Review of *Text Messaging and Literacy: The Evidence*

Wood, C., Kemp, N., & Plester, B. (2014). *Text messaging and literacy: The evidence*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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ABSTRACT

The media suggests that text messaging has adverse effects on literacy development. Wood, Kemp, and Plester (2014), however, state that there is not enough evidence to support these assumptions. In *Text Messaging and Literacy: The Evidence*, Wood et al. (2014) organize preliminary research conducted about text messaging and literacy. The authors also present findings to demonstrate how text messaging can possibly influence literacy development. In addition to a summary and critical analysis, this book review includes information about how researchers and educators in the literacy field might use this content to support instructional decisions in the classroom.

Keywords: book review, text messaging, literacy, literacy development

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Text messaging is a prominent mode of communication. While the media suggests that text messaging has adverse effects on literacy development, there is not substantive data to support these assumptions. In *Text Messaging and Literacy: The Evidence*, Wood, Kemp, and Plester (2014) draw on their backgrounds as psychology professors and researchers to organize preliminary research conducted about the impact text messaging has on literacy development. The result is a book that presents initial research supporting a range of opinions related to the controversy surrounding this ubiquitous form of communication.

Situating Text Messaging: Historically and Socially

Wood et al. (2014) provided the historical context of texting, beginning as early as 1876 with the creation of the telephone. This pivotal invention allowed people to communicate without being in the same physical space. More recently, text messaging has changed phone communication in terms of time. Messages can be sent and/or received at different moments. The book authors even referred to text messaging as 'convenient messaging' because users can decide when or if they want to read and respond to messages.

In the book, the authors explained how text messaging has developed at a varying pace across the world. Europeans have been using text messages to communicate since the mid-1990s. Some American readers may find this surprising. Text messaging only became a popular means to communicate in the 2000s as a result of Internet improvements in the 1990s. By 2010, individuals in developing countries began text messaging as well. Texting is an affordable way for people in isolated regions to remain connected with others (Wood et al., 2014). In fact, Nokia has created inexpensive cell phones specifically for consumers in developing countries. One model, the Nokia 105, costs just $20 (Boone, 2013). Another advantage of this economical tool is the potential for development of literacy skills. Wood et al. (2014) discussed the Mande people in West Africa and how the "ability to text in their own language [gave] people a powerful reason to learn to read" (p. 17). It is helpful that the authors situated the research historically and socially because context plays a critical role in how texting continuously shapes and re-shapes the world.

Textspeak: A Whole New Language

William Safire (2009) stated that "no tradition is more time-honored than rebellion against linguistic tradition", and there is currently a "rebellion" against Standard English via texting (Wood et al., 2014, p. 17). The outcome of this "rebellion" is a new language called textspeak. One of the first studies to describe the nature of texts occurred over a decade ago when Thurlow and Brown (2003) examined 544 text messages. They found common characteristics of textspeak to include: shortenings with letters missing (e.g., *bday* for *birthday*); acronyms (e.g., *omg*); letter/number homophones (e.g., *cu l8r* for *see you later*); misspellings (e.g., due to typing quickly and not editing); unconventional spellings that respect Standard English phoneme-grapheme rules (e.g., *nite* for *night*); regional dialect (e.g., *afta* for *after*); and symbols/emoticons (e.g., :-)).

In a more recent study, Turner, Abrams, Katíc, and Donovan (2014) analyzed the type of digital language (i.e., digitalk) 81 adolescents used while instant messaging, text messaging, and posting on social networking sites. Unlike Thurlow and Brown (2003), Turner et al. (2014) did not find that adolescents frequently omitted vowels (e.g., tmrw) and used numbers to represent sounds (e.g., I g2g). Rather, Turner et al. (2014) found that complete sentences (97%), end period not used (96%), and non-standard capitalization (94%) were the most prevalent conventions. The comparison of the two studies shows that language continues to evolve over time.

Throughout the book, Wood et al. (2014) stressed that texting is an entirely new language and portrayed textisms as 'unconventional spellings' as opposed to 'incorrect spelling.' However, 'unconventional spellings' is not an appropriate phrase. As a separate language, textspeak would not adhere to Standard English conventions. It would follow that textisms *are* conventional spellings for textspeak.

Text Messaging and Literacy Skills: The Research

Wood et al. (2014) remained firm in their stance that the observable data available are too minimal and inconsistent for the media to declare text messaging as harmful to literacy development. The authors included research with participants who are children, adolescents, and adults in chapters three through seven, offering readers a comprehensive perspective about how text messaging influences literacy development across multiple age groups.

