

EXPLORING THE USE OF SMS FEATURES IN THE ENGLISH WRITTEN WORK OF BENINESE POST-BEGINNER EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, because of the widespread and daily use of cellphones, and especially of text-messaging (SMS), one could assume that people's written language may begin to show certain features that are used when writing SMS messages. In particular, there are growing concerns that young people are losing the ability to spell and write "correctly". The present study is a descriptive study that uses 200 samples of post-beginners' writings to explore the impact of SMS speech on the written school work of EFL post-beginners in Benin secondary schools. The results of this study are surprising in that, given the large exposure to SMS speech and the amount of time compiling SMS, samples of composition collected from students did not contain a great number of occurrences of SMS speech features. It seems that the general lack of SMS features in the written work of the learners investigated is a result of their being able to assess when it is and is not appropriate to use a certain variety of language. These learners are proficient in SMS speech and use it when chatting with friends, but they can produce written work that adheres to the formally approved standards of written English. Teachers will have to take all necessary actions to impart knowledge and a sense of responsibility to their students, with regards to appropriate use of language.

KEYWORDS: Benin, EFL Post-Beginners, SMS Features, Written Composition

INTRODUCTION

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Today, cellphones are part of most peoples' lives (. In Benin, its use has been on the rise for more than a decade. And with its features such as SMS, most young Beninese people send SMS every day. Indeed, the text message or SMS provides users with a convenient service which has taken the Internet revolution to the next level, with regard to having a unique writing style. As indicated in the literature (Herring, 1996; Bizzelias, 2007; Bouzagloulou, 2006; Sutherland, 2002; Ross, 2006; Thurlow (2002:5), the average length of an SMS is 160 characters. This is an evidence of the need for speed, ease of typing and other symbolic concerns

Actually, like what occurs on Internet fora, SMS speech provides a somewhat literal representation of the way we people speak. To convey this, a variety of features such as emoticons (or "smileys", for example ☺ or ☻) to convey emotions, and punctuation and capitalization to emphasize words or phrases. One of the main objectives of SMSing is relational interaction. People want to be in contact with friends and other people that they care about, therefore SMS speech is highly interactive, dynamic and spontaneous (Thurlow et al. 2004; Baron, 2000; Crystal, 2001/2004; Finnegan, 1988). And this form of communication is now the most popular form of daily communication. Therefore, because of the

widespread and frequent use of text-messaging (or SMS), one could assume that people's written language may begin to show certain features that are used when writing SMS messages, thus no longer conforming to the formally approved standards of written language. Therefore, it is vital to explore the possible relations between the frequent use of SMS speech and the way in which learners use language in their written work.

PURPOSE

This study intends to explore whether there is any evidence of the use of features of SMS speech in the English written work of Beninese post-beginner EFL learners. The assumption is that SMS speech could lead to writing that displays features that deviate from standard written English as it is formally taught in schools.

LITERATURE

The prevalence of SMSing in the daily life is clear. Indeed, SMS has even every domain of life ranging from entertainment (through TV shows) through education to Politics. other domains. People are given numbers to which they could send messages to get information on various subjects such as family planning, horoscope, weather, stock exchange updates, and children's school results. During the presidential elections of 2011 and mainly of 2016 recently, the electoral commission gave phone numbers to which SMS could be sent to give details on the ongoing process and/or any inherent or observed flaw or lack.

Such a surge of communication has favoured the emergence of experimental and creative ways of using language. Actually, users have been limited by the fact that very often, text messages or SMS are typed with a limited space of 160 characters per SMS. These limits have led users to devise space-saving strategies to make SMSing quicker and more cost effective. These strategies include a significant amount of abbreviations and creative use of punctuation and symbols to convey messages. Therefore, technology has been the source of a profound shift in the way that people communicate: a shift away from the traditional printed page toward electronic communication. Many linguists and scholars have voiced concerns about the effect that this technological revolution is having on language use. More specifically, there are growing concerns that young people are losing the ability to spell and write "correctly" because of the Internet (Thurlow et al., 2004: 126).

