

## Short message service (SMS) language and written language skills: educators' perspectives

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*SMS language is English language slang, used as a means of mobile phone text messaging. This practice may impact on the written language skills of learners at school. The main aim of this study was to determine the perspectives of Grade 8 and 9 English (as Home Language) educators in Gauteng regarding the possible influence of SMS language on certain aspects of learners' written language skills. If an influence was perceived by the educators, their perceptions regarding the degree and nature of the influence were also explored. A quantitative research design, utilising a questionnaire, was employed. The sample of participants comprised 22 educators employed at independent secondary schools within Gauteng, South Africa. The results indicated that the majority of educators viewed SMS language as having a negative influence on the written language skills of Grade 8 and 9 learners. The influence was perceived as occurring in the learners' spelling, punctuation, and sentence length. A further finding was that the majority of educators address the negative influences of SMS language when encountered in written tasks.*

**Keywords:** English Home Language teaching; SMS language; text messaging; written language skills

### Introduction and rationale for study

Short Message Service (SMS), more popularly known as text messaging, developed as an initial by-product of the cell phone industry (Faulkner & Culwin, 2004). SMS messaging is closely related to instant messaging (IM) (Goldstuck, 2006). IM is a function of online chat rooms and has expanded to mobile phones due to their ability to carry applications that can be downloaded to the handset (Goldstuck, 2006). The South African market leader of these applications is MXit. MXit is a program that enables an individual to send and receive electronic text messages from a computer or mobile phone by means of the internet (MXit Join the Evolution, [sa]). MXit is a cost-free platform for sending messages, which was launched in May 2005 (Goldstuck, 2006). This South African program can be used instead of traditional short message service (SMS) technology (MXit Join the Evolution, [sa]). For the purposes of this study, the term text messaging will encompass short message service (SMS), text messaging, and MXit text messaging.

According to Goldstuck (2006) mobile phones were introduced to the youth market in the late 1990s. During 2004, 500 billion SMS messages were sent worldwide. In South Africa, 85.5 million SMS messages were sent during the 2004 festive season alone (Statistics & News, [sa]), highlighting the increase in communication via mobile phones. A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that teenagers view text messaging as an additional means of communication, seeing that they have been exposed to it since childhood (Faulkner & Culwin, 2004). Thurlow (2003) also indicates teenagers' preference to use text messaging as a core

feature of their mobile phones, and Goldstuck (2006) describes a new, dynamic English slang in development due to text messaging.

English language slang, as it is used in mobile phone text messaging, is referred to as SMS language (SMS Language, [sa]). According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2006) slang is defined as “very informal words and expressions that are more common in spoken language”. Text messaging resembles code rather than standard language (Thurlow, 2003). Standard English is often referred to as standard language. Standard English is the variant of English that is usually used in writing (especially printing); it is associated with the educational systems of English speaking countries worldwide. Individuals who make use of Standard English are viewed as educated (Thurlow, 2003), and outsiders and other educated people alike, can understand Standard English.

Unfortunately coded language expressions (text messages) are not necessarily comprehensible to an outsider (Thurlow, 2003). Some clarification and understanding of a governing rule system is needed. For example, single or multiple words are condensed by means of replacing individual syllables and words with single letters or digits. Whole words may also be omitted (SMS Language, [sa]). According to Goldstuck (2006) SMS language has altered with the times. For example “thank you” was condensed to “tnx” and then later shortened to “tx” (Goldstuck, 2006). According to Thurlow (2003) text messages may be perceived as non-standard typographic or orthographic forms, which can be divided into the following types:

- G-Clippings (excluding the end -g letter), for example: "Goin" (Going)
- Shortenings (deletion of end letters, excluding the -g letter), for example: "Aft" (After)
- Contractions (deletion of middle letters), for example: "Nxt" (Next)
- Acronyms and initialisms (formed from initial letters of various words), for example: "LOL" (Laugh out loud)
- Number homophones, for example: "B4" (Before)
- Letter homophones, for example: "U" (You)
- Non-conventional spellings, for example: "Nite" (Night)

