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13. Printed Resources and the Digital Age: Investigating Nigerian Academic Libraries and their Readiness for the Digital Revolution. - - - 73-91  
**Ogba O.C.**
14. Effect of Computer-Assisted Instruction on Secondary School Student' Achievement in Ecological Concepts. - - - - 92-97  
**Egbunonu Roseline Nkemdilim and Sam O.C. Okeke**
15. The Impact of External Debt on the Economic Growth of Developing Nations: A Focus on Nigerian Economic Between 2001-2010. - - 98-110  
**Sev Joseph Teryima and Abanyam Emmanuel Igbawase**
16. A Review of the Concepts, Model, Strategies and Theories for Problem-Solving in Mathematics and the Mathematical Sciences. - - - 111-128  
**Nekang Fabian Nfon**
17. Internalization of University Education in Nigeria through Inter-Institutional Collaboration: Patterns, Problems and Way Forward. - - - 129-135  
**Adetoro, J.A.; Sule, S.A.**
18. Status of Universities and Secondary Schools Teacher' Use of Learning Resources for Teaching Social Studies in South Western Nigeria. - 136-142  
**Adesina A.D.O.**
19. An Examination of Shortening Strategies in Composing Text Messages: Implications for English Language Teachers. - - - - 143-151  
**Amina Gogo Tafida**
20. Dependence Funding: The Emerging Trend in Financing of Higher Education in Nigeria. - - - - - 152-159  
**Luke N. Omaha**
21. Adapting Instructional Caption Films and Sign Strategy in Enhancing Academic Performance of Learning Impaired Economics Students in Special Schools in Uyo Akwa Ibom State Nigeria. - - - 160-164  
**Paulinus J. Etim and Atim Itighise Edet**
22. Evaluation of Gender Participation in Instruction Assessment among Students of Adamawa State University Mubi, Adamawa State, Nigeria. - - 165-169  
**Eyam, Justina Akunjom and Evelyn U. Ibok**

## AN EXAMINATION OF SHORTENING STRATEGIES IN COMPOSING TEXT MESSAGES: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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### ABSTRACT

*The invention of mobile and the consequent spread of text messaging by most mobile phone users bring about a change in language use. Text messaging or SMS service is characterized by the use of short forms of words and sentences to convey messages during communication. The use of these short forms in composing messages has recently become a controversial area in the field of language learning and teaching. Many researchers and language teachers have expressed the view that the short forms used in text messaging may have negative impacts on language learning while others share a different view. Nonetheless, the fact that some text message forms really differ from the standard orthography of English language is a matter of concern. This paper takes a look at the different shortening strategies employed by diploma students of information and communication technology centre of Federal University of Technology, Mimma. The outstanding implications of the use of such SMS forms are, that it may improve learners' language use while the disadvantage is that the SMS forms may infiltrate in to the formal language students are supposed to use.*

### INTRODUCTION

Language, just as the world itself is dynamic. This dynamism is noticed in every aspect of human endeavour particularly the speaking and writing media. One of the contributory factors to the dynamism in language is the advent of various types of technology. The fast development of technology has affected almost every aspect of our lives. It has tremendous influence on the efficiency of communication between people as well as the methods of education delivery. The invention of mobile phone and the popularity of its short message service (SMS) facility have brought a rapid change to communication process. The SMS, popularly known as text message was developed within the mobile industry in the early 1990s but become popular around 1998 (Crystal 2001).

It enables users to send short messages from one mobile phone to another, or to a mobile phone through the internet. Texting according to Bieswanger (2008) can be considered as a type of computer-mediated communication (CMC), although strictly speaking it is not computer-based, it is technologically mediated and text-based and it shares many of the features of other types of CMC. Texting allows synchronous and asynchronous communication depending on the availability of the receiver and the sender to use their mobile phone to reply just like mobile chat. The message can be read, forwarded, saved, and replied instantly or at a convenient time.

Mckenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) observe that texting permits usual anonymity and its synchronous nature permits for editing and self-reflecting. They opine that texters feel at greater ease being their 'real self' through a text message reducing the potential repercussion that may take place in a traditional or telephone encounter. Texting may also offer the texter more control over their interactions with others.

Reid and Reid (2005) opine that SMS wide adoption is due to the fact that it is instant, location-dependent and personal.

