

# Textese And Writing Skills: Aid Or Interference For High School Learners Of English?

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*Abstract: There seems to be no end to the debate about whether textese positively or negatively affects writing skills of high school learners of English. For instance, Carrington (2005:171) observes that “text messaging ‘infects’ Standard English...leading to lower scores on written examinations”. Plester, Wood and Joshi (2009) similarly found evidence that text literacy is positively associated with Standard English literacy. However, Crystal (2008:157) does not just disagree, he sees no correlation.*

*“I do not see how texting could be a significant factor when discussing ...problems with literacy. If you have difficulty with reading and writing, you are hardly going to be predisposed to use a technology that demands sophisticated abilities in reading and writing. And if you do start to text, I would expect the additional experience of writing to be a help, rather than a hindrance.”*

*A study conducted in South Africa by Geertsema, Hyman, and Van (2011) concluded that there is indeed negative correlation between texting and writing ability in English. This too is contested in Kemp & Bushnell (2011) who found that students can limit their textese use to appropriate contexts.*

*In response to such contradictory opinion, this study randomly sampled 500 pages of essays as well as classroom notes written by high school students of Mosoch Division, Kisii County, in Kenya. From the sample, 448 instances of textese were extracted and analyzed. It was found, among other things, that textese undermines ability of second language learners to write in English. Interference from textese was especially apparent in spelling, punctuation and capitalization.*

*Keywords: Literacy; Literacy Aid; Literacy domain; Literacy event; Literacy; Interference; Literacy practice; Standard English; Textese; Textese density; Text messaging/ Texting.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Rapid development in technology has changed the life of many people around the world. Yet no aspect of human experience has been impacted in unprecedented ways like communication. Increasingly integrated social space has

meant that billions of people must reach out to one another easily, efficiently and fast. Regarding exchange of messages, texting has emerged as the quickest means. It is also the most frequently used service because it is easy and rapid, which explains why texting is widespread in nearly every part of the world today (Horstmanshof and Powel 2005).

A survey by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project conducted in 2012 in 21 countries across the world indicates that a median of 75% of cell phone owners say they text. According to Pew Research Center, texting is common among cell phone owners in Indonesia (96%), Kenya (89%), and Lebanon (87%), with eight-in-ten or more in Poland, Mexico, Japan and China. Current numbers are likely to be higher. A study conducted by Pew Research Center (PRC) in April 2015 indicates that cell phone ownership has surged in Africa and that in Kenya over 82% of adults own cell phones. Kenya ranks third in Africa after Ghana (83%) and South Africa (89%) in cell phone ownership. In terms of age, cell phones are common among young and old alike. PRC further observes that texting is the most common use of cell phones by owners in Africa, at 80%.

Communications Commission of Kenya noted that the use made of Short Message Services (SMS) has increased more than threefold to 3.6 billion texts between September 2014 to December 2014 while voice calls grew by only a single digit (Business Daily, Sunday March 8, 2015). Global trends indicate that texting has been on the rise. From a study conducted in 2003, Smith observed that "Texting is more popular than any other form of communication for everyday use" (Smith (2003:98). Thus, SMS has become a popular alternative to voice communication, particularly among teenagers and young adults as it provides the convenience of communicating with a person from any location at any time, with privacy guaranteed (Kleen & Heinrichs, 2008). The popularity of texting as data application would surpass voice calls since 2008 (Drouin, 2011).

These trends in the use of texting has positioned it strategically for exploitation by people interested in conveying quick messages like those in broadcast and advertising industries. Where individuals jammed studio lines during call in radio programmes, now they can text, interact, and share opinion. Governments and leaders of programmes involving mobilization can likewise reach large numbers of people by means of the text message. In business and health, important information or updates are now transmitted through SMS.

Text message is preferred for its convenience and precision. According to Thurlow (2002:5), the average length of an SMS is 160 characters; a range that allows "function of the need for speed, ease of typing and, perhaps other symbolic concerns". It is this limit set by 160 characters per message that gave rise to what has become known as text message language, webspeak, textspeak, textism, or simply textese (see Thurlow, 2003; Crystal, 2008; Wood and Joshi, 2009).

Like other jargon, known features of textese include abbreviation characterized by letter-number homophones, contraction, shortening, morpheme deletion, vowel deletion, capitalization, repletion of letters or punctuation all of which defy the rules of grammar (Thurlow, 2003; Carrington, 2005). Textese also includes use of special characters allowing emoticons like smiley faces, winking faces and a range of other expressions which do not form part of standard written language as we know it.

That texting is convenient in relaying quick messages is not in doubt, what is contested is whether texting benefits or undermines the acquisition of writing skills in classroom.

Researchers appear to hold three conflicting opinions regarding implications of textese on formal writing skills.

One group feels textese has the potential of undermining the acquisition of formal writing skills so they view it as an impediment. This school of thought is particularly represented in Carrington (2005:171) who observes that "text messaging 'infects' Standard English...leading to lower scores on written examinations" and in Plester et.al.(2008) who found evidence that text literacy is negatively associated with Standard English literacy. To this group, use of textese constitutes a habit which might be transferred or which might transfer itself to written tasks in formal contexts. This paper took keen interest in this observation because subjects of the study happen to be second language learners of English whose proper acquisition of writing skills depends on regular exposure and practice.

A second group holds diametric opinion, arguing that textese benefits writing skills instead. Proponents of this viewpoint include Crystal (2008), Rosen et.al. (2010) and Drouin (2011) among others. The position of this group is distinctively expressed in Crystal (2008:157).

"I do not see how texting could be a significant factor when discussing ... problems with literacy. If you have difficulty with reading and writing, you are hardly going to be predisposed to use a technology that demands sophisticated abilities in reading and writing. And if you do start to text, I would expect the additional experience of writing to be a help, rather than a hindrance."

To this group, textese assumes some kind of expertise in writing. "Sophisticated abilities in reading and writing" involving abbreviation, letter-number homophones, contraction, shortening, morpheme deletion, vowel deletion, capitalization are not to be expected of people with poor writing skills. Good writing ability therefore benefits use of textese. But we pose; does the opposite apply?

The third group involving studies by Kemp (2010), Kemp & Bushnell (2011) and Masengill-Shaw, Carlson and Waxman (2007) find no correlation whatsoever between textese and formal writing skills. They feel users of textese know exactly in what contexts to use textese in the same way bilinguals use different varieties of the same language.

A study conducted by Drouin and Driver (2012) reckons the above three schools of thought. In their research involving 183 American graduates, they found overall textism density to be negatively related to reading and spelling, some textism categories like omitted apostrophes were negatively related to literacy skills while others like accent stylization were positively related to literacy skills.

