

Double-edged Texting

Teenagers' online habits, texting being one of them, have been a matter of concern among parents. Texting is becoming increasingly common, affecting teenagers' mental and physical health. While medical experts link this behaviour to anxiety, distraction, stress, sleep deprivation, and even musculoskeletal disorders, psychologists and parents raise concern over its effect on teenagers' social development and scholastic skills (Hafner, 2009). For instance, breaking away from parents has become a more challenging task for teenagers. Also, some parents put the blame for children's bad grades on texting, confiscating their mobile phones altogether, as Greg Hardesty did with his 13-year-old daughter Reina (Hafner, 2009). Although this move may be reasonable, given the obsessive nature of Reina's texting behaviour and improved grades afterwards, such draconian measures were hypocritical in the eyes of Reina, who constantly sees her mother on her iPhone. Perhaps instead of authoritatively prohibiting children from texting, which we all enjoy, we are ought to embrace its productive side?

Plester et. al. (2008) report on two studies that investigated the relationship between teenagers' texting behaviour and written language skills required at school. As might be expected, the group of children that texted more frequently had lower scores in standardised verbal and nonverbal reasoning. Yet the researchers observed a fascinating correlation between the increased use of text abbreviations and high verbal reasoning ability, together with good writing. What is more, pre-teen children were using their metalinguistic awareness to create new abbreviations and switch between registers, which shows their knowledge of different uses of language. The report ends by stressing the lack of direct correlation between texting and 'bad' English; on the contrary, texting is connected with better achievements school literacy.

Overall, the distinction has to be made between simply using mobile phones and frequency and creativity that may be, and often are, part of texting behaviour. Teenagers' texting abbreviations hint at their linguistic creativity, which can be as rich as the standard English we are all used to.

References

- Hafner, K. (2009, May 25). Texting may be taking a toll. *New York Times*.
<http://www.nytimes.com>
- Plester, B., Wood, C., & Bell, V. (2008). Txt msg n school literacy: does texting and knowledge of text abbreviations adversely affect children's literacy attainment?. *Literacy*, 42(3), 137–144.