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## An Examination of Shortening Strategies in Composing Text Messages: Implications for English Language Teachers

Lin (2005) gives several reasons for the use of SMS as follows:

- (1) SMS is more indirect and will reduce embarrassment
- (2) It is less disturbing than phone calls
- (3) There is no need to make call for trivial things
- (4) It is fun
- (5) It is romantic
- (6) It leaves something for future pleasurable remembrance
- (7) One is more certain that the other person will receive the message
- (8) One can ask the other person to send information to one to note down
- (9) One can reach the other party around the clock

The SMS facility, due to its limited space and the 160 character per message limit, allows individualized innovation formation of words. Crystal (2001) contends that the technical restriction of the 160 characters per message has motivated the use of new forms of language, such as the use of short forms which requires the texter to write economically, inventively, and playfully. But Doring (2002) in her investigation of the grammatical and lexical forms adopted by the SMS text interlocutors found that syntactic reductions are used even though space exists for the full version of words. She then concludes that short forms like abbreviation and acronyms fulfil a collective identity function. This concurs with Thurlow (2005) who opines that the linguistic shorthand that the users of SMS have developed is as a result of three sociolinguistic maxims, which are brevity and speed paralinguistic restitution, and phonological approximation. These maxims, according to him, are all geared toward the 'principle of sociality' or the desire to make SMS convention as much like face-to-face communication as possible. For instance, although the brevity of SMS communication is due in part to the medium's 160 character limit as well as the small keypad, Thurlow (2005) found that the average SMS message was 65 characters, a number that significantly lower than the medium's capacity. Thus, he concludes that the need for both brevity and speed appears to be motivated less by technological constraints, but rather by discursive demands such as ease of turn-taking and fluidity of social interaction.

Parry (2010) observes that the effect of technology on the way we communicate has changed English language forever. According to him, the e-mail, mobile phone SMS, blogging, social networking sites, such as MySpace, Bebo, Facebook etc., use words that can be described as user-generated content (UGC). Through these media, people write more how they speak and less like they used to write and essentially, less like they had to write either for a boss, a parent or a teacher.

According to Naralingam (n.d), SMS text message, like the internet, strips written of the most fundamental properties because of time limitations and lack of paralinguistic signs that exist in face-to-face communication. Cited by Naralingam (n.d), Millard (1996) refers to it as meta-communicative minimalism. According to him, the phatic or meta-communicative cues, the linguistic and paralinguistic signs that maintain cognizance of social relation between the sender and the receiver of a message are drastically reduced in this medium. The messages are amalgam of actual words and acronyms, abbreviations and short forms which are characteristics of the language of SMS text messaging.

Shortis (2001) adds that "messages are shortened through a process of truncation, omission or substitution of consecutive letters in a word with the shorter chunk of consecutive characters that are phonetically equivalent". Sutherland (2002) describes SMS as sad shorthand drab shrink talk------. Similarly, in a study of 100 text messages received from 100 level diploma students of information and communication technology (ICT), Federal University of Technology, Minna, shows that one thousand, two hundred and eighty seven cases of shortening forms were used. This was done using five (5) different shortening strategies. This analysis is as follows:

- (a) Abbreviation, acronyms, and consonant clusters -- 661 cases

- (b) Initialisms ----- 299 cases
- (c) Non-conventional spellings----- 142 cases
- (d) Phonetic approximation-----113 cases
- (e) Letter-Number homophones----- 72 cases

Shortenings or the use of short forms at lexical or syntactic levels is therefore a characteristic of SMS text messages. It is in the light of this that, this paper examines the strategies used in shortening words or sentences and the implementation of this phenomenon in language teaching and learning.

The 'S' in SMS means 'short', an adjective, which is used as shortening a gerund in this paper. The term 'shortening' is the act of reducing words or sentences in a message in order to save time, space or social reasons. In many forms of computer-mediated communication, shortening can be lexical or syntactical.

Rafi (2003) observes that SMS pursues simple sentence structures whose lexical and syntactic choices are not so different from a child's language. A child expresses his feelings through simple present progressive tense, eg, Mom eating instead of 'mom is eating' or 'eating' for 'am eating'. Rafi opines that SMS overlooks orthographic and syntactic rules of a language with a great emphasis on written sounds and compression. This concurs with Rintel and Pittam (1997) who add that text messages are structurally simple but fragmented, concrete, and conditioned on situation-dependent reference. They opine that many parts of spoken speech are eliminated through the process of abbreviation. Several other shortening strategies which cut across different geographical backgrounds are used. For instance, Swedish texters alter their spelling from the standard by spelling phonetically, splitting compounds, omitting vowels, using conventional and unconventional abbreviations, capitalisation, punctuation and blank spaces are often omitted (Hard af Segerstad 2002). In French, texters use phonetic reductions, syllabograms or rebus writing, logograms which are symbols, acronyms and unilateral abbreviations. (Anis 2007) cited in Thurlow and Poff (2009).

