

The Effect of Using English SMS on KAU Foundation Year Students' Speaking and Writing Performance

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effect of using English short messaging service (SMS) on the development of the foundation year students' speaking and writing skills at King Abdulaziz University (KAU). Written and oral tests developed by the researcher were used to measure such development. During the six weeks of the experiment (the time each module usually lasts) each student in the experimental group was asked to write at least one 10-15 word SMS in English to their teacher every day. The teacher corrects the SMS and sends it back to the student. A T-test was used to find the effect of practicing SMS on the students' oral and written performance. Findings showed that students who practiced SMS with their teacher noticeably improved their writing and speaking performance. In the light of the findings above, the researcher encourages all the students in the foundation year in KAU in particular and students in general to use SMS but in correct English as a means of communication because of their great impact on oral and written performance.

Keywords: KAU, ELI, SMS, T-test, Levels

Introduction

Short messages (SMS) can be of great importance to English language teaching in particular and to languages in general. It can be destructive if not controlled and left to accept make up words, choppy lingo, sloppy spelling and grammatical errors to get a quick and short message across (Starovoit, 2012). On the other hand, it can be a very good tool to boost language skills and sub skills if controlled and written in proper English especially that it comprises the main corpus of people's communication. Because (SMS) is widely used, some schools include them in their lesson plans. Some teachers use the quick writing style to spark the students' learning. They allow children to use SMS language in their first draft to get thoughts and ideas into paper more quickly. Then students can go back to Standard English when editing and revising.

In their response to the effect of (SMS) on writing, educators fall in three groups: On one hand, some teachers believe that abbreviations used in (SMS) are assaulting written English; students' papers are full of punctuation mistakes, bad grammar and inappropriate abbreviations. On the other hand, some claim positive effect of (SMS) as students are exposed to writing in a more relaxing and less stressful atmosphere. A third party says that (SMS) like slang language has its own language that has no effect on Standard English (Russel, 2012)

Research Question

The study attempts to answer one question:

Does the frequent use of SMS affect students' spoken and written communication skills?

Importance of the study

There are many reasons that make text messaging one of the best and most convenient means of communication especially in an environment like KSA. You rarely find a student who doesn't have at least one mobile phone. Most of their mobile phones have internet access that enables them to send and receive SMS anytime and anywhere as long as there is coverage. Students in this environment are so addicted to mobiles that they don't stop using them even in the classroom. Responding to this situation, we can't but go with the flow and benefit of this unavoidable situation as many teachers say:

“the best way to fight something is not to oppose it but rather to harness its own energy and convert that energy into learning”. (Maclean (2010))

Another reason is that SMS is a very easy and cheap way to convey any message. Any company or institution regardless of the number of staff it has can tell its members in one minute about a delay of an exam, a meeting or the first day of study or any other issue. A third reason is that SMS serves academic purposes; one can write, rewrite, store for later assessment and correction of mistakes, give feedback and receive revised versions. This process of healthy teacher-students exchanging of messages away from the traditional red pen and paper assessment is undoubtedly less threatening and more motivating to students. The three reasons above are enough to explore SMS and to investigate its impact on students' performance in English and other languages.

Limitations of the study

The sample of the study is restricted to twenty students the number of students the researcher could manage to exchange SMS with. The two forms of tests (written and oral) employed in the study are developed and organized by the researcher. Students are asked to send only one SMS a day to give enough time for the teacher to read, correct and send back and not to be money consuming.

Review of Literature

Most students either at university or at school have had the habit of using text messages in most of their communication. They are quick, they don't follow the rules of English grammar, they are relatively cheap, more convenient, they allow creativity and saves secrecy especially when communicating very personal affairs while sitting with others. This addiction to text messages has inspired researchers and educators to think about academic applications of text messages in the EFL/ESL classroom. Hashemi and Azizinezhad, (2012) gave an example of the academic use of text messages. This example is the language teacher Michael Nilson who owns and operates www.learning-by-sms.com – a language education company launched sometime ago and is dedicated to teaching foreign languages through the use of SMS technology. The idea comes from the fact that people are short of time and they wish they could speak more than one language; all they should do is to learn an entire foreign language, just by reading SMS messages sent to their cell phones.