While there may be differences between the studies above regarding sample size, culture or the matter of "text density", they seem to share one thing in common: they were conducted in the USA, Britain or Australia which are heavily populated by native speakers of English; a fact that makes their findings difficult to generalize beyond similar contexts. The case may be different for second language students like subjects of this study who need every opportunity to practice correct use of English which is not used by them outside the school context.

The extent of the problem is exemplified in a speech given by Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Education during the release of 2013 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education

examination results in which he cited rampant use of electronic communication devices -particularly use of textese - as being the main cause of dismal performance in English by secondary students.

In this paper, we provide evidence of textese as well as categories of it in the form of photo extracts from essays and notes written by second language students of English. Our study hopes to demonstrate the fact that textese usage constitutes a habit that undermines writing skills of second language learners regardless of whether the use itself is dense or not. Unlike in previous studies, we attempt to link textese, not with other literacy skills such as reading, but with writing alone.

The study reported in this paper was conducted at a time when dropping performance in English in Kenyan secondary schools became a matter of concern to educators and parents alike(KNEC 2013. Among other factors, reports have cited texting - usually widespread among urban youth - as an important challenge to acquisition of English literacy. In Kenya, a drop in English literacy has curriculum-wide consequences. Except Kiswahili, English is the sole language of instruction in school for all subjects from elementary to university level. It is also one of the few compulsory subjects throughout the school system. Students at secondary school level were strategic in this study for two reasons: one, it is at this level that writing skills in English is most exercised and two, students at secondary school are also the most active in texting habits on their phones and on social media. Like other suburban neighborhoods, Mosocho made a perfect choice as location for this study.

## II. METHOD

The study randomly collected 500 pages of essays as well as classroom notes written by high school students of Mosocho Division. Forty-nine (49) excerpts were purposively sampled and compiled for analysis. From the excerpts, 448 instances of textese of various sorts were found. The data was then subjected to the procedure of content analysis following features of textese proposed in Cohen, Manion& Morrison (2003), Thurlow (2003), Rua (2007) and Crystal (2008) among others. New Literacy Studies Theory was used to examine the data.

## III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Presentation and discussion of the data below follows the criteria for features of textese proposed in the literature referred to above. The typology used includes the characteristics below.

- ✓ Emoticons and Typographic Symbols
- ✓ Letter / number homophones(Logograms)
- ✓ Shortening, Contraction and Clipping
- ✓ Acronyms and Initialisms
- ✓ Non-conventional spellings, Accent Stylization and Graphones
- ✓ Punctuation marks and Capitalization

Some characteristics pointing beyond this typology were found from the data as well. The study considered these attributing them to creativity of the individual learners. It is hoped that these new patterns would guide future studies pursuing classification of textese.

Secondly, like in other qualitative studies, photo captions from primary data have been coded and included within the body of the paper for description and easy referencing. We used these captions to attest to dense use of textese from the sample. While we do not claim similar instances are already rampant in English texts written by subjects of this study, we demonstrate from the captions that textese has the potential of undermining acquisition of English writing skills.

For each characteristic, we put a sample of the text containing the instance of textese as it occurred in the data. We then proceeded to discuss cases of textese use by text category.

### FEATURES OF TEXTESE FROM THE DATA

Clear evidence was found from the data exemplifying almost every type of textese. Table 1 summarizes each instance by typology out of the total number of cases.

Features	Frequency	Percentage
Emoticons and typographic symbols	56	12.5%
Letter / number homophones	104	23.3%
Shortening, contraction and clipping	107	23.9%
Acronyms and initialisms	06	1.3%
Non-conventional spelling, accent	49	10.9%
stylization and gramophone	71	15.8%
Punctuation and capitalization	09	2.0%
Omission of personal pronouns	46	10.3%
Other features		
<b>Total</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1: Occurrence of features of textese

Of the 448 individual instances of textese we gathered, nearly 50% were cases of letter-number homophones, shortening, contraction and clipping. The other half comprised of punctuation and capitalization, emoticons and typographic symbols, stylization and gramophone, other features, omission of personal pronouns and acronyms and initialisms in that order. Clearly, the students are proficient and efficient in their use of textese; a fact that poses real threat to their formal writing capabilities.

Preference for strategies that omit middle vowels like shortening, contraction and clipping could lead one to conclude that the students are aware of English syllable structure. To the contrary, the fact that these features find their way into assigned writing tasks alone is evidence that these "short forms" may very well be avoidance strategies. Students use short forms to go around spelling problems when they are not sure of the correct spelling of a word.

Shortening, contraction, clipping and letter-number homophones which involve omission of one sort or the other, and which together accounted for almost 50% of the textese in the sample, undermine spelling abilities when their use is

habitual. Vowel omission in both contracted and short forms is associated with low levels of literacy. In English, vowels occupy a special position in spelling and orthography.

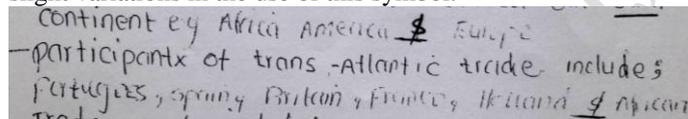
Use of letter-number homophones at 23.3% can also be attributed to the possibility that pronunciation of individual letters or numbers is prioritized over appearance of the homophone in the sample. From the table, misuse of punctuation and capitalization followed “short forms” in density at 15.8%. We show further below cases where small letters are used with proper nouns, personal pronoun ‘I’ and after the final punctuation marks. The apostrophe was also omitted by the students in cases involving contraction.

An interesting observation made from the data was instances of textism that fall outside categories previously attested in the literature. Such cases of self-representation accounted for 10.3% of the sample. We will elaborate this category further below.

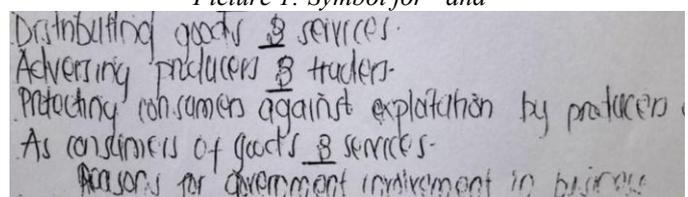
### EMOTICONS AND TYPOGRAPHIC SYMBOLS

Emoticons characterized by Baron (2004) as text modifiers and by Neviarouskaya, Prendinger and Ishizuka (2010) as visual cues used in face to face conversation, did not feature in the data. However, typographic symbols with which they are normally paired did. The term typographic symbols is used in reference to single or multiple characters that represent whole words (Bieswange, 2008). A commonly cited example is “zzzz” which is often used to suggest sleep, fatigue or boredom.

The symbol “&” for “and” appeared in the data as many times as 12.5% of the total number of textism used in the study. In all the 56 times, the symbol was used by the learners in place of ‘and’. Photo captions in 1 and 2 however reveal slight variations in the use of this symbol.



