EFFECT OF THE USE OF INSTANT MESSAGING APPLICATIONS ON WRITING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:

The use of Instant Messaging (IM) applications on the mobile phones of the youth has become inextricably attached to their everyday lives. Students on university campuses cannot leave their mobile phones behind for a minute because of the importance they attach to the use of IM applications. This paper investigated how the use of abbreviations in IM affects the writing of Standard English language of learners of English as a second language. A sample of 150 students in their 3rd and 4th years at Kenyatta University was used. The study also interviewed a lecturer on the problem. While students indicated that the IM usage does not do any harm to their formal English writing, a faculty member disagreed. It was recommended that awareness should be created through seminars and lectures to bring the issue to the fore for students. This would help students to be cautious of the use of IM.

Keywords: Instant messaging, textisms, textees, computer-mediated communication, students, Kenyatta University

1. Introduction

The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has enjoyed much popularity in recent times. Instant messaging (IM) is a form of CMC that is widespread on university campuses. This has attracted the attention of researchers to their uses and effects on students learning (Quan-Haase, 2008). Its use is hugely noticed among university students and these applications are found on almost every student's mobile phone. IM

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applications allow students as well as users to send real-time text messages to individuals or group of friends at a little cost through the Internet.

Recent developments indicate that more than 700 million users are actively using WhatsApp IM application with India alone having a user base of more than 70 million (Kim, 2015). Additionally, over 30 billion messages are generated and sent every day through the system. Another development that is of great interest in the use of this application is the growth rate. Radicati Group Inc. (2013) projects that IM accounts are expected to increase from over 3.4 billion in 2013 to over 4.4 billion by year-end 2017 worldwide. This represents an average growth rate of about 7% and this should be a matter of concern to educators and other policy makers.

The use of IM in the workplace hit the limelight a few decades ago. This attracted the attention of researchers to the use of IM among employees in an organization. Recent research on the appropriateness of IM in work context remains skeptical about its relevance to the workplace (Swartz, as cited in Lin, Chan & Jin, 2004). While Rennecker and Godwin (2003) believe that IM could decrease the productivity of workers and pose security threat to the organization, de Vos et al. (2003) on the other hand argue that it helps with corporate communication.

The youth's use of IM has reached astronomical proportions. De Bakker, Sloep and Jochems (2007) intimate that "*the medium is used on a much more serious level than many adults might think*" (p. 145). A survey in the United States showed that more than 70% of today's youth use IM, with ages between 12–17 year olds and 6–29 year olds in The Netherlands (PEW Internet, 2005; Qrius, 2005). Some researchers (e.g. PEW Internet, 2005; Qrius, 2005) believe that IM has become the major means of communication especially among the youth and comes with its own language and culture. There is no doubt that the youth constitute about 80 to 90 percent of the undergraduate student population on our university campuses today. It, therefore, makes a lot of sense to say that students on campuses make significant use of IM for various purposes.

With IM having its own language and culture well understood by the youth, its effects, at all cost, would be witnessed in every facet of their lives. Culture encompasses the way of life of group people. The culture and language of IM use among students have triggered much interest among researchers.

Though there exist quite a number of literature on IM on campuses, the concentration has been on North America and other western countries. For example, out of 138 American university students studied by Hu, Wood, Smith, and Westbrook (2004), it was reported that 89% use IM. Again, in Quan-Haase's study of 268 Canadian university students in 2007, it was revealed that 97% of students are users of IM.

However, Africa seems to be lagging behind in terms of research on IM and apparently, among university students on campuses. So far, there has been no empirical data on the effect of IM use on students' English writing skills in Kenyatta University.

