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EFFECTS OF TEXT-MESSAGING ON THE ACADEMIC WRITING OF ARAB EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effect of text-messaging on Arab EFL learners' English academic writing. It also investigates teachers' attitudes and reactions to the presence of e-texting features in their students' writing. Qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis were employed on data obtained from the following sources: (1) a sample of freshman students' writing, (2) a survey investigating students' use of e-chatting in Arabic and English, and (3) a questionnaire eliciting teachers' reactions to students' use of texting features in academic writing. The data were collected from a student sample of the Arab Open University (AOU). The research findings show that Arab EFL students' writing does not reveal a heavy use of texting features, which suggests that this phenomenon neither poses a serious threat nor adversely impacts students' written English.

Keywords: academic writing, impact, reactions, text-messaging

1. Introduction

The advent of the age of the Internet has revolutionized virtually all aspects of life. Such a massive revolution has affected education in a global context. While this substantial use of e-technology has undoubtedly enriched our life and resulted in many significant advances in the social, economic and educational domains, it seems to have genuinely affected our use of language both positively and negatively. Due to the heavy use of the net in texting, emailing, chatting, and social networking, users tend to create their own language norms such as acronyms, abbreviations, contractions, reductions, coinages and other forms of language novelty. Such innovative uses of language are motivated by various reasons including speed, brevity and simplicity, among other reasons. However, while such innovative uses might be acceptable in certain contexts, they may not be sanctioned in some others. Academic settings are a case in point.

With this escalating row and debate over the effect of the Internet on language use, the present study investigates the effect of text-messaging as a form of

e-language on the academic writing of students at the Arab Open University (AOU) in Kuwait. It attempts to seek answers to the following two questions:

1. To what extent does the use of e-language affect the quality of students' academic writing?
2. What is the reaction of English language teachers towards this phenomenon?

2. Review of Related Literature

The impact of the Internet on language use has raised conflicting viewpoints. Whereas pundits of e-technology and cyber space credit the Internet with the massive global communication highway leading to the dissemination of knowledge (cf. Crystal 2009 and Baron 2008), language purists have a more negative viewpoint. For them, this development in social media networks and the falsely acclaimed benefits constitute negative platforms that damage, harm and endanger language and linguistic heritage by reducing it to a deplorable state (cf. Tomaszewski 2011, Odey et al. 2014). However, for Thurlow and Poff (2009: 12):

The kinds of orthographic (or typographic) choices that texters make in their messages are motivated primarily by pragmatic concerns... and text messages are thus communicative events (i.e., genres) only superficially recognizable from their look; their real significance lies primarily in discursive content and communicative intent.

Of the various mobile applications, texting has become the most popular means of communication worldwide, witnessing a very rapid increase. According to a 2014 survey, texting statistics show that, on a global level, about 90% of people practice texting at least once a day, with the messages sent each month exceeding 350 billion (<http://www.openuniversity.edu/news/news/2014-text-messaging-usage-statistics>). According to Thurlow and Poff (2009: 2), "texting is a social communicative resource in people's daily lives," and in some locales like Hong Kong and Japan texting has priority over voice communication among young adults (cf. Leung 2007). However, while acknowledging that the Internet has profoundly changed communication worldwide through texting, chatting, and e-mailing, the issue has been largely debated over the years.

A staunch supporter of the positive effects of the Internet on language is the renowned British linguist David Crystal who argues that:

The impact of the worldwide web on language remains minimal ... what we are not seeing is an alternation, but additions to the language since the main effect of the Internet on language has been to increase the expressive richness of language ... with a new set of communicative dimensions that haven't existed in the past (VOA 2010: 2)
www.voanews.com/content/experts-divided-over-internet

The same argument was echoed by Erin Jansen, founder of Netlingo, an online dictionary of Internet and text messaging terms. Jansen says that “the new technology has not fundamentally changed existing language but added immensely to the vocabulary...what we’re seeing is more ways to use language to communicate... it is basically a freedom of expression” (ibid: 2).

In their study that investigated the “linguistic features of e-English,” Al-Sa’di and Hamdan (2005) found many characterizing features of e-chatting. They summarize such findings by saying:

Analysis of the data indicated that the overwhelming majority of the chatters’ sentences were short and simple...Analysis also showed that the e-chatters used several word truncation methods, e.g., using one letter for a whole word and eliminating one or more vowels in a word as long as it is still understandable. They also tended to misspell words either intentionally or accidentally. Furthermore, they applied regular methods of word formation, e.g., derivation, coinage, acronymization ... (421).