Picture 1: Symbol for “and”



Picture 2: Variant symbol for “and”

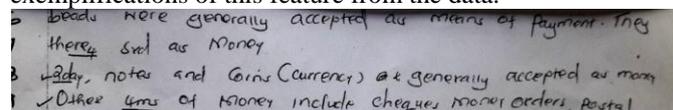
As can be seen from the captions, the symbol is used during periods of note taking for a subject other than English. Students who often use this symbol will obviously employ it any moment demand is made on their ability to write fast. In time, it becomes a writing habit.

### LETTER - NUMBER HOMOPHONES

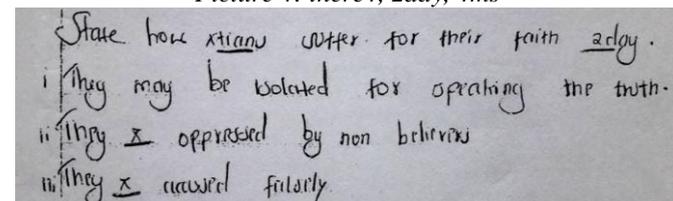
Letter - number homophones are phonetic reductions or syllabograms that use a letter or number in place of a word or part thereof (Thurlow & Poff 2009). In this category of textism, pronunciation rather than spelling is the trigger for the short form. A common example which uses both letter and number homophones is “c u l8r” - see you later. The

convenience of the strategy lies in the fact that it saves the effort, time and energy needed for composing long sentences (Plester, Wood & Bell 2008; Thurlow & Brown 2003). In the case of texting, a shorter message means a save on the charge as well.

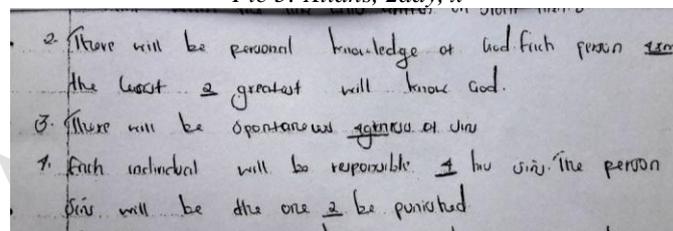
Letter - number homophones accounted for 20.1% of textism used in the essays. Commonly used homophones included forms like-“there4” (therefore), “2day” (today), “4ms” (forms), “r” (are), “2” (to), “4rm” (from), “4” (for), and “4gveness” (forgiveness). Captions in Pic 4 to 7 are exemplifications of this feature from the data.



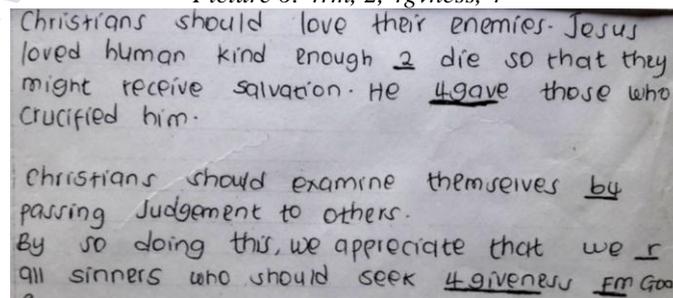
Picture 4: there4, 2day, 4ms



Pic 5: Xtians, 2day, x



Picture 6: 4rm, 2, 4gveness, 4



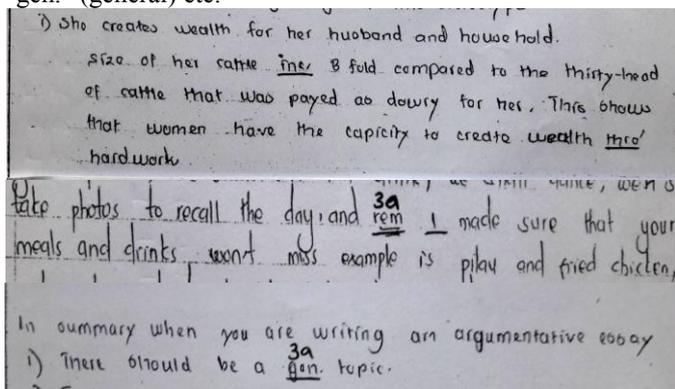
Picture 7: 2, 4gave, b4, r, 4giveness, fm

According to Crystal (2008), someone who will use letter-number homophones like “there4”, “2day”, “4ms”, “r”, “2”, “4rm”, “4”, xtians and “4gveness” draws from their skills in reading and writing, and so is unlikely to have their writing skills affected in any way by use of these forms. While we agree these phonetic reductions by the subjects demonstrate phonological awareness about English, we see no connection between that awareness and literacy in the way crystal does. Subjects of our study are people who still need practice to optimize their listening, speaking and reading capabilities in English. Being second language learners, they are barely able to write properly at this stage and so use of textism can only be said to slow down progress with writing.

### SHORTENING, CONTRACTION AND CLIPPING

Subjects of this study were also found to use shortening; defined by (Thurlow & Brown, 2003) as words with some

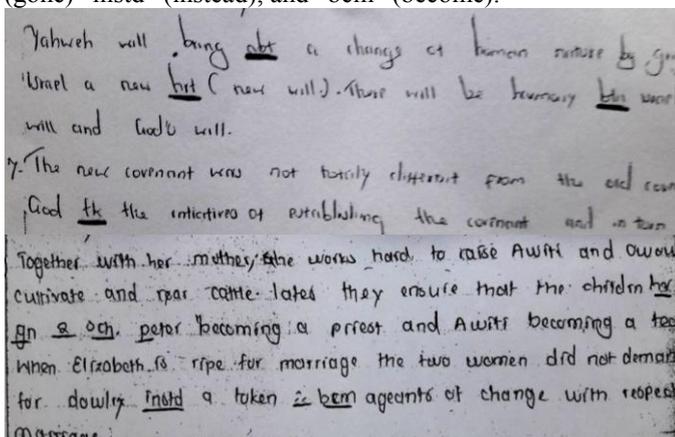
letters missing at the end. Shortening is commonly used for days of the week (Mon, Tue) or for months of the year (Jan, Feb). We found evidence of this feature from the data in forms like “incr” (increase), “thro” (through), “rem” (remember), “gen.” (general) etc.



Picture 8: Shortening

Like other categories of textism, shortening undermines the ability of students to exercise their spelling. The more the subjects omit letters from spelling of a word, the more they are likely to forget the correct spelling. Given that students write by hand in class, it is likely they use “shorthand” to avoid correct spelling. We think the situation may be the same even for students who use spelling prompts when they word process their written tasks.

