

## The effect of texting on EFL students' academic writing in English

Sana' Ababneh<sup>1</sup>, Mohammed K. Al-Ajlouny<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Al-Balqa'a Applied University, Jordan*

<sup>2</sup>*Yarmouk University*

### Abstract

*This study tried to shed light on the effect of texting on EFL students' academic writing since a high percentage of today's students have access to the new means of communication like computers and mobile phones. The researchers pinpoint certain lexical and spelling mistakes in students' academic writing which could be attributed to the influence of texting. The study recommends that teachers should pay attention to this serious phenomenon and that they make the difference between formal and informal writing clear to their students by giving them clear, distinctive examples on each of the two types. Furthermore, they can provide them with lists of certain abbreviations and symbols that are not allowed in their formal writing. The study calls for research on the effect of texting on Arabic especially that many Arabs write their instant messages in Roman letters to express their Arabic words.*

**Key words:** *texting, instant messaging, on-line chatting, writing, EFL.*

### Introduction

The idea of this paper came as the first author was checking the compositions of her students. She noticed that there are certain words that are misspelt or written in abbreviated form or as acronyms. She marked those mistakes and asked the students for explanation. Although the students had been reminded that they should not use the chatting or SMS language (texting or, interchangeably, instant messaging [henceforth, IM]) in their formal writing and their attention was called to the difference between formal writing and the texting, their mistakes persisted and they continued to use the same kind of texting. This has led the researchers to study this phenomenon by collecting and analyzing those mistakes which are hypothesized to be the result of texting that the students use in their every day communication with their peers.

This issue has created a debate<sup>1</sup> between educators and experts in the field of teaching, as some believe that texting has a positive influence on learners and claim that:

[i]nstant messaging and e-mail are creating a new generation of teenage writers, accustomed to translating their thought and feeling into words. They write more than any generation has since the days when telephone calls were rare and the mailman rounded more than once a day (Helderman, 2003).

Moreover, other educators believe that texting can develop other skills that are important in the active world, such as independence and autonomy (Almeida d'Eca, 2003), as well as improving students' interactive competence (Chun, 1994:17). Therefore, some teachers encourage their students to use IM as they believe it sparks their thinking processes. Lee (2002) mentions a form of writing (sometimes called 'lingo') by children which is not completely grammatically correct but which can express their thought and feeling. He quotes a sixth grade teacher who says, "When my children are writing first drafts, I don't care how they spell anything, as long as they are writing ... If this lingo gets their thought and ideas onto paper quicker, the more power to them." IM 'lingo' is not different.



On the other hand, there are some educators who disagree with that opinion and are afraid of creating a new English language that is far from the standard one, especially in spelling and vocabulary. For example, Lit (2009) writes:

Teens developed their own lingo that consists of abbreviations and symbols that mean words. Such abbreviations allow teens to text more efficiently, but such abbreviations have begun appearing in students' formal writing. Texting, therefore, becomes detrimental to the job that English teachers do.

And since many students have grown up in a world of technology and mobile phones, this problem is more significant with younger students than with older ones.

In the same vein, a 2001 Pew report (quoted in Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001:3) show that 74% of online teens use IM, and Almeida d'Eca (2003) claims that the abbreviated, oversimplified language used by younger students is obviously due to the new communication media such as e-mail, IM and mobile phones.

Ward (2004) in his article about texting refers to findings of a study that shows that text-experienced children write much less than those without mobiles, i.e., texting discourages writing thus affecting writing negatively. Moreover, many teachers believe that texting undermines proper spelling and syntax (Gerson, 2008). To use O'Connor's (2005:2) words, it is "bastardization" of language. She adds that "several articles indicate that students who use messaging on a frequent basis often use bad grammar, poor punctuation, and improper abbreviations in academic writing". According to Lee (2002), students who use IM frequently reach a saturation point where they no longer notice IM lingo because they are so used to seeing it. Lee also quotes the words of a 16-year-old, high school student who was so accustomed to IM who said "I was so used to reading what my friends wrote to me on Instant Messenger that I didn't even realize that there was something wrong.". This reveals that the more teens use IM the more they lose their ability to distinguish formal from informal English.

To sum up the debate on this issue, we should not deny the benefits of new technology to education, but we have to be wise in using it and prepare ourselves to face the reality that texting has a significant effect on the lives of teens in many parts of the world, and that English language teachers in foreign countries have a more difficult mission to accomplish nowadays, since they not only have to challenge the native language of the students, but also the new lingo that teens use in their Instant Messengers or mobile telephones.