During the construction of text messages, only exclamation marks and full stops are generally used (SMS Language, [sa]). Emoticons are extended interpunctuation symbols (SMS Language, [sa]). They convey emotions and represent human facial expressions. Examples include:

- :-) indicates a smile or happiness
- :-/ indicates scepticism
- :-( indicates sadness or a frown (SMS Language, [sa])

A study conducted in South Africa found that abbreviations, non-standard spellings and paralinguistic restitutions were used in text messages written in English. Text messages written in isiXhosa did not feature these characteristics (Thurlow & Poff, 2009). Although there are numerous resources that explain the adaptation of English when text messaging, there is not such an abundance of information relating to the adaptations made to the other 10 official languages of South Africa. The website Transl8it! (Transl8it!, [sa]) is an example of a resource that can be used to translate English into SMS language, and vice versa. According to the researchers' knowledge, there are no resources available that provide this function in alternative languages. It was, therefore, decided to use the English language as the focus of this study. The quality and length of a written product may be also influenced by spelling. This can partly be due to learners focusing on spelling instead of, or to a larger extent than, other components of writing. The content of written compositions may also be influenced by learners avoiding the

use of words of which the spelling is uncertain (Silliman & Wilkinson, 2007). Based on these facts, it is therefore plausible to surmise that adolescents who are practised at condensing their text messages will also apply this condensing to their written school work.

This study investigates the educators' perspectives regarding adolescents' utilization of the above-mentioned text messaging types in their written language. Educators' perspectives regarding adolescents' use of punctuation marks (including the use of emoticons) in written tasks were also included in this study. Educators are informally debating the impact of text messaging on the written language skills of learners. Contrasting views on the impact of proliferating text messaging are expressed (eSchool News, 2003). Articles on this website brought about the question of whether SMS language has an influence on the written language skills of South African learners. According to Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith and Rankin Macgill (cited in Weiss, 2009), several educators and observers are concerned that the abbreviated language style of text messaging is inappropriately filtering into official school writing. The use of SMS language has also been observed in examination scripts (Weiss, 2009). An official report published by the largest examination board in the UK disclosed that examination scripts were saturated with abbreviated words (Henry, 2004). Another aspect that should be taken into consideration is the individual differences that are found in the development of children's literacy skills. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors may explain the above-mentioned variability. Intrinsic factors consist of confirmed (for example, hearing status) and inferred biological components (for example, developmental disability), as well as genetic and neurological components. Extrinsic factors consist of a child's family environment, socio-economic and cultural-linguistic environment, literacy opportunities, as well as home and school instruction (ASHA, 2001). If it is determined that SMS language has an influence on the written language skills of Grade 8 and 9 learners, SMS language can then be viewed as an extrinsic factor which will influence the learner in the academic domain. It is, therefore, essential to determine whether educators are of the opinion that SMS language has either a positive or a negative effect on academic achievement of adolescent learners in their class rooms.

Owens (2004) states that, with specific regard to adolescent learners, reading and writing form an essential part of the educational system. Spelling and reading, as well as spelling and written composition, are proven to have a significant relationship (Silliman & Wilkinson, 2007). Reading and spelling share identical underlying phonological processes, but are not simply reverse processes (Perfetti, 1997 in Owens, 2004). Pronouncing spellings (reading) is less demanding than writing spellings. This is due to the fact that the writing of spelling requires larger quantities of information to be extracted from memory (Ehri, cited in Owens, 2004). To a large extent, spelling requires segmentation, whereas reading requires blending skills. Spelling and writing are correlating processes that must coordinate for optimal functioning (Owens, 2004).

## **Methodology**

### **Aims of the study**

The main aim of this study was to determine the perspectives of Grade 8 and 9 educators in Gauteng regarding the possible influence of text messaging on certain aspects of learners' written language skills. The sub-aims were to determine:

- Grade 8 and 9 educators' exposure to SMS language based on their personal use.
- Grade 8 and 9 educators' expectations of learners' written language skills regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation.

