'Do U txt?' – Using '*txting*' to learn maternal languages: a Portuguese case study

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Abstract: Analysing the influence of new technologies/media (e.g., mobile phones, chats, instant messaging services) on the use and learning of maternal languages basic rules is the goal of this investigation, involving teachers and students (10th, 11th and 12th grade pupils, aged between 16 and 21) at the *Escola Secundária de Silves* – ESS (Algarve/Portugal), and extended to include at the Irish School of St. Tiernan's Community (Dublin/Ireland). The use of *txting*, commonly pointed out as being responsible for the destruction of correct knowledge/mastery of maternal language rules in younger people is, however, in our opinion, one more factor proving the constant adaptability/transformation of languages, revealing the user's high creativity, ability to synthesise and to introduce – in *txting* itself – different language skill levels. Exercises using *txting* were developed/applied at the ESS, proving to be motivational (both for students and teachers) and efficient in transmitting Portuguese language rules.

Keywords: communication; constructivism; innovation; learning; language; media literacy; Portugal.

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1 Introduction

The use of one's experience in the teaching/learning process is *"an idea common to many researchers, mainly amongst those connected to the constructivist theories of education"* (Carvalho, 1998). Jean Piaget, the well known Swiss psychologist, talked about a continuous process of assimilation and accommodation that leads children to different development stages, until they achieve fully complex knowledge about a particular situation/theme ('gestalt'). *"Vigotsky commented on the influence of social interaction in the learning process and Bruner believed that better, new understanding of things was built on present and past understanding of facts"* (Carvalho, 1998), resulting from different stages: firstly, the process of transmission of knowledge involved the experiences and contexts that contribute to build the student's will to learn; secondly, the learning process had to be structured in such a way that the concepts could easily be learned by the students through the creation of 'spiral curricula' (repetitions of themes of increasing complexity and relating them just as the learner's capability of understanding increases). Bruner (Bruner *apud* Smith, 2002) proposes that teaching must be thought to facilitate the students' search for solutions, driving them to explore subjects beyond those given/presented by the teachers and valuing ideas such as 'intuition' and 'analysis'. Situated learning (developed by authors like Lave, Wenger, Schuman and Clancey (*see* Artman and Wærn, 1995; Carvalho, 1998), and more specifically the Situated action theory (proposed by Artman and Wærn, 1995), give a theoretically relevant framing to justify the use of *txting* (the abbreviated writing form used mainly by young people to communicate by means of mobile phones and IM – instant messaging services, such as MSN) in classes and in the teaching/learning of maternal languages, since this use implies the clear perception that the world relationships are permanently changing (Duncan and Leander, 1998), as well as the result of interaction and communication [Artman and Wærn, (1995), p.12]. The idea of using and valuing students' individual experiences, of bringing to the classroom their daily practices and personal *'libraries of knowledge'* inherent to this theoretical framework, could gather extra motivation capital and interest, very useful at any stage in the

teaching/learning process. In addition, it would promote the better adaptation of teaching methodologies to each student's profile and learning rates. So, it is acceptable to say that learning with things close to us is not a new idea, but it can be a new way of using *txting* as a valid pedagogical strategy to teach/learn, especially contents related to languages.

Observing the appearance of many influences of *txting* in written work by young students, the constant remarks of teachers about this, as well as the reference in press articles about the negative influence of cell phone/chats/MSN usage by young people has led us to question the need for understanding if pupils are able to distinguish communication situations, using the adequate code/language level. In Section 2, this paper therefore presents a case study being undertaken in Portugal and in Ireland, at two High Schools, involving pupils and language teachers of Portuguese (and English), with the aim of understanding students' skills concerning communication situations, as well as developing a small book of exercises (using *txting*), to be used in the teaching/learning process of maternal languages. At the same time, we aim to understand if students with more difficulties in learning maternal languages are more susceptible to introduce *txting* in their written work. To accomplish this several different methodologies were used to collect data: close reading of textual productions written work (both of school papers and *txting*), enquiries (to students and teachers), focus groups' discussions (both with students and teachers, with different characteristics) and bibliographical research. The study also aims to develop media literacy skills in all participants, especially those connected with analysing/criticising/being creative. This topic will be discussed in detail in Section 3.