A study into the effects of IM applications on students English writing skills is of great importance and essence, in the first place, to add to the body of knowledge on the use of IM among students. Secondly, the study provides reliable data on the effect of these applications on learning English as a second language. To this end, the objectives of this paper were in four folds. First, it explored the kinds of IM applications used by students. Second, it identified the kinds of writings used by students on IM applications. Thirdly, it determined how often student use IM applications. Finally, it established the effect of writing style in IM on students English writing skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Instant Messaging and Students

There has been a significant surge in the use of mobile phones among students who find themselves in the younger age brackets. This has led to a consideration and rapid increase in the use of text and instant messaging (IM or IMing). In a Mobile Youth Survey (Thinkhouse, 2014) conducted at the beginning of 2014 to assess mobile usage amongst Irish youth between the ages of 15 and 35, interesting trends and findings emerged. It was reported that 95% of this younger generation use smartphones. Out this number, 60% are iPhones followed by Android (35%) and Blackberry (3%). The study also revealed that a higher percentage (66%) prefer texting to talking on the phone. A number of applications were being used by these youth. Most people have approximately 10-20 applications on their mobile phones. Whilst texting is seen as an exchange of brief text message between mobile phones, IM is an online sharing of messages between two or more individuals which became more popular at the beginning of the 21st century. IMing is real-time i.e. synchronous and uses Internet data whereas texting is asynchronous communication and does not rely on the Internet.

Instant messaging has become part and parcel of students' life on campus. Students find it easier and comfortable to communicate through these applications than use voice calls apart from the fact that it is considered cheaper. According to Pew Report, (as cited in Marquez, 2003) IM applications allow students to multitask during the tight schedules of the day. Grinter and Palen (2002) posit that students are able to multitask because IM communications do not demand the full attention and concentration of a student on the conversation at hand. In this regard, students are offered the opportunity to study while maintaining an online connection with friends.

Verheijen (2013) did a review of empirical studies published in the last decades on the effect of messaging and instant messaging on literacy to determine their effects. In this review, he identified a language which has numerous characteristics and referred to by a wide range of terms, including "text language", "SMS speak", "text speak", and "textese". The features of this language include lack of standard spelling conventions, blatant disregard of grammar rules and the prevalent use of "textisms". This is attributed to the fact that this writing style saves time, less strenuous and produces quick responses to messages (Kemp, 2010).

Textese have been grouped in various ways and type. Thurlow, as cited Kemp's (2010) study on determining and understanding of textisms in an Australian university categorized to include letter/number homophones (e.g. 2moro, 2day, for *tomorrow and today* etc), word shortenings (tues, wedn), contractions to remove internal letters (txt, for *text*), sound-based spelling (skul or skool for *school*), clippings (goin, hav, mak for *going, have, make)*, initialisms (TG for *thank God,* gtg for *got to go,* ttyl for *talk to you later*), accent stylization (dat for *that,* dan for *than*) and symbols (@ for *at*, x for *kiss*). Verheijen (2013) though found almost same categorization, some additions were made. These include emotions/smileys(:-) for *happy:-* for sad), repeating letters to mirror lengthening (sooooo for *so*, grrreeeen for *green*), omission of punctuation or capitalization (cant for *can't*, i for I, im for *I'm*). Craig (2003) coined a new group and called it "inanities" neologisms (*lolz* for lol [laughing out loud]).

Though students' online communication using IM apps lack the standardized rules of correct spelling, grammar and punctuations, they take delight in composing and communicating with it. "*What seems to matter most is efficiency: getting one's message across rapidly, succinctly and effectively …*" (Verheijen 2013, p.584). In a related study conducted at a high school in a southern suburb of Chicago, Mohammed (2011) reveals that we can expect nothing but the attractiveness of short forms used in text messages in a society where the culture leans toward instant gratification and receiving everything fast.

2.2 Kinds and functionalities of IM applications

Instant Messaging applications affectionately called mobile apps could be said to be one of the best things ever to have happened to youth communication. They come in different shapes, designs, functionalities and complexities. At every point in time, users of these applications have not less than two IM apps on their mobile devices for various purposes. One's choice and preference of an app are dependent on a number of factors. According to Church and Oliveira (2013), factors that influence people to use a particular instant messaging or Short Message Service (SMS) include cost, social

influence, intent or nature, sense of connection or community, intimacy or privacy and expectations of the user.