- Whether Grade 8 and 9 educators perceive SMS language to have an influence on learners' written language skills regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation in the subject English Home Language.
- Grade 8 and 9 educators' perspectives of the nature of the possible influence of SMS language on learners' written language skills regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation.
- Grade 8 and 9 educators' perspectives of the degree of the possible influence of SMS language on learners' written language skills regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation.
- Whether Grade 8 and 9 educators are of the opinion that SMS language use affects learners' academic achievement in the subject English Home Language.
- Grade 8 and 9 educators' perspectives with regard to the role of the educator in assisting learners with written language difficulties.

### **Research design**

The research approach was quantitative. Survey research can be used as a general term for quantitative descriptive research. The research design was non-experimental research. A group of educators' perspectives regarding the influence of SMS language on specific aspects of Grade 8 and 9 learners' written language skills constitute the data of the study. A survey-based questionnaire was used to gain survey data from the participants.

### **Participants**

#### **Sampling approach**

Purposive sampling was employed, to select the individuals for a particular purpose. Participants with sufficient experience and academic training in the instruction of English as Home Language were chosen for the specific purpose of answering the questionnaire.

#### **Participant selection criteria**

The selected inclusion criteria for the educators participating in this study included the following:

- All participants should be teaching English as Home Language to Grade 8 or 9 learners at the time of the study, as it was their perspectives being investigated.
- Participants should have a minimum of one year's experience teaching English as Home Language to Grade 8 or 9 learners to ensure the educator has observed learners' English skills throughout the course of a grade.

The exclusion criteria for this study included the following:

- Educators who do not communicate via text messages (either SMS messages or MXit messages).
- Educators who neither send nor receive text messages containing SMS language.

### **Apparatus and material**

#### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was divided into categories which were formulated in accordance with the sub-aims of the research study, as discussed in the results. Open-ended questions, which required participants to answer questions using their own words, close-ended questions and factual and opinion questions were included. Factual questions required participants to provide

objective information and opinion questions required participants to indicate their views on the subject (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). Special care was taken to avoid the use of questions that could confuse participants, or lead to inaccurate results.

### **Research procedure**

#### **Data collection procedure**

The questionnaires were personally delivered and collected at the independent schools that participated in the research study. This ensured a high return rate of questionnaires (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). These self-administered questionnaires were completed by the participants without the assistance or presence of the researchers (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). In the event that personal delivery or collection of questionnaires could not be achieved, other means of distribution were utilised, such as fax or mail. When these alternative methods of distribution were utilised, the various independent schools' contact details were not distributed to anyone outside the study. The participants were informed of the confidentiality of their contact details.

#### **Informed consent and ethical issues**

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Department of Communication Pathology Research Committee, as well as the ethical committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. Participants granted informed consent by filling out the questionnaires.

#### **Data processing and analysis procedure**

During this survey research a collection of questions was posed to the participants; their responses were summarised with percentages or specific statistical procedures used, and lastly conclusions were drawn from the responses of a specific population. The statistical results of questions that were not answered or for which the answers were not applicable, were not included in the results of the study. The data processing and analysis procedure were conducted in different phases. A statistician was consulted throughout.

### **Results and discussion**

Results are presented according to the aims of the study:

#### **Grade 8 and 9 educators' exposure to SMS language based on their personal use**

All the educators (100%) ( $n = 22$ ) own mobile phones and use SMS messages to communicate. However, none of the educators indicated that they communicate via MXit. The results indicated that the majority of educators (95.5% ( $n = 21$ )) could identify emoticons, 86.4% ( $n = 19$ ) could identify contractions, acronyms and initialisms, and 81.8% ( $n = 18$ ) could identify letter and number homophones as categories of SMS language. Shortenings and non-conventional spellings were identified by 77.3% ( $n = 17$ ) of participants, while G-clippings were identified by 22.7% ( $n = 5$ ) of participants as categories of SMS language.

#### **Grade 8 and 9 educators' expectations of learners' written language skills regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation**

As stated by the Department of Education (2002) educators should implement individualised assessment strategies. The educators' individual choice of the content and format of the assessment strategies may be representative of the educators' expectations related to the tasks.