Odey et al. (2014: 92) list 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 emotions, onomatopoeic expressions and punctuations.” In the eyes of some (e.g., Tomaszewski 2011), such features and similar others have taken the language to a state of decline in terms of grammar and spelling. It is this intrusion on the premises of standard/formal language that creates this state of uncertainty and concern over the future of standard usage.

Such concerns and inhibitions were categorically dismissed by Crystal (2009: 7) who argues:

Psychologists, sociolinguists, health specialists, journalists, and educators have had plenty to say; but hardly any reports provide details of what exactly happens to language when people create texts. As a result, a huge popular mythology has grown up, in which exaggerated and distorted accounts of what youngsters are believed to do when they text has fueled prophecies of impending linguistic disaster.

Crystal adds that “all the popular beliefs about texting are wrong, or at least debatable. Its graphic distinctiveness is not a totally new phenomenon. Nor is its use restricted to the young generation. There is increasing evidence that it helps rather than hinders literacy” (ibid: 9). Crystal (2010:14) admits that the change caused by the Internet is huge, saying “nobody knows what the impact is going to be on language, except one can sense that it is making language change faster than ever before.” He further states:

...whether texting will be around long enough for a genre to develop permanently is anybody’s guess. Will we still be texting in 50 years’ time? Perhaps not. It may simply be a transient linguistic phenomenon due to the nature of technology. It may go out of fashion (14 – underlining is in the original).

The same was echoed by Ling (2010: 1) who believes that “intense use of SMS is a life-phase phenomenon and not a cohort one.”

Another source of support comes from Baron (2008: 1) who believes that “as soon as children can distinguish between formal and informal language, SMS language does not affect their literacy.” In this case, texting enriches literacy and proficiency in language. Thurlow and Poff (2009) report that, according to Crystal (2009), many of the non-conventional spellings found in texting are widespread and pre-date mobile phones. This line of argument is adopted by the authors who, based on the analysis of samples of AOU students’ writing, subscribe to this thesis.

The discussion presented by Aziz et al. (2013: 12889) indicates that their research findings have “demystified the popular belief or misconception that the students’ writing is adversely affected by the features specific to texting and thus the future of Standard English is in danger.” They add that “there can be other factors like carelessness or lack of knowledge on the part of students and the lack of training, feedback or emphasis on the part of educators or the system.”

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus and Sample


The corpus of data for this study consisted of a random sample of 130 essays which were written by freshman level AOU students in two English language courses: EL112 “Communication Skills in English II” (60 students), and EL117 “Essay Writing” (70 students).

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process utilized a variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches which were used in analyzing the data. Three tools of qualitative and quantitative methods were employed: (1) Analysis of sample writings of 130 AOU students, (2) a questionnaire designed to elicit teachers’ feedback on the students’ use of e-texting features in their formal academic writing and teachers’ attitudes toward such uses (see Appendix 1), and (3) a survey that investigates students’ use of e-chatting in both Arabic and English (see Appendix 2).

3.2.1. Sample students’ essays

In attempting to identify the errors/mistakes attributed to the influence of e-texting, the authors adopted the distinctive features of ‘textspeak graphology’ formalized by Crystal (2009), which include abbreviations, numerals, and symbols, together with misspellings, reductions, ungrammatical structures, word-play, loss of punctuation marks, using emoticons, etc. For (Crystal 2009: 78-79), the following examples are among the characteristic features of textspeak:

Abbreviations:	<i>LOL</i> for “laughing out loud”
Spelling:	<i>coz</i> for “because”
Numerals:	2 for “to”
Symbols:	@ for “at”
Reductions:	<i>gonna</i> for “going to”
Ungrammatical structures:	<i>ive</i> for “I have”
Word-play:	<i>L8</i> for “late”
Loss of punctuation marks:	Dropping punctuation marks and capitals such as <i>tom</i> for “Tom”
Smileys/Emoticons:	

It is noteworthy that some features of text messaging are used in the academic context due to the lack of social skills. Cell phones have been known to make their users antisocial. Nowadays, people rarely enjoy the company of family, friends or surroundings. They spend most of the time navigating the Internet and texting, which have become be the preferred modes of communication (cf. McCoy 2017).