2   Case study

2.1   Using students' experience

Engaging in these principles, and with the collaboration of some Portuguese language teachers and students, a programme of exercises was developed and tested in Portugal, at a High School in Silves (a small city in Portugal's southern province – the Algarve). It is still currently being improved to also be used in the Irish School of St. Tiernan's Community (Dublin/Ireland), since the investigation is being conducted in two different stages: the first one takes place at the aforementioned school, involving Portuguese language teachers and 10th, 11th and 12th grade students (aged between 16 and 21 years) in the compilation of an exercise book using *txting* (supervised by Reia-Baptista (2005–2006), from the University of the Algarve); and a second stage [supervised by Aguaded Gomez (*see* Aguaded Gomez and Moreira, 2009)] will concern another group of that same school and with the same characteristics in terms of age, grade and classifications, as well as a group from St Tiernan's Community School in Dublin/Ireland (mentioned above), which will also test some of the prepared exercises in the teaching/learning of their maternal language process. This investigation had a clear goal: to use students' experience as *txting* users and refer to examples of this code, as has been mentioned, in order to teach the students some of the basic grammar concepts. The application of such a programme improved the relationship between teachers and students, since they had to share unconventional knowledge, somehow seen as 'less

serious' (many of the teachers had never tried using *txting* before and by joining in this experience, they became closer to the students; the transmission of 'more serious' subjects became much simpler afterwards). But it also improved the critical judgment and analysis of student abilities, enabling the construction of individual tools/strategies for coping with different situations, whether related or not to the use of *txting*. As Paulo Freire said [Freire, (1987), p.83; Freire, (1995), p.83], it enabled the application of a *'Dialogical Education'*:

> "I defend a critical-dialogical pedagogy (…) the critical awareness of significant knowledge through a dialogical relationship (…) where one proposes the building of a collective wisdom articulating both popular knowledge, critical knowledge and scientific knowledge, mediated through the experiences of the world".

And the Brazilian pedagogue concludes:

> "Only dialogue, which implies a critical thought, is capable of generating that same critical thought. Without it there is no communication and without communication, there is no true education".

At the same time, the students involved in this study showed us that being able to use *txting* and new media in general is all part of being an active, participating and accepted member in their pear group. New media and *txting* grant symbolic and functional characteristics to communication that allow their users to become integral members of their social networks. This can be easily demonstrated by the attention shown in choosing a certain model of phone, with design features and functions reflecting the latest fashion and technological trends (and this is not only true of youngsters, but also other age groups; consider the example of Blackberry cell phones: executives and people in top positions use them to distinguish themselves socially and as objects that confirm their success). As a large diffusion code [Fiske, (2002), pp.90–116], *txting* generates an immediate attraction and appeals to familiar grounds between users, establishing links and bonds between them. This analysis of *txting* usage by young people has allowed us to better understand the characteristics of this specific *'form of communication'*. Because it combines characteristics common to other writing codes (such as maternal languages) and characteristics of iconic and signifying codes, *txting* cannot be considered a completely original code. However, it follows some basic rules and understanding, as stated by Noam Chomsky (see Szabó, 2004), requiring their users to develop certain skills to achieve an acceptable performance. Therefore, it can be seen as a hybrid code, because it mixes characteristics from maternal languages with others from computer mediated communication (CMC), and there is a clear possibility of classifying it as a new textual genre, with specific lexical or other linguistic features (Marcuschi, 2002; Marcuschi and Xavier, 2005; Santos, 2003). According to Lévy (1997, 2002) *txting* already integrates visual/iconic elements (e.g., graphic symbols or combination of symbols) such as emoticons and smileys. Therefore, its employment implies the social and emotional effects of language, resulting from the desire to share tools, creativity and originality, leading to the creation of a group identity. As stated by Segerstad (2002, p.210), *"[…] the specialized use of short forms is thus an indicator of belonging to a community […] and is a component of the group identity"*. Cultural and social references are part of contents implicit in *txting* messages, as well as generational markers, creating a gap between teenagers and other age groups and giving them a sense of being the only

