

The Effect of SMS Texting on ESL Learners' Writing Skills: Case Study of Derna University

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تأثير الرسائل النصية على المهارات الكتابية للطلبة المتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية: دراسة عن طلبة جامعة درنة

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of SMS texting on the writing skills of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The widespread use of technology, including mobile phones, has significantly impacted various aspects of modern life, and this study specifically examines its influence within the educational context of Derna University, Libya. A questionnaire was administered to 40 undergraduate students from the English department to explore their perceptions of how texting affects their writing abilities. The findings indicate that the majority of participants believe texting has a positive influence on their writing skills. These results suggest that mobile phone-based communication may be a valuable tool for developing writing proficiency among language learners. The study recommends further research to identify specific features of texting that contribute to this positive effect and to explore how these features can be effectively integrated into language instruction.

Keywords: SMS Texting, ESL, Writing Skills, Undergraduate Students, Derna University, Technology in Education, Libya.

الملخص:

تستقصي هذه الدراسة تأثير الرسائل النصية القصيرة (SMS) على مهارات الكتابة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة ثانية (ESL). لقد أثر الاستخدام الواسع للتكنولوجيا، بما في ذلك الهواتف المحمولة، بشكل كبير على جوانب مختلفة من الحياة الحديثة، وتفحص هذه الدراسة تحديداً تأثيرها في السياق التعليمي لجامعة درنة، ليبيا. تم توزيع استبيان على 40 طالباً جامعياً من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية لاستكشاف تصوراتهم حول كيفية تأثير الرسائل النصية على قدراتهم الكتابية. تشير النتائج إلى أن غالبية المشاركين يعتقدون أن الرسائل النصية لها تأثير إيجابي على مهاراتهم في الكتابة. وتوحي هذه النتائج بأن التواصل عبر الهواتف المحمولة قد يكون أداة قيمة لتطوير الكفاءة الكتابية لدى متعلمي اللغة. توصي الدراسة بإجراء المزيد من الأبحاث لتحديد السمات المحددة للرسائل النصية التي تساهم في هذا التأثير الإيجابي واستكشاف كيفية دمج هذه السمات بفعالية في تعليم اللغة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرسائل النصية القصيرة، اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة ثانية، مهارات الكتابة، طلاب المرحلة الجامعية، جامعة درنة، التكنولوجيا في التعليم، ليبيا.

Introduction

The rise of texting and mobile phones has profoundly changed how we communicate. While these technologies offer convenience, they also present a unique challenge for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Writing is a foundational skill in language learning, and any negative impact from texting could significantly affect an ESL learner's academic and professional success (Sidi Mahmoud, 2023; Lasheiky and Mohammed, 2024; Elwerfalli, Mahmoud, and Mohammed, 2024;

Alamaria, 2023; Abdalla and Wenis, 2024; Wenis Aomr and Abdalla, 2025; Mktad, 2025; Mohammed 2025; Khalifa, 2025). According to Waldeyer's (2020) studies, writing can help students learn more effectively. Her research suggests that writing acts as a form of cognitive offloading, allowing the writer to use external representations to reduce the mental load of processing information. Similarly, Crossley's study (2020) provides a detailed analysis of how examining the linguistic features of writing samples can improve our ability to predict a writer's proficiency and success. In Libya, where English is widely taught, the frequent use of texting raises concerns about its potential effects on students' writing proficiency. This paper explores the effects of texting on the writing skills of Libyan ESL learners. It will identify both the potential benefits and drawbacks of these technologies and propose strategies to mitigate any negative effects (Nawaz, S., Ahmed, R., & Mushtaq, A. 2021; Arshad, 2023; Ebrahimi, 2024)

Texting is often informal, characterized by abbreviations and acronyms. This can be a hurdle for ESL learners, as it may reinforce poor grammar and spelling habits that are inappropriate in formal settings, like academic writing. Additionally, an overreliance on mobile devices can distract students from their language learning tasks, ultimately hindering their writing proficiency.

This research aims to investigate the relationship between texting habits and writing proficiency among Libyan ESL learners. We will explore the specific challenges students face when using texting as a communication tool and provide recommendations for both educators and learners on how to overcome the negative impacts of texting and improve writing skills.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study seeks to determine whether SMS texting in English has a positive or negative effect on the writing skills of undergraduate students in the English Department at Derna University.