3.2.2. Students’ chatting habits in Arabic and English

This part, which took the form of a brief two-item survey, explores the students’ use of e-chatting in both Arabic and English. It aimed at detecting any correlation between the use of e-chatting and the presence of its features in students’ essays. The sample group for this survey was restricted to students enrolled in EL117 “Essay Writing”. The student sample was asked two questions:

1. How often do you chat in Arabic?
2. How often do you chat in English?

The students’ responses were compared to the results of their use of e-texting features as demonstrated in their essay writing practice.

3.2.3. Teachers’ questionnaire

This instrument (see Appendix 1) aimed at investigating teachers’ attitudes (question number 20) toward e-texting. It also elicits teachers’ feedback on the presence of e-texting features in their students’ writing.

4. Findings

In examining the 130 essays written by the sample freshmen AOU students, the authors detected, contrary to what they had assumed, only a minimal presence of e-language features in students’ writing. Unexpectedly, about 80% of the essays (i.e., 104) exhibited little or no texting features. In reviewing these essays, it was

found that none of them received a score of 7 out of 10, which places them in the “below-average” category. Although these essays were replete with grammatical, punctuation, spelling and/or stylistic problems, such problems cannot definitely and solely be blamed on e-texting practices. In judging whether a certain error is generated by an e-texting influence, the authors adopted, as explained above, Crystal’s (2009) texting model. The results are given in Table (1) on the next page.

The data in Table 1 above will be interpreted at two levels:

1. Students’ proficiency in English according to grade earned.
2. Authentic e-language features vs. general errors.

Table 1 shows that there is a positive correlation between students’ proficiency in English and the total number of errors/mistakes in the two categories of general errors and authentic e-language/texting errors. As the findings reveal, the students were classified into three categories based on the results of their performance out of 10: high (7-9), average (5-6.5), and poor (1-4.5). The first category comprised 26.2% of the total number of the students in the study, the second category made 50%, and the third 23.8%. In terms of the ratio between the number of students in each category and the number of errors/mistakes committed by each student, we found that the ratio is 12.4 errors in the upper category, compared to 19.3 in the average one, and 39.3 in the lowest.

On the other hand, the second level of analysis shows that the number of general errors in the three categories of students outscores that of the authentic texting errors. In fact, the presence of e-texting errors is so low that it constitutes a negligible percentage of the total number of errors committed. That is, whereas the number of inaccuracies in the general errors category is 2892, it is only 78 in the e-texting-driven error category. This means that the ratio of inaccuracies in the general errors category to the number of students is 22.2, whereas it is only .06 in the e-texting category. Interestingly enough, however, the data establish a positive correlation between the students’ proficiency in English and their use of authentic e-language/texting features. A close scrutiny of the results shows an e-texting errors cluster in the upper category of students. For example, 50 of the e-texting errors, i.e., 64.1%, were made by the students in the upper category, compared to 19 by the average students, and only 3 by the low-level ones. If anything, these research findings indicate that it is those students with good proficiency in English who can utilize texting language features in their writing.

Table 1. General and e-language errors in the writing of EL117 and EL112 students

Course	No. of essays	Grade (out of 10)	Type of Errors							
			General Errors		e-language/texting Errors				Total Errors	
			Gr.	Sp. & punctuation.	Total	Abbrev. Reductions & spelling	Numerals & symbols	Word play	Emoticons	Total Errors
EL117 (Freshman level: "Essay Writing")	16	(High) 7 - 9	126	137	263	17	3	1	0	21
EL112 (Freshman level: "English Communication Skills II")	18		60	98	158	15	10	2	2	29
Total	34		186	235	421	32	13	3	2	50
EL117	26.2%	(Average) 5- 6.5	411	464	875	64%	26%	0	4%	100%
EL112	33		180	198	378	10	7	1	1	19
Total	65		591	662	1253	16	7	1	1	25
EL117	50%	(Low) 1- 4.5	567	315	882	64%	28%	0	4%	100%
EL112	21		165	171	336	0	0	0	0	0
Total	10		732	486	1218	3	0	0	0	3
TOTAL	130		1509	1383	2892	51	20	4	3	78
			52.2%	47.8%	100%	65.4%	25.6%	5.1%	3.8	100%

Examples of salient e-texting errors found in the students' essays include last consonant dropping, as in 'goin,' 'doin'; writing the slang forms of *want to* and *going to*, as 'wana,' or 'wanna' and 'gonna', respectively (Crystal refers to these as reductions). Other examples include ungrammatical structures such as 'ive,' 'im,' for *I've, I'm*; lack of capitalization. Examples of spelling problems are 'cos,' 'bfore,' and 'n' for *because, before, and*, respectively. Examples of abbreviations and numerals are shown in the use of '2nite' *tonight*, 'b4' *before*, 'face2face' *face-to-face*, '&' *and*, and '@' *at*.