## **Problem of the study**

With the spreading World Wide Web, it is noticed that students in the last few years have tended to use a deformed type of English they have learnt while chatting with Internet users or while sending SMS messages on their mobile phones to their peers. Such a new phenomenon affects their writing skills especially at the lexical level and the level of spelling. Exposure to those electronic means has created a special form of language that can be written using the smallest number of letters possible where pronouns, prepositions and articles may be omitted and abbreviations are widely used. Moreover, they use special symbols or "smiley faces" to use Baron's words (2008:29) that represent how someone feels instead of using words or full sentences. This informal writing style is not in line with the accepted norms of formal writing which can be defined as the use of "prescribed forms that certain written messages must adhere to" (Brown 2001:306), or, put differently, the kind of language used in situations when speakers or writers are careful about their choice of words and sentence structure. (Cf. Richards, Platt and Platt [1992: 144] who define formal speech.) The present study attempts to analyze students' writing in order to identify students' writing deviation from these prescribed forms which can be attributed to the influence of texting process on students' mobiles or computers.



## Methodology

### Subjects of the study

The sample of the present study consisted of sixty-seven Jordanian female students who were studying English as a foreign language in two different sections. They were taking eight classes of English every week in which they were required to submit a piece of writing as part of their classroom activities.

### Instruments of the study

The researchers used two research instruments. The first one was the writing assignments that were required of the subjects as part of their English classroom activities. These writing assignments were collected over the second semester of the school year 2010/2011. The second instrument was a questionnaire which was prepared by the researchers with the help from experts in the field to measure students' tendencies and attitudes towards the use of the Internet or the mobile phones via the use of emails or IM, as well as their choice of language of chatting or messaging, Arabic or English. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions. ( See Table 2).

### Data collection and analysis procedures

The subjects' writing pieces were marked. Attention was given to the errors which could be due to the effect of texting. The errors were classified according to five categories namely: spelling, clipping, simplification, use of abbreviations, and imitating the sound which the word represents.

After that the researchers distributed the questionnaire to identify to what extent the subjects use the Internet in order to be able to connect their errors to the use of texting. Their responses were analyzed and the percentages were computed.

### Findings and Discussion

This part of the paper will present the types of errors committed by the students as well as the frequency of their occurrence, and then it will proceed to discuss the reasons behind such errors.

The spelling phenomena discussed here will be called errors because they constitute deviations from standard spelling. They might be practical strategies resorted to by their users for different reasons and might be standard within a closed circle (chatters, etc.), but they still deviate from the norm and are, therefore, seen as errors.

The errors occur in spelling pronouns, prepositions, verbs (especially auxiliaries) as well as other types of words especially common ones or ones with special spelling peculiarities. These errors are mainly attempts at simplifying spelling and saving space. These strategies can be classified into different types. First, writers utilize sound correspondences between the words they want to write and certain numbers or letters. So they use 2 and 4 for *to* and *for*, respectively saving one character in the former case and two in the latter. They use *u*, *ur* and *r* for *you*, *your* and *are*, respectively. Some sound correspondences are a little more complex: *bcoz* for *because* is an intelligent substitution where the combining of the name of the letter *B* (pronounced [bi]) and the pronunciation of *coz* [koz] produces [bikoz] which is the correct pronunciation of *because*. The use of *n* or *nd* for *and* is an imitation of the way the word is pronounced in connected speech.

The second type is simply a kind of clipping where letters which are deemed unnecessary elided. So if *frnd* can be read why use the more cumbersome *friend*; *frm* for *from* is seen as satisfactory, and so is *abt* for *about*. Even *thx* is sufficient for *thanks*. Another type of clipping involves omitting a whole syllable as in *coz* for *because* where *z* is used instead of the standard spelling *s*, giving the impression that the 'erroneous' spelling is an attempt at correcting a spelling problem common in the English spelling system where the same letter (e.g. *s*) can have more than one pronunciation.

The same impression is suggested by the third type of error, namely, when standard spelling is simplified. Using *skool* for *school* is an example of this strategy. The use of *no* for *know* seems very natural from this point of view.

The fourth type involves the use of abbreviations as in the case of using *Qs* for *questions* or *tc* for *Take care!*

Finally, imitating the sound represented by the word *kiss* produces *mwaah* and the use of *da* for *the* seem to resist any categorization.

Below is a table with some of the errors the first author has observed in the writing of her students.