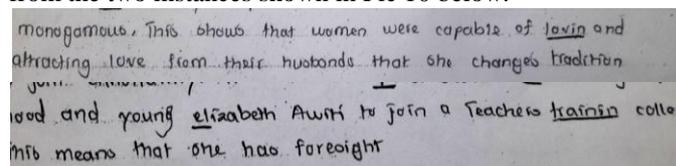
The same can be said about use of contraction. The data shows omissions of middle letters - usually vowels - in contracted forms. Crystal (2008) attributes this tendency to the possibility that in English, consonants provide greater information than vowels. There are many possible contracted forms, but (Plester, Wood & Joshi, 2009) mention “txt” for text and “hmwrk” for homework as commonly reported it textese. In this study, contracted forms like “abt” (about), “hrts” (hearts), “btn” (between), “tk” (took), “hv” (have), “gn” (gone) “instd” (instead), and “bcm” (become).



Picture 9: Contracted forms

A close look at the contracted forms in Pic 9 reveals that contraction is an individualized category of textese, meaning there exist infinite possibilities. While the strategy may help a student to take notes faster, it gives weak ones among them room to gloss over spelling. Also, the highly contextualized nature of contracted forms poses difficulty later when the students go over their notes to recover the words.

As a word formation process, clipping involves omission of one syllable or more from a word. However, attempts at clipping found from the data are clear evidence that the students have limited knowledge about the structure of English words. It is not clear, for instance, why “g” is dropped from the two instances shown in Pic 10 below.



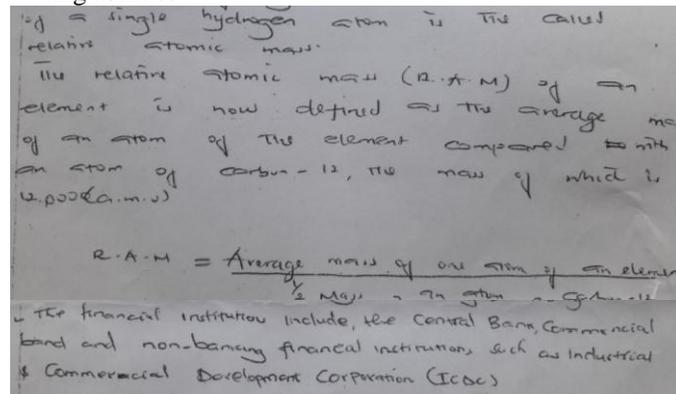
Picture 10: G-Clipping

From the caption, the final ‘g’ is omitted from two progressive verbs; training and loving. In both instances, the ‘g’ comes at the end of the word which probably shows the students are aware of the classical G-Clipping; but unclear is to what end? Since the difference between ‘ng’ and ‘g’ do not amount to saving time, we conclude that this was an instance of “bad” writing habits. It demonstrates the possibility that the student was exercising the wrong writing skill.

#### ACRONYM AND INITIALISM

Farina & Fiona (2011) follow Crystal (2008) in defining acronym and initialism as involving shortening of words to their initial letters (Crystal, 2008). While acronyms have for a long time been used in formal writing use of initialisms became more apparent with textism. Today, initialisms like “omg”(oh my god)”, “bf” (boyfriend), “IMHO” (in my humble opinion)” or “fb” are nearly conventional in use (see Farina and Fiona). Bieswanger (2008) however distinguishes between acronym (letters pronounced as one word) and alphabetization (letters pronounced letter by letter) for example TV, BBC and FB. Most of these have been in use for a long time and are now standardized (Crystal 2008).

Similar instances of initialism were spotted from samples of the writing collected from the students. Pic 11 below shows use of forms like RAM (Relative Atomic Mass) and ICDC (Industrial Commercial Development Corporation) by the students. While use of these shortened forms is not unusual, their appearance alongside a host of other individualized features we discuss under “others” means overuse could hurt writing abilities



Picture 11: Acronym and Initialism

## NON-CONVENTIONAL SPELLING

Spelling is one of the most important skills to be acquired while learning how to write. This is why large amount of time is usually spent making second language learners familiar with spelling of a target language. Success with spelling means teachers must include sufficient spelling exercises in the learning experience. However, spelling can pose a real challenge to learners where correspondence between written and spoken language is low such as is the case with English.

While misspelling fits well within textism typology since textese is “sound based”, we attributed non-conventional spelling found in the data to avoidance strategy. This is in total contrast with Drouin (2011) who associates accent stylizations like this to better literacy abilities. When second language students fail to learn the correct spelling, they use textese as an excuse to get around it.

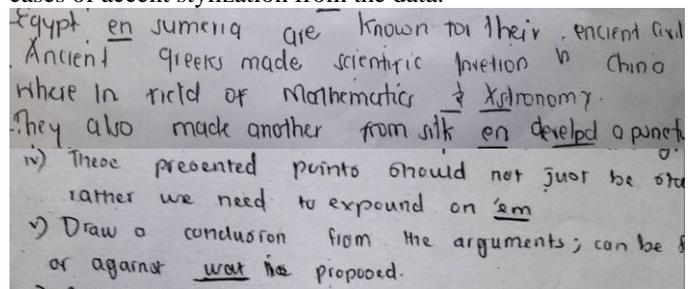
The other justification is expressed in Halliday (2003: 145) who observes that “electronic text tends to lessen the distance between the spoken and written mode; it develops features and patterns of its own, part written, part spoken and part perhaps unlike either”.

Common cases of non-conventional spellings include renditions like “sum” (some), “thanx” (thanks) and use of “k” in “skool” (school) (See Farina & Fiona, 2011; Thurlow & Brown 2003).

Non-conventional spelling includes both Accent stylization and Graphones.

### ACCENT STYLIZATIONS

Accent stylizing causes words to be spelled in a way that conforms to a given accent. The youth are likely to use stylizations like “wanna” (want to), “gonna” (going to), or “tat” (for “that” – often heard among Kenyan youths from Kisii or Kericho regions). Since accent stylizations are often associated with the youth, they are sometimes referred to as “youth code” (Plester et al, 2008). Captions in Pic 12 show cases of accent stylization from the data.



Picture 12: Accent Stylization

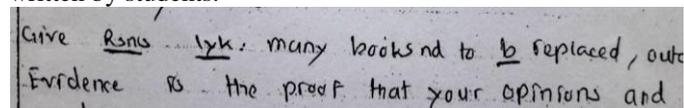
Underlined forms like “em”, “en”, “wat” in Pic 12 are instances in which spelling follows from informal speech. The students have spelt the words as they say them in speech. Interestingly, some of the forms like “wat” follow closely from regional variety of English spoken around Kisii town where the study was conducted. The likelihood to include such forms in formal writing can be determined from this tendency

## GRAPHONES

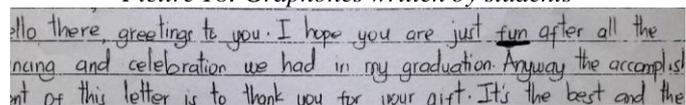
This study defines the term graphones as a feature of textese in which words are written the way they are pronounced (spoken like writing). This comes from the words ‘graphic’ (written representation) and phone (speech sound) (Barasa & Mous 2013).

