Text messaging, pragmatic competence, and affective facilitation in the EFL context: A pilot study

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Abstract

Since text messaging is a widely popular method of communication among young people, the paper tries to investigate whether it might have some practical application in the EFL classroom. Kuwaiti EFL students asked to render a mixture of text messages written by their peers and native English speakers into Standard English produced a large number and variety of basic language errors. However, native English-speaking judges were unsuccessful in discriminating between the native and non-native English messages. In addition, the EFL text messages showed that the students were effectively able to achieve their pragmatic aims. Text messaging may therefore have some pedagogical use in terms of motivating the learner. This idea is supported by referring to studies in the literature on text messaging which suggest that the medium may not be as linguistically damaging as is commonly thought.

Résumé

Partant du constat que les jeunes font un usage fréquent des messages téléphoniques instantanés (parfois appelés textos ou SMS pour Short Message Service), cet article examine quelques applications de ce mode de communication en classe d'Anglais Langue Seconde (ALS). Des étudiants koweitiens en classe d'ALS à qui on a demandé de traduire en anglais standard des messages téléphoniques écrits par leurs pairs ou par des locuteurs natifs de l'anglais produisent un nombre élevé d'erreurs linguistiques élémentaires. En revanche, les SMS en langue anglaise de ces mêmes étudiants koweitiens ne peuvent être distingués de ceux écrits par des locuteurs natifs de l'anglais et atteignent parfaitement leurs objectifs pragmatiques de communication. Il est proposé ici que ces SMS peuvent avoir une utilité pédagogique dans la motivation des apprenants. Un survol de la littérature spécialisée sur les SMS nous porte également à conclure que ce mode de communication n'est pas aussi nuisible linguistiquement qu'on a tendance à le croire.

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Introduction

One of the most striking developments in recent years has been the rapid spread of the mobile telephone and, along with it, the widespread use of text messaging, particularly among the young. This growth can be seen in the fact that, while Crystal (2001) reported that 15 billion messages were sent world-wide during August 2000, Watts (2008) reported that 212,616,000 SMS messages were being sent *every day*. In spite of its ubiquity, text messaging does not seem to have attracted as much research attention in the area of pedagogy as other forms of electronic communication, but it may be helpful to examine this wider research area to draw any possible useful insights that might have relevance to text messaging. It is now customary in this context to distinguish between asynchronous communication, where there is a delay between sending and receiving the message (as in threaded discussions, emails, and text messages), and synchronous communication, where there is no delay, apart from the time taken to type and read the message (as in instantaneous interaction on a local area network and chat groups) (Renkema, 2004). We now know that, compared to the face-to-face situation, electronic discussions by second and foreign language students result in more formal language (Warschauer, 1996), more complex language (Kern, 1995; Warschauer,1996; Ortega, 1999), and more equal contributions among the participants (Warschauer,1996). Furthermore, within computer-mediated discussion, Sotillo (2000) found that advanced EFL students produced more complex syntax in asynchronous discussions than in synchronous discussions, the facilitating factor undoubtedly being the extra processing time afforded by the delay between contributions. Obviously, it would be unwise to try any direct extrapolation from pedagogically inspired electronic discussion to text messaging since the latter is, by its very nature, informal, abbreviated, and unsupervised (although see Haggan, 2007, for a discussion of the formal, unabbreviated nature of Arabic text messages).

On the other hand, there *is* a clear link between the reduced type of language used in internet chatting and that used in text messages and Crystal (2001) attributes some of the abbreviated forms in text messaging to the users' familiarity with chat rooms and what he calls "Netspeak." In fact, text messaging is something of a hybrid since it allows for the easy informality of synchronous conversation while, at the same time, its asynchronous nature permits the sender to deliberate over the content and form of the message, or indeed whether to send the message at all. This special nature of text messaging has given rise to a wave of studies internationally, mostly relating to the psychological and cultural implications of text messaging among teenagers, of which addiction to the medium figures prominently. (See Bergs, 2003; Igarashi, Motoyoshi, Takai, & Yoshida, 2005, 2006; Kasesniemi & Rautiainen, 2002; Kim & Mitomo, 2006; Laurilla, 2002; Ling & Yttri, 2002; Puro, 2002; Rössler & Höflich, 2002; Reid & Reid, 2004; Segerstadt, 2003; Smith & Williams, 2004.)

