

**TEXT AND CONTEXT:**  
**ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF TEXTING ON INDIAN STUDENTS’  
COMMUNICATION**

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***Abstract***

*The advancement in technology has led to an obsession with texting. However, through its open violations of grammar, punctuation and eccentric use of short forms, texting has encroached on other formal oral and written forms of communication, violating their very essence.*

*Against this backdrop, my paper has analysed the impact of texting on the acquisition and use of English, among Indian students, as is manifested through violations in grammar, spellings, punctuation, forwards and excessive use of emoticons and short forms. It has also suggested solutions that could help students to acquire, retain and use the English Language effectively.*

***Key Words: Texting, Language Acquisition, Indian Students***

***Section 1: Introduction***

“I wonder what people who write “u” and “ur” do with all their extra time.”

- Adam Lynch

Humorous though it may sound, this message on a friend’s Facebook page, at a deeper level, paradoxically captures the lament of many sticklers for effective communication, about what drives individuals to text the way they do.

Technological advancement and the proliferation of social media have created around us, what Marshall McLuhan calls, the ‘global village’. Technology has transformed the way we communicate and has left a deep impact on how people express themselves. Gone are the days of Milton, who wrote the epic *Paradise Lost*, comprising 10,000 lines of blank verse. We now witness the popularity of the cell phone novel - a literary work, originally composed on the cell phone, over text messaging.

The obsession with text messaging has led to a movement towards economy of expression, while it has contrapuntally also facilitated communication, by speeding it up. However, through its open violations of grammar, punctuation and at times an eccentric use of short forms, it has created a situation where “English completely disappears; why in America they haven’t used it for years!”, as Prof. Higgins raves in the movie *My Fair Lady*, though in a different context. In fact, texting has invariably encroached on other formal oral and written forms of communication, violating their very essence.

But is this claim, about texting impinging on other formal modes, like letters, emails and reports an exaggerated one, or one that begs attention is what needs to be examined, before coming up with ways, to set the balance right.

And while most may dismiss the claims to correctness as exaggerated expectations of old fogies, two incidents in the recent past, illustrate the need to pay attention to communicating formally. In the first incident, an MNC had to suffer a huge loss of face, when one of its young management recruits drafted an informal email to clients overseas. The Manager in charge had to intervene and apologise to 18 overseas clients, causing a lot of embarrassment to the MNC. In another case, when an Alumni coordinator of a Management Institute asked a student to forward her resume via email, the student drafted a one liner stating “Looking forward to your reply”. The coordinator was annoyed by the curt email, which displayed a total lack of professionalism and etiquette. Whether these two cases are directly related to the impact of texting on formal communication is open to debate. However, these and similar incidents definitely echo the concerns of placement coordinators and recruiters, who constantly doubt the ability of the young workforce to communicate formally. And more often than not, the inability to do so is attributed to the excessive use of text slang, which is ubiquitous in nature, as is seen through varied platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp etc.

### ***Section 2: Contextualising the Research***

The dynamics get more complicated in a multilingual country like India which has about 780 spoken languages and 86 written scripts and where teachers constantly battle with the influence of the mother tongue on English. Peculiarities that creep into writing, through texting, only add to the challenge.

Against this backdrop, this paper will analyse the impact of texting on the acquisition and use of English, among Indian undergraduate and postgraduate Media and Management students, as is manifested through violations in grammar, spellings, punctuation and the random use of short forms, emoticons and forwards. The reason this research focuses on professional courses, like Media and Management, is that they are fairly interdisciplinary in nature, thus offering a variety; being professional presuppose a readiness for the workspace and also since this researcher has worked closely with students from these two disciplines.

### ***Section 3: Research Methodology***

In order to pursue this study, a questionnaire was drafted and 100 responses were gathered from students and 25 from academicians. Moreover, 5 academicians with a wide experience of interacting with students were interviewed, to get an insight into issues affecting formal written

communication and to learn about specific steps being taken, to address them. Furthermore, the study focuses on the impact of texting violations on predominantly three forms of formal written communication - letters, emails and reports, since these modes are most frequently used, by media and management professionals and given the limited length of this intervention.