Graphone strategy is the substitution of for example [ai] diphthong with <y> as in *like* and *lyke*.

The following photo captions show the graphones as written by students.



Picture 18: Graphones written by students

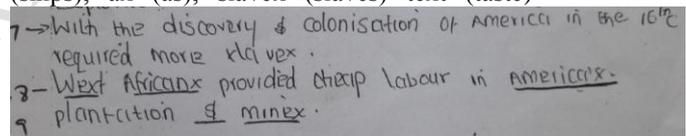


Picture 19: Graphones written by students

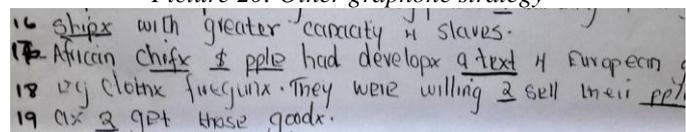
It can be seen from the photo caption, pict 18 and 19, that students not only substituted [ai] diphthong with <y> but also omitted the last vowel ‘e’ as in “lyk” (like), “fyn” (fine). The students are writing the words the way they are pronounced, omitting ‘e’ because in English consonants provide greater information than vowels.

In addition, graphones also involve when [s] is replaced by [x]. This can be seen in the photo captions of the students’ notes.

“Wext africanx” (West Africa), “minex” (mines), “shipx” (ships), “ax” (as), “slavex” (slaves) “text” (taste)



Picture 20: Other graphone strategy



Picture 21: Other graphone strategy

In the captions above, Pict 20 and 21, the students replaced [s] with [x]. This is in an effort to write the words the way they are pronounced although in some cases haphazard replacement of [s] with [x] may distort the intended meaning like in the case of Pict 21, the word ‘text’ gives a totally different meaning from the intended one. In context the intended meaning is ‘taste’ and neither ‘text’ nor ‘test’.

## PUNCTUATION AND CAPITALIZATION

According to Ehrlich, punctuation marks are symbols used in writing to indicate pauses within a sentence, at the end of a sentence to bring out clarity in a sentence and to help one understand the intended message (Ehrlich, 1987). Punctuation is very important to disambiguate the meaning of a sentence.

During texting, many texters pay little attention to capitalization and other punctuation marks like commas, apostrophe and full stops. This may be because of the need for speed, ease of typing and the limited average length of SMS

characters of 160(Thurlow 2002:5). The texters tend to assume that avoiding the punctuation marks makes them type faster and easily thus saving time and the cost therein.

The features of punctuation that were attested in this study included the presence or absence of capitalization ,exclamation marks and the apostrophe and how the learners use manipulate their use while texting.

**CAPITALIZATION**

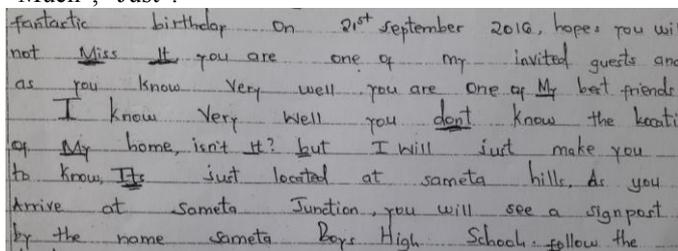
On the other hand, capitalization is a standard form that is used at the start of every sentence, direct quotations, proper nouns, standard abbreviations and the personal pronoun I.

In the case of capitalization in textese, there are three scenarios: that of no capitalization, capitalization of only the first word and full capitalization of all the letters (Ling 2005). Textese reduced the use of capitalization. The use of capitalization on the first letter of a sentence of text message may in fact, not be intentional, and may likely be due to the default capitalization setting of the devices. Capitalization too may encode prosodic elements, where copious use may signify the textual equivalent of raised voice or heightened emotions (Watt 2010).

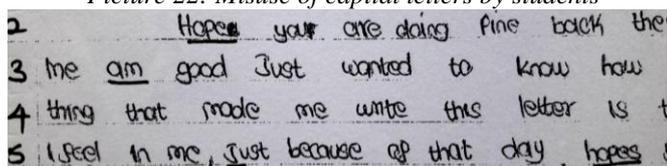
In standard form, capital letter is used at the first word of a sentence, direct quotation, proper nouns and after all the final punctuation marks like full stops, question marks and exclamation marks. In textese, learners violate the standard use of capitalization as a compensatory strategy for paralinguistic cues. The data collected showed a lot of misuse of capital letters or lack of it thereof.

The students showed unconventional use of capital letters. In English, capital letters should not appear in the middle of a sentence unless the word is either a proper noun or personal pronoun I. These words extracted from Pict 22, 23 and 24 are found in the middle of sentences yet the students wrote the first letters in capital letters and they are neither proper nouns nor personal pronoun I.

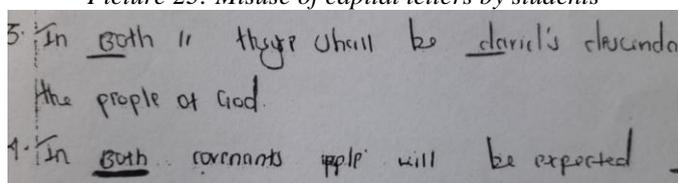
“It”, “Birth Day”, “Miss”, “Its”, “My”, “Miss”, “Both”, “Much”, “Just”.



Picture 22: Misuse of capital letters by students



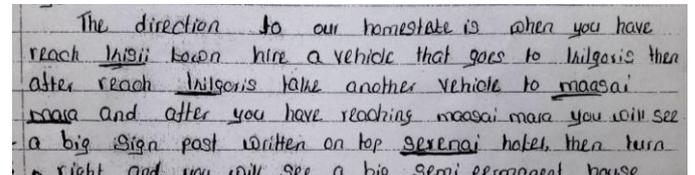
Picture 23: Misuse of capital letters by students



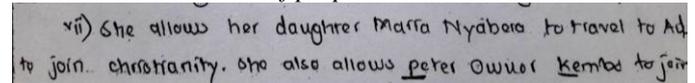
Picture 24: Misuse of capital letters by students

The students wrote small letters where capital letters are required. In English, first letter of proper noun should be written in capital letter. On the contrary, students used small letter in place of capital letter as in the following.

Proper nouns such as such as “lord”, “lord’s”, “samwel”, “sameta”, “almighty”, “kilgoris”, “serena hotel”, “masaai mara”.