The Middle East presents an area of particular interest because of the cultural constraints which might affect mobile phone usage in general and text messaging in particular. Using data obtained from a questionnaire eliciting information from just over 300 Kuwaiti mobile phone

users aged mainly between 16 and 25, Haggan (2007) found that text messaging was a fairly common means of communicating among the respondents and, in spite of the introduction of the Arabic keypad, around three quarters of them indicated some use of English in their messages. This use ranged from the case of a few English characters mixed in with Arabic characters in Arabic messages, through to a rough phonetic rendition of Arabic messages using English characters and extended to messages written entirely in English using English characters, the latter constituting 13.2% of the sample.

Given the fact that English is not the native language of Kuwaitis, it may seem remarkable that so many respondents said they usually send their text messages completely in English. This can be explained partly by the fact that English is a well-established second language in Kuwait, with a large number of private English medium schools, while children in the government Arabic medium schools start English lessons from the age of 6 to 7. However, another reason frequently mentioned by informants was that they were accustomed to chatting on the internet where similar abbreviated language and symbols are used. Students taking part in Haggan's survey were also asked to submit copies of English text messages they had received from friends or family and, on inspection, they illustrated some of the devices listed by Crystal (2001) as used in native English text messages. For example, they showed the reduction of commonly recurring stereotyped phrases to strings of letters, the reliance on consonants and omission of vowels, and the use of contractions and innovative abbreviations. Students also showed knowledge of some of the symbols used in texting such as the more common emoticons. A few examples from their messages are:

:-D	happy
:-(	sad
:'-(	I'm crying
:-*	a kiss
:-p	making fun of someone

In short, their English text messages "looked like" text messages sent by native speakers.

However, the question then arises of how far these impressions of *apparent* authenticity are, in fact, valid. The question is an important one since a positive answer would seem to offer the possibility that text messaging in English could have useful application in fostering the confidence of EFL students in their ability to communicate in English. However, communication has two sides: production by the speaker/writer and comprehension by the hearer/reader. Regardless of whether the messages are comparable to those written by native speakers, our focus is on their reception by non-native speakers. How many of the English messages received by EFL students do they actually understand? Given the conventions employed in text messages, does decoding the contracted forms and reduced syntax prove too much of a challenge for the non-native speaker? In an attempt to provide some empirical answers to these questions, the following investigation was carried out, starting with the first one, namely how native-like are the text messages of the EFL students in the study?

The Present Study

Message Production

Participants.

(a) The Students.

The students taking part in this part of the study were 10 Kuwaiti nationals who were students majoring in linguistics in the Department of English Language and Literature, Kuwait University, and who were enrolled in a third-year course in Discourse Analysis. At this point, it may be worth outlining the background of students in this department vis à vis their standard in English. Many of them have already been educated in English medium private schools in Kuwait and these follow either the British or American curriculum. Graduates from these schools adhere to the corresponding variety of English. In the government schools, the British influence predominates as far as English teaching is concerned. Consequently, any class may present a somewhat mixed population with respect to variety of English in use by individual students, a situation mirrored by the teaching faculty which comprises members with PhDs in branches of linguistics and literature from both sides of the Atlantic. This mixture has given rise to a fairly relaxed attitude whereby teachers accept either variety of English, with the underlying proviso that students aim at consistency. Students entering the Faculty of Arts first have to take a number of general subjects, among which are two English language skills courses. Those wishing to major in English have to obtain a score of at least 70% in an English proficiency examination prepared locally by the testing specialists in the Language Centre of the university targeting general skills and also those areas which experienced EFL teachers know to be problematic in Kuwaiti students. This score is felt to represent the minimum level which would enable students to engage effectively in their English-degree courses. Subsequent to attaining the necessary score, they take a variety of English-taught required courses in both literature and linguistics before specializing in one of these disciplines. Since students entering the department are assumed to have already reached the above level of competence in English, they are required to take only two credit skills courses, one on writing techniques and the other allowing a choice between oral presentation and dramatics.