ones to entirely master the communicational process. More than a 'fashion item', *txting* will have a tendency to establish itself as a characteristically CMC form of expression, with such particular and equally signifying singularities as film or television language, initially the object of so many doubts, suspicions and fears and, these days, an integral part of everyone's life. Even handwriting (seen as a new technology) once had the 'disapproving eye' of many, as Eco (1996, 2004) often mentions in his papers and conferences. Writing, as a means of transmitting ideas using a code and a physical support (paper), assumed the role of a social distinguisher, since it was reserved to the few for some for many centuries (priests, the nobility people, scholars) and is still the 'barometer' of social and economic development in our societies. Therefore, many accuse *txting*, in recurrent press articles, for example, of being the cause of dramatic language changes, the cause of poor learning and poor use of maternal languages, especially when considering the fact that young people are the main users. Some radicalise and say *txting* is destroying languages as we know them. Nevertheless, we, as well as many others (Segerstad 2002; Benedito 2003a, 2003b; Thurlow, 2003; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2006), believe they will not be structurally affected by the use of these new forms of communication, even though we can find marks and signs of them in written work of young people, such as abbreviations, shorter sentences, acronyms, amongst others. This is natural in living languages, which progress and are modified constantly, as do living organisms (Lavoisier and Darwin clearly demonstrated this principle), without being destroyed in the process. This possibility is even more evident in languages, which are products of conventions, accepted and transformed at the same pace as societies and mentalities change themselves.

Curiously, the above mentioned case study carried out in Portugal (and Ireland) shows that students understand this plastic faculty of languages and relate it to examples in Portuguese. For example, in the 19th century the word now spelt 'farmácia' (drugstore) was 'pharmácia'. This study also shows that students (at High School level, between the ages of 16 and 21) with difficulties in learning maternal languages had a more significant tendency to integrate these *txting* marks in their writing, especially in contexts/situations that reveal inappropriate timing, and in cases of formal communication (exams, reports, etc.). They also reveal fewer skills in its use, so to speak, a poor mastery of the aesthetic and grammatical features of Portuguese language, as well as a significant lack of creativity, also apparent in the use of *txting* productions. RAT (the MSN nickname of a 17-year-old seventh grade student) had such significant difficulties in expressing himself in the Portuguese language, that when he used *txting* he could not decode the basic sentences or its signs. This poor use of both codes can bring about confusion and the unlearning of languages. Having been able to establish this, why not also consider taking advantage of this reality to do exactly the opposite: improve the knowledge of one's maternal language and motivate problematic students to learn it? Why not learn with/from something so used by young people and yet so disapproved of by educators in general?

2.2   *Compiling a small exercise book*

As a result of this case study undertaken in Portugal, a small book of exercises is being compiled, taking into consideration national guidelines defined by the Portuguese

Ministry of Education and the goals/timings of the participating teachers. The same thing will be done with the Irish group. Many other experiments in the field of developing strategies to create media literacy programs were also analysed (CLEMI, France and Instituto de Inovação Educacional, Portugal, for example). Each exercise proposal therefore contains: goals to be achieved, the public for whom they were prepared, the material required to make them, suggestions as to the work methodology (group/individual work, for example), key words and concepts, subjects to look into, articles/websites to consult (with references), the activities themselves and some notes. The graphic designs of the book were also taken into consideration, since it had to be appealing and easy to use.