4.1. Students' E-Chatting

As indicated above, the presence of authentic e-language features in students' essays is strikingly low. It may be rather hard to explain such unexpected results. However, the results of the survey that investigated the students' use of e-chatting in both Arabic and English should contextualize such results. As indicated above, the sample group for this survey was restricted to the 70 students enrolled in EL117.

Table 2. Time students spend e-chatting in Arabic and English

N=70

Survey Questions	1-3 hrs. a day	1-2 hrs. a day	1-5 hrs. a week	1-2 hrs. a week	Never
How often do you chat in Arabic?	32=45.7%	27=38.5%	8=11.4%	3=4.3%	0
How often do you chat in English?	0	3=4.3%	7=10%	26=37.1%	34=48.6%

As Table 2 shows, all students e-chat in Arabic, with the vast majority spending a considerable amount of time e-chatting. While 45.7% of them spend 1-3 hours chatting a day, 38.5% spend 1-2 hours. In contrast, only three students (i.e., 4.3%) engage in English e-chatting for a period of 1-2 hours a day. Furthermore, nearly one half of the students (48.6%) never e-chat in English. The fact that these students do not engage in English e-chatting explains why they do not exhibit a significant number of e-features in their English writing. The authors believe that including the section about the students' chatting in Arabic is quite relevant as it shows how little our students chat in English, compared to their attempts in Arabic, which supports our results. This finding is fairly similar to that of Odey et al. (2014), who stipulate that "the more students use SMS texting, the more they tend to employ SMS slang in their essays" (92). It is worth pointing out, however, that it is not e-texting in English that adversely affects students' writing and always results in errors. On the contrary, it is those students with a high level of

proficiency in English who exhibited a more frequent use of e-texting features in their writing. On the other hand, the below-average students, whose essays are marred with all kinds of errors pertaining to the language and mechanics of writing, were not influenced by e-texting features, but were found to have a poor academic performance marked with lack of knowledge, negligence, and carelessness.

4.2. Teachers' feedback

Table (3) below summarizes the percentages of teachers' responses to the questionnaire items that investigate their attitudes toward the phenomenon of e-texting in students' writing (see Appendix 1).

Table 3. Teachers' responses to the questionnaire on the impact of e-texting on students' writing*

N=20

Item*	SA %	A %	UD %	D %	SD %
1	10	40	-	30	20
2	-	60	-	20	20
3	20	60	-	20	-
4	60	40	-	-	-
5	60	10	10	20	-
6	20	80	-	-	-
7	20	40	40	-	-
8	10	50	40	-	-
9	20	30	20	20	10
10	20	50	10	20	
11	20	10	30	30	10
12	30	40	-	20	10
13	30	50	10	10	-
14	20	30	30	20	-
15	20	10	70	-	-
16	10	30	30	20	10
17	10	60	20	-	10
18	-	20	10	40	30
19	-	80	10	-	10
20	-	80	-	10	10

SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, U= Undecided, D=Disagree, SD= Strongly disagree

*See Appendix (1) for questionnaire items.

For further clarification of Table 3 data, the following bar chart figures 1-5 has been provided:

Bar Chart

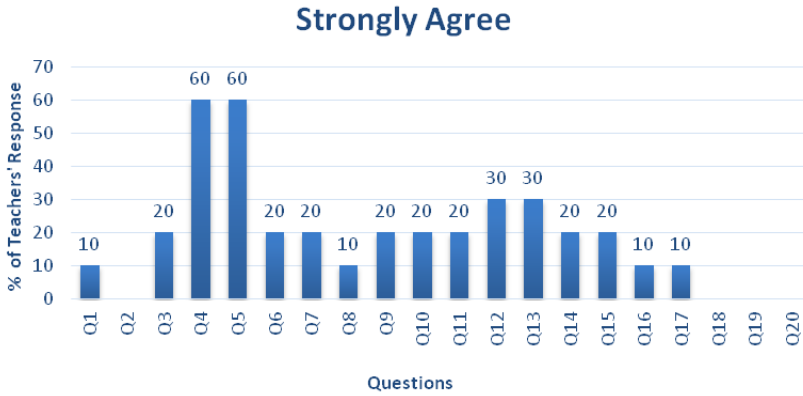


Figure 1. Strongly Agree Teachers' Responses

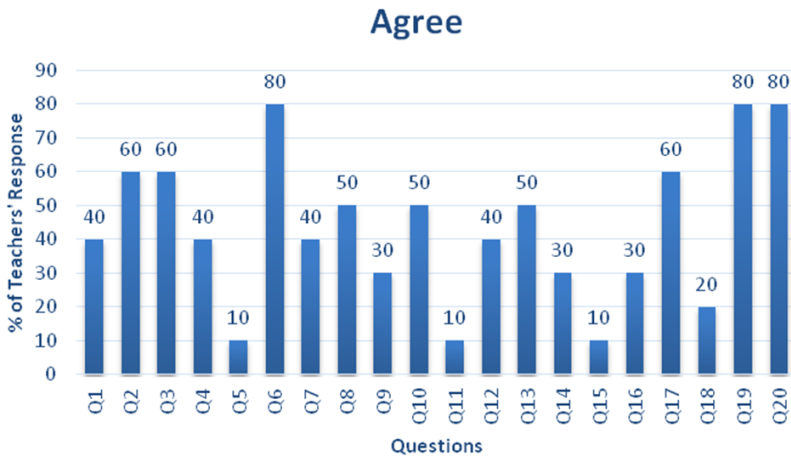


Figure 2. Agree Teachers' Responses

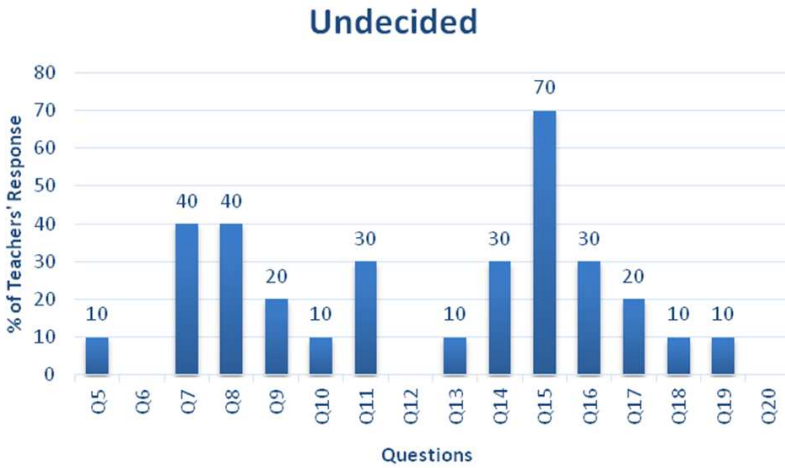


Figure 3. Undecided Teachers' Responses

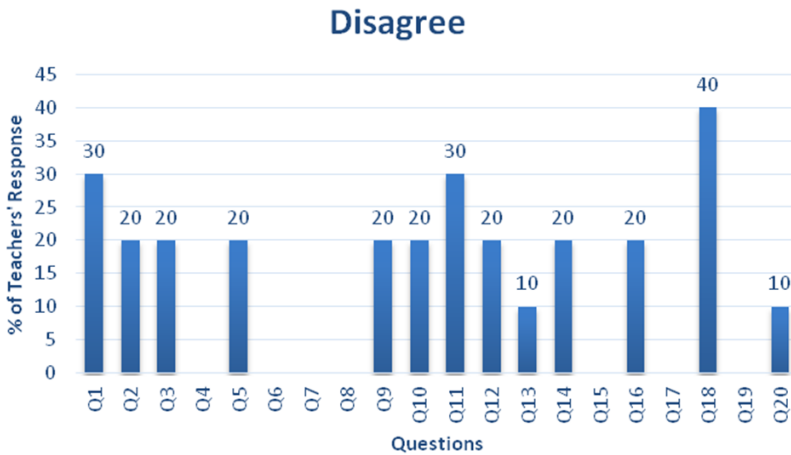


Figure 4. Disagree Teachers' Responses

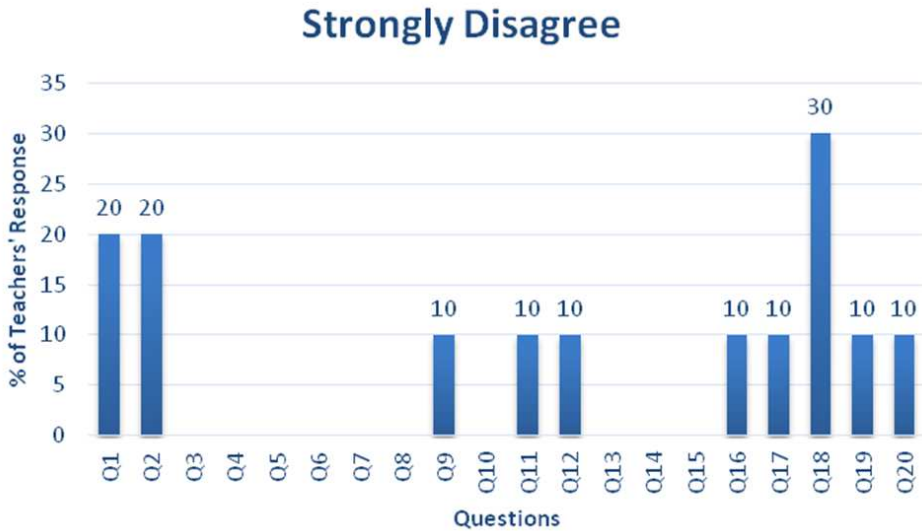


Figure 5. Strongly Disagree Teachers' Responses

As Table 3 and the bar chart figures illustrate, the results of the teachers' responses are quite intriguing. Interestingly enough, the teachers expressed conflicting views as regards the overall impact of SMS texting on their students' writing. For instance, whereas 50% of them think that SMS texting positively affects their students' writing (item 1), the other half hold the opposite view. Whether or not SMS texting poses a threat to students' writing was also debatable, with 60% in favor and 40% against, as the teachers' responses to item 2 indicate. It is noteworthy, however, that based on responses to item 15 of the questionnaire-- and compared to their Arab counterparts-- non-Arab students in the sample did not exhibit an overuse of texting features in their writing, with only 30%.

While teachers exhibit different views regarding the overall influence of SMS texting on students' writing, they generally agree that the language of texting does not always observe grammatical rules, with 80% holding such a view (see responses to item 3). As for the attitude of texters toward their language when texting, all the teachers (100%), as item 4 statistics show, agree that texters do not pay attention to all aspects of language use. The findings also reveal that more than 50% of the teachers think that language problems such as misuse of punctuation marks, misspelling, fragments as well as grammar are among the most negatively affected aspects of language due to the influence of texting, as items 7, 8, and 9 above show. For instance, 80% of the teachers report that the fragments