Table 1. *Spelling Errors in Students' Academic Writing*

<b>Error</b>	<b>Standard Spelling</b>
2	to
4	for
u	you
ur	your
r	are
ur / urn't	You are /you aren't
nd/ n	and
cuz / coz /bcoz	because
mwaah	kiss
t.c	Take care
skool	school
frnd	friend
thx	thanks
no	know
Qs	questions
frm	from
abt	about
z	is
m	am
ma	my
da	the
playin'	playing
readin'	reading
drawin'	drawing

Based on this analysis a simple questionnaire was developed and distributed to 67 students to find out how often such students use the Internet to chat with their peers and how often they write SMS messages or e-mails. The questions and the subjects' responses appear in Table 2.

Table 2. *Subjects' Responses concerning Access to Electronic Means of Communication, the Use of IM, etc.*

Question No.	Question	Response	Percentage
1	Do you have a computer?	Yes: 67	100%
		No: 0	0%
2	Is your computer linked with the Internet service?	Yes: 55	82%
		No: 12	18%
3	Do you have a mobile phone?	Yes: 63	94%
		No: 4	6%
4	How many hours do you use your computer?	1-5 hours : 60	89.5%
		5-10 hours: 5	7.5%
		More than 10 hours: 2	3%
5	Do you write SMS messages?	Yes: 60	95%
		No: 3	5%
6	Do you do online chatting with your friends?	Yes: 54	98%
		No: 1	2%
7	Which language do you use in chatting?	Arabic: 17/54	31.5%
		English: 37/54	68.5%
		Arabic in Roman letters: 37/54	68.5%
8	Which language do you use in SMS messages?	Arabic: 17/60	28.3%
		English: 37/60	61.7%
		Arabic in Roman letters: 37/60	61.7%
9	Do you send or write e-mails?	Yes: 52	94.5%
		No: 3	5.5%
10	Which language do use in your e-mails?	Arabic: 10/52	19.2%
		English: 44/52	84.6%
		Arabic in Roman letters: 19/52	36.5%

(The numbers in the responses to Questions 7, 8 and 10 do not add up to 54, 60 and 52, respectively, because some subjects gave more than one language as their choice.)

Table (2) shows that all the students have computers and that 82% of them have access to the Internet. Of those who have this access 98% do online chatting with their friends. A majority of these students (94.5%) write or send e-mails as a means of communication with their peers. Moreover, 94% of the students have a personal mobile phone and 95% of them write SMS messages to their friends on their mobiles.

One more interesting point to be mentioned here is that 61.7% of those messages or e-mails are written in English or in a new form of Arabic which is written in Roman letters, and only 28.3% of their



messages are written in Arabic using Arabic alphabet. Another interesting thing is that the students use Arabic only to send religious messages or e-mails.

Another point revealed from this table is that 89.5% of the students use their computers from one to five hours daily, and they spend this time mainly in chatting and writing e-mails.

From the above data one could attribute the kind of error committed by the students in their academic writing in English (as exemplified in Table 1) to texting as they use English as a means of electronic communication, and this activity occupies a considerable part of their time. About two thirds of those who do chatting or send messages use English (and even when they use Arabic they use Roman letters). The extent of their use of the computer and the Internet is attested by the time they spend daily doing this: about nine out of ten of the respondents spend 1-5 hours a day in front of their computers; the tenth spends even more, up to 10 hours or more for some. This may foster their fluency in the use of English, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, it may negatively affect their spelling and grammar. The possible negative influence on their mother tongue (i.e., Arabic) is not within the scope of this paper.

### **Pedagogical recommendations**

Based on the above conclusion, it is recommended that teachers draw students' attention to the concept "of audience" as O'Connor (2005) calls it:

Students need to understand the importance of using the appropriate language in the appropriate setting, and that who one is writing for affects the way in which one writes. For example, IM-speak is perfectly acceptable when instant messaging with someone; on the flip side it is completely unacceptable when writing a formal letter.

So it is important to familiarize students with the difference in style between formal and informal texts, between spoken and written language. A term paper or a formal essay is different in style from an instant message or a chat with a peer and it thus requires more attention from its author.

A practical procedure to carry out this recommendation could be for teachers to provide their students with a list of abbreviations and symbols in common use in texting and let them know that these writing forms are not allowed in their academic writing, and if they appear in their writing they will lose marks (Lit, 2009).

Though outside the scope of this paper and away from the effect of texting on the English of Arab EFL students, a recommendation could be put forth to study the effect of texting the students' Arabic since the study revealed that a high percentage of the students do not use Arabic as a mean of electronic communication; rather, they resort to English or a new form of writing where they write Arabic in Roman letters.

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(1) Baron (2008: 28ff) reports on the kind and history of controversy concerning the usefulness or harm of the use of IM and other computer-mediated communication on students' writing.

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