There are quite a number of IM applications available to students. These apps keep changing due to the constantly evolving nature of technology. Every day new features and functionalities are added with the old features dropped or modified. Quan-Haase (2008) describes this as a "moving target". Some earlier IMs (Lin et al., 2004; Quan-Haase, 2008) include MSN messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, AOL Instant Messenger (AIMing), Google Talk, Skype, Windows Live Messenger (WLM) ICQ ("I seek you"). In the past five years, several new IM apps have been introduced into the mobile market. These include WhatsApp, IMO, Line, Instagram, Viber, Tango, Kik, ChatOn, and others.

The applications come with astounding functionalities. According to Rennecker and Godwin (2003) IMs have functions such as history-keeping, real time video and audio chatting, sending offline messages, allowing users to check email, appear invisible, pop-up notifications with knocking sound. Another common function with IM apps is posting of 'away messages' (Bonera et al., as cited in Quan-Haase, 2008) and the ability to create a status report message. The possibility to forward messages, pictures to friends with attached, set emotions with smileys to indicate moods or emotions make it quite heart-warming. An equally important feature is the ability to block and unblock unwelcomed contacts. Aside from the fact that these functionalities serve utilitarian purposes, some enhance communication and also allow users to play with their identity (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001). For instance, students change their profile pictures and writings to depict their present mood.

2.3 Effect of IM on Students English writing Skills

While some studies have reported that IM applications could indeed be a valuable tool to learning, others perceive these applications as social tools that add little value to academic life. In their research on the use of IM in education, (Coniam and Wong as cited in de Bakker, Sloep & Jochems, 2007) are of the view that students could use the application to practice language proficiency skills with their remote friends.

A lot of debates are going on in support and against the use abbreviations and slangs referred to as textese or textisms among researchers and students. There are, however, concerns about the impact that use of texting slang and abbreviations ('textisms', such as *bcos* for because; *gr8t* for great) may have on literacy development (e.g., Thurlow, 2003; Crystal, 2008; Wood, Kemp, & Plester, 2014).

In spite of all these concerns and debates about the use of textisms in text writing, research has proven that they do not harm the literacy skills of children but rather could even support spelling development (e.g. Plester, Wood, & Bell, 2008; Coe & Oakhill, 2011; Bushnell, Kemp, & Martin, 2011). For instance, in their study on children's use of mobile phone text messaging and its impact on literacy development, Plester et al. (2008) conducted a study on age 10-12-year-olds. The study found a significant positive correlation between the proportion of textisms produced and both verbal reasoning and spelling ability. The study also revealed a positive relationship between spelling and use of phonology-based textisms: letter/number homophones. These results suggest that increased use of textisms in children texting tend to improve children spelling and verbal reasoning abilities.

However, few researches have looked at the effect of the use of textisms on adult literacy and the data appear to be inconsistent. Besides, Mohammed (2011) opines that these developments should be considered as a generational issue. He states that:

Slang and abbreviations of terms used in writings (e.g. FYI, meaning "for your information") have been with every generation. In a sense, slang and the creation of new terms and symbols are a generation's cultural mark on the march of time. Sometimes these words have become so popular that they found themselves being invited into official language use and found a place in world-renowned dictionaries. (p.7)

This makes the use of these abbreviations so appealing to students and users to the extent that they do not realize the ills and illegalities involved in their appearance in formal writings.

Contrary findings have come up in some studies on this issue. For instance, Drouin and Davis (2009) carried out a study on the effect of the text speaks on literacy using 80 college students as study participants. The study employed the mixed method design to assess students' proficiency and familiarity with textese and how they affect their standardized literacy levels and misspellings of common textese. It was revealed that the use of textese in messages has no relationship with literacy performance. This result is an indication that the use of textisms has no effect on students' literacy. However, students admittedly indicated that they had presumed the negative effect of textism on their Standard English.