#### ***Section 4: Impact of Texting on Grammar***

The first constituent on which the impact of texting was evaluated was grammar. Academicians opined that students violate numerous grammatical conventions. Among errors, they listed the absence of subject verb concord, improper use of plurals, random shifts in tense and incomplete expressions, which are passed off as sentences, as occurring very frequently. It was observed that formal emails/letters typically begin as follows - "Will not be able to attend today's meeting. Got a family function to attend." Students tend to drop the subject, a feature seen in texting, but not in formal email/letter etiquette. Additionally, among Management and Media students, the habit of expressing themselves in points could also be attributed to the excessive use of PowerPoint presentations and its expected style.

Ironically though, in responses to the questionnaire, 44% students opined that grammar is important while communicating formally. However, only 30% students were confident about using grammar in a formal context; 17% students found it difficult to use grammar and a whopping 53% said that they get confused occasionally, in figuring out whether they are grammatically correct. The foremost cause was considered to be inadequate formal writing, followed by excessive texting, social media and its impact, poor knowledge of grammar and lack of reading. Academicians, on the other hand, believed that texting was the foremost reason for students' lack of adherence to grammar and observed that students were selectively grammatically correct vis-à-vis different formal media - while they adhered to grammar most in reports (82%), they were careless when it came to letters and emails (44%).

#### ***Section 5: Impact of Texting on Spellings***

As regards spellings too, only 34% students were confident about their spellings, while 8% students found it difficult to spell and 58% students indicated that they got confused occasionally while spelling. Lack of adequate formal writing followed by the impact of social media were considered, by most students, as affecting their ability to spell. Excessive texting, poor reading and knowledge of spelling rules were cited as other reasons for poor spellings. The findings cited about grammar also applied to spellings. However, academicians considered poor knowledge of the basics to be the primary reason for poor spellings, while excessive texting, exposure to social media were other factors affecting students' spellings.

#### ***Section 6: Impact of Texting on Punctuation***

Furthermore, punctuation, which is often ignored by students, in comparison to grammar and spellings, revealed an ironical finding. 87% students considered punctuation to be important in formal communication. Among students, who expressed that they occasionally get confused in the use of punctuation, 46% ascribed this to excessive texting, followed by the impact of social media, where punctuation is used very erratically by them – like, for example, using numerous

question marks or exclamation marks in their sentences, without understanding the need and implication of their use. Poor knowledge of punctuation rules was cited as another reason for students' inability to punctuate effectively, in a formal context.

### ***Section 7: Impact of the Use of Short Forms on Formal Writing***

Ironically though, the most conspicuous offshoot of texting is using short forms in communication, which encroach very often on formal writing. Although using standard short forms like e.g. for example viz. for namely etc. for etcetera, is common and even acceptable, short forms used in social media find their way into formal communication. Replacing 'you' with 'u', 'are with 'r', use of 'asap' for 'as soon as possible', 'fyi' for 'for your information' is commonly observed in formal writing. Yet, individuals from all age groups and cultures are not familiar with texting abbreviations, leading to confusion. Moreover, students are not aware of the possible effects of varied short forms. A case in point is a student's reply to a thank you message with "WC Mam". The abbreviation WC is commonly used for Water Closet. Another instance was when a faculty member received ttyl as a response from a student, which threw him into confusion until he discovered that it meant 'talk to you later'.

When questioned about the use of short forms, students opined that they used short forms widely on Whatsapp and sms and they were aware of their inappropriateness in formal writing. The teachers' view too matched those of the students', but they additionally observed that students tend to use short forms occasionally, in letters and emails, although not so much in reports.

### ***Section 8: Impact of the Use of Emoticons on Formal Writing***

Another area, which is as problematic and complex, is the use of emoticons. Although emoticons are considerably ubiquitous, while communicating through Whatsapp, they often feature in official sms and emails. While explaining the reasons for this, 58% students expressed that emoticons helped them express the right emotions, without using words, 25% ascribed their use to be an influence of communicating through social media and 17% cited excessive texting to be the cause for using emoticons in a formal context. Academicians like students, believe that students use emoticons because they facilitate brevity in expression. Their excessive use was also seen to result from ignorance about professional etiquette, followed by excessive texting as the third factor. What is often not realised though, as Dr. Preeti Shirodkar, a communication expert pointed out, within emoticons there may be a lot of ambiguity of meaning and interpretation as emoticons are not uniform across platforms, making it difficult to decipher them, especially since in themselves even facial expressions are often difficult to decode.