The educators' expectations are graphically depicted in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

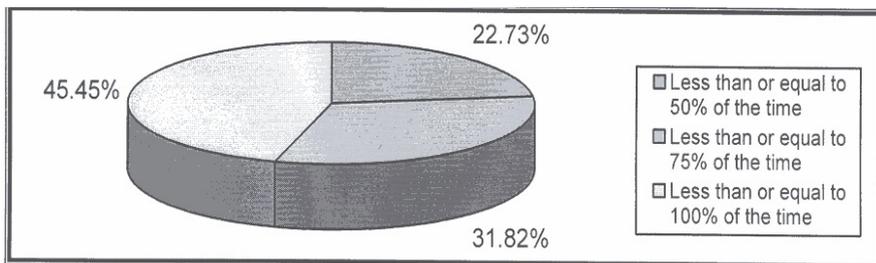


Figure 1 The educators' expectations regarding correct spelling

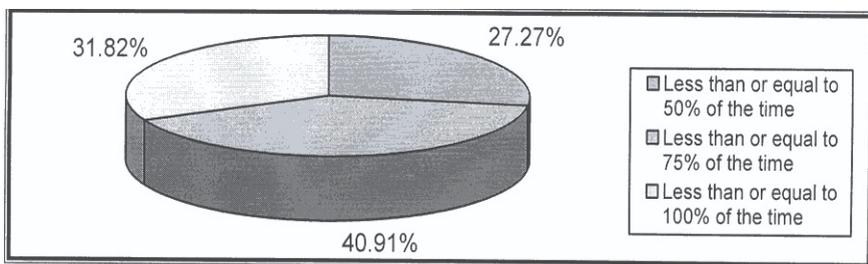


Figure 2 The educators' expectations regarding appropriate sentence length

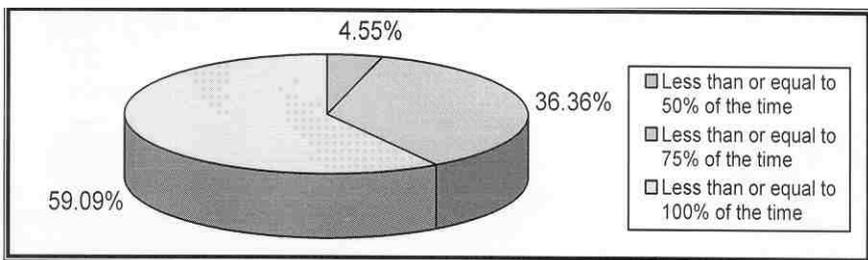


Figure 3 The educators' expectations regarding correct punctuation

The educators have high expectations for their learners to spell correctly, use appropriate sentence length and correct punctuation. According to Owens (2004) reading and writing form an essential part of the educational system. Standard English is the variant of English that is used in academic writing (Thurlow, 2003). Standard language encompasses correct phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax and pragmatics (ASHA, 2001). Therefore, the high expectations of the educators regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation demonstrate a high

expectation of Standard English language use. These high expectations indicate that the educators demand high standards as part of their individualised assessment criteria.

### Grade 8 and 9 educators' perspectives about SMS language having an influence on learners' written language skills regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation in the subject English Home Language

Text messaging changes what and how students write. Whether these changes are viewed as positive or negative depends on an individual's beliefs on how closely writing should adhere to accepted conventions of formal writing (Abdullah, 2003).

One educator (4.6%) ( $n = 1$ ) stated: "Learners make use of abbreviations. This style is becoming the norm due to constant use of SMS language, especially Mxit". Both SMS and Mxit text messaging use SMS language. Seeing that this educator indicated that Mxit influences learners' written language, it seems that this educator correctly assumes that SMS language is used in SMS text messaging and in Mxit text messaging. This reinforces the inclusion of Mxit text messaging with SMS text messaging as part of this research study.