Le Bodic (2005:xv) explains that SMS users have "forged their own dialect to cope with service limitations" and "composed their own communication groups." This shared way of speaking promotes a sense of belonging, which fulfils the in-group needs and desires of adolescents. Such a kind of language can be described as a sociolect and is typified by the use of informal language such as slang and jargon. SMS speech can be seen as an evolution of this type of informal language, although it is represented in an innovative format: creative spelling, abbreviations and acronyms, shortening of words, and rebus writing (e.g., 2 for two; l8r for later). This type of language use is unique to SMSing and online interactions, and because these domains are increasingly utilised by adolescents, the language that they use can be regarded as a sociolect. The features of adolescents' sociolect include the creative, innovative use of written language, which is highly expressive and completely informal. SMS speech and Netspeak can be seen as a diffusion of oral discourse features into written language, as both SMS speech and Netspeak contain features of spoken language presented in written format.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, a qualitative method has been used. It has consisted in collecting EFL post-beginners' (of *Seconde* and *Terminale*) sample essays through their teachers. The teachers provided samples of written work from 200 learners (100 from *Seconde* and 100 from *Terminale*) randomly selected. These samples (which consisted of a one-page answer to examination essays) were then photocopied and later analyzed to mark out features of SMS speech such as spelling errors, lack of punctuation, over-punctuation, lack of functional words, and use of abbreviations or acronyms, emoticons, rebus writing, etc.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the students' composition show the findings indicated in the following table.

Table 1: Non-Standard English Features Identified in Post-Beginners' Work

N°	Non-Standard Features	Percentages of Post-Beginners (N=200)
1	SPELLING ERRORS	180 (90%)
2	LACK OF PUNCTUATION	80 (40%)
3	OVER-PUNCTUATION	110 (55%)
4	ABSENCE OF FUNCTION WORDS	60 (30%)
5	ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS	20 (10%)
6	EMOTICONS	04 (02%)
7	REBUS WRITING	12 (06%)
8	WORD SHORTENING	56 (28%)
9	SLANG	02 (01%)
10	COLLOQUIALISMS	06 (03%)

Table 2 indicates the non-standard features of English that were identified in the samples of written work of the participants, and the number of samples in which each of these features were identified. The samples of written work were analyzed for the previously identified features of SMS speech; however, during this analysis, a significant presence of extra features of SMS speech was noticed. Table 1, therefore, includes three additional features, namely slang, colloquialisms and shortening of words.

The most common feature of non-standard English was incorrect spelling: both groups (90%) produced many examples of spelling errors, including *grabed* (for *grabbed*), *wether* (for *whether*), *begginer* (for *beginner*) and *Knowlege* (for *Knowledge*). The first three examples of incorrect spelling presented here might represent one of the additional features of SMS speech, namely shortening of words. The last example is more than likely a spelling error unrelated to SMS speech.

The excessive use of punctuation was the second most prevalent feature of SMS speech in the samples of written work, with 55% of samples including, for example, *!!!* as in *ooh!!!*, or *...* as in *in fact, this was the ... Best!* Many examples of incorrect use or lack of punctuation were found (in 40% of the participants' Compositions), especially the lack of apostrophes. The following serve as examples of words that lack apostrophes: 1) "*Thats* (for *that's...*) *how the problem started*", 2) "*it wont* (for *won't*) *be much fun*" and 3) "*up and over Dantokpas* (for *Dantokpa's*) *Pass*". The examples of lack of punctuation, such as question marks, full stops and commas include 4) "*How is it done.*" (for "*How is it done?*"), 5) "*keep this in your bag*" (for "*keep this in your bag.*") and 6) "*When like we're nearly ready the lights went out!.*" (For "*When like we're nearly ready, the lights went out!*"). Apart from being omitted, commas were also frequently used

incorrectly, as shown in the following example: 7) *“I went outside to check but, I couldn’t see anybody”*.

There were very few examples of emoticons or rebus writing found in the samples of written work. One participant made use of emoticons, for example drawing a smiley face at the end of a section of written work, and another participant used the number 2 instead of the word *to* in a sentence: 8) *“He reacted 2 others’ comments.”* for *“He reacted to others’ comments”*.