The Effect of SMS on Writing

A few researchers and theoreticians have unanimous agreement that text messaging has a positive effect on students' writing. O'Connor (2006) examines how students' use of text messaging technology affects their writing skills and how classroom teachers can build on students' use of this increasingly popular technology. IM can be harnessed by educators to help students learn school-related content as when teachers encourage students to use messaging shorthand to spark their thinking processes. The use of IM speak can be useful in building student- teacher relationships in enhancing students' comfort level in school setting and in improving academic performance. Al-Qmoul (2011) investigated the effect of using English Short Message Service (SMS) on the development of the first year students' spoken and written communicative skills in Tafila Technical University. The findings of the study show that the students who practice English SMS in their communication with their colleagues, friends and families improved greatly in both oral and written skills. The researcher recommended that students use English SMS in their communication. Dansie (2011) examines the transformative effect of SMS text messages on students' written communication skills. In his article he examines the possible effects of SMS on students' writing skills, and students' and teachers' attitudes towards this phenomenon. Jacob (2011) conducted a study to investigate the effect of using mobile phone short message service (SMS) on note taking and comprehension of materials presented through an audio system. The results of the study concluded that SMS style of writing improves students' note-taking competence as well as comprehension. Based on these findings, recommendations were made including the teaching and learning of strategic note taking using SMS style of writing, and also that teachers should make deliberate and conscious efforts to encourage their students to write notes during lectures.

The Effect of SMS on Speaking

Because SMS is a practical safer and less expensive means of communication, it has been used in place of speech to settle conflicts, stay in touch with family members and friends, and increase intimacy in all types of relationships. Teenagers and adults commonly use "small talk" in text messages to communicate about issues that are not very important to them. This is a way to avoid talking about issues that more appealing to adults. An example of this is when a teenager sits at the dinner table texting about sports or cars to a friend. The teenagers' family would probably prefer to talk about their day, but according to several studies, what the teenager texts about with his friend is more beneficial to how he communicates with the public. Because the teenager is shifting his communication to the world outside the family, he becomes less shy and more likely to open up to new people. (Starovoit (2012))

The Effect of SMS on Teaching Vocabulary

Teaching vocabulary has occupied much space in the research of the last decade as vocabulary is the most important component of teaching and learning languages especially in relation to communication. Motlebzadah (2011) investigated the effect of Short Message Service (SMS) on the retention of collocations among Iranian lower intermediate EFL learners. To do this, forty university students were assigned into experimental and control groups. The participants received English collocations as well as definitions and example sentences either on paper or through SMS messages in a scheduled pattern of delivery twice a week during five weeks. Students were compared at the end of the study. The results showed that participants in the SMS group could significantly outperform the ones in the conventional group. Bushnell, et al (2011) conducted a study to investigate 10- to 12-year-old Australian children's text-messaging practices and their relationship to traditional spelling ability. Of the 227 children tested, 82% reported sending text-messages; a median of 5 per day.

Children produced a wide range of text-message abbreviations when asked to re-write a list of 30 conventionally-spelt words as they would in a text-message to a friend. The proportion of textism produced was significantly positively correlated with general spelling ability, which agrees with previous findings of positive relationships between children's textism use and literacy. Tabatabaei and Goojani (2012) investigated the effectiveness of text messaging on vocabulary learning of EFL learners. The participants in the experimental group were required to send SMSs containing a sentence for each covered word in class while those in the control group wrote some sentences containing the target words to exchange them with their partners and bring their assignment to class. Results of t-test analysis indicated that participants in the experimental group out performed those in the control groups. Haashem and Azizinezhad (2012) study how short message (SMS) can help EFL/ESL students in learning English vocabulary. They aimed at investigating the capabilities of this new learning method, and students' attitudes towards it. They guide language learners to integrate mobile technology into their study plan and finally to be flexible in their learning activities. The findings of the various research projects show that SMS-based vocabulary learning can increase EFL/ESL language learners' flexibility and may be highly motivating for them.