In a related study, Kemp (2010) carried a study in Australia to examine the use and understanding of textisms and links with traditional language skills in young adults. Using 61 participants with mean age of 22.2 (SD=5.7) years, all participants had English as a first language. The study used questionnaire, text composition, spelling and reading tasks as data collection instruments. The study confirmed enough textese

have spread into the communication of students because they are faster to type but less quick to read than conventional English. It, however, indicated that though the intrusion of textese was confirmed, it disagreed with the hopelessness expressed by the media about its spread into conventional writing. The overall results suggested a positive correlation between use of textese and traditional language skills. It suggests that continuous use of textisms equally improves traditional language skills. These results interestingly defeat the claims that students' exposure to wrongly spelled words can negatively affect both adults and children's spelling and writing (Dixon & Kaminsha, 1997).

Further interrogation of literature rather revealed dissimilar findings with respect to the effect of textisms on standardized English. Drouin and Drive (2014) are of the view that while textisms of omission (e.g. missing apostrophes) may be as a result of poorer literacy, students with stronger literacy skills tend to use more textisms of addition (such as emoticons or creative re-spellings). Wood, Kemp and Waldron (2014) concludes that young people's use of grammatical violations in texting is an indication of more than just their language and literacy skills and grammatical dexterity but has more to do with one's tendency to feel or to show emotions and affections. Their results showed that research (e.g., Woronoff, 2007) on this subject has exaggerated the impact of textisms in texting and instant messaging. For instance, in a study involving about 2,500 young adults aged 18 to 25, Rosen, Chang, Erwin, Carrier and Cheever (2010) found little use of textisms in formal writings. The effect is not as disturbing as is being painted.

The reviews discussed above are all based on imperial studies conducted in countries where the English language is the mother tongue. Results from studies conducted on non-native speakers of English may therefore not yield similar results. Learners and speakers of English as a second language (L2) are presented with numerous problems due to conformance to standardized rules associated with its writing and speaking. With the widespread use of the L1 (native language) in undertaking various activities, L2 learning and speaking tend to be a very tall mountain to climb. Kannan (2009) intimates that to learn L2 requires constant practices and patience. This practice involves engagement in activities and processes where English is used as a medium of instruction.

The frequency at which the students type and send a text message is a significant factor in determining the effect of texting on student's spelling and writing. It is believed that a student engages in some kind of word play, short spelling, and abbreviations. Such include *gr8* for "great", *TG* for "Thank God". Critics of textisms argue that there is a positive correlation between number of text sent and students'

spelling performance. It is therefore believed that *"prolonged exposure to the phonetic spellings of textisms could make it difficult to learn or apply grammar-based spelling rules"* (Wood et al., 2014, p. 3). Wood and others added that these students might later find it difficult to write, learn or remember the correct spellings of the full forms. Though these claims need to be buttressed with an empirical study, there is a paucity of literature in this respect. Thus, the focus of this research was to fill this gap through the following research questions:

1. What IM applications do students use?
2. How frequently do students use IM applications?
3. What forms of abbreviations (textisms) do students use in instant messaging?
4. How does the use of textisms in communication affect students English writing skills as a second language?

3. Method

3.1 Design

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design due to its main objective of ascertaining the effect of IM usage on the students English writing skills. *"Descriptive research involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection"* (Glass & Hopkins, as cited in AECT, 2001, para. 3). Mixed methods data collection strategy was used allowing both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected. The use of mixed methods in the study is premised on the principle of triangulation, which seeks to ensure that the researcher uses more than one measurement procedure and invariably enhances trust in findings (Bryman, 2011). Besides, this strategy for data collection allows for deeper insight into the problem at hand.

3.2 Participants

The participants for the study were students (*N=150*) from the 3rd and 4th years of the May-August academic session of Kenyatta University. One faculty member from the languages department was interviewed. The students were randomly selected while lecturer was purposively chosen and interviewed. Random selection was done to ensure the results of the study are generalized to the population under study.

