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English Language B

Paper 1

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Text One

David Crystal is one of the most respected writers on language and communication. In this interview, he explains how persistent myths about the dangers of texting, particularly in his native Great Britain, compelled him to write a book about this form of communication.

David Crystal on the Myth of Texting

INTERVIEWER: What made you interested in the subject of texting?

DAVID CRYSTAL: Virtually everywhere I went, people would come up and talk to me about it. One of the frequent questions was what my opinion was about this new disaster that was affecting all our children. People were saying how kids were unable to spell and their literacy was going down. And it's all the fault of these mobile phones, these cell phones! So this was building up and building up, and eventually I thought I've just got to do something. So I sat down and started to research it.

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INTERVIEWER: Why do you think the reactions have been so intense about texting? There have been similar reactions to previous communication technologies, but it seems that the reaction against texting has been particularly extreme.

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DAVID CRYSTAL: I'm as amazed about this as anybody else. I can't quite understand why it's had such bad press, but I think I know why it reduced us all in the UK to panic. It all went back to a hoax message in 2003. An essay went up on the Web, supposedly written by a school kid in the UK, entirely in text messaging abbreviations. The teacher couldn't understand a word of it and complained. The story just became bigger and bigger, but the whole thing was undoubtedly a hoax.

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INTERVIEWER: Was the entire story a hoax, or did something actually happen that was exaggerated?

DAVID CRYSTAL: Some kid could have written something like that as a joke – as a game, really. The essay has never been found, nor has the teacher been found. Somebody posted this on the Web. Exactly who did it first, I haven't been able to find, but it spread within a matter of weeks. Five years on, people are still saying, "But children are doing this all the time!" And you say, "Can you give me an example?" And they say, "Well, there's this essay about school holidays on the Web..."

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In the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, everybody started to panic and say, "The kids are going to be using these in examinations all the time, so we better make sure they don't by putting in rules into our system to stop them doing it." And these are the things that get the headlines: "Exam board puts in rules saying no text messaging abbreviations."

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I do quite a bit of work in schools, giving talks to the kids. Every now and then, text messaging comes up and I ask them for their views. And the reaction is unbelievable, in contrast with the myth. The kids say, "What are you saying? Are you saying that we would put text language into our schoolwork?" I say, "Yeah, people say you do that." And they look at me as if I was mad, you know? They say, "Well, you have to be absolutely stupid to do that. We don't do that!"

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They tell me very clearly it would be idiotic to do that because you would get low grades. "We text 'cause it's cool outside school, and we don't want to mix it up with school." And the thought that they'd actually do it in the examinations is just inconceivable. I get this message over and over. In other words, you'd have to be pretty stupid to do this sort of thing. Now, there are stupid people out there, so occasionally the odd one does get through. But 99 percent of the kids I talked to were just horrified at the thought.

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Text Two

An extract from an article about teenagers' use of mobile phones and technology.

Teenagers and Technology



"I'd rather," says Philippa Grogan, 16, "give up, like, a kidney than my phone. How did you manage before? Carrier pigeons? Letters? Going round each other's houses on BIKES?" Cameron Kirk, 14, reckons he spends "an hour, hour-and-a-half on school days" hanging out with his 450-odd Facebook friends; maybe twice that at weekends. "It's actually very practical if you forget what that day's homework is."

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Emily Hooley, 16, recalls a Very Dark Moment: "We went to Wales for a week at half term to revise. There was no mobile, no TV, no broadband. We had to drive into town just to get a signal. It was really hard, knowing people were texting you, writing on your Wall, and you couldn't respond. Loads of my friends said they'd just never do that."

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For a decade, the Pew Internet and American Life Project has researched the internet's impact on the lives of 21st-century citizens. This is what the Project says about the way US teens communicate in an age of Facebook Chat, instant messaging and unlimited texts.

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First, 75% of all teenagers now have a mobile phone. Almost 90% of phone-owning teens send and receive texts, most of them daily. Half send 50 or more texts a day; one in three send 100. In fact, in barely four years, texting has established itself as, comfortably, "the preferred channel of basic communication between teens and their friends"

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But phones do more than simply text, of course. More than 80% of phone-owning teens also use them to take pictures. Sixty per cent listen to music on them, 46% play games, 32% swap videos and 73% access social networking sites, mostly Facebook – 50% more than three years ago. The mobile phone, in short, is now the favoured communication hub for the majority of teens.

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Digital communication is not just prevalent in teenagers' lives. It IS teenagers' lives.

There's a very straightforward reason, says Amanda Lenhart, a Pew senior research specialist. "Mobile phones and social networking sites make the things teens have always done a whole lot easier."

Flirting, boasting, gossiping, teasing, hanging out, confessing: all that classic teen stuff has always happened, Lenhart says. It's just that it used to happen behind the bike sheds, or via tightly folded notes pressed urgently into sweating hands in the corridor between lessons. Social networking sites and mobile phones have simply made it much easier.

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But what do teenagers make of this newfound freedom to communicate? Philippa reckons she sends "probably about 30" text messages every day, and receives as many. Like most of her peers, Philippa wouldn't dream of using her phone to actually phone anyone, except perhaps her parents. Calls are expensive, and you can't make them in class (you shouldn't text in class either, but "lots of people do"). Philippa also has 639 Facebook friends, and claims to know "the vast majority."

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Sometimes, though, it ends in tears. Everyone has witnessed cyber-bullying, but the worst thing that happened to Philippa was when someone posted "a really dreadful

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picture of me,” then refused to take it down. It’s quite easy, she thinks, for people to feel “belittled, isolated” on Facebook.

There are other downsides. “Privacy’s a real issue,” says Emily. “I get ‘friend’ requests from people I don’t know and have never heard of. I ignore them.” 45

What concerns most parents, though, is whether such a huge amount of non face-to-face communication is somehow changing our teenagers. Yet teens, on the whole, seem pretty sensible about this. Callum, 16, says there’s a big difference between chatting online and face to face. “Face to face is so much clearer,” he says. “Facebook and instant messaging are such detached forms of communication. It’s so easy to be misinterpreted, or to misinterpret what someone says.” 50

Emily is fairly confident that social networking and texting aren’t changing who she is. “I’m the same online and in person. All this is an extension to real life, not a replacement.” Olivia Stamp, 16, says she thinks social networking actually helps her to be more herself. “I think of myself as quite a shy person,” she says. “I definitely feel more confident online – more like the self I know I really am, beneath the shyness.” 55

Lenhart concludes, “Our research shows face-to-face time between teenagers hasn’t changed over the past five years. Technology has simply added another layer on top. Yes, you can find studies that suggest online networking can be bad for you. But there are just as many that show the opposite.” 60

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