The primary research questions are:

- Does SMS texting positively or negatively affect students' English writing ability? Why?
- If so, what specific aspects of their writing are most affected, grammar or morphology?

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach. A semi-structured questionnaire was given to 40 undergraduate students from all levels of the English Language Department at Derna University.

Literature review

What Does Texting Mean?

According to Margaret Rouse (2017), the generation and transmission of brief electronic text messages between two or more users of mobile devices via a network is referred to as texting. This often refers to transmitting messages with no more than 100 characters, while the term "multimedia message service" (MMS) has since been expanded to encompass audio, image, and video material, short message service (SMS), which allowed only 144 characters of pure text per message, was the precursor to texting. In academic terms "a text is anything that conveys a set of meanings to the person who examines it." (Susan C. Herring, Dieter Stein & Tuija Virtanen, 2013). Brief typed communications exchanged by SMS (short message service) on mobile/cell phones, PDAs (personal digital assistants), smartphones, or web browsers are referred to as "text messaging" or just "texting." Texting was initially developed and released commercially in the early to mid-1990s and has since seen a huge rise in popularity around the world following the rapid spread of mobile telephone in general.

When Was Texting Invented: The History of Texting

Throughout the past few decades, communication and information channels have undergone a remarkable evolution. When texting was first developed, co-animation options were limited. The technologies and services found in modern smartphones, such as RCS, GSM, 3G, cross-network text messaging, bulk text messaging, and many others, were formerly exclusive to other devices. With phones from the 1990s, sending a text required you to use your thumb to navigate a tiny 10-number keypad (predictive texting was not yet a thing, however). With the advent of SMS, text messaging, and lengthy phone calls were replaced by trillions of texts that rapidly sent pertinent information to the appropriate audience.

The Beginning of Text Messaging

In 1837, the electric telegraph was created. It was the first gadget that could electronically transmit text messages between two locations. Only two miles were covered by the first telegraph sent by Samuel Morse, the Morse Codes creator. Between Baltimore and Washington, a distance of 44 miles, in 1844, Morse established the first long-distance telegraph system. What Has God Wrought was the first message sent through the system. This quotation from the Book of Numbers, which translates as "What has God madder was used to emphasize the miraculous nature of technological advancement. The first messaging network in 1933 – The German Reichspost (postal service) unveiled the Telex service to overcome the shortcomings of telegraphs. Telex was a public network of teleprinters that was

very similar to today's telephone networks. In 1971 the University of Hawaii used ALOHA net to send ultra-high frequency (UHF) radio waves carrying text message data.

This technology eventually gave way to today's wireless networks. In 1984, Friedhelm Hillebrand and Bernard Ghillebaert invented text messaging. To fit onto existing signaling standards, the original SMS messages could only contain 160 seven-bit characters, Fun texting trivia: Hillebrand stated that while 160 characters may not seem like much, they are more than sufficient to express the majority of communications. In order to arrive to this conclusion, he wrote out a series of random words on a typewriter while keeping track of each letter, number, punctuation, and space. Nearly always, his rambling thoughts were contained within the allotted 160 characters.

Who Invented Texting?

Hillebrand and Ghillebaert are credited with coming up with the SMS (Short Message Service) concept. The SMS invention is attributed by some to Finnish engineer Matti Makkonen the "Father of SMS", for his work at Nokia though he did not consider himself the inventor of texting due to the large number of engineers involved.

In 1992, the first text message was sent to a cell phone by a 22-years-old engineer Neil Papworth. The recipient was Richard Jarvis, who was attending a Christmas party near Vodafone headquarters in Newbury, England. This is when texting was invented, as we know. What did the first text message say? The text was a heartwarming message that simply read "Merry Christmas". A year later, Brennan Hayden, an engineer for Irish wireless company Aldiscon, sent the first commercial text message. It said "burp," which had nothing to do with gastroenterology but instead signified the "birth" of a new form of communication in the history of texting.

Which Was the First Texting Phone?

The 1993 cell phone released by Nokia was the first phone that could text. One of the first cell phones that could text messages: Nokia 2110 (on the left).



Figure 1. Nokia Mobile.

In 1995, Autofill was a key development in the history of texting as well, it opened the door to faster texting. The first autofill technology was called "T9". This technology made it quite a bit easier to send text messages using a 10-digit keypad (Alexa Lamzy, Text Magic, 2011).

