

# Nigerian Teachers Perception on the Use of ‘SMS Communication on Students’ Conventional Writings

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## ABSTRACT

The newly invented short message service (SMS) communication occasioned by the emergence of mobile telephones is a new phenomenon in communication. This form of communication oftentimes disregards the basic rules of English grammar especially among youths and this has raised a major worry for the society in recent times. This concern is that SMS communication is gradually taking over written communication and indirectly jeopardizing students’ usage of the Standard English language in their academic writings. Within this context therefore, this paper investigates Nigerian teachers’ perception of the pervasiveness of the SMS language among students and how this form of communication is jeopardizing students’ formal academic writings. A survey was carried out among the teachers in the six zonal headquarters of Post Primary School Service Commission (PPSSC) in Anambra State, Nigeria. A sample of 400 teachers was randomly selected. Two schools were randomly sampled from each zone making twelve schools, and about 33 teachers were sampled from each school. Findings show that teachers are aware students use SMS communication because they observe that it filters into their academic writings, particularly in written examinations. The study also identified that the form of SMS language commonly used among students is replacing words with alphabets such as ‘U’ in place of ‘You’. Based on the findings, the study concludes that SMS language in communication is very detrimental to the students’ academic writings and recommends that students who use the SMS language in their written examination should be strictly penalized.

**Keywords:** Short Message Service; SMS communication; Teachers’ Perception; Text messaging; academic writings, Nigeria.

## 1. Introduction

Mobile phone technology has become a modern day necessity, to the extent that virtually everybody both youths and adults have it. It is not just about having this technology; people are growing increasingly attached to them, depending on them steadily for their communications with other people, in carrying out their job duties, and for other daily activities that they must accomplish. Ajala (2007) opines that mobile phone communication system is an exceptional landmark telecommunication breakthrough that has become part and parcel of many people. This technology Adenegan (2009) observes has positively impacted on virtually all areas of human endeavors thereby bringing speedy transformation and accelerated growth and development to mankind.

Many people generally believe that mobile phones unlike the conventional landline telephone system that were in existence before now have revolutionized communication because of the many facilities embedded in the phones. Apart from engaging in voice communication, substituting as cameras, clocks, radio sets and a host of other utilities, it offers users the opportunity of sending text messages popularly referred to as Short Message Service (SMS). The ‘SMS’ is a miniature and abridged style of transmitting written information. Text messaging as a form of communication involves communicating through a composed message or a piece of information typed using the phone’s alphabetical keys which is then sent to the intended recipient who reads the visual written message or information. This style of communication became prominent in Nigeria with the introduction of the mobile phones (handsets/GSM). This SMS style of communication is used for different communication purposes such as exchanging information on events; invitation to religious, social, political, academic meetings, making business contacts and sending goodwill messages among others (Taiwo, 2009, p. 102). Scholars argue that this form of communication has systematically revolutionized human communication system the world over and has systematically transformed written communication (Atanda & Umar, 2006; Oluga & Babalola, 2012).

It is observable that people generally spend a greater part of their time communicating in one form or the other. Aside making phone calls, sending messages has become second nature of communication for many people. This mode of communication through texting is a common habit especially among youths who constitute students in

secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Many reasons adduced for this form of communication include that; it is quick in message delivery, it does not adhere to the rules of English grammar, it is relatively cheap, it is more convenient than making calls, it allows for creativity in writing, it is used in establishing new and re-enforcing old relationships etc. Young people in particular are increasingly prone to texting and the implication is that the speed at which texting takes place, is the speed at which mistakes and short hands used in texting are becoming common place in most of their writings including academic works.

In as much as mobile phone usage and telecommunication has been one of the many successes of the twenty-first century, many people especially teachers have expressed concern at the rate at which literacy levels are dropping among youths and children. Educationists also have observed that text messaging is completely devastating the English language. According to Dansieh (2011) some teachers, parents and students themselves are expressing concerns that students' writing skills stand the risk of being sacrificed on the altar of text messaging. It is arguable that before this mobile technology came into existence, schoolchildren in the 1960s and 1970s were far more literate in terms of usage of the English language and essential writing skills than schoolchildren of today. In recent times, the average schoolchild struggles more with spelling, grammar and essay-writing. These essential skills were before now considered key to a good grasp of the English language.