In USA, Ling and Baron (2007) cited in Thurlow and Poff (2009), reports that texters use unambiguous abbreviations (eg 'u' for 'you'; 'r' for 'are'), vowel deletions and lexical shortenings. Also, apostrophes and sentence final punctuations are omitted in most of times. In an African study on texting, South African texters are found to use abbreviations, paralinguistic restitutions, non-standard spellings when texting in English but not at all when texting in Isixhosa (Deumert and Masinyana 2008) cited in Thurlow and Poff (2009).

In Nigeria, Chilwa (2008) cited in Thurlow and Poff (2009) reports that texters employ spelling manipulations, abbreviations and phonetic spellings. Awonusi (2004) adds that apart from the peculiar phonetic representations and orthographic representations, Nigerian text messages have both orthographic and grammatical peculiarities, such as non-use of internal punctuation (comma, colon, and semi-colon), shortening of auxiliary and modal verbs, the deletion of nouns, and groups functioning as nouns.

### Shortening Strategies in SMS

An examination of the text messages received from the one hundred level diploma students, friends, relations and other students depicts the following shortening strategies in composing text messages.

- (1) **Abbreviations and consonant clusters:** Abbreviations and consonant clusters involve deletion of most vowels in words or phrases. Examples are:

SMS Abbreviations	Correct forms
Ord	Ordinary
Jst	Just
Pls	Please
Yr	Year
Snd	Send
Govt	Government
Abs	Absent

- (2) **Initialisms and acronyms:** initialsims and acronyms involve shortening words to their initial letters. Crystal (2008) opines that acronyms are sometimes formal shortening eg NEPA, UNESCO, NATO



## An Examination of Shortening Strategies in Composing Text Messages: Implications for English Language Teachers

while initialisms are more informal, for example, "OMG" means "oh my God", "bf"- my boyfriend, "IMHO"- 'in my humble opinion' etc.

In initialism, items are spoken as individual words, while in acronyms, items are pronounced as single words. Some cases of initialisms and acronyms discovered are:

- B ----- be
- F----- friend
- W ----- why
- V----- very
- Bd----- birthday
- M----- me
- O ----- on
- Ny----- New year

- (3) **Letter and number homophones:** letter and number homophones are also termed syllabograms or phonetic reductions. In letter-number homophones, alphabets and numbers whose sound resemble the alphabets or syllables in a word are combined to form the spelling of the word. In some cases, a number is used to stand for a word with similar sound. Crystal (2001) refers to this phenomena as rebus-like potentials of letters and numbers eg "cul8r"- "see you later", "wuu2"- "what you up to" other examples are:

2	To, too, two
1	One
4	For, four
8	Ate ,eight
Gr8	Great
4get	Forget
4give	Forgive
B4	Before
tn8	To night
Db8	Debate
9t	Night
1ce	Once
4tne	Fortune
1drfl	Wonderful
M8	Mate
2geda	Together
Sk8	Skate, skirt
Gr8 2 no u	Great to know you

Bodomo and Lee (2004) in their paper titled 'the linguistic features of SMS in Hong Kong' examine the material and linguistic properties of HongKong SMS texts and reveals that the texters made use of letter-number homophones such as "88" for "bye-bye", "99" for "nite nite", which literally means "good night".

- (4) **Clippings:** clippings are shortenings in which part(s) of a word are deleted at initial, medial or final positions (Bieswanger 2008). Clippings are divided into two; g clippings and other clippings. G clipping involves the deletion of the final 'g' in words, particularly progressive verbs as in

- Goin ----- going
- jumpin ----- jumping

comin ----- coming  
 drivin----- driving  
 lookin----- looking  
 thinkin ----- thinking

The second class of clipping is termed other clippings which involves clippings such as

Sun----- Sunday  
 Feb----- february  
 Sis-----sister  
 Ankl-----ankle  
 Hav-----have  
 Til-----till  
 Alrigh-----alright  
 To nigh-----to night  
 Bday----- -birthday

- (5) **Phonological approximation:** In phonological approximation, words are written in the manner in which they are pronounced. As a result, all the sounds that do not feature in the pronunciation are ignored. Examples are:

becos----- because  
 tuk-----took  
 naim-----name  
 alwaz-----always  
 rong-----wrong  
 fon-----phone  
 cut-cee-----courtesy  
 buk-----book  
 haus----- -house  
 laf-----laugh  
 dos-----those  
 tym-----time  
 tek-----take  
 bak-----back  
 gud-----good  
 doo-----though  
 sori-----sorry  
 luv-----love  
 becos----- because  
 rite-----right  
 thru-----through  
 kias-----cares  
 beta-----better  
 pawa-----power  
 swit-----sweet  
 bn-----been  
 leta----- -letter  
 skool-----school

- (6) **Non-conventional spellings:** some text message forms are highly unconventional because there are no guidelines or clues to their formation. Words are formed at random and sometimes structures which are not language forms are used to stand for words. Examples are;