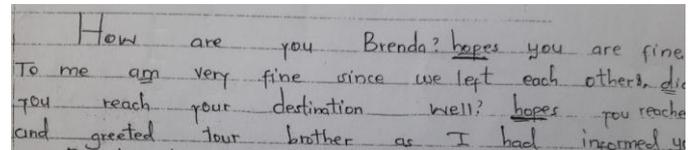


Picture 24: First letter of proper nouns written in small letter

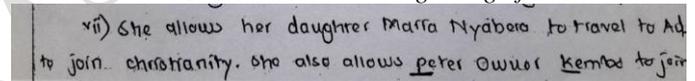


Picture 25: First letter of proper nouns written in small letter

Furthermore the students used small letter at the beginning of sentences especially after the final punctuation marks like question mark (?) which is contrary to English conventions.

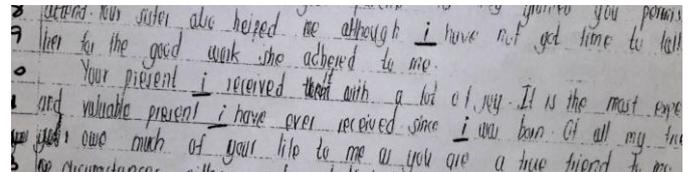


Picture 26: Small letters at the beginning of a sentence



Picture 27: Small letters at the beginning of a sentence

Personal pronoun “I” is also written in small letter as shown in Pict 28 below. The rules of English language require personal pronouns to begin in capital letters irrespective of whether they appear at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a sentence.



Picture 28: Proper nouns written in small letter

The learners commonly used lower case just as they do while texting. This shows that when students get used to using lowercase letters, it becomes a habit, which can be difficult to change when they are required to write Standard English. Therefore, the learners do not see the need to use capital letters according to the rules of English grammar especially the use of capital letters at the beginning of a sentence unless it occurs automatically on their cell phones. Ling reported that 82% of all text messages have no capital letters I the beginning of sentences (Crystal 2008).

**APOSTROPHE**

Many interlocutors did not pay attention to the use of apostrophe as a punctuation mark. A standard type of apostrophe (’) has three principles. These are: to form contraction for example won’t for will not, to for plurals of

letters or numbers for example in 90's, to show possession or ownership for example Mary's books.

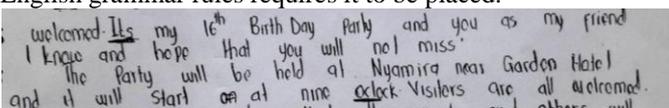
In this study, apostrophe was either omitted where they are required by the rules of English language.

The table below shows the cases of omission of apostrophe as extracted from the essays and note

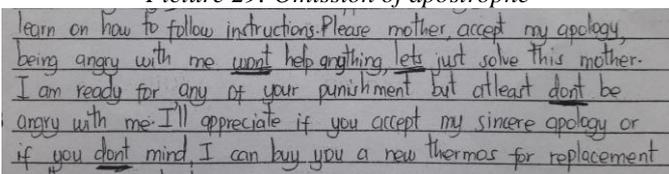
OMISSION OF APOSTROPHE	STANDARD TYPE
Its	It's
Dont	Don't
Oclock	O'clock
Wont	Won't

Table 4: Instances of omission and the standard use of apostrophe

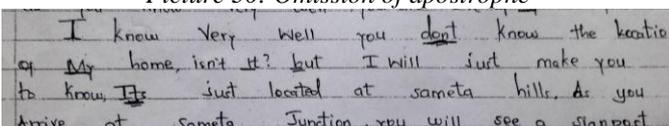
The photo captions in Pict 29, 30, 31 and 31 show the context in which the students omitted the apostrophe where it English grammar rules requires it to be placed.



Picture 29: Omission of apostrophe



Picture 30: Omission of apostrophe



Picture 31: Omission of apostrophe

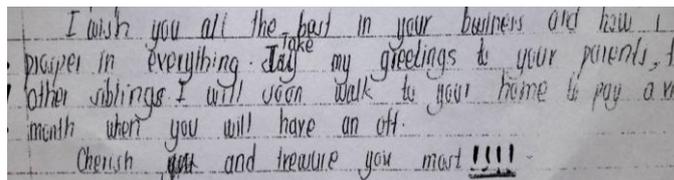
It is evident that learners omitted the apostrophe in their notes and essays. This trend may be due to the demand of speed in texting and the fact that the intended information could still be understood by the recipients. They therefore violate English language conventions of the use of apostrophe in the process.

### EXCLAMATION MARKS

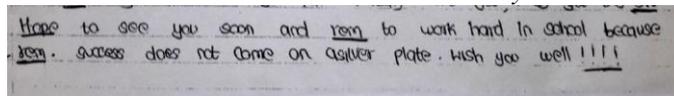
The exclamation mark is used to express strong emotion: excitement, surprise, astonishment, shock, protest or dismay. Exclamation marks are used in literacy texts, business and regulatory writing, with an aim to communicate information objectively, (Lauchman 2010). Exclamation marks are used one at a time.

Textese also make use multiple punctuation like "!!!!", "?????" either for emphasis and "... " to express contemplation (Thurlow 2002).

In the written work used in this paper, two instances of use of multiple exclamation marks have been identified. Coincidentally, the exclamation marks were placed four times at the end of a sentence by different learners just as the examples given in literature reviewed by previous researchers. This shows that the learners have a good mastery of these textese features and they are able to apply in the essays.



Picture 32: Exclamation marks as used by students



Picture 33: Exclamation marks as used by students

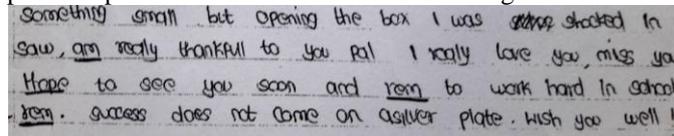
The exclamation marks may have been used to emphasize the intended information being passed across by the learners. From the above illustrations, it is clear that the learners give no importance to the rules of punctuation marks especially capitalization, apostrophe and in a few instances full stops. This is because the textese language is highly structured and theme-focused; the intended meaning precedes the rules of English language. Therefore textese is like a new language with its own prescription rules hence another different literacy in its own domain.

The data discussed above confirms the features of textese as proposed in the literature review by Thurlow (2003), Rua (2007) and Crystal (2001) among others. However, some characteristics pointing beyond this typology were found from the data as well. The study considered these in their own right, attributing them to creativity of the individual learners.

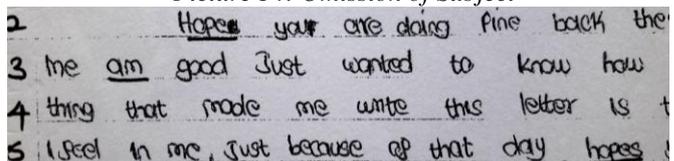
The two features are omission of the subject (personal pronoun I) and 'other unique features'.