Can Texting Damage Writing Skill?

More and more young kids are getting cell phones. Parents may feel safer knowing they can get in touch with their kids. Tweens are starting to learn how to type in text abbreviations, which could alter how well they write. According to WJS.com According to the media research company Nielsen Co., the average 13 to 17-year-old sends and receives 3,339 SMS a month more than 100 every day. Adults are making up ground. In the second quarter of 2010, people between the ages of 45 and 54 sent and received 323 messages each month, up 75% from the same period in 2009.

The website Eudopia.org has published a survey asking, "IYO texting = NME or NBD?" to determine whether text messaging is damaging students' writing abilities. If you don't know what that implies, then. Translation: "In your opinion, is text messaging the enemy, or no big deal?" Mike Darcher, a 20-year English teacher, was questioned by PiercePioneer.com about his opinion on whether texting was impairing his students' ability to write. He claimed that he was unable to draw the conclusion that unwise texting practices were reflected in students' work. "In terms of writing skill, there is no way of measuring its impact," Darcher said. TimesDaily published a story on the findings of a Pew Internet and American Life Project survey. "Growing worries about how text-based electronic communications influence kids who are heavily exposed to electronic media led to the study, in large part because of these worries.

Out of 700 youth aged 12 to 17 who took part in the phone survey. 60% say they do not consider electronic communications, such as e-mail, instant messaging, and mobile text, to be writing in the formal sense. 63% say it has no impact on the writing they do for school. Also 64% say they unintentionally use a type of shorthand common to electronic text, such as emotions, incorrect grammar,

or punctuation (Hamilton, 2009). On how texting affects writing abilities, some linguists have differing opinions. Several people believe that this might not stick around and might simply disappear like several slang terms that were formerly commonplace. Some people believe that learning to text is similar to learning a new language. The pupils do not see a problem with it as long as they can keep them apart. (Saleem & Bakhsh, 2017) Short Message Service (SMS) was created as the first instant messaging solution (Faulkner and Culwin, 2004) (Goldstuck, 2006).

Most words used in text messaging were abbreviated or represented by symbols. According to students, text messaging on mobile devices was impairing their ability to write (Russell, 2010). According to Yousaf and Ahmad's research (2013), university students' writing abilities suffer more adversely the more exposure they have to SMS. The use of text messaging has affected how individuals communicate verbally and in writing.

Additionally, their investigation showed that SMS texts were written consciously or unconsciously by neglecting orthography. By widely held beliefs, texting has emerged as a twenty-first century trend as a highly distinctive, colorful style, full of contractions and unusual language usages employed by an immature generation that does not concern about rules.

Findings Discussion

In this paper, the effects of texting on students' writing skill were investigated, and it was found that texting generally has a positive effect on them, even though Liraz (2020) in her study finds out that texting is not an appreciate technique to learn English or to improve the writing skill of the students. She states, "Texting is a relatively new phenomenon in language, and many people have decried texting as a decline in the language skills of the younger generation" However, the results of this study do not support her findings because 80% in total of participants see texting is a perfect way to improve their English as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Effect of SMS Texting on ESL Learners' Writing Skills: Case Study of Derna University.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
15	17	4	4
37.5%	42.5%	10%	10%

Students' academic writing is positively affected by the SMS language of text messaging and chatting as revealed as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' academic writing is positively affected by the SMS language of text messaging and chatting.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
20	5	5	10
50%	12.5%	12.5%	25%

From the 40 students who participated in the survey, 30 (80%) They agreed that texting has a great influence on the way they write, they find that messaging helps them write faster, and this is due to more practice as illustrated in the following table. Texting makes learning English easier and more enjoyable. It can help English learners practice their writing skills in a low-pressure setting and develop their language skills in a more authentic and natural way. In contrast, Pathan et al. (2021) study found that the more university students are exposed to text messaging, the worse their writing skills become. The frequent use of informal SMS language, with its incorrect spellings and shortened abbreviations, is negatively impacting students' academic work. This drift is considered harmful to their success in academia because these habits are not acceptable in exams or daily coursework. Table 3 shows the responses of the following statement: Texting and SMS do not pose a threat to student's academic writing.