3.3 Instruments

The study employed both questionnaire and interview schedule. The questionnaire was self-developed and self-administered to solicit responses from students in three main

areas: the first part was on the IM usage among respondents which covered the type of mobile phone used, type of IM application used, and frequency of usage; the second part preferred writing style used and the reasons for the choice, and the effect of this writing style on students English writing skills. Items in the questionnaire included close-ended and open-ended items. The items under the students' use of IM include *"Do you have a mobile phone"*, *"What type of IM application do you often use?"* and *"How often do you use these IM applications"*.

The effect of IM on students writing skills was measured on four-point Likert-type questions denoted by 1= "strongly disagree" and 4 = "strongly agree". Items included "Instant messaging application provides spell check that improves my spelling". Four items were reverse coded because they were negative statements.

The interview schedule contained a few questions that sought to find out the effect of IM applications on students writing. Some questions were on interviewee's awareness of students' use of IM applications. Mention was also made of the awareness of the use of textisms in students' communication.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected from students on Kenyatta University main campus. The researcher accessed participants from their lecture rooms before the lecture starts. Researcher accessed students during their lecture periods, established rapport with students and informed them of the purpose of the study. For easy completion of the questionnaire, the services of a gatekeeper was sought to help. The questions were explained thoroughly to the gatekeeper to ensure proper completion of the items. The researcher's inability to speak Kiswahili became a barrier. Students who could complete the items did that quickly and the questionnaires were collected. Some pleaded to complete them and return them to class the following day for lack of time.

The interview schedule contained a few questions. The interview was conducted at the office of the respondent. The atmosphere during the interview was very favourable to solicit necessary data. The interview lasted about 10 minutes and was fruitful.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the sample. Out of the 134 respondents data analysed, 72 (53.3%) were males while 62 (46.7%) were females. The mean age for the distribution was 23.11(SD=0.64) years. The minimum age was 20, the maximum age of 28 and a range of 8. Ninety-nine percent of the students had mobile phones who own

mobile phones with 114 (85%) being smartphones while 20 were ordinary phones. Android (68.9%) emerged as the most ubiquitous mobile operating system (OS) available on students. This was followed windows (7.5%) and I-phone OS (5.2%) in that order. Samsung brand of mobile devices also emerged as the most used brand (24.6%) available to students. This was closely followed by Techno brand (23.1%), Nokia (15.7) and Huawei (10.4%), with LG being the least owned brand (1.5%) among the respondents. The other category of brand refers to the other less familiar brands on the market currently.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Sample

Variable	Response	N	%	Mean (SD)	Total (%)
Gender	Male	72	53.7		
	Female	62	46.3		134
Age					
	Min	20		23.11(0.64)	
	Max	28			
	Range	8			
	Mode	23			
Phone Ownership	Yes	133	99.3		
	No	1	0.7		134(100)
Phone Type	Smart Phone	114	85.1		
	Ordinary	20	14.9		134 (100)
Phone Operating system	Android	92	68.7		
	Windows	10	7.5		
	I-Phone OS	7	5.2		
	Symbian	2	1.5		
	Blackberry	3	2.2		
	Others	20	14.9		134(100%)
Phone Brands	Samsung	33	24.6		
	Techno	31	23.1		
	Nokia	21	15.7		
	Huawei	14	10.4		
	Alcatel	9	6.7		
	I-Phone	7	5.2		
	HTC	7	5.2		
	Sony	4	3.0		
	Blackberry	3	2.2		
	LG	2	1.5		
	Others	3	2.2		134(100%)

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The study set out to investigate the effect of the use of mobile instant messaging (MIM) applications on students' English writing skills. These skills include spellings, punctuations, and capitalization of words. The first objective of the study sought to explore the kind of MIM used by students. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Kinds of Mobile Instant Messaging Applications Students Use

1. Facebook	2. Palmchat	3. Kik
4. Twitter	5. Chat	6. Yahoo! Messenger
7. WhatsApp	8. Instagram	9. Hangout
10. 2go	11. Om	12. ChatOn
13. Skype	14. Pinterest	15. GoogleTalk
16. Qeep	17. Line	18. Tango
19. Viber	20. Google+	21. GoSMS
22. IMO	23. IQ	24. Windows Live
25. Messenger	26. Ehubby	27. Telegram
28. Blackberry Messenger	29. Badoo	30. WeChat

The results as shown Table 2 indicate that as many as 30 MIM applications were identified as applications used by students on their mobile devices. Each student had at least one mobile application they use for communication with friends and relatives. Students were further asked to indicate their preferred and frequently used MIM application.

