



TEXTISMS IN EFL WHATSAPP COMMUNICATION: A MULTIMODAL STUDY OF LEARNER VOICE, REGISTER AWARENESS, AND CONSTRUCTIVIST PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of textism use among Indonesian EFL learners engaged in real-time WhatsApp communication, focusing on how their linguistic behavior aligns with the principles of constructivist learning and learner accommodation. Drawing on triangulated data from chat transcripts, student-generated textism lists, and reflective surveys, the research reveals that learners are metalinguistically aware and rhetorically strategic in navigating informal and formal registers. Rather than viewing textisms as a form of linguistic degradation, this study reframes them as valuable pedagogical resources that foster creativity, voice, and contextual adaptability. Three learner profiles—pragmatic, creative, and cautious—emerged, reflecting diverse strategies in balancing expressivity with academic formality. Based on these insights, the study recommends integrating digital literacy activities, promoting multimodal writing tasks, differentiating writing instruction, fostering classroom metalinguistic dialogue, and encouraging translingual practices. These recommendations position informal digital language use as a scaffold for developing critical and flexible communicators in both academic and real-world contexts. The findings offer practical implications for EFL writing pedagogy and suggest directions for future research on digital literacy in multilingual classrooms.

Keywords: *EFL writing, constructivist pedagogy, textisms, digital communication, learner agency, metalinguistic awareness, multimodal discourse, register awareness, translingual practice, WhatsApp*

INTRODUCTION

The linguistic phenomenon of textism, marked by the incorporation of non-traditional digital markers in written discourse, has become a salient feature of contemporary computer-mediated communication. This adaptive linguistic practice demonstrates how language evolves to accommodate the dynamic and informal nature of digital exchanges, frequently employing lexical shortenings, pictographic symbols, and other deviations from standard orthographic conventions. The rise of textism can be analytically situated within theoretical perspectives such as communication accommodation theory, which elucidates how interlocutors modify their linguistic patterns to achieve interpersonal alignment (Adams & Miles, 2023).

Grace & Kemp (2015) define textism as non-conventional spellings used in text messaging, such as abbreviations and expressive characters. Its emergence in digital communication has evolved alongside technological advancements, influencing how

users adapt their written language over time, particularly among university students. Further, Odey et al. (2014: 92) have listed the linguistic features of the SMS language found in their study which include “truncation, vowel deletion, alphanumeric, homophony, graphemes (letter homophony), initialization, lack of inter-word space, logographic emoticons, onomatopoeic expressions and punctuations.”

This type of language phenomenon has at least three features. Lexical compression: This includes truncated forms and acronyms that optimize communicative efficiency (Dolzich & Dmitrichenkova, 2019). Secondly, it features paralinguistic signifiers as textism uses pictograms like emoticons designed to supplement the meaning of the more richly and diversely, to clarify their expressive-intonational coloring (Otajonova, 2025) and other non-verbal markers function as affective and prosodic supplements, enhancing semantic depth beyond conventional text. Thirdly, it can reflect contextual variability in that textism manifests across multiple digital domains (Shortis, 2016), from social networking platforms to educational environments, shaping both casual and structured modes of interaction (Shahwani et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia, rather than as a second language. English is not widely spoken in daily life, and instruction happens primarily in educational settings (Cahyono & Widiati, 2009). Lessons often compare Indonesian and English culture, using both as reference points, helping students relate the foreign language to their local context (Giyatmi, 2022). However, to arm students with intercultural competence, teachers and students face constraints such as large class sizes, lack of exposure to native speakers, and pressure to follow standardized curricula (Asanti & Sudirman, 2020).

Based on previous studies, Al-Salman & Saeed (2017) found that Arab EFL students did not extensively use texting language in their academic writing, suggesting that the influence of texting features (textisms) is minimal and does not pose a threat to formal English writing performance. In contrast, Manzolim & Cruz (2024), studying Filipino EFL learners, observed that “shortenings and abbreviations” were the most frequently used texting forms. Their findings linked this usage with a “Developing” level of writing competence, implying that frequent use of textese may negatively affect students’ formal writing performance.

Building on prior studies that either downplay or criticize the impact of textism, this research takes a more nuanced, constructivist approach by exploring how EFL learners engage with textism in real-time WhatsApp communication. Rather than asking whether textisms are inherently harmful or harmless, this study investigates *what types of textism are most commonly used, how learners perceive and strategically employ them in group chats, and what grammatical or pragmatic patterns emerge from their usage*. Additionally, it examines *how learners’ demographic profiles—such as linguistic background, education level, and digital exposure—relate to their use of textisms*. These questions aim to uncover not just the presence of texting language, but its *metalinguistic significance* and *pedagogical potential* in fostering flexible, context-aware communicators in multilingual learning environments.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a multimodal qualitative approach (Sommer, 2021) with embedded quantitative analysis, aiming to investigate the role of textisms in real-time digital communication among EFL learners. Various data were collected to supplement the



meaning of the statement in a richer and more diverse way, to clarify its expressive-intonational coloring (Sommer, 2021). Besides, it integrated discourse analysis, typology classification, and clustering methods to examine learners’ linguistic behavior, register awareness, and metalinguistic strategies in WhatsApp-based group interactions. Constructivist pedagogy served as the theoretical lens to interpret how learners negotiated meaning, identity, and formality in informal academic settings.