Scholars still insist that SMS language has seemingly destroyed the way schoolchildren read, think, and write the conventional English Language. O'Connor (2005, p. 2) reports that the more students use tools like instant messaging, the less they are able to separate formal and informal English. For instance, they abbreviate "y-o-u", as "u". He also observed that another major problem currently being noticed is that students no longer punctuate accurately but instead, their text messages often contain run on sentences and hardly punctuations. He further argues that papers are being written with shortened words, improper capitalization and punctuation, and characters such as &, \$, @ and so on. One may therefore rightly argue that SMS language discourages complex vocabulary and prevents the creation of longer, more sophisticated phrases. A pertinent question that society must answer therefore is – has text message usage affected the way students presently use the English language? And if it has, is it for better or for worse?

### **1.2 Research Problem**

The conventional English language has overtime being thought in schools and had remained the dominant and the acceptable language of expression for teaching many other subjects. There has however being some incursions of the conventional English Language by a new form of abridged expressions reinforced by the mobile telephony, popularly called the SMS language. This work examines the level at which the newly invented SMS language posses potential harm to the student's use of the conventional English Language in their academic work. The conventional English language is traditionally guided by the outlined grammatical rules, encompassing the established regulated tenses and concord agreements. Consequently, problems seemingly exist when student's use of the conventional English language is influenced or negatively affected by their use of the SMS language. In the light of these, this study, interrogates teachers perception of the pervasiveness of students' use of SMS language in their academic writings.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The following research objectives will address this inquiry:

1. To find out teachers awareness of the use of SMS language in their students' conventional writings.
2. To determine the students level of adoption of the SMS language in their academic work.
3. To determine the teachers perception toward students use of the SMS language in academic work
4. To ascertain the measures teachers' have taken to curtail the use of SMS language in conventional writings.

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

Based on the objectives generated, the study research questions include:

1. Are teachers aware of the use of SMS language in their students' conventional writings?
2. What is the students' level of adoption of the SMS language in their academic work?
3. What is the teachers' perception towards students' adoption of the SMS language in academic writings?
4. What measures have teachers' taken to curtail students' use of the SMS language in their conventional writings?

## **2. Theoretical Framework:**

This study employs the social learning theory, which posits that individuals learn behaviors from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling as its theoretical framework. This theory was first introduced by Albert Bandura, to connect the behavioral and cognitive learning theories by taking into account how imitable behaviors are affected by cognitive constructs, such as attention, retention, and motivation. Uniquely, the social learning theory explains how behaviors are learned in the context of reciprocal determinism, or the interaction between observed behaviors, cognitive factors, and external environments.

This theory being a widely referenced model of media effects, especially in relation to children and young people, applies to socializing effects of media and the adoption of various models of action such as clothing, appearance style, eating and drinking, modes of interaction and personal consumption (McQuails 2010, p. 491). According to Bandura (1986), the theory only applies to behavior that is directly represented in symbolic form and on the active engagement on part of the learner and on the individuals self reflective ability. Applying the theory to this present study, the social learning theory incorporates the gradual process of students' learning of the abridged form of interactive chats as they consistently expose themselves to social networks and receive texts via their mobile telephony, to the application of the learnt SMS languages abruptly to an extent that such shortenings, become integrated into the students conventional writings and then becomes a part of their formal written communication.

### **2.1 Empirical Review of Literature**

#### **2.1.1 Text Messaging and Youth's English language**

Debate has continued to rage among the academic community about the effects of text messaging on students' English grammar. This debate has brought in its wake three main schools of thought. While some educators and students suppose that text messaging is one of the banes of mobile telephony because of its presumed negative impact on students' writings; some contend that it rather enhances their written communication, and therefore is a blessing; others believe that text messaging has neither positive nor negative impact on students' conventional writings. (Crystal, 2008).

The growing concern about the profuse use of SMS endangering the standard form of English language has prompted individuals and cooperate bodies to continuously decry how strong this negative impact is taking its toll on the spelling and punctuation of students in their writings. British Broadcasting Company report of March 4, 2003, cited in Aziz, Shamim, Aziz and Avais, (2013) blames SMS language for the declining standards of spelling and grammar, particularly in essay writing. Even parents and teachers have shown great concern that the increasing prevalence of SMS among youths is influencing their use of the English language. This new form of communication taking hold in the linguistic sphere, means new challenges for teaching and learning as most of the words used in SMS are not found in standard dictionaries or recognized by language scholars.