### OMISSION OF SUBJECT (PERSONAL PRONOUN I)

The core elements of a sentence are the subject and the verb which can be deleted sometimes (Crystal 2009). Textese applies the grammatical possibility to concentrate on the elements that convey the intended meaning more economically. The learner's omit the subject especially the personal pronoun as illustrated in the following:



Picture 34: Omission of Subject



Picture 35: Omission of Subject

In English, the second person 'you' is normally not written because it is always understood in context, particularly in commands and requests. The students may have applied the rule of omitting the second person in situation which requires the first person 'I'. The students assume that the first person I is understood as the second person 'you'.

### UNIQUE FEATURES

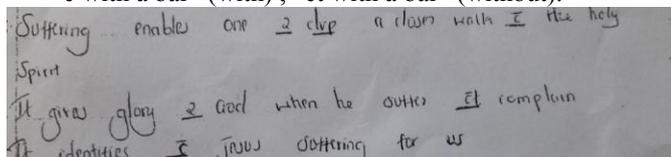
The samples of written work were analyzed for the previously identified features of textese. However, during the

analysis, there was a significant presence of other features that were not previously specified in the literature review. Meanwhile, we do not claim similar instances are already rampant in English texts written by students but we demonstrate from the captions that textese has the potential of undermining acquisition of English writing skills.

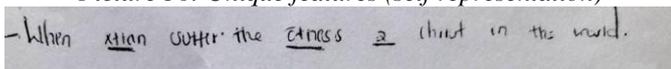
The following features were in the learners essays

“c with a bar” (with), “ct with a bar” (without), “owith a bar” (which), “ēa” (there), “ē” (the)

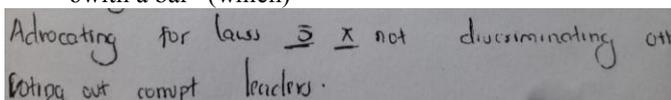
“c with a bar” (with), “ct with a bar” (without).



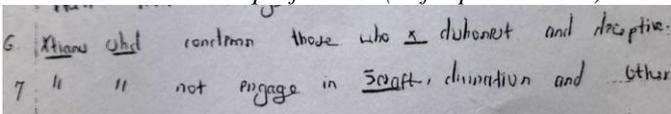
Picture 36: Unique features (self representation)



Picture 37: Unique features (self representation)  
“owith a bar” (which)



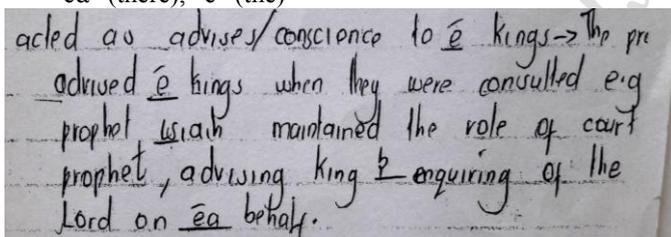
Picture 38: Unique features (self representation)



Picture 39: Unique features (self representation)

This illustration above, “owith a bar then craft” (witchcraft), below shows that the learner has phonological awareness hence the use of “O with a bar” meaning “which” thus serving as an equivalent for “witch”.

“ēa” (there), “ē” (the)



Picture 40: Unique features (self representation)

In Pict 40 the students used the vowels to represent the words, for example “ēa” (there) and “ē” (the). This is contrary to the belief that only vowels may be omitted in a word because in English, consonants provide greater information than vowels (Crystal, 2008).

#### TEXTESE – ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS INTERFACE

Textese exists in the format of a written text but it closely resembles spoken language in that it does not have a complicated structure and the meaning is mainly on context. In textese, people tend to write as they speak thus making the two skills now seem to overlap.

Researchers agree that this form of language has many features that convey textual equivalent of verbal prosodic features such as facial expression and tone of voice (Ong’onda

2011). Textese is non-standard because of lack of clear sentence boundaries and involvement of prosodic features such as stress and loudness normally shown by use of capital letters and overuse of punctuation marks. Further, the standard spelling conventions and grammar rules are often disregarded hence orthographically unconventional language forms. Consequently, textese may begin to overwrite the conventional orthographic representation (Grace, Kemp, Martin & Parrila, 2013) yet in classroom domain the learners are required to writes notes and essays in Standard English.

It is evident from the data that textese are used by the learners in their notes and essays. This shows that learners have failed to differentiate literacy domain in which textese should be used. As a result, the learners’ conventional orthographic representations are overwritten by their textese version as earlier observed by Grace, Kemp, Martin & Parrila, (2013). Worse still, they use these features in English compositions where grammar convention is expected.

The influence textese has on learners’ ability to spell, punctuate and capitalize correctly cannot be overstated. This is because examinations in High school are written. Besides, English language examinations usually test the grammar rules that include but not limited to spelling, punctuation and capitalization. On the contrary, texting uses new and non standard orthography that inevitably erode children’s ability to spell, punctuate and capitalize correctly. This trend is transferred into their schoolwork and examinations and consequently gives them poor marks in exams.

#### SPELLING

Accurate spelling reflects more advanced linguistic knowledge because it requires the integration of phonological, orthographic and morphological knowledge (Ehri 2000). The 26 letters of the alphabet can produce approximately 44 sounds (phonemes) that are represented in 250 different spellings (Ball & Blanchman 1991). Spelling requires redundant exposure to the grapho- phonemic patterns of the language (Robbin, Hosp 2010). Therefore, constant exposure to textese may overtake writing skills particularly spelling. This exposure to textese by learners is because they either spend a lot of time texting in their phones or frequently use the textese when writing their notes and essays.

Textese features that affect spelling include: Letter/ number homophones, Shortening, Contraction and Clipping, Non- conventional spelling, Accent stylization and Graphones and Other unique features. They affect English spelling in the ways exemplified in the data discussed below.

#### LETTER/ NUMBER HOMOPHONES

These are phonetic reduction or syllabogram use of a letter or number to represent a word or part thereof (Thurlow & Poff 2009).

The following letter number homophones were used by the learners in their essays and notes.

“b”(be), “4”(for), “4gave” (forgave), “b4” (before), “r”(are), “4giveness” (forgiveness).

Despite having the phonological awareness of the words in letter/ number homophone hence representing them with the

figures, the learners may in the long run completely forget the English spelling of these words. This may affect spelling and lead to deterioration in their scores in English.

#### SHORTENING AND CONTRACTION

Shortening are words with missing end letters (Thurlow & Brown 2003) whereas Contraction are words with omitted middle letters especially the vowels as, in English, consonants provide greater information than vowels (Crystal, 2008).

The learners use shortening and contraction as a time saving strategy. They may transfer consciously or unconsciously these textese features to their formal essays and this may interfere with their spelling ability of the words that they consistently shorten and contract.

Shortening and contraction used by the students are “incr.” (increase), “thro” (through), “abt” (about), “hrt” (heart), “btn” (between), “tk” (took).