The data collected also captured the most preferred and often used IM application on students' mobile phones. The results are as shown in Figure 1.
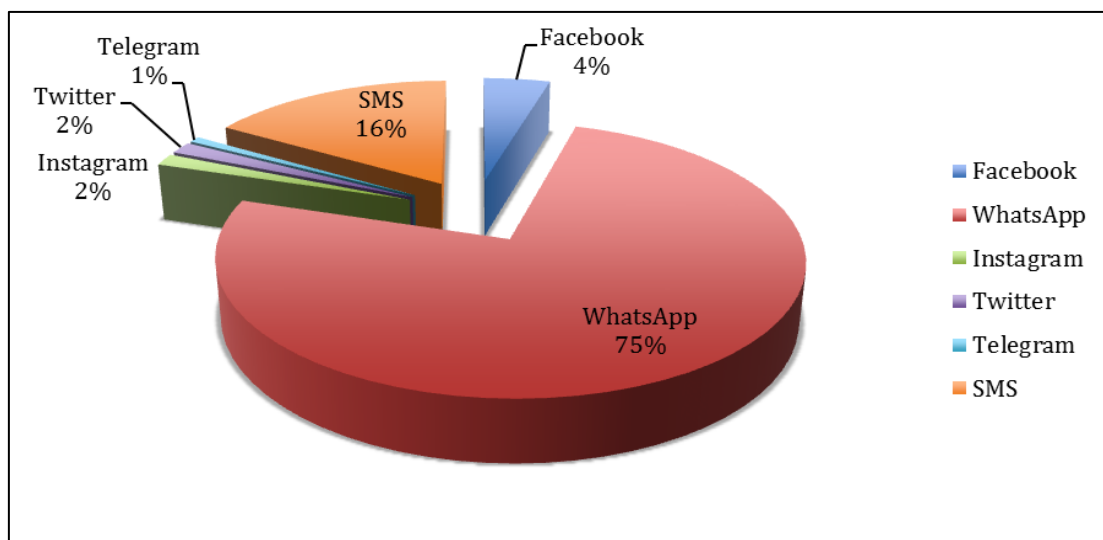

Figure 1: Students Preferred and Often Used IM Application

Results in Figure 1 indicate that WhatsApp (75%) was the most used and preferred IM application used by students followed by SMS (16%) and Facebook (4%). The telegram was the least preferred by students. Twitter and Instagram were also used by students but were not as heavily used as WhatsApp and Facebook.

The second objective was intended to establish how frequently students use these applications in their communication with friends and other relations. The results were as shown in Table 2.

Table 3: Frequency of Use of Instant Messaging Applications

Response	N	Percentage
Never	4	3.0
Seldom	3	2.2
Sometimes	12	9.0
Often	67	50.0
Always	48	35.8
Total	**134**	**100.0**

It can be seen from Table 3 that more than half of the students (N=115, 85.8%) use instant messaging application almost always. This is made up 67 (50%) students who use them often and 48 (35.8%) students who use them always. Out of the 135 students, only four students (3.0%) indicated that they never use IM applications while 12 (9.0%) use them sometimes. It could be concluded that an insignificant number do not use instant messaging at all.

The third objective of the study sought to find out kinds of textisms or text speaks used by students in their communication on IM applications. Students were asked whether they use textisms in their messages. Table 4 displays the results.