Aziz, Shamim, Aziz and Avais, (2013) observe that educators are facing a great challenge due to the fact that learners have a tendency to use SMS language as an officially accepted and standard language and thus make different errors from incorrect spelling to even ungrammatical sentence constructions. They further opine that the language of texting does not observe grammatical and syntactic rules; so it is neither formal nor standard because words are spelled as they are spoken.

Lenhart and his colleagues reported in a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, that 64 percent of US teens admitted that some form of texting has crept into their academic writing (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). Even in America, Kate Ross presented the view of the American Federation of Teachers who opines that "text and instant messaging are negatively affecting students' writing quality on a daily basis, as they bring their abbreviated language into the classroom. As a result of their electronic chatting, kids are making countless syntax, subject-verb agreement and spelling mistakes in writing assignments....Many teachers believed that students' wide use of "text speak" was a key factor in their students' negative performance....Text speak is a problem (Ross, 2007, p. 4).

Scholars observe that SMS communication style is harmful to students' writing and grammar, it destroys the ways students read, think and write, it makes them show lazy attitude towards reading and writing as they are incapable of thinking rightly as to decode ideas accurately. Russel (2010: 3) opines that: "Young adults who used more language-based textisms (short cuts such as LOL" 2nite, etc.) in daily writing produced worst formal writing than young adults who used fewer linguistic textisms in daily writing". This is true because, if one fails to consciously avoid its' use in formal writing; the inevitable effect is poor performance in academic assessment.

Again, students find it difficult separating formal and informal English as they freely use “U” for “you”, “4” for “for”, “pls” for “please”, “2mrw” for “tomorrow” etc. during formal academic work.

Educators have observed that students impulsively transmit text message language in their test and examination without knowing its effects on their academic performance. Weiss (2009) asserts that several educators and observers are concerned that the abbreviated language style of text messaging is inappropriately filtering into official school writing. Also Henry (2004) reports that the use of SMS language has also been observed in examination scripts, according to an official report published by the largest examination board in the UK it disclosed that examination scripts were saturated with abbreviated words.

### **2.1.2 Effects of SMS Language on Students Academics Work**

The use of short or condensed form of words and expressions, characteristic of the mobile phone text message negatively affects the continuous writings of users especially their spelling system making it difficult for them to familiarize themselves with correct spellings of words. It has been observed that people unconsciously integrate abbreviated forms of words into formal written communication which creates the impression that the writer is a carefree or lackadaisical person who ignores the cardinal rules of English grammar.

Pushed by worries about language abbreviations, word shortenings, acronyms and other violations of grammatical rules, concerns are being expressed by scholars that SMS language is causing severe harm to Standard English, leading to a communication failure and possible dearth of the English language in the future. O’connor (2005, p. 3) expressed concerns that “bastardization” of the language which points towards the use of wrong grammar, poor punctuation and improper abbreviations in formal and academic writings is a bane to education. Crystal (2008, p. 5) also avers that texters are prone to ignore spellings, either intentionally or reflexively and that the accepted credence is that texting has developed as a twenty-first-century trend and as a highly idiosyncratic vivid style, full of contractions and out of the ordinary use of the language. There is however a broadly voiced apprehension that the practice is nurturing a decline in literacy.

Freudenberg (2009) studied the impact of SMS on written school work of English language learners, with the aim to ascertain the dominance of the SMS language among them as well as the evidence of their use of SMS features in English written works. Results showed that the learners are avid users of the SMS language given that they all reported using SMS features while writing messages and could utilize the features in their written school work.

Besides, Ping, (2011) conducted a study to visualize how the adoption of SMS language affects writing among its adopters. Analyses were made on the semantic and syntactic aspects of the e-mails. Traces of impact of SMS on the standard of writing among the participants were also examined from several other aspects but findings suggest that the degree of the ignorant use of SMS language in writing among university students might reach an unacceptable state if not curtailed. Rafi (2010) equally established that SMS language ignores orthographic and syntactic regulations of a language with a enormous stress on written sounds and comprehension. Njemanze, (2012) similarly examined the SMS style of language communication among Nigerian University students with emphasis on its effect on English language usage and concludes that SMS style could generate greater linguistic confusion if it is not constrained.