Text messaging is one of the topics touched on in the course on Discourse Analysis and it generated enthusiastic discussion among class members. All reported that they regularly write and receive text messages in English. As to their daily frequency of sending and receiving English text messages, four said they send and receive around 5 such messages, three said between 5 and 10 messages, and three estimated between 10 and 20. On this basis, it was felt that they were familiar enough with texting to provide suitable data.

Students' Task. Students from the above class were asked to collect English text messages they received from their fellow students over a one-week period. The only restriction placed on the collection of messages was that they should be those they had received from their classmates. With the permission of the recipients and the suppression of the senders' names, these were presented to the class and agreement was reached that the messages constituted a representative sample of the types of messages they commonly send and receive.

Text messages used in the study. After removing messages which were written in a mixture of English and Arabic, the remaining English messages were further screened to eliminate those incorporating local place or person names. The remaining 12 were mixed with 6 English text messages composed by native English speakers. The latter were taken from various internet sites, but rested heavily on a sample presented by Thurlow (2003), who had collected them from British undergraduates. One further restriction was placed on the choice of messages from this group, however; namely, the exclusion of those which were too sexually explicit. In the context of conservative Kuwaiti society, in such messages, the content and not the style of text message language might have revealed their provenance. The messages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Text Messages Used in the Study

	Message	**Native/Non-Native**
1	Where shall i meet u tonite? What time? See u soon	Native
2	y u gotta go? Ur dad's cumin?	Non-native
3	May b lata?	Non-native
4	C u in 5 min	Native
5	Oki dok, wen u cumin ova?	Non-native
6	RUF2T?	Native
7	No class 2day! Woohoo!	Non-native
8	Would u prefer me calling u B4 class or after?	Non-native
9	Erd ur doin proj.did u 12 borrow mine?	Native
10	Awake? Busy? Can call? Gonna let me wait long?	Non-native
11	Luv ya kidow	Non-native
12	B4, we used 2go2NY2C my bro FTF.ILNY,its a gr8 plc	Native
13	u got blutoof or not? I got a nice ring tone u'd like : D	Non-native
14	R u bak already? I am not comin 4 anuva 2 wks	Non-native
15	haha tanx but no tanx	Non-native
16	Read ur email-thought waz gonna burst	Native
17	Snd me a msg wen u get there	Non-native
18	It k. Sharing ur probs makes me happy :-)	Non-native

(b) Judges.

The judges were 10 native speakers of English from a variety of occupations: English language teaching (at Kuwait University), teaching English literature at Kuwait University, the British army (officer level), executive secretarial and school teaching. All were educated to at least the level of BA or BSc. They were recruited from the writer's colleagues in the English Department or were members of the public at large approached in a local coffee shop. All were

either British or American, and were unaware of the general aims of the project. Since there is currently much discussion regarding what constitutes nativeness in the context of language, it may be useful to refer to one writer's thoughts on this. At the end of an entire book devoted to the topic, Davies (1991, p. 167) concludes that "to be a native speaker means not being a non-native speaker. Even if I cannot define a native speaker, I can define a non-native speaker negatively as someone who is not regarded by him/herself or by native speakers as a native speaker." All the judges, by this criterion, were assuredly native speakers and had no difficulty in understanding the requirement to judge whether something was written by a native or a non-native speaker. In addition, all judges said they were comfortable with the required task since they regularly sent and received text messages.

Judges' Task. The messages were presented to the judges in a table and they were asked to tick the appropriate box beside each one depending on whether they thought it had been sent by a native speaker or a non-native speaker or they couldn't tell (i.e., it could be either). These instructions allowed for six possibilities: that a message written by a non-native-speaker could be judged as having been written by a native speaker, a non-native speaker, or by either a native or a non-native speaker and a similar classification for messages written by native speakers.