Figure 1 Example of exercise shit (see online version for colours)
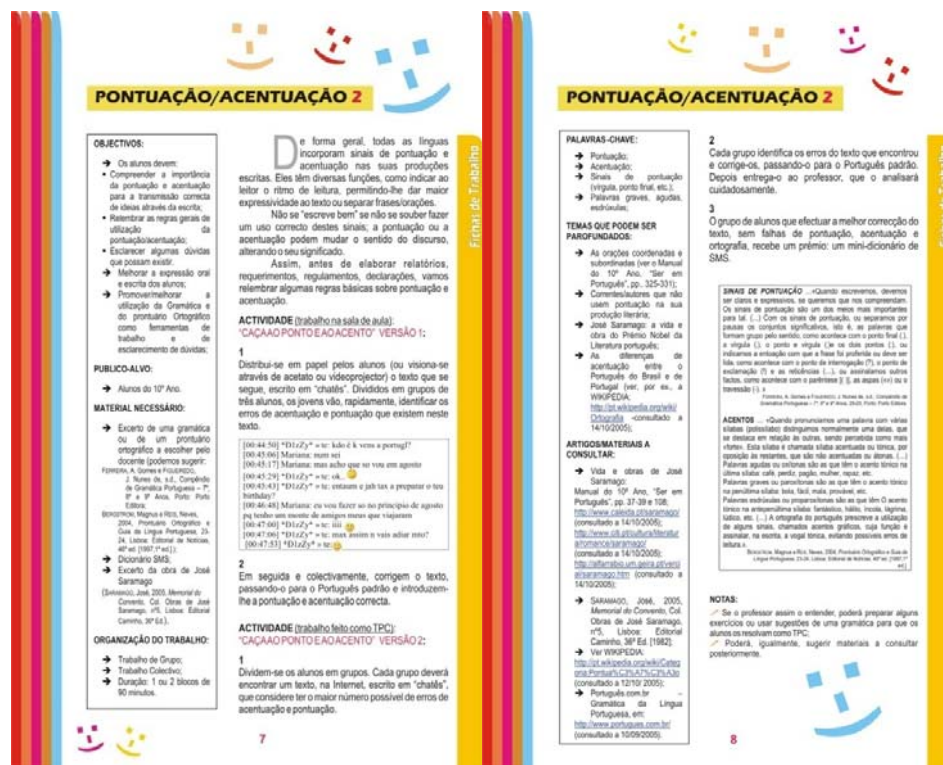
The teachers were continuously consulted in the process of compiling and testing the book and they carried out tests with their 10th, 11th and 12th grade classes (as mentioned above, students between the ages of 16 and 21). Subsequently, several focus groups of both men and women with different characteristics are still being established: a group of teachers to analyse the exercises and reactions of students; one of the students with higher grades in Portuguese classes; another of students with poor grades in Portuguese classes. This choice of samples is justified by the need to understand if poor Portuguese language students would reveal more signs of *txting* in their textual productions written work or not

and if they would have the same understanding of this code, as good Portuguese language students. The definition of good or bad students was made only by taking into consideration the grades obtained in the Portuguese subject. Other methods of obtaining information were bibliographical research, gathering/analysis of texts (close reading), application of enquiries by e-mail to teachers and students who are IM/SMS users (a total of 15 in the first phase of this study: six teachers and nine students, both male and female).

Table 1   Main opinions of the student focus groups

| | *Focus groups* | | | |
	Group 1	*Group 2*	*Group 3*	*Group 4*
Focus group characteristics	7 elements	4 elements	2 elements	4 elements
	12th grade	11th and 12th grades	11th grade	12th grade
	Average classification in Portuguese: 11.8	Average classification in Portuguese: 9.75	Average classification in Portuguese: 18	Average classification in Portuguese: 16.5
Who uses *txting*: students with good or bad Portuguese?	Students with bad Portuguese	Students with good Portuguese	Students with bad Portuguese	Students with bad Portuguese tend to use it more, but good students use it too.
How is *txting* learned?	With friends, through experience.	With friends, through experience.	With friends, through experience.	With friends, through experience.
Why do young people use *texting*?	Because it's fast, simple and fun. Because it's easier to communicate with peers and allows group integration.	Because it's fast, simple and fun.	Because it's fast, simple and fun. Because it's easier to communicate with peers and allows group integration.	Because it's fast, simple and fun. Because it's easier to communicate with peers and allows group integration.
Is *texting* damaging the use of Portuguese?	No.	Yes.	No.	No.
Should *txting* be used in the classroom as a way of teaching/learning?	Yes.	No.	Yes.	Yes, but with certain precautions.