Table 4: A List of Textisms, Meanings and their Types

Textism words	Standard English	Textism type
coz/bcoz	because	Phonological spelling
u	you	Letter homophone
b4	before	Number homophone+ Letter homophone
c	see	Letter homophone
tanx	thanks	Phonological reduced spelling
sed	said	Phonological spelling
gux	guess	homophone
btw	between	contraction
asap	As soon as possible	initialism
TGif	Thank God is Friday	initialism

lol	Lough out loud	initialism
hw	how	contraction
mong	Morning	contraction
Fn/fyn	fine	Phonological reduced spelling
cd	could	contraction
Kk	Okay	Unconventional spelling
aftn	Afternoon	contraction
Idk	I don't know	initialism
Info	Information	contraction
OMG	Oh my God	initialism
hv	Have	contraction
hpe	hope	contraction
Smthn	Something	contraction
Hpn	Happen	contraction
n	and	homophone
bt	but	contraction
nth	Nothing	homophone
LMAO	Laugh my ass out	initialism
fyi	For your information	initialism
gud nyt	good night	Sound-based spellings
plz	please	Slang abbreviation
r	are	Letter homophones
kul	Cool	Sound-based spelling
skul	School	Phonological abbreviation
y	why	Letter homophone
sq	Sick	Sound-based spelling
dat	that	accent stylizations
wat	What	contractions
brb	Be right back	initialism
Tlk 2 u l8a	Talk to you later	Letter homophone + number homophones

Table 4 shows a list of textese used in students' instant messaging conversations. Students were asked to write three textisms used in their conversations. These words categories include missing words (btw for between); contractions (bt for *but*); initialisms (fyi for *for your information*); accent stylizations (*dat* for *that*); number/letter homophones (u for *you*, 2day for *today, r* for *are*); Phonological abbreviation or sound based spelling (skul for *school*). Nevertheless, some textese could be coded to belong to two categories, e.g. *im* for "I am" may belong to contractions as well as omitted apostrophe.

With the reason for using textisms, about 80% of the students indicate that it saves time because it is faster to compose messages with textisms. Others indicated that it is cheaper, convenient and keeps the flow of conversation.

The fourth objectives sought to find out the effect of the use textisms on students writing of Standard English language. Table 4 shows that results of the effect.

Table 5: Positive effect of the use of Instant Messaging

Response	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	8	6.0
Disagree	49	36.6
Agree	64	47.8
Strongly agree	13	9.7
Total	**134**	**100.0**

With a total of 134 respondents, it was revealed that majority (88.8%) indicated that they have been using textisms in their text-messages while few students (11.2%) said they normally use the standard English when texting. The results in Table 5 show that majority (58%) of students agreed that the use of instant messaging applications improves their English writing skills, while the minority (42%) disagreed with the statement. The majority asserted that the use predictive text which is a functionality in the application helps with the spelling of words when texting.

Interestingly, quite a greater number (72%) of the students denied the fact that textisms sometimes find their ways into formal writings such as assignments and examination manuscripts. However, a few (28%) of the students admitted that as hard as they try, they find textims appearing in formal English writing. The most common ones include *u* for 'you', *c* for see, *2day* for today, *skul* for school.

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the perceptions on the effect of textisms on students' English writing between users and non-users. The results showed a significant difference between users (*M*=2.47, *SD*=0.64) and nonusers (*M*=2.87, *SD*=0.72) of textisms, *t*(132)=2.213, *p*=0.29. The results suggest that users and non-users perceive the effect of textisms on student's writing differently. While non-users perceived the use of textisms as having an effect on their English writing, users perceived as not having any effect.

To confirm students' claims and increase the reliability of the findings, an interview with a faculty member who has taught the English language at the Kenyatta University for over 15 years. She indicated fact that the use of IM application has both social and academic benefits. They are sometimes used to schedule meetings, inform students of social and academic events, ask quick questions and clarifications, coordinating and scheduling tasks, and further strengthen relations between faculty and students leaders. On the contrary, the respondent indicated that the use of IM is

gradually affecting students' formal English writing. The interview revealed that majority of students' formal writings (assignments and exams scripts) are full of textisms. She stated; "*The frequent use of Whatsapp and other mobile applications has become an issue of great concern to faculty. The short forms of words and other variants of English have started to appear in students formal writing*" (Faculty member). She added that students' assignments and examinations scripts sometimes become unreadable due to the use of textisms. This leads to students losing important marks which could give them better grades. The comments made suggest that the use of textisms has begun to have an effect on students' formal English writing.