### ***Section 9: Impact of Forwarding Messages on Formal Writing***

Another prime area, the last within the scope of this research, is sending random forwards, which often result in a lot of miscommunication. Moreover, sources of forwards are unknown, casting doubts on their veracity. As a result, forwards, revolving around language use, through information they carry or language they use, could hamper a student's ability, to use language. Also, since the emergence of Whatsapp and circulation of a great deal of information on diverse

issues, forwarding often becomes compulsive with some individuals, which might rub off on other forms like emails; and, in a professional context, this might affect one's reputation.

As regards forwarding, most students opined that they send forwards on Whatsapp, to generally keep in touch with people. While through emails and sms, they use forwards to circulate professionally relevant information. Academicians, on the other hand, stated that they perceive Whatsapp forwards from students as attempts at networking and seeking help and opportunities. As regards forwards through email and sms, academicians agreed with the students that information was forwarded mostly for professional purposes.

The findings made it evident that in most areas excessive texting was either the foremost or the second reason for inappropriate use of grammar, spellings, punctuation, whereas random forwards and emoticons were considered to be in abundance thanks to the proliferation of the social media.

### ***Section 10: Solutions***

Considering the findings of this study, ways were suggested by academicians, to help reduce the negative impression that students give about themselves while communicating professionally.

#### ***Subsection 10.1: Laying Emphasis on the Value of Communication***

Dr. Preeti Shirodkar, Associate Professor, Communication and Soft Skills, MET argued that it is very important to make students aware of both the importance of communication and the pitfalls of its absence, right from school to the professional world. While teaching and training, Dr. Shirodkar said she includes examples and anecdotes about miscommunication and misunderstanding, due to violations in grammar, spellings and punctuation. Additionally she emphasises, through examples, etiquette to be followed vis-à-vis short forms, emoticons and forwards and includes cases of professionals, who were penalised for errors, while communicating. Such cases, Dr. Shirodkar observes, prove to be an exercise in unlearning, which is pretty tedious for students at the Post Graduate level. Hence she feels that at the school level, teachers should not only try to teach students the language, but also emphasise the value of communication. According to Dr. Shirodkar, teachers need to stress on the fact that effective communication is not a choice, if one desires to succeed in the globalised context.

#### ***Subsection 10.2: Need to Develop Written Skills of Students***

Along with this, educationists have expressed the need for an education system, which does not tolerate laxity in communication. Dr. Abhay Pethe, Professor of Economics, Dr. Vibhooti Shukla Chair, University of Mumbai states that the Indian education system itself needs to be clear about what will be accepted and what will be penalised in the context of communication. He opines that assessing the general understanding of a subject and overlooking grammar, spellings and punctuation errors is itself the doom of the education system. The debate about curriculum, pedagogy, student-teacher ratio and strictness to be adopted vis-à-vis students apart, Dr. Pethe opines that education imparted and tested in a 'Multiple Choice Question ish' fashion is bound to deaden the intellect. Writing practice and retaining the subjective element through long answers, essays etc. in school will help develop the written skills of students. Instead of mollycoddling

students and pardoning them for language related errors, students need to be pulled up because only then will communicating effectively become a habit and not remain a choice.

As regards communicating effectively, Dr. Pethe states that students nowadays are reasonably capable of wearing different hats while communicating. Students rarely commit mistakes in dissertations, as they are made aware of the etiquette to be followed and the marks or grades they would lose, for not following it. However, he observes that students become careless vis-a-vis emails and letters, either because formats are available online or because the awareness of being formal is absent.