Table 2   Main opinions of the teacher focus groups

	Focus groups	
	Group 1	*Group 2*
Focus group characteristics	3 elements	1 element
	Between 35 and 41 years old	46 years old
Who uses *txting*: students with good or bad Portuguese?	Students with bad Portuguese use it more often	Students with bad Portuguese use it more often
How is *txting* learned?	With friends, through experience.	With friends, through experience.
Why do young people use *texting*?	Because it's fast, simple and fun. Because it's easier to communicate with peers and allows group integration;	Because it's fast, simple and fun. Because it's easier to communicate with peers and allows group integration;
	Because they don't want adults to understand what they are saying.	Because they don't want adults to understand what they are saying.
Is texting damaging the use of Portuguese?	No.	No
Should *txting* be used in the classroom as a way of teaching/learning?	Yes, but always as part of a work of contextualisation, and with the close participation of teachers in the process.	Yes, but always as part of a work of contextualisation, and with the close participation of teachers in the process.

Table 3   Characteristics of *txting* users mentioned in the students' questionnaires

Age	*Sex*	*Geographical location in the country*	*Socio-economic situation*	*Academic level*	*Knowledge /mastery of the technology*
12–26	M/F *(Some girls have a bigger tendency to use it)*	Countrywide, coastal and large urban centres.	Situation that allows payment for an internet connection and the acquisition of a PC.	Any level.	No special knowledge requested.

This experiment has proved one of great cooperation, and also success, since all those involved have revealed sincere appreciation and given interesting suggestions and contributions in order to perfect the prototype exercise book and to continue with the investigation, preparing the aforementioned second stage in which a different country, a particular language and another school are being involved. More than anything else it has created an arena for debate on media literacy questions, regarding CMC, and Chats, SMS and MSN in particular.

3   Media literacy: a goal to achieve

Many people use cell phones to communicate, as well as IM. Several studies in different countries reveal this situation: communication industry regulators (OFCOM's in Great Britain, for example, or ANACOM, in Portugal, (OFCOM, 2006; ANACOM, 2008), non-profit organisations and marketing study enterprises (Kaiser Family Foundation and Pew Internet & American Life Project in the USA), as well as research projects led by universities or other institutions, such as the European Union (e.g., MEDIAPPRO, 2006; Pérez-Tornero, 2007) and UNESCO (1982, 1999, 2002) or Gothenburg University and its International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media (Nordicom), to cite a few, are constantly monitoring how are these media being appropriate, especially by young people. In spite of this, some areas remain unexplored, such as the pedagogical use of *txting*. Media Literacy is a well debated concept in the scientific community connected with the study of media education as well as in international organisations (UNESCO, European Council and European Union), and is still a concept being shaped by many contributions made by scholars and researchers, because of its many implications and nuances. According to some experts of the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona [see Pérez-Tornero, (2007), pp.5–6], to become a media literate citizen one has to master a different set of skills related to different areas of knowledge: semiotic skills (to code and decode messages), technical-instrumental competences skills (to use the technological tools used in the message construction process), interpretative and cultural skills (to relate the different communication products and their contexts). The three C's model for media literacy, with the C's referring to cultural, critical, and creative use of media, proposed by the main European researchers in this field is explored in this investigation, promoting language teaching/learning through a constructivist process. Using the students' *txting* experience enhanced their awareness towards new media; it made them realise that language is a code and that codes have rules. You can break the rules, but this can lead to misunderstandings or, if done well, can lead to a creative process and to language evolution. According to the young participants in the first phase of this study, their understanding made them become more aware of these issues and, above all, more 'capable' of dealing with both maternal language issues and *txting* use. They became more critical about their own use of languages and more resourceful in using aesthetic and grammar tools. Their perspective about the IM/SMS technology was challenged and changed, since they understand now, in a conscientious way, the reasons for using it (economy of time and money, synchronous communication, speed, among others). They became aware of the cultural differences resulting from generation gaps, as well as from geographical placement, such as the introduction of regional language expressions (in Portuguese, 'regionalismos') or even resulting from temporal changes in language conventions [*vide* Pérez-Tornero, (2007), p.9 example]. They even realised that the correct use of maternal languages promotes a more creative use of *txting*. So, a critical, cultural creative view of this subject is being achieved. At the same time, teachers understand not only the construction process of *txting* messages and its 'rules', but also they are putting in action something far more important: the difference between media education and education through media by being directly involved in this process, both as teachers and also as 'learners', since the majority of them did not use/comprehend the technological possibilities of IM/SMS. The first step in learning is using and teachers are using these tools nowadays (one of the teachers from the Portuguese group told us only a few weeks ago that she is using MSN to communicate with her classes, from her house;