Children

The media often claims that texting has adverse effects on children's spelling. To investigate this, Wood et al. (2014) referred to several studies on the relationship between spelling in Standard English and spelling in textspeak. Bradley and King (1992) as well as Powell and Dixon (2011) found that frequent use of textisms did not inhibit conventional spelling in other contexts because it is quite dissimilar to Standard English (e.g., including numbers, omitting vowels). In another study, Ehri, Gibbs, and Underwood (1988) asked primary students to spell pseudo-words, which are comparable to textisms because both rely on similar, but not exact, phonetic rules of Standard English. They discovered students were still able to spell words using Standard English conventions in other contexts. Furthermore, Wood et al. (2014) stated that "children who demonstrate the greatest knowledge of text abbreviations (textisms) also demonstrate better knowledge of conventional spellings" (p. 32). Many textisms can be read phonetically (e.g., *nite*). It would follow that individuals using textisms would understand letter-sound correspondence rules so that their audiences are able to understand messages.

Additionally, the authors summarized studies on a variety of literacy skills. For example, they indicated that "children who appeared to be highly-dependent phone users also tended to be the children with strong text processing skills and rapid phonological retrieval abilities" (Wood et al., 2014, p. 62). Wood et al. (2011) discovered a positive correlation between textism use and phonological awareness/phonological processing skills during a longitudinal study with 119 children. The book authors synthesized the studies to suggest that "textism use appears to be contributing something positive to reading performance above and beyond factors such as memory, vocabulary, and phonological skills" because users need an understanding of language conventions in order to read and write textisms (Wood et al., 2014, p. 32). However, Wood et al. (2014) noted negative correlations between the number of different people a child texts and scores on phonological awareness assessments. The data demonstrated that exposure to a wide range of texisms may affect orthographic development of Standard English because it could be confusing to see multiple spellings of the same word.

Adolescents and Adults

Similar to research with children, Wood et al. (2014) mentioned the media's proposal that text messaging has negative implications for adolescents' and adults' Standard English spelling. Yet, inconsistencies across data are even more prevalent with this population. Massengill-Shaw, Carlson, and Waxman (2007) inquired if more frequent texting was associated with poor spelling. They found no significant difference between self-reported texting amounts and spelling. On the other hand, Drouin (2011) found a positive correlation between the amount of self-reported texting and spelling. Among 61 undergraduates in Australia, Kemp (2010) discovered no significant differences in language skills between those who texted often and those who texted less frequently. Grace, Kemp, Martin, and Parrila (submitted) calculated negative correlations between the number of text messages sent every day

and scores on an un-timed word reading task in a study with 150 Canadian and 86 Australian first-year university students. Furthermore, Turner et al. (2014) found that five conventions in the top 50% of digitalk samples *aligned with* Standard Written English. Adolescents used complete sentences 97% of the time, question marks 74% of the time, standard capitalization 72% of the time, end periods 59% of the time, and apostrophes 54% of the time. Given such varying data, can the media claim that textspeak has adverse effects on Standard English literacy development?

Connections to the Classroom

The focus of *Text Messaging and Literacy: The Evidence* was research, but educators can draw on data in this book when designing lessons. Children and adolescents use textspeak to communicate with friends and family outside of school. Yet, children and adolescents continue to use textspeak during more formal academic work in school. Teaching students the appropriate contexts for textspeak could be a way to diminish the argument that texting is the cause of poor spelling and grammar. Educators can facilitate language awareness by implementing lessons related to code-switching (i.e., the process of altering "one's language and register to meet the needs of audience and context") (Turner et al., 2014, p. 165).

One specific idea Turner (2009) outlined is the "Flip the Switch" lesson. Students engage in contrastive analysis between textspeak and Standard English, sort examples of written language into categories of textspeak or Standard English, and determine appropriate contexts for textspeak and Standard English. Finally, students can translate to the opposite code. For example, the sentence "Hello. How is your day?" might become "hey how r u."

Considerations

Wood et al. (2014) dedicated chapter nine as a space for summarizing their book so readers can make connections across major ideas in a reflective manner. Although the media reports potentially harmful consequences of text messaging, Wood et al. (2014) attempted to quell any worries educators and families may have by presenting research representative of both sides to this argument.

However, Wood et al. (2014) could have incorporated a broader range of topics in their book. First, the book authors only discussed how text messaging in *English* influences literacy development. Yet, individuals speaking other languages utilize textspeak (Nuessel, 2010). Additionally, new forms of communication (e.g., SnapChat, Instagram, Vine) allow users to send messages with a variety of modalities, such as pictures, videos, words, and symbols. It is important to address how communication with multi-modal, emerging technologies impacts literacy development.

Wood et al. (2014) have published a text that is a great start to disseminating research around text messaging and literacy. Hopefully, this book will inspire others to conduct studies related to this timely topic so the field can build a sizeable, balanced database before making decisions about the effects text messaging has on literacy development.

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**NOTE: A revised version of this paper has been published as Grace, A., Kemp, N.,
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