Table 3: Texting and SMS do not pose a threat to student's academic writing.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
12	12	10	6
30%	30%	25%	15%

60 % of students see that texting does not pose a threat to their ability in academic writing. Texting and SMS messages are usually written informally and are intended for a specific audience, often friends or family members. In contrast, academic writing is typically more formal and is intended for a wider audience, such as a professor, academic community, or the general public. Students are usually aware of these differences and adjust their writing accordingly. However, this result was completely different

to Katoon's case study which found that students' frequent use of text messaging, or "textese," negatively impacts their formal writing. The research found that features like vowel deletion (leaving out vowels), alphanumeric homophony (using numbers and letters to represent words, like "gr8"), and graphemes were the most common texting habits that carried over into their academic work. This incorporation of text language, whether intentional or not, was found to distort the morphology and syntax of the English language, ultimately lowering its standards in their writing. (Katoon, 2020) The language of text messaging does always observe grammatical rules. The following results of this question are revealed in Table 4.

Table 4: The language of text messaging does not always observe grammatical rules.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
5	10	-	25
12.5%	25%	-	62.5%

From the above table, Texting and SMS messages are often exchanged in casual settings and are not expected to adhere to strict grammar. In contrast, academic writing is expected to follow established conventions of grammar, syntax, and punctuation. Students understand the context in which they are writing and adjust their writing style accordingly, so 62.5% of students think that SMS does not always observe grammatical rules. According to Arshad et al. (2023) findings of their survey of SMS effects on learners' writing abilities from teachers' perceptions reveal that no remarkable different English spelling patterns in writing between those who utilize text messaging and those who do not. They each make various errors, which might be unrelated to their frequent use of technology. However, they discovered that SMS has a negative influence on students' grammatical proficiency, therefore, my study might not support Arshad et al. results. Results of the statement 'When writing a message, texters do not pay enough attention to all aspects of language use' are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: When writing a message, texters do not pay enough attention to all aspects of language use.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
-	10	8	22
-	25%	20%	55%

The vast majority of participants go to the 'strongly disagree' option as shown in the previous table, which represents in some social contexts, such as when communicating with peers or colleagues, there may be pressure to write in a certain way. Learners may pay close attention to the way they write when texting to avoid being judged or criticized by others. They may want to become more fluent in English, and paying close attention to the way they write when texting can help them achieve this goal. By practicing their language skills in a low-pressure context, such as texting, they can become more comfortable with the language and improve their overall fluency. Findings of the following question, 'Text messaging affects negatively students' use of punctuation marks,' are revealed in Table 6.

Table 6: Text messaging negatively affects students' use of punctuation marks.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
19	15	6	-
47.5%	37.5%	15%	-

From the above table, it is noted that the largest percentage strongly agreed, which amounted to 47.5%, followed by I agree, where a ratio of 37.5% was recorded. It is clear that the majority strongly agree that text messaging negatively affects students' use of punctuation marks. Apparently, this is because students usually use the informal style. The following Table 7 illustrates the results of the Statement, 'I believe that text messaging and chatting will endanger the future of standard English.'

Table 7: I believe that text messaging and chatting will endanger the future of standard English.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
4	7	20	9
10%	17.5%	50%	22.5%

Of the 40 students who participated in the survey, 20 (50%) were not sure that texting will endanger the future of standard English. There is little doubt that the language we use today differs significantly from the one we did a few hundred years ago. Texting is challenging but using text language can make

it easier for texters to communicate. Many young people view it as "cool," "stylized," and "modern," and it can save time, space, and money (Javed, Mahmood, 2016). In terms of writing, Benseddik (2020) found that the impact of texting related to assessment outcomes does not vary significantly between writing Standards. Errors in students' writing are attributed to a lack of knowledge and not necessarily to frequent texting. The Results of this statement are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Errors in students' writing are attributed to a lack of knowledge and not necessarily to frequent texting.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
20	7	3	10
50%	17.5%	7.5%	25%

40 students who participated in the survey, 27(67.5%) agreed that "Errors in students' writing are attributed to a lack of knowledge and not necessarily to frequent texting" The result of this showed that it is important to recognize that frequent texting is not the only factor that can contribute to errors in writing. Other factors, such as a lack of knowledge or understanding of grammar rules, poor writing skills, and limited exposure to reading and writing, can also play a role. Therefore, it is important for educators to address the root causes of errors in writing, rather than simply attributing them to one factor alone. This may involve providing students with more opportunities to practice their writing skills, improving their knowledge and understanding of grammar rules, and encouraging them to read and write in a variety of contexts. The Respondents of the following statement 'As a feature of technology, texting improves students' English in general and their writing in particular' are represented as follows in Table 9.