Worries about Using SMS

Pushed by their worries about language against abbreviations, word shortenings and acronyms in addition to other violations of grammar rules, some researchers showed their concerns that messages may cause unintentional harm to Standard English. This in turn will cause communication barriers among English speaking countries in the future. Freudenberg (2009) examined the impact of SMS speak on the written school work of English first language and English second language high school learners. The aims are to see how common the SMS is among high school learners and to look for evidence of the use of SMS features in the English written work of such learners. Results show that high school learners are avid users of SMS. All participants reported using SMS features while writing messages and many use these features in their written school work. O'connor (2006) expressed her concern about "bastardization" that is the use of bad grammar, poor punctuation and improper abbreviations in academic writing. Ping, A. C. and et al (2011) conducted a study to visualize how the adoption of SMS language affects writing among its adopters. Analyses were made on the semantic and syntactic aspects of the e-mails. Traces of impact of SMS on the standard of writing among the participants were also examined from several other aspects. The findings suggest that the degree of the ignorant use of SMS language in writing among university students might reach an unacceptable state if not observed.

Njemanze, (2012) examines the SMS style of language communication among Nigerian University students with emphasis on its effect on English language usage. The paper comes to a conclusion that SMS style will generate greater linguistic confusion if it is not controlled.

Methodology and Procedures

Research Design

Participants in this study were 40 foundation year students enrolled at KAU for the academic year 2012/2013. The participants were enrolled in two level 2 sections 20 students each. The two sections were chosen randomly from 70 level 2 sections. Level 2 was chosen as it is a medium level, not easy and not difficult. The two sections were assigned to two groups: a control group to be taught using the strategies followed in ELI and an experimental group to be taught using the same strategies as the control group in addition to using (SMS) as a means of communication between the students and their teacher.

Instruments of the Study

Three instruments were used in this study: the first one was using students-teacher and teacher-students interaction through SMS to exchange ideas and provide feedback about students' writing performance. The English SMS was exchanged on daily basis – at least one 10 to 15 word message per day written in full English words free of abbreviations and short forms. These messages were corrected by the teacher and sent back again to students for further revision. The second instrument was an oral test which consisted of two tasks: Task 1 is Picture Discussion where a student has to describe what he can see in a picture using at least five correct sentences and Task 2 where a student acts as a customer and the teacher as a sales agent. The two tasks are marked out of 20. Third: The writing test where students are asked to write a well- organized paragraph about one of two topics related to the material they studied throughout the module. They are provided with helpful information and given the freedom to add information of their own. See Appendix 1

The validity of the two tests was approved by a number of referees (five members of staff with varied qualifications and experience). The reliability coefficient correlations for the two tests-speaking and writing- were found to be 0.81% and 0.84% respectively which were considered satisfactory for the purpose of the study. A t-test was used to find out the effect of practicing SMS on the students' oral and written performance.

Results of the Study

To find out whether there are any statistically significant differences between the means of the control and the experimental groups on the pre-test, a t-test was used and the results were as follows. (See table 1)

Table 1: Mean Scores of the Control and Experimental Groups on the Pre-Tests- Writing and Speaking.

	Experimental group		Control group		T-test value	d.f	Sig.
	Mean	Stdv.	Mean	Stdv.			
Writing	13.85	2.37	13.15	2.23	0.962	38	0.342
Speaking	14.65	1.46	13.80	1.91	1.582	38	0.122
Tabulated t is calculated at the significant level (0.05) at (38) df, and reached (1.684)							

Table 1 shows that t statistical (0.96) for the writing pre test is smaller than t critical (1.684), the significance is 0.342 which is bigger than 0.05 and the mean scores for the experimental and the control groups on the pretest are almost the same (13.85 and 13.15) respectively. This means that there are no statistically significant differences between the experimental and the control groups on the writing pretest. Table 1 also shows that t statistical (1.58) for the speaking pre test is smaller than t critical (1.684), the significance is 0.122 which is bigger than 0.05 and the mean scores for the experimental and the control groups are close to each other (14.65 and 13.80) respectively. This means that there are no statistically significant differences between the experimental and the control groups on the speaking pretest.