Results.

The total number of "votes" for each of these categories is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Opinions of Judges

	Judges' opinions of non-native messages			**Judges' opinions of native messages**		
Judge	**Non-native could be either**	**Non-native judged to be native**	**Non-native judged to be non-native**	**Native could be either**	**Native judged to be non-native**	**Native judged to be native**
1	5	6	1	2	2	2
2	4	1	7	1	2	3
3	2	6	4	3	1	2
4	8	0	4	3	3	0
5	0	8	4	1	3	2
6	0	5	7	0	3	3
7	1	8	3	0	3	3
8	3	3	6	2	1	3
9	3	4	5	0	0	6
10	6	4	2	3	1	2
Total	32	45	43	15	19	26
%	26.7	37.5	35.8	25	31.7	43.3
	64.2% of judgments of non-native messages were incorrect		**35.8%** of judgments were correct	**56.7%** of judgments of native messages were incorrect		**43.3%** of judgments were correct

As can be seen, judges were correct in identifying non-native messages as such in only 35.8% of cases, which was slightly less than those non-native messages they judged to have been written by native speakers. These figures would indicate that a message written by a non-native

speaker would be just as likely to be considered as a native English message as a non-native message. However, added to this is the fact that judges were unable to decide in the case of a further 26.7% of instances whether a non-native-message was sent by a native speaker or a non-native speaker. This confusion as to authorship is further compounded by the figures obtained for the messages written by native speakers. Again, judges showed a high degree of uncertainty over whether messages were written by native or non-native speakers, with just over half their opinions being to the effect that messages which had been written by native speakers were written by non-native speakers or could have been written by either native or non-native speakers.

Judges were also asked for any optional comments they could offer as to why they had decided that any particular message(s) had been written by a native speaker. Responses here ranged from "just a gut reaction," to fairly elaborate analysis of spelling and types of contracted forms used. As indicated by the above figures, these strategies yielded mixed results as far as accuracy was concerned. For instance, one judge felt (erroneously) that the more elaborate or obscure the contraction, the more likely it was that the writer would be a non-native speaker since non-native speakers would want to show off their facility in using this medium. The presence of colloquial expressions was another clue cited as an indicator that the writer was a native speaker (again, an erroneous assumption). However, another judge felt that the spelling of some words (such as *lata* for *later*, *cumin* for *coming* and *kiddow* for *kiddo)* were give-aways that the writer was not a native speaker and, in this case, judged some of the messages correctly. As can be seen from these comments, judges reported a diversity of strategies to distinguish between native and non-native messages and this in itself would seem to offer an interesting area for further investigation.

Discussion.

It has to be admitted that the sample obtained in this analysis was small, which is why the present investigation has to be regarded in the nature of a pilot study, raising certain questions or presenting suggestions that would merit investigation on a larger scale. However, notwithstanding this limitation, certain useful insights can be derived from the analysis. In summing up the findings, it can be said that it was not easy to distinguish the native from the non-native English text messages, and that text messaging language may provide a basic type of universal English which can be picked up and used by young native speakers and non-native speakers alike. Another way of looking at this is to say that the findings suggest that text messaging provided the participating students with a vehicle not just for communicating, but for doing so in a way that is essentially indistinguishable from that of native speakers in English.