#### ACCENT STYLIZATION

This refers to words that are spelled in accordance with informal/ regional speech, for example, “wanna” (want to) and “dat” (that) (Crystal, 2008).

Accent stylization found in this study were “wat” (what), “ém” (them), “en” (and).

#### GRAPHONES

Graphophone strategy is the substitution of for example [ai] diphthong with <y> as in *like* and *lyke*.

“Fyn” (fine) and “lyk” (like) were used by the learners as shown above. In both cases, [e] is omitted and [ai] diphthong is substituted with <y>. This strategy goes against the standard spelling of the respective English words. When the learners master such spelling, they may misspell the word either consciously or unconsciously.

Another graphones strategy used by the students involves replacing [s] by [x] as can be seen from the extracts of the photo captions of the students’ notes below.

“Wext africanx” (West Africa), “minex” (mines), “shipx” (ships), “ax” (as), “slavex” (slaves) “text” (taste).

According to rules of English language, all the above words in bold have been misspelled. Furthermore, the meaning of the last illustration is distorted “text” (taste). The student did not mean “text” but because of replacing [s] with [x] and omission of [e], the word has been given a different meaning from the intended one. The student meant “taste” in the context of the sentence. This haphazard replacement leads to misspelling that distorts meaning and consequently affects communication in English language.

#### PUNCTUATION AND CAPITALIZATION

Punctuation marks are symbols used in writing to indicate pauses within a sentence, at the end of a sentence to bring out clarity in a sentence and to help one understand the intended message (Ehrlich, 1987). Punctuation is very important to disambiguate the meaning of a sentence.

There are rules governing the use of punctuation marks in a sentence which when not followed may lead to misunderstanding of the intended message and consequently give the learners poorer marks in exams.

#### APOSTROPHE

Truss (2003) reports that many people find it difficult to use apostrophe correctly and that The Apostrophe Protection Society is not happy with how apostrophe is used. The same concern echoed by teachers of English as a major concern despite the learners being taught the rules as can be seen in their notes and essays.

The omission apostrophe where it is required is evident in this study. The learners exclude apostrophe where is required particularly in contracted words such as, “Its, Dont, Oclock, Wont.”

The learners either consciously or unconsciously omitted apostrophe in the above words. This may be as a result of using textese where texters do not see the need of using the apostrophe in order to save time. Furthermore, the learners are aware that the information would still be understood in context.

#### EXCLAMATION MARKS

Textese also make use multiple punctuation like “!!!!”, “????” either for emphasis and “...” to express contemplation (Thurlow 2002).

In English, exclamation mark (!) should be indicated once to express strong emotions. On the contrary the written work used in this study showed multiple use of exclamation marks. Coincidentally, the exclamation marks were placed four times at the end of a sentence by different learners just as the examples given in literature reviewed by previous researchers. This is contrary to the conventions of English language of use of exclamation mark.

#### CAPITALIZATION

Capitalization is a standard form that is used at the start of every sentence, direct quotations, proper nouns, standard abbreviations and the personal pronoun I.

In the case of capitalization in textese, there are three scenarios: that of no capitalization, capitalization of only the first word and full capitalization of all the letters (Ling 2005). These scenarios are not in line with the English conventions on the use of capital letters. The use of textese where use of capital letters is minimal has infiltrated into learners formal writing.

The learners use small letters more frequently than the capital letters. This trend is so common that the learners have ignored even the basic conventions for the use of capital letters like at the beginning of a sentence, for proper nouns and for personal pronouns “I”. The convention of English language requires personal pronouns be written in capital letters irrespective of where it appears in a sentence.

Occurrence of small letters in context of capital letters is not expected in Standard English. Small letters are used even in the proper nouns as can be seen below.

“lord”, “lord’s”, “samwel”, “sameta”, “almighty”, “kilgoris”, “serena hotel”, “masaaimara”.

This paper observed that the use of small letters was surprisingly frequent among the learners. This is as a result of textese, where learners (texters) hardly see the need to use capital letters at the beginning of a sentence unless it occurs automatically on their cell phones. Ling reported that 82% of all text messages have no capital letters at the beginning of sentences (Crystal 2008).

This shows that learners give no importance to the rules of punctuation marks especially capitalization, apostrophe and in a few instances exclamation marks. This is may be because the textese language is highly structured and theme-focused. Therefore textese is like a new language with its own prescription rules hence another different literacy in its own domain. This trend may consequently affect their formal English writing thus affecting their performance in the examinations.

Worse still, the learners may not be in a position to write grammatically and well-punctuated sentences even when applying for jobs, an event which requires formality and use of Standard English.

#### OTHER UNIQUE FEATURES

The samples of written work were analyzed for the previously identified features of textese. As mentioned earlier there was a significant presence of other features that were not previously specified in the literature review. This self-representation has given rise to other textese features other than the ones already mentioned in literature review.

It was observed that some of these textese used by learners were so unique that it was not only difficult to identify the features but also making out the meaning of the entire construction became very problematic.

Self-representation of words written by students

“c with a bar” (with), “ct with a bar” (without), “owith a bar” (which), “ēa” (there), “ē” (the).

The meaning sometimes was clear in context but in some occasion, it was not easy to comprehend what the symbols stands for. These self representations save time for the writer but wastes the readers’ time in trying to figure out what the writer meant.

While we do not claim similar instances are already rampant in English texts written by students forming subjects of this study, we demonstrate from the captions that these unique features have the potential of undermining acquisition of English writing skills especially if they become rampant as one of textese features. Previous studies on spoken language shows that people influence each other in the way they speak often adopting the features of the accent of the person they are talking to. Similarly, textese follow similar accommodation (Crystal 2008). The learners tend to copy and adopt the textese of the people they relate to may be to show a sense of belonging. Consequently, other learners may adopt these unique features in the end as another feature of textese.

The revelation above on spelling, punctuation and capitalization is a clear testimony of the negative effects of the use of textese on students academic work and general development of learners’ of English.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper investigated whether textese use either interferences or aids literacy among by learners. This was intended shed more light in the contested association between textese and literacy and the fact that in Kenya textese has been faulted as the reason why students’ performance in English has been on the decline.

The fear that students’ conventional orthographical representations will be overwritten by their textese version has some truth in it. The paper found out among other findings that textese negatively influence learners spelling, capitalization and use of punctuation marks. The influence textese has learners’ ability to spell, punctuate and capitalize correctly is very evident. This non standard orthography will inevitably erode children’s ability to spell, punctuate and capitalize correctly. This transfer of textese into students’ schoolwork and examinations may affect the conventional English orthography and consequently give them poorer marks in exams.

It was also discovered that learners are aware of the features of textese which is why they use textese with a lot of ease and consistency. This very fact demonstrates the possibility that learners view textese as literacy event to be made use of in new domains where rapid writing and efficiency in communication is valued. More interesting is that students used self representation of their own creation; new textese features.

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