo happy.

Viki:    che…anyway…have your rash gone?

Sue:    yes, but I have scar oh…..ho ugly ar.

Viki:    icic…..ng gan yiu la…..still a pretty girl, haha!

It must be remembered that anyone reading this exchange is effectively eavesdropping on a private conversation, with all the in-jokes, understatements and privately coded references that would be expected in unrehearsed speech. Hence the exchange – I have 9 tmrw; haha, I have 2-4 – refers to the next day's lecture timings, and automatically explains why Sue is "sooooooooooo happy". It is interesting to note at this point how closely text English indicates the intonation of Sue's statement.

Other utterances - "wei, wei…..lei dim ar?" – remain utterly opaque, until it is explained that Viki and Sue are actually Chinese students attending courses in England, and so "ng gan yiu la" is texted Cantonese for "it doesn't matter."

The implications here are completely revolutionary. It becomes clear that text messaging not only permits code switching across languages, but also across orthographies. Provided both parties share the same linguistics background(s), there is nothing to prevent Arab, Chinese, Greek, Japanese, Russian or Tamil speakers from texting each other in Roman letters, substituting L1 lexis where the L1 phonology permits this.

The final example took things one step further. This is a parody, cited by Bragg (2003: 310) but it is a very good parody, written in accordance with texting conventions as they were understood in 2003. It is based on an incident that was mentioned by Norbrook, and before introducing it to the students, I always issue them with a page of emoticons and acronyms from Tavares (2004: 59).

The text reads as follows:-

Dnt u sumX rekn eng lang v lngwindd? 2 mny wds & ltrs? ?nt we b usng lss time & papr? ? we b 4wd tnking + text? 13 yr grl frm w scot 2ndry schl sd ok. Sh rote GCSE eng as (abt hr smmr hols in NY) in txt spk. (NO!) Sh sd sh 4t txt spk was "easr thn standard eng".Sh 4t hr tcher wd be : ) . Hr tcher 4t it was nt so gr8! Sh was : ( & talkd 2 newspprs (but askd 2 b anon). "I cdnt bleve wot I was cing!  :o' - ! - ! - ! OW2TE. Sh hd NI@A wot grl was on abut. Sh 4t her pupl was riting in "hieroglyphics".

The exercise was quite simply to rewrite this passage in conventional English, working as a group with teacher support.

The difficulty with this text is, of course, that is its very density. Indeed, it is almost too dense for any individual, unsupported EFL student to understand. Concepts the "w scot 2ndry schl" – a secondary school in the west of Scotland – have to be reconstructed, and terms like "GCSE" rely on cultural knowledge of the type required for the far more obvious "NY" – New York. "4t" for "thought" and "bleve" for "believe", moreover, depend on advanced linguistic understanding. The reader must be aware

    (a)    that contemporary vernacular English speakers from the south east of England substitute unvoiced labial dental fricatives for dental fricatives

    (b)    that they elide the first syllables of words,

    (c)    that British teenagers have learnt this speech from watching the soap opera "Eastenders".

Only then it is impossible to reconstruct these target items. Lacking this wealth of sociolinguistic and cultural data, the non-native speaker really has "NI@A" – no idea at all.

Even so, it is possible to partly reconstruct the text, using awareness of emoticons - : ) = happy; : ( = unhappy, as these are international in application. So is the use of the ampersand, and terms like b = be; 2 = to; cing = seeing and gr8 = great can be reconstructed as a puzzle.

**Conclusion**

I do not want to suggest that it is absolutely essential that our students learn to read and send text messages, but I would suggest that it is something that the students themselves might want to do. Andrewes (2005: 5) quotes Kumaravidelu's (2004) statement that "to ignore local exigencies is to ignore lived experiences." And it is extremely easy for even committed stakeholders to be left behind if they fail to identify developing technological and linguistic trends.

One of the most telling differences between Soars and Soars (1996) *New Headway Course* and their *New Headway New Edition* (2003) course is the difference in the size of the mobile phones in the illustrations. Books published as recently as the mid 1990's illustrate huge mobile phones that have neither photographic nor text facilities. This (once cutting edge) technology is unrecognizable to young teenage students today.

IT has transformed the way we work, and it has already influenced the way in which we correspond (Morgan 2005) – both physically and linguistically. Our students must be prepared to move into a new era where human resources become ever more important, and those human resources will require IT support. The English that we are teaching our students now will sustain future economic and personal development, and personal development depends on communication.

How effective this communication can be is illustrated by the following anecdote. In March 2005, large advertising billboards were erected beside the main highway that runs through Muscat, the capital of Oman. Just outside the International Airport, one hoarding asked "R U Ready 4 Red?"

The hoarding was advertising the launch of a new product – Red Mountain Dew – which despite its name is a rather sickly, luridly coloured soft drink aimed at the teenage market. Interestingly, the campaign used texted English, NOT Arabic, to suggest that this was a completely up to date, "hip and happening" product. The very wording (?) of the advertisement was enough to convey the message to the target audience.

Even more interestingly, the campaign worked. Red Mountain Dew became an overnight success, as teenage Omanis drank it by the gallon. They were ready.

R U?

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