Research Participants

Participants were 76 undergraduate students enrolled in three Bachelor English Language Education (B-ELE) classes at Yogyakarta State University. They were assigned into five to six WhatsApp groups per class, resulting in six working groups for data collection. The participants were predominantly female (78%) with an average age of approximately 18.1 years. Most students identified Indonesian (74%) or Javanese (24%) as their first language, with a small number reporting other language backgrounds. In terms of living area, 53% resided in villages and 46% in urban areas.

Data Collection

The study collected data from four primary sources.

Table 1. Types of collected data

Source	Description
WhatsApp Chats	Naturalistic group conversations during task-based activities in six WhatsApp groups.
Textism Lists	Self-reported student-generated lexicons of informal expressions and abbreviations.
Survey	Structured questionnaire assessing participants’ frequency of textism use, contextual adaptation, and attitudes.
Clustering Data	Log-based frequency and type analysis of individual textism usage, prepared for KMeans clustering.

Data Analysis

This combination of qualitative coding and quantitative modeling provided a comprehensive view of how Indonesian EFL learners employ textism not only as linguistic shortcuts, but as adaptive tools shaped by context, purpose, and identity. The multimethod approach adopted for data analysis includes the following.

- a. Textism Typology: Instances of textisms were classified based on established frameworks including categories such as initialisms (e.g., *idk*, *brb*), reductions (e.g., *pls*, *u*), emoticons, slang, creative spellings, and code-mixing with local languages (*wkwk*, *anjrit*).
- b. Sociolinguistic-Pragmatic Coding: Chat transcripts were analyzed to identify pragmatic functions (e.g., tone, politeness, informality, in-group signaling) and sociolinguistic markers (e.g., identity performance, power negotiation).
- c. Clustering and Visualization: Using KMeans clustering, learners were grouped based on their textism usage profiles, resulting in three emergent user types: *pragmatic*, *creative*, and *cautious*. Visual tools such as PCA plots and word clouds were used to illustrate distribution and lexical density.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This finding has successfully revealed the *types of textism most used, how learners perceive and strategically employ them in group chats, and what grammatical or pragmatic patterns emerge from their usage*. Overall, it is found that students code-switch and code-mix freely in informal academic settings. Secondly, the study would suggest that textism is not a barrier but a social tool for bonding, managing group conflict, and expressing identity. Thirdly, based on the data, many students consciously adjust register depending on context (e.g., when addressing the teacher vs. peers).

Common Types of Textism

Analysis of both chat data and student-generated lexicons revealed a diverse range of textisms used in EFL WhatsApp group communication. Figure 1 depicts an excerpt of WhatsApp chat among four B-ELE students.

This chat excerpt in Figure 1 offers a compelling example of how EFL learners collaboratively negotiate the meaning of an unfamiliar acronym—"TOM"—within an authentic digital interaction. The conversation begins with a simple question from Amanda ("What is TOM meaning btw 😊"), prompting a cascade of responses from group members who propose different interpretations: "*Theory of Mind*," "*Time of the Month*," "*Tomorrow*," and even a functional suggestion that it means "*I think*."

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08:53 - Sabrina Pbi G: yes
08:53 - Hafifah Zahra Pbi G: its true or not guys??
08:53 - Hafifah Zahra Pbi G: tell me if im wrong :D
08:54 - Fira Pbi G: true
08:54 - Amanda PBI UNY: What is TOM meaning btw 😊
08:54 - Hafifah Zahra Pbi G: i dont know 🙄👉
08:54 - Fira Pbi G: tom theory of mind ?
08:54 - Fira Pbi G: or what ?
08:55 - Amanda PBI UNY: Yess is right
08:56 - Fira Pbi G: ooh
08:56 - Fira Pbi G: time of the month ?
08:56 - Amanda PBI UNY: The meaning like "i think" (?)
right?
08:56 - Fira Pbi G: Time Of the Month (TOM)
08:56 - Hafifah Zahra Pbi G: OH GUYS
08:57 - Hafifah Zahra Pbi G: IMG-20210906-WA0006.jpg (file attached)
how about this?
08:57 - Hafifah Zahra Pbi G: TOM is Tomorrow?
08:57 - Amanda PBI UNY: Ohhh i think is the meaning
08:57 - Fira Pbi G: i think
08:58 - Amanda PBI UNY: That relate in the chat
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Figure 1. WhatsApp Group Chat Excerpt

The sequence reflects real-time peer scaffolding as learners rely on one another to derive meaning, showcasing a constructivist process of meaning-making rather than dependence on external sources. Hafifah's and Fira's questions ("TOM is Tomorrow?", "I think...") reveal metacognitive monitoring as learners actively test hypotheses against the evolving context of the conversation. Amanda's concluding comment, "That relate in the chat," suggests that learners ultimately resolve the meaning through contextual inference—an essential skill in pragmatic communication.

