TEACHING ENGLISH USING SMS
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Introduction

In contexts where connectivity is poor and smartphones are not the norm, teachers, learners and parents can be supported through SMS. Written text involves low levels of data so it is low cost, it does not require many technical skills, it can be sent to individuals or groups and it can be interactive or non-interactive. This document provides practical ideas and activities for enhancing English language teaching and learning through the use of standard SMS.

Providing instructions and information

SMS can be used by a school or government department to give instructions or information to teachers, and by a teacher to reach learners or parents. Types of information that can be sent this way might be reminders of key dates, homework, preparation, deadlines, updates on marking, assignments available for collection or larger tasks with clear deadlines and chunks. Here are some examples:

- **School to teachers**: *Complete pp 12-15 in workbook for Grade 6 by Friday | All absences must be sent to the principal by Thursday.*
- **Teacher to older learner**: *Write a 50-word paragraph on pollution. Use at least 6 of the new vocabulary items from Tuesday. Send one example to your teacher. | Make a list of 10 dos and don'ts for the kitchen. Use 'must' and 'mustn't'. Send them back to your teacher.*
- **Teacher to parent or younger learner**: *This week's Treasure hunt – every day, find 5 things in your home and text your teacher the words – Monday: find 5 yellow things / Tuesday: find 5 heavy things / Wednesday: find 5 cheap things / Thursday: find 5 sweet things / Friday: find 5 colourful things. | Text one word for each of the first 10 letters of the alphabet.*

Combining SMS with other low-resource media

- Decide on a TV or radio programme that will be broadcast soon. Ask your learners to watch / listen. SMS questions and new vocabulary to look out for. Even if the programme is in another language, you can still ask and answer questions in English.
- Ask learners to read an article in an English language newspaper and answer generic SMS questions on it – e.g. *who?/what?/where?/when?/why?* Text others their recommendations of things to read.
- Listen to the news in English on TV or radio and note down key events and details. Using this, students write sentences about the news story and SMS these to the teacher.

Language input

Agree days to send out different kinds of information. Students need to note the SMS text you send in their notebook. You could have a week focused on vocabulary (see example below), then the following week focus on grammar revisions, the next week pronunciation.

- **Monday** could be new vocabulary items: e.g. *rescue (v) – save somebody or something from danger e.g. She rescued the child when he fell in the river.*
- **Tuesday** could be collocations: e.g. *heavy rain (col) – a lot of rain e.g. Heavy rain has been forecast for Colombo.*
- **Wednesday** could be idioms: e.g. *make do with something (idiom) – use something that is not very good, because there is nothing better e.g. We didn't have a table, but we made do with a box.*
- **Thursday** could be UK vs US English: e.g. *lorry (n-UK) = truck (n-US) – a big vehicle for carrying heavy things e.g. He drove the lorry full of vegetables from Kandy to Colombo.*
- **Friday** could be learner training tips or a 'did you know' question: e.g. *Set goals for yourself such as learning ten words a week or giving a presentation in English next month. Goals will keep you motivated | Did you know the most common letter in English is 'e'?*
- **Weekend homework** could ask learners to write a short story (30 words) using as many of the new words/phrases as possible.

Things to consider

- **Permission and privacy**: For kids and teenagers you'll need to make sure parents or caregivers know that you plan to use SMS to contact them. Ask permission to use parents' phone numbers for younger learners.
- **Sending SMS to groups of students**: Sending out SMS to a group is possible with some mobile providers. Check with the one that you use how you can do this – it could save a lot of time.
- **Character limits:** Check what these are with the main mobile providers your learners might be using. Some services have a 160-character limit, for example.
- **Cost**: While it is inexpensive, it still costs money and your learners or their parents may not be prepared to spend the money.
- **Feedback**: Students will need to know how they are doing. If classes do a series of activities over a week, text the answers to the group at the end of the week. Feedback on individual writing can include emoticons for praise along with error correction.
- **Preparation**: Planning lists of content for language input can be quite time-consuming, however, this can be based on a coursebook syllabus. Planning is important to ensure you are clear about what you want your students to learn.

Useful links
- A guide to teaching and learning via mobiles: https://tinyurl.com/o6fafns
- An introduction to mobile learning: https://tinyurl.com/yaxxjk2a