In the light of this, Russel (2010, p. 3) maintained that: “Young adults who used more language-based textisms (short cuts such as LOL” 2nite, etc.) in daily writing produced worst formal writing than young adults who used fewer linguistic textisms in their daily writings”. This is significant because, when one fails to consciously avoid the use of SMS language in formal writings, the inevitable effect is poor performance in academic assessments.

Besides, users seemingly consider it difficult separating formal and informal Language as they freely use “U” for “you”, “4” for “for”, “pls” for “please”, “2mrw” for “tomorrow” etc. in their formal academic work. This is the basis behind some scholars’ argument that SMS messaging style is harmful to students’ conventional writings. Holloway (2011, p. 10-11) opined that; ...Writers and language experts have come out against the use of SMS abbreviations, with the argument that it wrecks the conventional English language and as such, reduces users’ ability to write correct English sentences, while harming their spellings and vocabulary.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts the survey design, to gauge the perception of secondary school teachers, regarding their students’ use of the SMS language. The choice for survey is based on the need to represent all the teachers within the government owned Secondary schools in Anambra State Nigeria. The population for the study was

4657 teachers retrieved from the Post Primary Schools Service Commission (PPSSC) Headquarters in Awka, Anambra State. Using a multi stage sample technique, a sample size of 400 teachers was drawn from the six PPSSC Zonal headquarters in Anambra. Two secondary schools, each were randomly selected from each of the zones while a minimum of thirty three (33) teachers were chosen to represent each of the selected schools. This is shown in the table below;

**Table 1**

***Sample of Teachers in Anambra State Government Secondary Schools***

PPSSC Zones	Population of Teachers	Selection of Two Schools within each of the Zones	Number of Teachers chosen from the Schools
PPSSC Nnewi Zone	925	Community Secondary School, Nnewichi.	34
		Union Secondary School, Ichi.	33
PPSSC Onitsha Zone	617	D.M.G.S, Onitsha	33
		Christ the King College, Onitsha	33
PPSSC Ogidi Zone	642	St. Monicas College Ogbunike	33
		Girls Secondary School, Umudioka	33
PPSSC Awka Zone	817	Girls Secondary School, Awka	34
		Igwebuike Grammar School, Awka	33
PPSSC Aguata Zone	822	Government Technical College, Umuchu	33
		Community Secondary School, Isuofia	34
PPSSC Otuocha Zone	834	Col. Mike Attah Secondary school, Otu-Aguleri	34
		Ogbe High School, Anaku.	33
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,657</b>		<b>400</b>

**4. Analysis of Data**

Out of a total of 400 copies of the questionnaire distributed to the respondents among teachers in] the six PPSSC zones Anambra State, 397 copies were returned representing 99% return rate.

**Table 2**

***Teacher's Awareness of the use of SMS language by students in Academic Work***

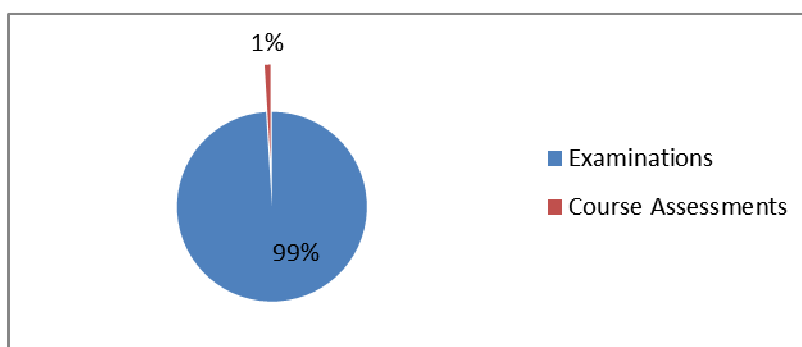
Teachers Awareness of the use of SMS Language by students	Percentage
Yes	100%
No	0%
Total	100% (N=397)

The table above shows that all the teachers sampled indicates they are aware that students use the SMS language in their academic work. The implication of this finding is worrisome for the school system particularly and students' academic performance in general since SMS language is gradually taking hold on students' academic work.