Contextual and Pragmatic Use

Textism usage was shaped by context and audience across the six WhatsApp groups. The group-by-group analysis showed that Group 1 and 2 used humorous and expressive forms (*wkwk*, *anjir*, 😊) during casual brainstorming sessions. Group 3 showed more task-oriented usage, using textisms like *pls* and *asap* to manage workflow and delegate



responsibilities. Group 4 students used polite shorthand (*thx, cmiw*) when negotiating ideas or clarifying points. Group 5 and 6 integrated multilingual textisms, blending Indonesian or Javanese slang with English, especially during moments of disagreement or bonding.

Concerning typologies of textese, Thurlow and Brown (2003) suggest some categories, and in those categories, the most frequently observed data exported across all WhatsApp groups chat files included the following.

- a. Initialisms: e.g., *idk, cmiw, brb, asap, tbh, lol, omg, thx, aka*
- b. Letter/Word Reductions: *u* for *you*, *pls* for *please*, *bc* for *because*
- c. Acronyms & Emoticons: *lol, tmi, hbu, xoxo*, , 🤔, 😏
- d. Creative spellings: *wazzup, aight, okeh, no prob, dunno, oghey, urwell*
- e. Slang & Local Mix: *jamet, wkwk, anjrot, btw, frends, gaiss*

In view of the pragmatic use, Figure 1 shows the use of emojis (🤔, 🙌) and humorous tone that enhances the relational aspect of the interaction, softening uncertainty and fostering a supportive atmosphere for language exploration. The emoji and informal tone also signal reduced power distance and a safe learning environment, supporting studies on digital discourse communities (Tagg, 2023). The variation in interpretations also reflects learners' intertextual awareness: they draw on different domains of knowledge (academic terms, daily speech, slang), demonstrating their multicompetence in navigating multilingual and multimodal discourse.

This excerpt in Figure 1 reinforces the finding that textisms and informal language forms are not barriers to learning but are actively negotiated and repurposed for communicative clarity and social bonding. The dynamic, trial-and-error nature of the interaction illustrates learner agency, register awareness, and emergent digital literacy—key indicators of strategic and adaptive language use in EFL settings.

Learner Awareness and Negotiation

Contrary to views of textisms as automatic or careless, students frequently demonstrated metalinguistic awareness. Several chat excerpts showed them questioning or modifying their own language.

“idk if I should say this in English or Indo 🤔”

“sorry typo, maksudku gini...”

“OMG too informal ya? wait I fix it”

These examples reveal active register negotiation and audience awareness. Learners displayed strategic use of textisms to shift between formal and informal registers, especially when addressing teachers versus peers. Humor, self-correction, and playful language experimentation also reflect learner agency and creativity in digital interaction. From the survey it is evident that students can use textisms to navigate between informal and formal registers.

The table presents the frequency of 15 types of textisms used by EFL students when communicating with different interlocutors: both classmates and lecturers, classmates only, and lecturers only. The data clearly show that EFL students adjusted their digital language depending on the recipient. Informal and playful textisms were reserved for peer communication, while interactions with lecturers were significantly more formal, indicating a strong awareness of audience and register in digital discourse.

Overall, initialisms (e.g., otw for "on the way") and homophones (e.g., CU for "see you") were the most widely used forms of textisms, with 75 and 76 instances respectively, nearly all of which occurred in conversations with classmates. These forms were rarely or never used when addressing lecturers, indicating a clear awareness of register and formality.

Table 2. Students' awareness of register and formality upon using textism

No.	Item	Classmates, Lecturers	Classmates	Lecturers
1.	Emoticons or smiley faces	44	26	6
2.	Stickers	2	73	1
3.	Initialisms (e.g., otw = on the way)		75.0	1.0
4.	Homophones (e.g., CU = see you, 2nite = tonight)		76.0	
5.	Contractions (e.g., hpy = happy)	2	73	1
6.	G-clippings (e.g., bein = being)	7	65	4
7.	Omitted apostrophes (e.g., dont = don't)	15	53	8
8.	Extra letters (e.g., Siiiiir = Sir)	1	71	4
9.	Extra words (e.g., yes yes yes = yes)	5	66	5
10.	Extra punctuation (e.g., ??!!! = ?)	2	73	1
11.	Accent stylisations (e.g., yar = yes)	1	72	3
12.	Nonstandard spelling (e.g., (guyz = guys)	1	74	1
13.	Omitted capitals (e.g., bob = Bob)	11	57	8
14.	Extra capitals (e.g., HELLO = hello)	4	69	3
15.	Conventional symbols (e.g., xoxo = hugs and kisses)	-	75.0	1.0