In addition, there were a significant number of examples of shortening of words, although this feature was used by only 26% of the participants. For example, one participant wrote 9) *“I need yor help”* (*yor* for *your*) and another wrote 10) *“cause he goes too fast for me”* (*cause* for *because*) and 11) *“It felt like a earthquake”* (*a* for *an*). Other participants provided examples of slang and colloquialisms (used by 1% and 3% of the participants, respectively), as seen in the following examples: 12) *“we had the munchies”* (where the standard English version would be *we were very hungry*) and 13) *“I also saw two gals”* (where the standard English version would be *I saw two girls*).

Table 2 displays the non-Standard English features for the two post-beginner classes.

Table 2: Non-Standard English Features for the Two Post-Beginner Classes

N°	Self-Reported Features	Post-Beginners	
		Seconde Students (N=100)	Terminale Students (N=100)
1	SPELLING ERRORS	91 (91%)	82 (82%)
2	LACK OF PUNCTUATION	67 (67%)	33 (33%)
3	OVER-PUNCTUATION	83 (83%)	24 (24%)
4	ABSENCE OF FUNCTION WORDS	41 (41%)	31 (31%)
5	ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS	20 (20%)	06 (06%)
6	EMOTICONS	00 (00%)	02 (02%)
7	REBUS WRITING	00 (00%)	02 (02%)
8	WORD SHORTENING	13 (13%)	04 (04%)
9	SLANG	02 (02%)	02 (02%)
10	COLLOQUIALISMS	09 (09%)	00 (00%)

Note. Multiple features of SMS speech occurred in the sample of written work of any one participant, therefore the frequency counts and percentages given in each cell in this table are independent of those in other cells.

The results found in Table 2 show a distinct difference in the analysis of written work between the Seconde students and Terminale students. The written work of significantly more Seconde students than Terminale students contained features of non-standard English.

As can be seen from Table 2, each of the features of SMS speech that were identified, were used by more Seconde students than Terminale students in their compositions, with the exceptions of emoticons and rebus writing which were used more by Terminale students. Three times more Seconde students than Terminale students used abbreviations and acronyms, and the written work of the Seconde students showed a far larger collection of over-punctuation and lack of punctuation than that of Terminale students. Also, more Seconde students than Terminale students produced spelling errors. These results displayed in Table 2 are supported by those on self reported use of SMS features in SMS messages: collectively these two sets of results showed that Seconde students report using more features of SMS speech in their SMSes and that there are more features of SMS speech found in their written work. As such, the researcher’s idea whereby Terminale learners will use fewer features of SMS speech than Seconde students in their SMSes and, therefore, also in their compositions – was thus confirmed by the results.

This might be partly due to the amount of time spent in the school system: Terminale students might have had more exposure to the standards of school English than Seconde students and are therefore possibly more accomplished in their ability to switch between the formal language of school work and the language of SMS. However, it is significant to note that the Terminale students reported more frequency of SMS usage than those of Seconde. This could be explained in terms of fluency or adaptability in style-shifting techniques: Terminale students might have had more exposure to SMSing but also more exposure to the school system than Seconde students. The fact that Terminale students' written work showed fewer examples of SMS features than that of Seconde students means that Terminale students are more competent than Seconde students in switching between the formally approved English of the school system and the SMS speech used in SMSes; Terminale students, more so than Seconde students, might have learnt when it is appropriate to use these different variations of English.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study are surprising in that, given their large exposure to SMS speech and the amount of time they spent compiling SMS, samples of composition collected from students do not contain a great number of occurrences of SMS speech features. It seems that the general lack of SMS features in the written work of the learners investigated is a result of their being able to assess when it is and is not appropriate to use a certain variety of language. These learners are proficient in SMS speech and use it when chatting with friends, but they can produce written work that adheres to the formally approved standards of written English. Teachers will have to take all necessary actions to impart knowledge and a sense of responsibility to their students, with regards to appropriate use of language.

There are several limitations to the present study. Indeed, studying the influence of technology on writing is a complex and tough task. Therefore, this study investigates such an influence only on post-beginner students in the Beninese EFL setting. Students of beginner and intermediate level are not concerned. Moreover, the instrument of this study (collection of samples of composition) does not allow participants namely students and teachers to voice their concerns about beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes towards technology and its classroom effects. It is hoped that such limitations would be the object of further studies.

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