

Inquiring Minds topic for February 14, 2020

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IS TEXT MESSAGING RUINING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE?

by Wil for EF English Live (an on-line blog)

The speed and shorthand of SMS (short message service) has irreversibly changed our use of English, but is this a good or bad thing?

A UN poll in 2012 found that at the time of polling just over a year ago, there were as many mobile phones as people in the world: over six billion. When you consider that around half of that global population lives in a state of subsistence or poverty which makes owning a mobile phone unlikely, those statistics are even more incredible.

Mobile phone usage and telecommunication has been one of the runaway successes of the twenty-first century. But the question which puzzles us at EF English Live is – has it affected the way we use the language of English? And if it has, is it for better or for worse?

We'll take a look at a few areas that might help us navigate this tricky problem. Hope u tnk it's gr8!

Mobile phone usage: a few quick facts

– The country with the highest density of mobile phones is... Panama! This Latin American state has an average of over 202

phones per 100 people; meaning each person has at least two mobile telephones.

– The country with the lowest density of mobile phones is North Korea

– The country with the most mobile phones is China, registering just over 1.2 billion (with a population of 1.3 billion)

What are mobile phones are capable of?

– 3G phones (introduced in the late 1990s) were the first to go beyond simple voice technologies and introduce digital technologies including internet communication

– with the advent of 3G and 4G, live messaging and other forms of ‘instant’ writing have become the norm for mobile users

Talking vs texting

One conflict that has been produced by the surge in mobile phone use is a rift between people who like to talk and people who prefer to text. Sending text messages has become a medium of choice for mobile phone users.

Young people are increasingly prone to texting and shy away from making calls, which are more direct – but also less permanent forms of communication. Ironically, the speed at which instant messaging or texting takes place means that mistakes and shorthands are common: but we often let each other get away with them because we know what they mean.

Many teachers in primary and secondary schools have expressed concern at the number of children whose literacy levels are dropping; and who are not even able to write by hand, so accustomed are they to computers, tablets and mobiles.

Some texting terms have even made it into common parlance: 'lol' (laugh out loud), 'omg' (oh my god), pls (please). The craze for shortening words, absorbed from texting, is also changing how we speak – 'amaze' for 'amazing', 'totes' for totally, 'blates' for blatantly: these are all largely teenage usages that are becoming mainstream.

But does this mean it's turning us all into inarticulate blobs?

Is text messaging is ruining the English language?

YES

You only need to look at recent education statistics to see that text messaging is completely devastating the English language. Recent findings have suggested that schoolchildren in the 1960s and 1970s were far more literate than children of today. In 2013, the average schoolchild struggles more with spelling, grammar and essay-writing: essential skills which before now were considered key to a good grasp of the English language. Text messaging is alienating English speakers from their native tongue and confusing non-natives who wish to learn the language. It promotes mis-spelling. English is a beautiful tongue with a rich literary history which does not deserve to be overshadowed by phrases like 'c u l8r' and 'megalolz'.

NO

As any linguist knows, language is not a static thing. Change and development is the one constant in life, and the changing sounds and phrases of a language are merely reflections of the changes in a particular society. You cannot expect the English language to remain the same while the world around us – and particularly the way we communicate – is subject to so much variation. Text messaging can be a fun and playful way to communicate – the

important thing to remember for education is teaching children how to employ different ways of communication. Writing an essay and writing a text are different things; children can learn both. What is more, texting is being used to actually help literacy in developing countries: a UN SMS-based literacy program in Pakistan aims to help women in Islamabad to read. Now what's so bad about that?

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you text and are you up-to-date on text speak?
2. Does text speak pose a threat to effective communication?
3. Do you remember Ebonics and the debate over its use?
How about the debate over cursive and printing?
4. Is SMS limited to texting or does it threaten written communication as well?