detected in their students' writing are possibly due to effects of texting (item 19). On the other hand, the use of uncommon abbreviations was the least serious problem in students' writing based on teachers' responses. It should be noted, however, that the frequent use of fragments is not necessarily the result of texting

and e-messaging. The use of fragments is a characteristic feature of EFL students' writing (e.g. Oshima and Hogue 2006).

The findings also reveal that half the teachers attribute students' language problems to lack of knowledge and not necessarily to the effect of texting, yet e-texting is not entirely without blame; the vast majority of respondents (80%) consider it conducive to a shallow style of writing even in good students' essays, as responses to item 13 show. Still, 40% think that texting improves students' command of English, as responses to item 16 show. In fact, 70% of the teachers report that features of texting appear most in the essays of students who have good command of English, as item 17 statistics show, which can point to, among other things, some positive impact of texting on students' writing and also lend credibility to the hypothesis that students with good command of a language tend to engage in texting in that language more than others.

Although teachers acknowledge that e-texting features appear in good students' writing, they do not exercise much tolerance for this practice; only 20% report that they demonstrate tolerance for the presence of abbreviations but not, apparently, for other aspects of structure and mechanics of writing.

As for the teachers' anticipation of the overall impact of texting on the future of English, the majority of the respondents (70%) think that texting is bound to have negative effects on the future of the standard form of the language (see responses to item 12). Yet, oddly enough, the vast majority of teachers (80%) think that texting, despite its drawbacks, is an added value to language users, as responses to item 20 show.