Girlyz-----girls  
 Boyz-----boys

## An Examination of Shortening Strategies in Composing Text Messages: Implications for English Language Teachers

Xlnt-----excellent  
 Coz-----cause  
 @ -----at  
 X -----kiss  
 & -----and  
 Sez-----says  
 Skool-----school  
 Nite-----night

### (7) Contractions:

Contractions are words with omitted middle letters, usually vowels. They are done at lexical or syntactic levels. Examples are;

Do not-----don't  
 Must not-----musn't  
 We are-----we're  
 Shall not-----shan't  
 I will-----I'll  
 Would not -----won't  
 He will -----He'll  
 Can not -----Can't  
 Tomorrow -----tmrrw  
 Yr -----your  
 Mt -----meet  
 Hmwork-----homework  
 Txt-----text

### (8) Lack of inadequate punctuation

In some text messages, only four principal punctuations are used, full stops, commas, question marks and exclamation marks. Many text messages ignore commas and full stop as the end of a line signifies the end of an utterance. Some texters also do not use inter word spaces so as to minimize character space. The whole text is written as one block with the use of initial upper case letters to act as word boundaries. Apostrophes and dashes are also ignored and at syntactic level, most texters omit the subject as in, "phone u l8ter".

Ling and baron (2007) also observe that punctuation was less frequent in text messages than in instant messages (IM).

### (9) Logographic emoticon:

Crystal (2008) describes emoticon as a type of pictogram that typically conveys an emotion or a facial expression, though objects can also be represented.

Baron (2004) considers emoticons as text modifiers; while Naviarouskaya, Prendinger and Ishizuka (2010) in Bieswanger (2008) likened them to visual cues in face-to-face conversation. In emoticon, icons are used to denote emotions convey messages. The following are examples

- ☺ means happy
- ☹ means sadness

### Sampled text messages exhibiting the shortenings.

1. How r u	How are you
2. W al lve in mx	We all line in Minna
3. It is tym 4 m 2 join u	It is time for me to join you
4. U r al invtd	You are all invited
5. Let d wold c d beauty of islam tru yr	Let the world see the beauty of Islam through

wok n dds	your work and deeds
6. Pls b infirmed dat my wedin wil b tmrrw	Please be informed that my wedding will be tomorrow
7. Al u nd I hve	All you need I have
8. I fl inderfl 2nite	I feel wonderful to night
9. He sbmt d rpt ystrdy morn	He submitted the report yesterday
10. Hppy 2 u	Happy birthday to you
11. Pls infm d cls	Please inform the class
12. 2mrrw, I goin 2 c u at 2pm	Tomorrow, I am going to see you at 2pm

### Implications for English Language Teaching

Though text message is characterised by new linguistic forms, coinages and spelling innovations geared towards shortening words in composing text messages. However, English as second language teachers can use text message to improve the teaching and learning of English language. According to Crystal (2008) using the language in any way helps to teach that language. As a result, English as second language teachers should note that;

1. Language and spellings are always changing. For according to Geoff Hall cited by Thurlow (2006) "the way we spell words is not set in stone, English language should therefore not fear the rise of text messaging". English language has had some changes before now. Teachers should therefore be conscious of the impact of modern technologies on language and be ready to face the challenge by emphasizing to the students the concept of audience analysis. That is, they should know the context in which text message forms can be allowed and not in formal situations.
2. Text messaging is not a grammar correction-driven-tool but can help the students to acquire the skills for managing real-time communication.
3. Text messaging can offer more exposure to the written word, so should be used for greater literacy attainment.
4. Text messaging can be used to develop language skills. It can help to launch discussions on formal and informal language, such as, comparing the language and syntax of text message with that of formal written English.
5. It can help to develop students' thinking processes. Students can be taught to capture their thoughts or imaginations in text messages and later translate them into formal English. Lee (2002) observes that the innovating approaches to texting could spark the students' thinking processes and encourage them to write more and more.
6. Text messaging can be used to create short summaries of more formal pieces of literature, thereby improving learners' control of the language.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has taken a critical look at mobile phone text messaging with particular reference to one of the most important features of text messages, shortening, the phenomenon of shortening which captures the 'S' in 'SMS' is achieved through different strategies. These strategies and their consequent forms differ from what obtains in the formal written English. Consequently, many views have been expressed by teachers and researchers on the fact that the use of shortening in composing text messages may have negative impacts on students' writing. This paper allays that fear, as it offers worthwhile recommendations on how English as a

## An Examination of Shortening Strategies in Composing Text Messages: Implications for English Language Teachers

second language teachers can exploit text messaging to teach and improve on the teaching and learning of English language.

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