5. Discussions

The study found that the mean age of students who use IM application heavily was 23.11(*SD*=0.64). The range of eight shows that the bracket of IM users is a minus or plus of eight of the mean age. It could, therefore, be said that most users of IM application in the universities are in their teens and early thirties. This is consistent with the findings of Thinkhouse (2014) who conducted a mobile youth survey and found that the age bracket of the Irish youth who use mobile phones was between 15 and 35. The same results were realised in a survey conducted in the United States which showed that more than 70% of today's youth use IM, with ages between 12–17-year-olds and 6–29-year-olds in the Netherlands (PEW Internet, 2005; Qrius, 2005).

The results further suggest that Android mobile operating system was the most extensively used and preferred. In spite of it recent introduction, and unlike I-Phone OS, Android fits most devices and compatible with a majority of third party applications.

The study also found that students not just use the IM application but use it almost always. This is due to the fact that IM applications allow students to multitask during the tight schedules of the day (Pew Report, as cited in Marquez, n.d). IM applications offer the opportunity to study while maintaining an online connection with friends. Grinter (2002) maintains that students are able to multitask because IM communications do not demand the full attention and concentration of a student on the conversation at hand.

A long list of textisms or textees and their meanings was realized in students' communication on IM. These include phonological spelling (e.g. *bcoz* for 'because'), number homophone + letter homophone (e.g. *b4* for 'before') and so on. Students are quick and comfortable to writing these variant words in their IM communications because this writing style saves time, less strenuous and produce quick responses to

messages (Kemp, 2010). There is, therefore, a high temptation for students to engage this style of writing in their formal communications.

Researchers and other stakeholders have debated upon the effect of the use of textisms in students' communication. While some maintain that it significantly improve language acquisition, others believe that it harms students language. The current study found that difference in students and lecturers views on the effect of the use of textisms on IM application. Students saw no adverse effect of this kind of language on their formal writing whereas lecturers saw it otherwise. Students' views agreed with findings of Plester, Wood, and Bell (2008) Coe and Oakhill (2011), Bushnell, Kemp, and Martin (2011) who posit that textisms do not harm the literacy skills of children but rather could even support spelling development. Contrary to this were the views of lecturers which intimated that students' English language writing is at risk with the over reliant on textisms on IM.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings as revealed above convey certain far-reaching conclusions. There is no doubt that the use of instant messaging application hugely rests with the youth. The use of mobile phones on our university has moved from just a phone-in device which allows users to communicate with others one-to-one, to a communication that takes place from one-to-many or many-to-many at a time. It could be concluded that almost every student on our university campuses has a mobile phone that house at least one instant messaging application.

Such rampant use of mobile phones and its numerous instant messaging applications comes with its own implications. Apart from the fact that these applications make communications with friends and relations easier, faster and convenient, we should also not lose sight of its adverse effect on students' learning. With a majority of students, indicating that they use it almost always triggers the fear of conflicting with students' instructional time. It is not for nothing that Junco and Cotten (2011) concluded that *"the greater the amount of time spent actively chatting via IM each day, the more likely students were to report impairment"* (p.373).

Although students apparently disagreed that IM harm their Standard English writing, lecturers opposed to this assertion. A faculty member bemoaned students overuse of IM application because of the kind of language used on the IM which has started permeating into examinations scripts and assignments. These opposing views as expressed by both students and the faculty shows a lack of awareness of the harm the use textisms is doing to students' writing of Standard English. While students see the

use of IMs as an effective and efficient way of communication, lecturers consider it as having an effect on students' formal English writing.

It is against this backdrop that this research recommends that education faculty should create awareness of the harm being done to the writing of Standard English as a result of the use of IM and textisms. Such awareness could be created through seminars, leaflets and lectures. The awful spelling of words found in examination scripts, assignments, and term papers. These measures, if not eliminating the problem, would bring it to the barest minimum.

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