To recap, although the results of the questionnaire do not seem to strongly and clearly support one side or the other, there is enough evidence to believe that texting features are characteristic of good student writers. Besides, an extremely high teacher population thinks that texting is an added value despite its drawbacks, while at the same time expressing some concern over the future of Standard English. Most importantly, however, is the response to item 14 of the questionnaire where 50% of the teachers agree that the general language errors in students' writing are not necessarily the result of texting; only 20% hold the opposite view.

5. Conclusions

The research findings of the present study on the effect of texting on AOU-EFL students' writing serve to alleviate concerns over an imminent danger and threat to formal English. Based on a thorough analysis of the students' essays, texting features and graphology were not extensively used. Many students' essays, especially those of students with modest proficiency in English, show no traces of texting whatsoever. Consequently, with this small number of texting features, made by a relatively small number of students, the authors are inclined to believe that other factors than text-messaging have an effect on students' writing. The

limited number of violations manifested in abbreviations, contractions, numerals and symbols, word play, emoticons, grammar and spelling in digital communication are therefore not necessarily a serious weakness, but rather a style used by well-informed and sophisticated student writers. Put differently, there is no danger in using texting features by teenagers or other age groups if they have the necessary awareness where they can draw the line in distinguishing between formal and informal usage. This is not to suggest, however, that possible dangers of texting are totally ruled out; 80% of the teachers' responses hint to this, as inferred from their responses to item 13 in the questionnaire. It is only with caution that texting features may be safely used, and only when users are well aware of the context and writing styles.

While acknowledging that modern technological innovations, particularly the Internet, have influenced people's life patterns tremendously, the influence of texting on the future of the English language is far from being resolved and decided, even when 70% of the teachers' views in this study are in favor of the claim that text messaging and chatting will endanger the future of standard English. The question is still going back and forth between the proponents and opponents of this issue.

Finally, since the findings of the present study are based on freshman level student writers, we recommend that further research on more advanced levels of student writers be carried out. The findings of such studies will be significant to teaching academic writing in the EFL curriculum in general. Such research should not only diagnose and identify academic writing problems, but also help to devise and implement relevant remedial strategies to combat learning difficulties based on their type and source, be it e-texting based or otherwise.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire for teachers

Dear Colleagues of Freshman Writing Courses,

This questionnaire has been designed as part of a study investigating the impact of e-texting on our AOU students' writing. We would appreciate it if you kindly respond to the following items:

Key to symbols: SA= strongly Agree; A= Agree; UD= Undecided; D= Disagree; SD= Strongly Disagree

	Item	SA	A	UD	D	SD
1	Students' academic writing is positively affected by the SMS language of text messaging and chatting.					
2	Texting and SMS do not pose a threat to student's academic writing.					
3	The language of text messaging does not always observe grammatical rules.					
4	When writing a message, texters do not pay enough attention to all aspects of language use.					
5	My students do not recognize the difference between informal language use, where features of texting and SMS are allowed, and formal writing-- which should be purely academic.					

6	Uncommon abbreviations and contractions appear in my students' academic writing.						
7	Text messaging affects negatively students' use of punctuation marks.						
8	In my students' writing, spelling is the most affected aspect due to texting effects.						
9	In my students' writing, punctuation is the most affected aspect due to texting effect.						
10	In my students' writing, grammar is the most affected aspect due to texting effects.						
11	In my students' writing, the use of abbreviations is the most affected aspect due to texting effects.						
12	I believe that text messaging and chatting will endanger the future of standard English.						
13	Due to texting effects, a shallow style of writing is sometimes detected even in good students' essays.						
14	Errors in students' writing are attributed to a lack of knowledge and not necessarily to frequent texting.						
15	Non-Arab students in my classes use texting features in their writing more than their Arab counterparts.						
16	As a feature of e-technology, texting improves students' English in general and their writing in particular.						
17	In my writing classes, features of texting appear in the essays of students who have good command of the language.						
18	Using some aspects of texting such as abbreviations in formal writing can be tolerated.						
19	In my students' writing, fragments are always found due to texting effects.						
20	Despite some drawbacks, texting is considered an added value to language users.						

Appendix 2: Survey for students

Time students spend e-chatting in Arabic and English
N=70

Dear Students,

Please read the following questions and respond to them as accurately as possible:

	Survey Questions	1-3 hrs. a day	1-2 hrs. a day	1-5 hrs. a week	1-2 hrs. a week	Never
1.	How often do you chat in Arabic?					
2.	How often do you chat in English?					