This is surely a situation which is both unusual and valuable. Indeed, the format of text messages could almost be said to be an EFL student's dream. Once the commoner abbreviations are mastered, which does not seem to present our students with any great difficulty, a message can be communicated without any apparent need to worry about spelling, tenses, agreement, etc. The fact that their text messages were so authentic in terms of comparison with those of native speakers seems to point to a positive spin-off from the text-messaging phenomenon. One can therefore see how it could be utilized, perhaps occasionally, as a classroom aid to encouraging fluency of written expression by allowing a largely error-free output. This outcome would seem

to be a reinforcing state of affairs for the EFL student. In general, students in my linguistics classes show an aversion to writing about the respective course material. Lack of confidence in their ability to express themselves adequately when writing in the target language is obviously a major factor here. They may have the knowledge of the subject, but feel they do not have the language resources to convey their ideas. To use Krashen's (1985) terminology, their feelings of anxiety regarding writing has set their affective filter too high. Legitimate confidence building should play an important role in the teaching of target language writing, and the occasional utilization of text messaging in an intermediate or advanced EFL class may, therefore, have a place. The satisfaction experienced in composing authentic text messages in the target language could provide one way to lower the affective filter. Also, since the messages are sent and received for the purpose of real-life interaction, using them in the classroom engages students in "learning by doing," one of a list principles of proposed by Doughty and Long (2003) which they feel should underlie CALL, the idea being that students' learning is enhanced by engaging in real communication rather than in fabricated situations. Additional support can be found in Jarvis (2005), who discusses the changes that have arisen in language teaching whereby computers and emails can be used to provide students with the opportunity to engage in authentic, real-life tasks as means of furthering their language skills. This reality-based benefit can be seen to be further enhanced when one looks at the non-native messages obtained from a functional perspective. Inspection reveals that they successfully fulfill various pragmatic functions. These are shown in Table 3, the analysis resting on Searle's (1979) macro-classes of speech acts and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

Table 3

Functional analysis of non-native text messages

	Message	**Pragmatic Function**
2	y u gotta go? Ur dad's cumin?	Interrogatives (Wh +Yes/no) The caller provides a possible answer to her own question, but puts it also in question form indicating the tentative nature of her suggestion. Possibly an attempt to save the positive face of the recipient.
3	May b lata?	Interrogative (Yes/no) The caller appears to be rejecting an appointment (?) with the recipient but, by putting forward the possibility of a later time, does not issue an outright rejection. The positive face of the recipient is thereby saved.
5	Oki dok, wen u cumin ova?	Acceptance (of a previous situation) + Invitation
7	No class 2day! Woohoo!	Representative + Expressive
8	Would u prefer me calling u B4 class or after?	Interrogative. By providing alternatives, the caller preserves the recipient's positive face.

10	Awake? Busy? Can call? Gonna let me wait long?	A series of four interrogatives indicating insistence of the caller that the recipient return the call.
11	Luv ya kidow	Expressive
13	u got blutoof or not? I got a nice ring tone u'd like : D	Inquiry as a pre-offer +Offer
14	R u bak already? I am not comin 4 anuva 2 wks	Interrogative(Yes/no) +Statement
15	haha tanx but no tanx	Expressive + Rejection
17	Snd me a msg wen u get there	Directive
18	It k. Sharing ur probs makes me happy :-)	Reassurance (preserving the recipient's positive face)

As can be seen, these non-native messages reveal authentic dialogue being carried out promoting authentic pragmatic aims. Again, this seems to point to useful pedagogic application. Students could, for instance, be asked to collect messages they have received over a given period and these (with names removed) could be subjected to analysis and discussion by the class, focusing on a range of socio-pragmatic issues. The particular messages in our sample show various and subtle forms of positive politeness, for example, and this could provide a useful basis for discussion on politeness theory for advanced students, as well as on the everyday practical use of polite forms. Negative politeness is something which is difficult for learners to achieve in the target language and its absence can lead to negative social consequences. In our sample, only one directive appears (#17) and it is presented as a bald command. It is, of course, not possible from only one example to say whether this lack of any negative politeness strategy—not even the use of the conventional *please*, or its texting equivalent—arises simply from the shorthand nature of text messages or from a general shortcoming in the use of appropriate pragmalinguistic forms in the target language. In either case, the collection and discussion of requests and directives in student-generated text messages could provide a useful entry into heightening students' awareness of the importance of suitable target language formulae and expressions in establishing and maintaining social relationships. Additionally, drawing attention to the informal nature of text messages would also seem to provide a springboard into constructive advanced level discussion of appropriate use and forms of different registers. Again, this is an activity which must surely have more relevance and meaningfulness to the students by very virtue of the fact that it derives from material that they have generated in their own everyday interactions and which may, therefore, have more impact on student learning than working through the artificial material found in textbook exercises and examples.