The educators were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that "the negative influence of SMS language on written language skills causes learners to achieve poor grades in English Home Language as a subject". The majority of the educators (72.7%) ( $n = 16$ ) agreed with this statement, 18.2% ( $n = 4$ ) strongly agreed and 9.1% ( $n = 2$ ) disagreed with the statement. An indication of agreement with the statement that "the negative influence of SMS language on written language skills causes learners to have diminished knowledge of correct Standard English" was requested from the participating educators. 50.00% of educators strongly agreed while 36.4% ( $n = 8$ ) of educators and 4.6 % ( $n = 1$ ) disagreed with the statement. It is therefore generally accepted that educators perceive text messaging to influence academic achievement (72.7%) ( $n = 16$ ) and learners' knowledge of Standard English (50%) ( $n = 11$ ).

The results indicated that the educators perceive SMS language to have a negative influence on Grade 8 and 9 learners' written language skills in English as Home Language. Furthermore, the educators agreed that they perceive SMS language in written language to lead to poor grades in English Home Language as a subject and may cause learners to have diminished knowledge of correct Standard English. The perceptions of the educators are similar to the statements of Cameron (cited in Thurlow, 2007), who mentions that Standard English is corrupted by text messaging as the standards of spelling, grammar, sentence structure, punctuation and capitalisation are decreasing. Thurlow and Poff (2009) also indicate that standard writing, grammar and spelling are negatively influenced by the use of SMS language.

Only one educator (4.6%) ( $n = 1$ ) was of the opinion that he did not perceive SMS language to have a negative influence on learners' written language skills. The educator specified that in independent schools, learners are aware of register, therefore appropriate language is used for the tasks at hand. Registers are language variations influenced by specific situations (Owens, 2005). According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2006) the style and level of a writing task that is appropriate to the specific situation, is correct register. The register of a written task can switch between a formal and informal writing style. SMS language is viewed as English language slang (SMS Language, [sa]). Slang is defined as "very informal words and expressions that are more common in spoken language" (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2006). It is probable that the use of SMS language (English language slang) will change academic formal writing into a more informal style. However, the opinion

of this one educator demonstrated that a negative influence on register does not occur.

One educator (4.6%) ( $n = 1$ ) stated that this instant language leads to learners' inability to engage with text, uncover layers of meaning and expand their vocabulary development. A limit of 160 alphabetical characters is available to create a text message (Goldstuck, 2006). The information involved in the quick exchange of these short text messages, potentially contain the most essential information which does not require the uncovering of layers of meaning and expansive vocabulary.

#### Grade 8 and 9 educators' perspectives of the nature of the possible influence of SMS language on learners' written language skills regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation

It was indicated by the majority of educators (54.6%) ( $n = 12$ ) that learners use mostly simple sentences in various writing tasks given to them during creative writing. Some participants (40.9%) ( $n = 9$ ) have also noticed the shortening of sentences during creative writing tasks over the past 4.25 years. The incorrect use of full stops (13.6%) ( $n = 3$ ), commas (45.5%) ( $n = 10$ ) and exclamation marks (45.5%) ( $n = 10$ ) were encountered more in comparison to questions marks (4.6%) ( $n = 1$ ), in learners' written work.

Figure 4 depicts the different types of text messaging categories encountered by educators in general in the written tasks that educators expect of the learners in creative writing. These categories are thought to be the reason for many of the mentioned changes in spelling, sentence length and punctuation (Thurlow & Puff, 2009).

#### Grade 8 and 9 educators' perspectives of the degree of the possible influence of SMS language on learners' written language skills regarding spelling, sentence length and punctuation

The frequency of occurrence of the various categories of SMS language in general written tasks given to learners in creative writing, was determined and is summarised in Table 1:

The results that relate to the degree of the influence of SMS language on the written language skills of Grade 8 and 9 learners cannot be compared to other literature. Limited literature on this specific aspect is available. Thurlow and Poff (2009) found that some diffusion of SMS language into formal writing takes place. This research study's results, therefore, provide unique information on this aspect. However, it remains only relevant to the specific context in which this study occurred. It is clear that all the aspects depicted in Table 1 are perceived to be influenced by SMS language, although it occurs to varying degrees. The educators were able to specify a period in which this perceived influence has been taking place. All the aspects mentioned in Table 1 form part of written language, therefore the educators perceived written language to be influenced to varying degrees in the academic context.