Table 2: Mean Scores of the Control and Experimental Groups on the Post-Tests- Writing and Speaking.

	Experimental group		Control group		T-test value	d.f	Sig (2-tailed)
	Mean	Stdv.	Mean	Stdv.			
Writing	19.90	1.68	13.70	1.56	4.289**	38	0.00
Speaking	17.60	1.88	13.55	1.76	7.04**	38	0.00
Tabulated t is calculated at the significant level (0.05) at (38) df, and reached (1.684)							

** Difference is significant at (0.01) level.

Table 2 shows that the mean scores on the writing post test are in favor of the experimental group (using SMS as a students-teacher and teacher-students means of communication) which is (19.90). Whereas the mean score of the control group is (13.70). Table 2 shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the writing scores of the experimental group and that of the control group. Students in the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group at the 1% level.

Table 2 also shows that the mean scores on the speaking Post test are in favor of the experimental group (using SMS as a students-teacher and teacher-students means of communication) which is (17.60). Whereas the mean score of the control group is (13.55). As table 2 shows t statistical on the speaking post test (7.04) is much more than t critical (1.684) and the significance is (0.00) even less than (0.01) which means that the difference in the mean scores is statistically significant.

Upon looking at the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in table 1, we can easily discover that they are almost equal for both the writing and the speaking tests. On the other hand, table 2 shows that the mean scores on the post test are in favor of the experimental group in both the speaking and the writing test. This means that the differences in the mean scores are attributed to using short messaging service as a students-teacher and teacher-students means of communication. The clear improvement of students' performance while writing the short messages over the seven weeks is enough proof that SMS is a very beneficial strategy if controlled and corrected. (See Appendix 3)

Discussion

The evidence obtained in this study showed that prior to using SMS as a teaching/ learning strategy students in the experimental group were not as good in writing as they were after using SMS on daily basis and receiving immediate feedback from the teacher. The performance of the students in the experimental group improved significantly more than those in the control group. This statistically significant difference in the mean scores in favor of the experimental group refers to students sending about 10 to 15 word short messages to the teacher on daily bases over seven weeks through a device students are motivated to use. This could be because students had the chance to receive immediate feedback from their teacher through the same channel away from the red pen or the embarrassing moments in front of their colleagues.

Students in normal cases write once a week in the best cases because teachers don't have enough time to correct and give feedback. Furthermore, they consider writing one of the difficult skills as students don't like to run the risk of making mistakes and consequently losing grades. Writing short text messages gives students a chance to practice their writing through doing something that is part of their daily or even hourly routine. Something they do unintentionally and with pleasure. This improvement in students' writing appears clearly in the sample of students' messages over the seven weeks. (See Appendix 3)

The above mentioned research has shown positive relationship between text messaging and writing performance (O'Conner, (2006); Al-Qmoul, (2011); Jacob, (2011); Dansieh, (2012)). But most of these researchers always conclude by reaffirming that the frequency of SMS style may generate linguistic confusion if not controlled, Njemanze, (2012) or students may have the tendency to adopt non-standard uses and contracted forms of English words in their formal writings, Dansieh, (2011). In order to avoid such inconveniences, the researcher in this study informed the students that their messages should be in correct English free of any abbreviations, shortenings, contractions, initials or any non-conventional spelling. The immediate feedback from the teacher confirms the impression that text messages should be in formal English.

Table 1 also showed that prior to using SMS as a teaching/learning strategy, students in the experimental group were not as good in speaking as they were after using SMS on daily basis and getting immediate feedback from the teacher. The performance of the students in the experimental group improved significantly more than those in the control group as shown in Table 2. This statistically significant difference in the mean scores in favor of the experimental group refers to the excessive exposure to English language through writing every day and receiving feedback from the teacher. These SMS texts that mainly summarize what students have studied everyday especially vocabulary items and new expressions give students the chance to have more input and consequently better ability to express themselves. As independent foundation year students, they find texting, practical, easier and an affordable means of communication which makes it a good substitute for speaking.