Table 3. Textism variations as listed by the students

No.	Standard Spelling	Textism Version						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	because	bcoz	cuz	cos	bcause	cz	bcz	bcs
2	kisses and hugs	xoxo						
3	smile	:-)	:)	XD				
4	sad	:-(:(
5	tonight	2nite	2N8					
6	by the way	btw						
7	be right back	brb						
8	to be honest	tbh						
9	thank you	thx	tx	ty	tq	tyty	tqtq	
10	see you soon	sys						
11	do it yourself	diy						

Emoticons or smiley faces were also commonly used, appearing 44 times with both lecturers and classmates, but much more frequently with peers (26 times) than lecturers (6 times). A similar pattern can be observed in omitted apostrophes (e.g., dont), which occurred 53 times with classmates only and just 8 times with lecturers. In contrast, several informal forms such as contractions (hpy = happy), extra punctuation (e.g., ??!!!), accent stylisations (e.g., yar), and nonstandard spellings (e.g., guyz) were used almost exclusively in peer interactions, with 73–74 instances occurring with classmates and only 1–3 with lecturers. Likewise, conventional symbols such as xoxo were never used with lecturers and only appeared 75 times with classmates. Less frequent forms included extra letters (e.g., Siiiiir), G-clippings (e.g., bein), omitted capitals, and extra capitals, each of which also followed the general trend of being avoided in messages to lecturers.



Besides, across the self-reported lists of textism lexicon, students are aware of textism variations. Some of them are listed in Table 3. Based on Table 3, learners demonstrate that they are aware that one standard phrase can have various short versions like “because” and “thank you”. This is important in that such awareness implies on the way they respond to informal conversations in the digital sphere.

Clusters of Users

Based on the analysis using KMeans clustering, learners were grouped into three distinct profiles based on their frequency and variety of textism use.

Table 4. Three Identified Groups of Textism Users

Group	Dominant Textism Use	Characteristics
1	High & expressive	Creative, expressive, exploratory
2	Moderate	Casual but cooperative
3	Controlled & reflective	Cautious, learning-oriented

Firstly, creative users are those who employ textism in high frequency and diversity; most playful, emotive, and expressive. Moderate users can be identified based on balanced use of informal forms, context-sensitive, flexible in register. Lastly, cautious users are identical with low use of textism, more formal tone, more adherence to standard English norms.

Moreover, cluster membership correlated with gender and background. Female students and those from urban areas were more likely to be in Group 1, while rural or male students tended toward Group 2. Language background also influenced code-mixing patterns; Javanese-speaking students integrated more local expressions into their English chat. This shows that texters have adapted the orthographic features of traditional written language (i.e., punctuation and spelling conventions) and drawn on the unique affordances of the medium (i.e., emojis and digital stickers) to communicate pragmatic functions such as politeness, illocutionary force, and identity (McSweeney, 2018).

This study contrasts with SMS-focused research such as Al-Salman & Saeed (2017), which found minimal textism impact on Arab EFL writing. While their context suggested low usage, our WhatsApp-based environment revealed rich, purposeful use of textisms, especially for interpersonal and collaborative functions. In contrast to Manzolim & Cruz (2024) who linked textese to lower writing competence, this study found that Indonesian EFL students displayed conscious adaptation and rhetorical skill in managing register through multimodal interaction. The key difference lies in the platform: WhatsApp allows for multimodal, real-time, and group-based interactions, which foster greater awareness, negotiation, and creativity. Unlike the linear, isolated nature of SMS, WhatsApp provides social scaffolds that encourage learners to experiment, reflect, and co-construct meaning in dynamic, digital discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Indonesian EFL learners use textisms in real-time WhatsApp communication, their awareness of register shifts, and how these practices reflect constructivist learning and learner accommodation. Through triangulated data from chat transcripts, learner-generated lexicons, and surveys, the findings illustrate that students are active, reflective users of digital language, strategically balancing informal expressivity with formal academic expectations. Importantly, the research repositions textism not as a linguistic threat but as a pedagogical resource. By recognizing textisms

as pragmatic, creative, and rhetorically responsive tools, educators can foster learners' metalinguistic awareness, voice, and contextual adaptability. The three learner profiles (pragmatic, creative, and cautious) highlight the need for flexible instruction that accommodates diverse linguistic identities and communicative strategies. Future research should investigate how writing pedagogy can systematically integrate textisms to support, rather than inhibit, academic literacy development—particularly in multilingual digital contexts where hybrid language practices are the norm.

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