Message Reception

Participants.

These were 34 students in the writer's third-year psycholinguistics class who happened to be present on the day of testing.

Task.

The same 18 messages used in the judging task above were retyped and presented to the subjects who were asked to write out the messages in complete form using standard English. To allay any possible anxiety on the part of the students, they were told that the task was not connected to grades in any way and that papers could be handed in without names. These rewritten messages were then inspected to see how far they had been understood by the students.

Results.

Out of a total of 612 possible responses, there were 125 blank or half blank responses (20.4% of total possible responses). The most troublesome was message #6 (RUF2T? [*native*]), which was left completely blank by 19 students and substantially blank by another 5, but messages #9 (Erd ur doin proj.did u 12 borrow mine? [*native*]), #12 (B4, we used 2go2NY2C my bro FTF.ILNY, its a gr8 plc [*native*]), #15 (haha tanx but no tanx [*non-native*]) and #16 (Read ur email-thought waz gonna burst [native]) also proved perplexing to them. Over-all, 29.6% of the messages composed by native speakers and 15.8% of those composed by the non-native speakers were left blank.

Discussion.

The fact that there were so many blank responses may have been partly attributable to the nature of the test situation: since responses were not going to be considered for class grades and were handed in anonymously, students may simply not have put so much effort into the task. However, that this was not the whole answer can be adduced from the fact that certain messages were commonly problematic for the students. Thus, the percentage of native English speakers' messages left blank by the students was almost double that of the non-native speakers' left blank. This difference may indicate that there might be some texting usage patterns common within the native group that students were unfamiliar with. However, it is worth remembering that even within the native English-speaking population, not all abbreviations and other contracted forms used in text messages are readily deciphered—hence the plethora of websites offering texting dictionaries. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that there are local styles and preferences in text-message expression, a suggestion which perhaps may be a matter of interest more to discourse scholars, who could conduct a separate, wider study of text messages written in different regions to ascertain whether this is so. In the context of the present study, since not all the messages were understood by student readers, the question then arises whether these readers would, in fact, do anything to try to seek clarification if they had actually received the messages, or indeed any others that they could not understand. The issue of learner negotiation of meaning in *oral* interchanges has been the subject of considerable research in the field of second-language acquisition, given even more impetus in the light of the newer classroom applications of informal internet chatting and more controlled electronic discussion groups. (See Doughty & Long, 2003 for a useful review of the literature). Extending this line of inquiry to include text messaging seems seems to offer interesting research questions for further investigation. For instance, how far do receivers pursue the meaning of messages they do not understand? Do they seek clarification from any text messaging dictionary/glossary or from the sender? Or, do they simply let the matter rest?

However, in focusing on the text messages that were *not* understood by the students, the fact is being ignored that the majority *were*. Interpreting text messages rests on applying gestalt principles of mentally filling in the gaps in an incomplete stimulus, and involves using contextual, grammatical, orthographical, lexical, and phonological knowledge to help supply missing or unrecognized items. Thus, exercises involving the decipherment of text messages could provide useful training in the top-down processing of written language and thereby enhance reading skill. Again, the fact that such an approach would utilize real messages sent and received by the students would provide a level of motivating validity which may be absent in the exercises prepared in the textbook. Escober-de la Rosa (2003) points the way by demonstrating various language activities based on text messaging which she devised for her students in the Philippines.

Syntactic Accuracy.