Conclusion

Using SMS in language learning is one of the best opportunities for language learners to extend and increase their learning outside of their classrooms whenever and wherever they desire. Language learners would be able to extend their learning opportunities and participate in a different type of learning. They are highly motivated to use SMS because they can communicate things they can't communicate through other means and they enjoy the freedom of violating the rules of spelling and grammar constraints. Responding to this situation, educators and technicians at schools and other academic institutions should be very sensitive and skillful in exploiting this phenomenon. Students shouldn't feel they are being deceived through using something they are fond of for something they may not feel easy about. Once they discover that the SMS is part of the serious teaching and learning process, their attitude may change towards it.

The results of research over the last decade led to a conclusion that mobile phone and text messaging use is very high and has the potential to rise whenever there is a need for communication. With such empirical evidence, the main stream of researchers (Freudenberg (2009), O'connor (2006), Ping, A. C. and et al (2011), Njemanze, (2012) warned of the negative effect of SMS on learners academic work and formal writing. If the SMS features are not controlled, students are likely to get so used to it that they may no longer realize the need for Standard English constructions even in writings that are supposed to be formal, a phenomenon O'Connor (2005) describes as "saturation".

Recommendations

Students should not only see text messaging as the easier and quicker means of communication, but should realize its negative effects on their academic work. They should practice writing formal letters and essays adhering to grammatical conventions and writing mechanics. They should be conscious of their writing so as to separate informal and formal writing in order not to use text features in their formal academic work. If they want their writing and speaking performance in English to get better, they should write their messages in correct English as much as possible and to consider their teachers' feedback every time they write a new message. On the other hand, teachers should give assignments and assess student' work properly warning their students of using the text messaging features. If these recommendations are utilized, it is believed that the negative effects of SMS style of communication on students' academic performance and formal writing will be reduced.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the management and students of the foundation year in ELI/KAU for their cooperation and support, my colleagues who helped me in conducting this study, my family who were patient and tolerant and finally my colleague Dr Salah Zugheib whose comments and editing remarks add much richness to this article.

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B. Task 2: Buying an item from a shop.

Teacher: shop assistant

Student: customer

Teacher: Can I help you?

Student:

Teacher: What color/size are you looking for?

Student:.....

Teacher: What about this one? Do you like this?

Student:

Teacher: (if asked about the price) £39.

How do you want to pay?

Student:

Teacher: That's fine. Thank you very much.



Appendix Three

Samples of Students Text Messages over Seven Weeks

No.	Student Name	Students' Messages	Teachers' feedback
after week 3			
1	Faisal	We studied today is yes or no questions, how add possessive's, and prices of meals in baker ster street café.	Today we studied yes/no questions. How to add the possessive "s", and the prices of meals in Baker Street Café.
2	Abdullah	I wrote power book. I lisen studnt book in the laptob. My teatsher is gave papers	I wrote power point. I listened to the student book in the laptop. My teacher gave us papers.
3	Hazem	We finished unite one. We started unitetwo. I am wrote power book. Unite one	We finished unit one. We started unit two. I wrote power point unit one.
4	Mashaal	Today we studid how do we know ourselves and also pronouns and then received a list of words and understanding how to pronns and mening	Today we studied how to know ourselves and also pronouns and then received a list of words and understood how to pronounce and meanings
5	Majid	We studied today is vocabulary and pronunciation when to use a and an, personl identity card.	Today we studied vocabulary and pronunciation. When to use a and an, personal identity card.
6	Suhaib	We studied today is pronuns, How tell frinds about my self and hans story with blind man.	Today we studied the pronouns. How to tell friends about me. We studied the story "Hans and the Blind man."
7	Firas	PLECE GIVE ME RED STORY We have study subjekit and object. I lerning new word. I am taking with my friend	Please give me the story to read it. Today we studied subject and object. We learned new words. I talked to my friend.
After week 5			
1	Faisal	Today we are study can, can't, cod, wer was , negativ positiv We study words parents, interested, succesful, chocolat.	Today we studied "can and could", "was and were", the negative and the positive. We also studied the following vocabulary items: parent, interested, successful and chocolate.
2	Abdullah	We lisen CD, we sit group, data show, we study accounts, supermarket, produc, company, parents.	We listened to the CD, we sat in groups, we used the data show. We also studied the vocabulary items: account, supermarket, produce, company and parents.