**Table 3 Teachers observation of SMS language filtering into students writings**

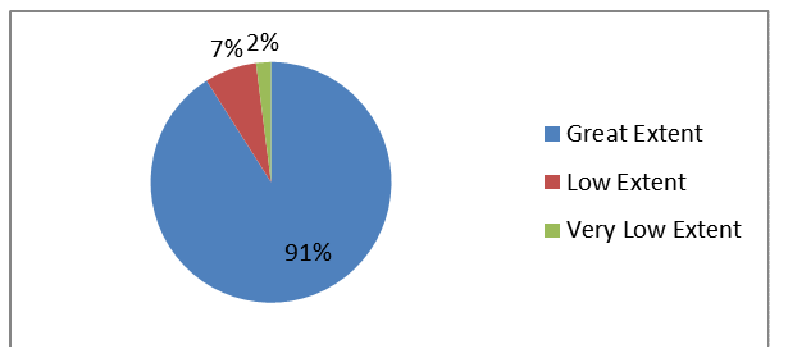
SMS Language filtering into students' writings	
Yes	99% (N=395)
No	1% (N=2)
Total	100% (N=397)

The table above demonstrates that nearly all the teachers representing 99% observe that SMS language is gradually filtering into the student's academic writings. This finding confirms the concerns that have been raised by educators previously concerning the use of abbreviated language style of text messaging which is inadvertently filtering into official school writing.



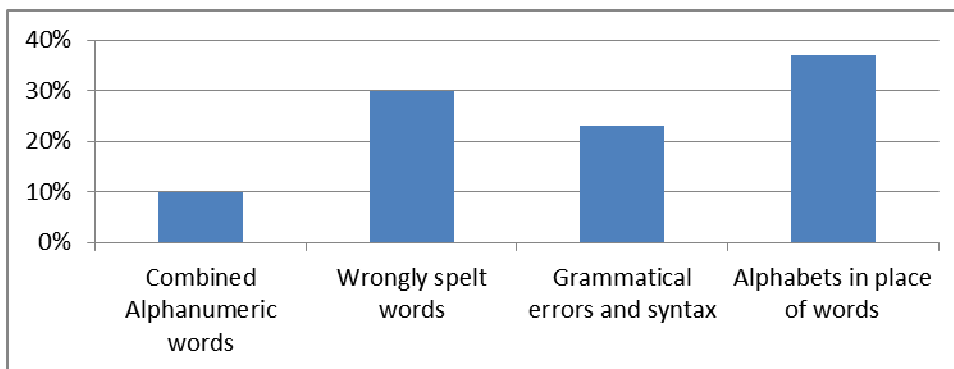
**Figure 1: Occasions where students use SMS language in their academic work**

Figure two above further investigated occasions where students mostly use sms language in their academic work. It is evident from the figure that teachers observed that students apply the sms language more in their written examinations than when they are doing course assessments. One may attribute this finding to the fact that many students during exams may write under intense pressure of time constraint and so could inadvertently apply the sms language.



**Figure 2: Level of adoption of SMS Language in students' academic work**

Data in the figure above show that teachers observe that to a great extent majority of the students, representing 91% predominantly use the SMS language in their academic work. While only 9% observed that a very low extent students use SMS language in their academic works. This finding further buttresses the fact that SMS language is predominantly adopted by students as observed by the teachers.



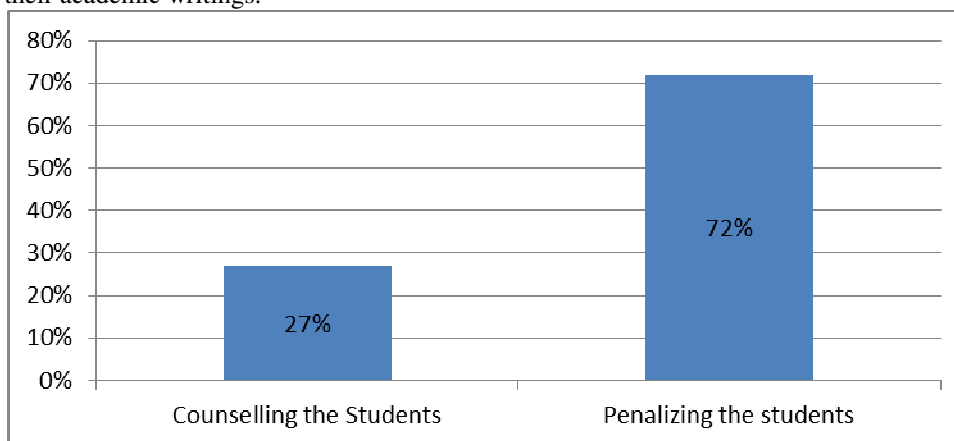
**Figure 3: Predominantly used form of SMS language among the students**

The figure above identified the dominant forms of the SMS language mainly applied by students in their formal writings. As illustrated in the figure the dominant SMS language used among the students is the replacement of formal English words with alphabets, such as ‘U’ in place of ‘You’, D in place of ‘the’ etc. Other varied forms of SMS language observed among students’ academic writings, ranges from wrongly spelt words, grammatical errors and errors of syntax as well as combined alphanumeric words. These categorizations of SMS language used by students are perceived as non-standard typographic or orthographic forms of the conventional language.