### ***Subsection 10.3: Using Specific Examples for Reinforcement***

With respect to bringing about awareness about formal aspects those among the faculty members, who are conscious, adopt fairly diverse approaches. When Dr. Farida Virani, a faculty in HR comes across students, who commit language related errors, which is quite often, she refers them to the Business Communication faculty and encourages students to use the language laboratory, a facility which is meant to improve proficiency in language. Dr. Virani says that she also monitors the progress of these students, by checking whether they are making the effort to iron out problems. So too, during exams, Dr. Virani notes down specific errors that students commit vis-à-vis grammar, punctuation, spellings and other peculiarities and shares them in the class, without disclosing their names. Students, thus, understand the need to be careful at least so that they are not pulled up.

Another way of showing students their mistakes is adopted by Ms. Usha Subramaniam, a faculty in Business Communication. Ms. Subramaniam displays samples of poor writing as bad examples in class and gets students to discuss and correct them. She has a host of emails and letters, which she shows in class, for students to realise the faux pas they make. In various forums, she attends, she makes a note of specific communication errors they commit, so that she can share such examples with her students.

### ***Subsection 10.4: Providing Scope to Develop Written Skills***

However, along with pointing out specific bloopers, it is vital for students to have practised enough writing, before they get their first job and this is where Dr. Preeti Shirodkar's approach of going back to the basics comes in handy. Despite being an expert at using PowerPoint, as a pedagogical tool, Dr. Shirodkar went back to using the white board and marker, when she realised that students in her Business Communication classes did not focus on basic spellings. Throughout the term, she writes down frequently misspelt words on the board and shares with students the usual mistakes committed. When students ask for model answers and samples of writing skills, she refuses to part with samples and insists that students write themselves and get their assignments assessed by her. Additionally, in order to enhance class participation, she has designed certain exercises in which spellings, vocabulary, grammar and punctuation get tested and additional marks are awarded to students, who successfully answer these questions. Incentives in the form of marks and the prestige that the exercise brings motivates students to work hard in these areas and has helped develop those aspects of their language, which are otherwise taken for granted by students.

### ***Subsection 10.5: Leading by Example***

Over and above having the courage and dedication, to make a difference, as an educator, one needs to lead by example, by communicating formally. A significant change in tone and structure of emails and text messages that were sent by students, during the course of this research was observed, when the researcher adhered to a formal style. However, when format, language, short forms etc. were ignored or practised, students emulated the approach.

### ***Subsection 10.6: Being Aware of Trends Among Youth***

While leading by example, one however needs to be aware of reasons why students communicate the way they do, which emerged as one of the findings of this research. Some students, who used full forms while communicating, especially through formal emails and sms were perceived by their peers, as not being trendy or, worse still, being arrogant. Also, though many students, quoted brevity in expression, as their defence for using short forms, they used expressions like 'kk' instead of 'ok' just because they found it rather 'cool' and trendy.

This resonates with what David Crystal states in his book *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*, where he says that "some texting expressions are exactly like slang. And the chief use of slang... is to show that you're one of the gang". As an educator, it is important to be aware of the logic behind a certain usage, which does not necessarily have to be related to knowledge about a language, but may have to do with the psychology of the youth.

In fact, Crystal's book, which provides an interesting insight on texting, concludes by stating that texting reflects the human ability to play with language, creatively. This however comes only after being aware of the language, which allows a person to explore its subtleties. In the Indian context though, such a conclusion does not hold true, as most are trying to master the basics of the English language and so use short forms more as a habit or trend or because they do not know any better; and those among a niche section of the population, who have mastered the language, use them with great caution and a manner that befits the form rather than attempting to prove or achieve anything else.

### ***Section 11: Conclusion***

All else being said, the final defence of effective communication can be culled out from Dr. Pethe's outpourings; he opines - educationists, parents and students need to work in synergy, understand the dynamics and possible effects of social media and their impact on the formal communication systems, to get to the root of rectifying errors that occur in formal writing. Students need to be made aware of the fact that what they write on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter is essentially different from the way one communicates in a professional set up and each has its own place, in the larger scheme of things.

It is when parents and educationists give students a reality check and when students express their dilemmas about the reasons they communicate the way they do, can one bridge the gap between what one desires to say and what one is constrained to mean. Else it will not be long before we cross over the thin line that contorts the text and CONtext, throwing the sender, the receiver and the message into an endless vortex of chaos.

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