3	Hazem	We write booklet, reading circle, grammar, wh, question, who, which were, what, speaking. We take words- cotton, created, sister, daughter	We wrote in the booklet, we took reading circle, we studied Wh. Questions- who, which, where and what. We took the words: cotton, created, sister and daughter.
4	Mashaal	We study how to make question, who, which, where when- do, does, we know words new coplet, journey, amaze impossible	We studied how to make questions-who, which, where and when., do, does. We knew some words like complete, journey, amaze and impossible.
5	Majid	The teacher give reading groups, ask question play game datasho, we had listening and writing. We studied vocabulary- politics, orange juice, machine	The teacher gave us reading in groups, asked questions, played games, used the data show and we had listening and writing. We studied some words: politics, orange juice and machine.
6	Suhaib	Today I study present and past, make short question, negative positive, I study words fashionabl, strong, spanish	Today I studied the present and the past, how to make short questions and the negative and the positive. We studied words like fashionable, strong and Spanish.
7	Firas	Teacher make quiz, on projector, I came late. We study how to ask question, negative, we study words picture, produce. Work room, transmitted	I came late. The teacher gave us a quiz on the projector. We learned how to make questions, negative and positive. We studied some vocabulary items like: picture, produce, workroom and transmitted.
After week 7			
1	Faisal	Today we study have and have got, the comparative and the superlative. We know some words: population, expensive and originally. We take reading circle 2 and answered a worksheet.	Today, we studied “ have, have got” The comparative and superlative. We know some new words: population, expensive and originally. We took reading circle 2 and answered a worksheet.
2	Abdullah	What are units in final? Are we know all words? Today we study –er, –est We take words: commercial, business, sanitation. We write paragraph about my favorite job.	What are the units included in the final? Do we have to know all the words? Today we studied –er and –est. We studied words like: commercial, business, sanitation. We wrote a paragraph about my favorite job.
3	Hazem	We study the present continuous, rules spelling the pronouns. We take new vocab: interested, umbrella, parachute, dangerous.	We studied the present continuous, spelling rules and pronouns. We also studied new vocabulary items: interested, umbrella, parachute and dangerous.
4	Mashaal	We take reading, make groups, discuss the story, teacher asked question we know words like disgusting, hungry, dangerous, volcano.	We took reading circle, made groups, discuss the story. The teacher asked us questions. We studied some new words like: disgusting, hungry, dangerous and volcano.
5	Majid	Today we are study wh. Questions who, which, where. We study adverbs, and adjectives. We take words like businessman, understand, thankful, grandchildren.	Today, we studied Wh. Questions- who, which, where..., We studied verbs and adjectives. We also studied new words like: businessman, understand, thankful and grandchildren.
6	Suhaib	We studied the past simple and the present perfect. He ate dinner. He has eaten dinner. Regular and irregular verbs. We study words: surprised, interesting, mountains.	We studied the past simple and the present perfect. He ate dinner. He has eaten dinner. We also studied regular and irregular verbs. We studied words like: surprised, interesting, mountains.
7	Firas	The teacher make revision, tell us about exam final, do worksheet, correct writing booklet. Important for the exam: reading, vocab. Grammar, listening.	The teacher made revision. He told us about the final exam. We did a worksheet and the teacher corrected the writing booklet. He told us to focus on reading, vocabulary, grammar and listening for the final exam.