**Table 4: Teachers perception concerning SMS Language being harmful to the students’ conventional English Language**

SMS Language, seen as harmful to students	Percentage
Yes	(100%) N=397
No	(0%) N=0
Total	<b>100%</b> N=397

Having identified the dominant forms of the SMS language mainly applied by students in their formal writings, the study went further to investigate whether the teachers consider the SMS language harmful to students’ academics and thus affecting their conventional English language. The table above shows teachers opinion of the harmful effect of SMS language on their student’s usage of the Language. Almost of the teachers sampled opine that SMS language is very harmful to the conventional English language and should not be encouraged among students in their academic writings.



**Figure 4: Measures Taken To Regulate the Students' Use of SMS Language**

Considering that teachers opine that use of SMS language is harmful to students conventional writing, teachers have taken to penalizing any student who employs the SMS language in conventional writing as a measure in discouraging students from allowing such to become part of them. Nearly the entire teachers, who support the discouragement of the language, apply several precautionary measures to curtail the students’ usage of the language, with 72% of them penalizing the students while only 27% counsel them to desist from using same.

#### 4.1 Discussion of findings

The result of the findings show that SMS language is gradually taking over students conventional writings and inadvertently impacting negatively on their writing and grammar skills. It is evident from the study that teachers are aware that majority of the students use SMS language in their school works. The study also discovered that teachers observe that most of the students use this form of communication mainly during examinations probably due to the time constraint associated with examinations. This finding is in congruent with an official report published by the largest examination board in the UK, it equally disclosed that examination scripts were saturated with abbreviated words (Henry, 2004).

The proliferation on this form of communication among students who are mostly youths considered to be ardent users of the new media technology could be attributed to their constant use of interactive social networks and mobile telephony where communication often times is shortened to accommodate the limited space on the screens. Findings also show the SMS language predominantly used among the students is the replacement of formal English words with alphabets, such as 'U' in place of 'You', D in place of 'the' and so on. This could be attributed to laziness on the part of these students in writing. Weiss (2009) asserts that several educators and observers are concerned that the abbreviated language style of text messaging is inappropriately filtering into official school writing.

Findings of this study also reveal that teachers strongly believe that SMS language of communication is very harmful to students' writings. This practice is nurturing a decline in literacy among students because they are drifting away from correct grammar usage in writing. This finding is in line with O'connor (2005, p. 3) concern that "bastardization" of the language in terms of the use of wrong grammar, poor punctuation and improper abbreviations in formal and academic writings is a bane to education. Equally Rafi (2010) observed that SMS language ignores orthographic and syntactic regulations of a language with a enormous stress on written sounds and comprehension.

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the preponderance of SMS language among Secondary School Students, despite the fact that many scholars argue that mobile phone users often resort to SMS language due to limited space, maintenance of desired speed, reduced words and so on, this paper concludes that SMS language endangers and influences the Students formal writing which poses severe threat to scholarship.

Therefore, teachers should monitor and educate students on the need to avoid their abuse and intrusion of the SMS language into their formal writings while students should not feel overwhelmed by the social relevance of text messaging but should rather aim at attaining mastery of and communicability in the target language because bastardization of a language cannot enhance its development.

In view of the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

- Students realize and consider the impacts of the SMS language on their formal writings especially on their academic work. They should overtime practice formal writings with strict adherence to grammatical rules and conventions.
- People, especially the secondary school students should be conscious of their writing so as to distance themselves from the influence of the SMS language.
- Secondary School teachers should encourage the avoidance of text messaging among students. "The ability to put sentences together effectively needs systematic encouragement and sometimes explicit teaching and that part of the work in a writing course involves teaching students to be sensitive to the rules of discourse in English". Cited in (Otagburuagu, 1997, p. 10)

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