she answers questions, corrects homework or just chats). When we use the media, we can analyse contents (think about the quality of what is being produced) and build it; we can focus on our own experiences and reflect on our own uses, becoming media literate, since action is the key element in social/intellectual change. One idea is central, nevertheless, in our opinion, to understanding this: media literacy can only be a reality if educational programs are drawn up and implemented, in order to enhance specific skills in people in general and the younger generations in particular, since the latter are much more aware and sensitive to all matters concerning the use of new media and therefore much more exposed to all the good and bad consequences that might arise from it. Educationally responsible people are, naturally, an important part in this process due to their involvement in developing strategies and motivational courses of action leading to better understanding of information societies.

4   Conclusions

At the moment, and regarding the case study mentioned above, there is a clear perception that the introduction of *txting* in language classes prepares both teachers and students to face the necessity of constant awareness of these matters. In addition, in terms of the teaching/learning process we can surely confirm that this experience enhances the students' comprehension of language structures, thus improving their use of lexicon, semantics and grammar. On the other hand, this improvement leads them to reveal a much more assertive identification/correction of their own mistakes (and the mistakes of others), improving quality of expression and demonstrating an improved level of use in their maternal language. We can also see that the poor Portuguese language students use *txting* more frequently in their formal written work (tests, reports); at the same time, they reveal less use of aesthetic functions and less creativity when using *txting*, in comparison to good Portuguese language students. Since *txting* is a hybrid code, based on maternal languages, this fact seems to be connected with the way students deal with and learn language skills, which is being further analysed. At the same time, all pupils recognise and distinguish the communication situations in which it is appropriate to use *txting*.

As far as literacy is concerned, there are two major benefits:

1   better comprehension of messages, because students can better understand the meaning of some words

2   tools provision for more advanced use of the new technologies among students and teachers, which will increase the "*abilities of identifying, accessing and analyzing, as well as to interpret, evaluate and communicate/select competently*" the media [OFCOM, (2006), p.1].

Therefore, we can expect them to become media literate; that is to say, people

> "able to exercise informed choices; understand the nature of content and services; be able to take advantage of the full range of opportunities offered by new communications technologies; and be better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive materials."

Hopefully, they will be engaged and competent citizens in a society already requiring them to be media literate

> "as a result of the media convergence – that is the merging of electronic media (mass communication) and digital media (multimedia communication) which occurs in the advanced stages of development of information society. This media literacy includes the command of previous forms of literacy: reading and writing (from understanding to creative skills), audiovisual, digital and the new skills required in a climate of media convergence." [Pérez-Tornero, (2007), p.8]

These students are becoming more critical, more creative and they are gaining a better knowledge of their language tools; this conscientious analysis allows them to master, also, all the concepts involved in this process, improving their cultural background and their desire for a more personal involvement in the teaching/learning process. On the other hand, teachers are much more aware of and relate to the concept of media literacy, something that did not occur before. The use of technology is empowering them and allowing the establishment of stronger relationships and it is building an awareness that they are all receivers, actors and authors. More than just mastering functional skills, they understand the concept of 'transgression' (going beyond basic rules) and by doing so, they improve the communication process. Now and in the future, students and teachers will also all be able to carry on the message of media education proposed by UNESCO (1982, 1999, 2002), the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1   This is a free translation of the original Portuguese text, by Paulo Freire, that reads: *"Defendo uma pedagogia crítico-dialógica (…) apreensão crítica do conhecimento significativo através da relação dialógica (…) onde se propõe a construção do conhecimento colectivo articulando o saber popular e o saber crítico, científico, mediado pelas experiências do mundo»; «Somente o diálogo, que implica um pensar crítico, é capaz, também, de gerá-lo. Sem ele não há comunicação e sem esta não há verdadeira educação".*