#### Whether Grade 8 and 9 educators are of the opinion that SMS language use affects learners' academic achievement in the subject English Home Language

SMS language use was viewed the same as any other spelling error by eight educators. As stated by a participant: "*Spelling is a part of correct language use and influences the quality of a text. Any incorrect spelling in home language should be penalised*". The high expectations of the educators, combined with the perceived negative influence of SMS language, is perceived to influence the academic achievement of learners, as specific percentages of marks are deducted for errors attributed to this negative influence. Marks which are deducted for incorrect

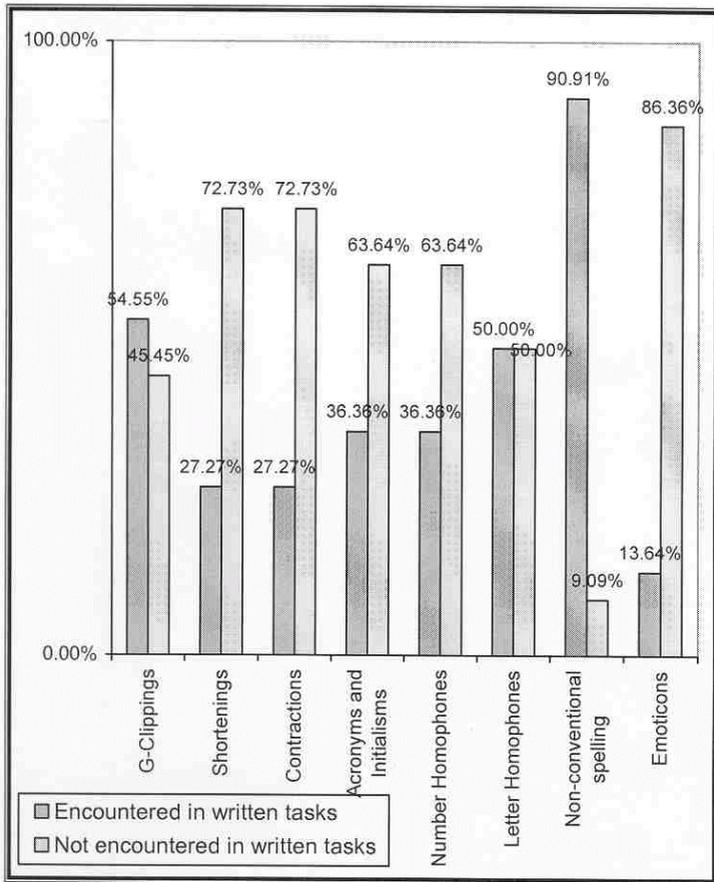


Figure 4 The different types of SMS language categories as encountered by educators in the written tasks of Grade 8 and 9 learners

spelling, reduced sentence length and punctuation may, according to the most educators, be attributed to the influence of SMS language. The fact that educators deduct less marks for errors attributed to SMS language than for normal errors, implies that the educators are able to discriminate between the two. It is thus clear that educators show an awareness of errors that are caused by the SMS language influence.

The educators also demonstrated awareness that the learners' written language skills may be influenced by the use of, and exposure to, SMS language as an extrinsic factor. Extrinsic factors that are the cause of the variability in the development of literacy skills include the socio-economic and cultural-linguistic backgrounds of the learner, as well as literacy opportunities and instruction at school and home (ASHA, 2001). The above supplementary reasons

**Table 1** The frequency of occurrence of the different categories of SMS language in general written language tasks of Grade 8 and 9 learners