Table 9: As a feature of technology, texting improves students' English in general and their writing in particular.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
23	10	-	7
57.5%	25%	-	17.5%

From the preceding table (9), it is noted that the largest percentage strongly agreed, which amounted to 57.5%, followed by I agree, where a ratio of 25% was recorded. It is obvious that the majority strongly agree that texting improves their language, and that's showed as an e-technology, texting can be a useful tool for improving students' English language skills; including their writing abilities. Increased motivation: Many students enjoy texting and social media and incorporating these technologies into the classroom can help to increase their engagement and motivation to learn. Table 10 represents the results of the statement 'Using some aspects of texting such as abbreviations in formal writing can be tolerated'.

Table 10: Using some aspects of texting such as abbreviations in formal writing can be tolerated.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
2	1	10	27
5%	2.5%	25%	67.5%

The table above presents that 67.5% of the total respondents strongly disagree with the above given statement, this response unequivocally demonstrated that, in official writing assignments, students generally do not tend to employ short and shortened forms. They regularly communicate online using messaging services and other online platforms, especially when speaking to those who are closest to them, according to (Albasheer, Alfaki, 2016, p. 29) "Abbreviations used in text messaging are linguistically incorrect, but communicatively acceptable" such as: ASAP: As soon as possible/ LMK: Let me know/ DOB: Date of birth/ LOL: Laugh out loud. Despite some drawbacks, texting is considered an added value to language users. This is undoubtedly revealed in Table 11 as follows:

Table 11: Despite some drawbacks, texting is considered an added value to language users.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly disagree
24	7	4	5
60%	17.5%	10%	12.5%

Table 11 shows that only 12.5% respondents strongly disagreed with it, but 60% of the total participants strongly agreed with it, and 17.5% agreed. This result evidently showed that texting could be considered an added value to language users for several reasons; Texting can help language users to improve their writing skills. Because text messages are often short and concise, users need to use simple and effective language to convey their message. This can help to develop their ability to write clearly and succinctly, which is a valuable skill in many areas of life, such as in business or academia. Texting can also allow language users to communicate with people who speak different languages. With the help of translation apps, users can send messages in their language and have them translated into the language of the recipient. This can help to break down language barriers and facilitate cross-cultural communication.

Conclusion

'Texting is a rapid and concise means of exchanging ideas and thoughts' Moreover, it has been proved that texters used texting to communicate with others, as they feel more connected and supported by their family and friends. This study concludes that using texting and cell phones can have both positive and negative effects on the writing skills of ESL Libyan learners. While these technologies can offer opportunities to practice English writing and communication, they can also lead to the development of inappropriate writing habits and errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. This is approved by Nawaz, S., Ahmed, R., & Mushtaq, A. (2021) that university educators hold a negative view regarding the effects of text messages on the academic writing of graduate students. This is due to the perceived influence on spelling, grammatical structure, and punctuation. However, the main results of my research show that Texting has positive impacts on learners' writing in the same way of study that revealed a strong positive correlation was observed between the frequency of students' WhatsApp usage and the enhancement of their writing skills. The study also found that providing writing examples by either the instructor or fellow students within the WhatsApp group facilitated superior writing outcomes. Furthermore, the application of messaging platforms fosters heightened levels of engagement, interaction, collaboration, and comprehensive language acquisition.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are made for educators:

- Further research is needed to explore the potential benefits of using SMS language
- Embrace Technology: Teachers should use texting and cell phones as a tool to improve the writing skills of English language learners.
- Integrate into Curriculum: Incorporate texting and other forms of digital communication into classroom activities and assignments. Encourage students to use their phones to practice writing in their daily lives.
- Provide Guidance: It is crucial for educators to provide clear instructions on the appropriate use of language in different contexts and to help learners develop the ability to write effectively in various situations.
- Promote Balanced Use: Educators should be aware of the potential negative impacts of excessive phone use and encourage students to engage in other forms of communication and writing practice.
- Support Success: By thoughtfully integrating texting and mobile phones into language learning, educators can help students acquire the writing skills necessary for success in academic and professional settings.

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