	Frequency of occurrence							
	Never		Seldom		Regularly		Almost always	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
G-Clippings	5	22.7	12	54.6	4	18.2	1	4.6
Shortenings	6	27.3	10	45.5	5	22.7	1	4.6
Contractions	7	31.8	9	40.9	5	22.7	1	4.6
Acronyms and Initialisms	6	27.3	13	59.1	2	9.1	1	4.6
Letter homophones	5	22.7	11	50.0	4	18.2	2	9.1
Number homophones	6	27.3	11	50.0	4	18.2	1	4.6
Non-conventional spelling	1	4.6	7	31.8	12	54.6	2	9.1
Emoticons	1	4.6	13	59.1	6	27.3	2	9.1
Shortening of sentences	2	9.1	12	54.6	7	31.8	1	4.6
Incorrect use of exclamation marks	2	9.1	9	40.9	8	36.4	3	13.6
Incorrect use of question marks	2	9.1	13	59.1	4	18.2	3	13.6
Incorrect use of full stops	3	13.6	8	36.4	8	36.4	3	13.6
Incorrect use of commas	0	0	4	18.2	12	54.6	6	27.3

provided by the educators as having an influence on spelling, sentence length and punctuation, can be categorised as extrinsic factors. These extrinsic factors may exercise increased negative influences on a learner's written language skills, if the additional factor of a poor language background is present.

#### Grade 8 and 9 educators' perspectives with regard to the role of the educator in assisting learners with written language difficulties

The perceived negative influence of SMS language raises the topic of the role of the educators regarding written language skills of adolescents (especially Grade 8 and 9 learners). Of all the educators who answered the questions in this section of the questionnaire, 90.9% ( $n = 20$ ) indicated that it is an educator's role to address the use of SMS language in the learner's written tasks. They did not, however, specify how this is achieved.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it can be stated that generally the educators were of the opinion that SMS language is negatively influencing the written language skills of Grade 8 and 9 in English as Home Language. The negative influence is perceived to lead to poor grades and a diminished knowledge of correct Standard English. This perceived influence can be described according to its perceived nature and degree. The nature of the perceived influence of SMS language includes the encountering of spelling adaptations that are based on the SMS language categories, shortening of sentences and incorrect punctuation use. The majority of educators encounter G-clippings and non-conventional spellings. Sentence structure and length is also perceived to be influenced as sentences are shortened and simplified. Furthermore, punctuation is also perceived to be influenced. The incorrect use of full stops, commas and exclamation marks are encountered the most in learners' written language tasks. The perceived degree of the influence of SMS language on written tasks includes the regular occurrence of non-conventional spellings (large degree of influence). The shortening of sentences seldom occurs (small degree of influence). Full stops and commas are used incorrectly on a regular basis (large degree of influence). Whether educators view the perceived influence of SMS language on written language skills as either negative or positive depends on the educators' expectations of the learners to adhere to Standard English. The educators exhibit high expectations of their learners to spell correctly, use appropriate sentence length and correct punctuation. These high expectations indicate that the educators demand high standards as part of their individualised assessment strategies.

The perceived negative influence of SMS language on the written language skills of Grade 8 and 9 learners, combined with the high expectations of their educators, have implications for the academic achievement of these learners. The academic achievement of learners is also perceived to be negatively influenced by SMS language. Marks are deducted for incorrect spelling, reduced sentence length and punctuation attributed to the influence of SMS language. It can also be concluded that the educators have a role to play in the educational context. This role involves the provision of intervention to learners with written language difficulties.

There is a definite lack of information on the influence of SMS language on adolescents' written language skills in the South African context, as little research could be found in the literature. Therefore this study has contributed to the advancement of knowledge in this field and opened doors for research pertaining to the specific nature, degree and academic impact on learners' written language skills, and not just the perception of the educators in this regard.

More than half of the educators indicated that they believe punctuation skills are weaker in learners who have inferior language knowledge. Further studies could be conducted to determine specific problems experienced by second language learners, and the subsequent role of the educator in addressing these specific problems. The essence of this study could be replicated when researching the influence of SMS language on other official languages in South Africa. This will ensure a comprehensive view on the influence of SMS language on the home languages of all learners, the nature of the influence and the related academic implications.

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