When inspecting the rewritten text messages to ascertain how far they were understood by the students, it became clear that these rewrites seemed to be full of syntactic inaccuracies. To further explore this impression, an additional *post hoc* investigation examined the level of grammatical accuracy characterizing the rewritten messages. The students' rewrites were each "graded" independently by two experienced EFL teachers who have taught English to Arabic-speaking students for many years. They simply marked each paper as if it were a composition paper written by an EFL student. Since the messages were so short and did not allow scope for rhetorical development, it essentially meant that the errors picked up on were at the level of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and syntax, and that there was 100% agreement between the judges as to the results of their analysis.

The most common errors were in failure to punctuate the ends of sentences either with a full-stop or question mark, and failure to capitalize in sentence-initial position. Both these errors frequently occurred on occasions where the original message had actually shown correct punctuation or capitalization. Also common were errors in question formation and spelling. Notwithstanding the fact that the text messages the students had to rewrite involved fairly short sentences employing fairly simple structures and vocabulary dealing with everyday matters, a total of 553 errors were counted, equivalent to an average of 16.3 errors per student, or 1.14 errors per sentence attempted. These figures represent a fairly high level of basic inaccuracy, possibly arising out of students relaxing their monitor (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Thus, although they had been asked to take the task seriously, these instructions were perhaps undermined by also telling them that they were not required to write their names on their papers and that the task had nothing to do with grades for the course. As it stands, however, if the students' full versions of the text messages had been treated as a regular classroom exercise, they would have been returned to them covered in a depressing amount of red ink—a situation with the potential to reduce the individual's confidence. Such an outcome has to be contrasted to the more reinforcing situation in which judges found difficulty in telling whether the original text messages had been written by native or non-native speakers.

Conclusion

The general conclusion to be derived from this study is that text messaging seems to offer interesting pedagogical possibilities, especially when taken into consideration with the popularity of text messaging among the young. Specifically, it is something that could be exploited to advantage in the EFL classroom as a means of allowing the intermediate or advanced EFL learner to gain confidence in his or her communicative skills in English. At the production level, the psychological satisfaction of being able to communicate successfully in English may provide strong reinforcement in the learning process, while the demands of interpreting such texts could provide useful training in both bottom-up and top-down reading skills. In addition, student-generated text messages could provide useful resource material for discussion on pragmatic factors underlying informal interaction and lead into a consideration of the forms and functions inherent in different levels of formality in English. Mention has already been made of the limited sample forming the basis of the present study. In spite of this, certain interesting insights have been gained. However, a more extensive study is needed to follow up on some of the points raised. The students providing the text messages here were a specific group, and it would be interesting to widen the net to include other language-speaking groups to see whether similar results would be obtained. Our students were all native speakers of Arabic and it may be worth pointing out Cowan's (1958) observation of the short-hand nature of written Arabic. Except in the Quran and scholarly works, vowel marks for short vowels are usually omitted. Therefore, it might be the case with Arabic-speaking EFL students that interpreting and writing text messaging in English may capitalize to some extent on skills honed through dealing with the orthographical conventions of their native language, so that they enjoy an advantage not enjoyed by non-Arabic speaking EFL students.

While highlighting the gains at both production and comprehension levels deriving from classroom use of students' target language text messages, it is best not to ignore popular perceptions that text messaging contributes to a deterioration in standards of spelling and grammar. If such is truly the case for young native English speakers, then it could be argued that the damaging effects on the English of EFL students must be even greater. However, there may be good reason for believing that such fears may be unfounded. David Reinheimer, Director of the Writing Assessment program at Southeast Missouri State University (reported in Rodgers and Starret (2007)) asserts that students taking the university's writing assessment exam did not use the abbreviated writing styles associated with electronic discourse and that in a first-year seminar, "students were generally aware of the need to adopt a writing style appropriate to the audience." Bergs (2003) puts forward similar views in his study of text messaging in English and German, and attributes the widely held negative views of text messaging in teenagers to what he terms a "complaint tradition" that characterizes attitudes to teenagers in general. Tackling the issue on an empirical basis is Laurilla's (2002) direct testing of grammar and spelling in mobile phone owners versus non-owners among her students at two universities in the Philippines. She found no significant difference between the two groups, and she also suggests that college students are able to make a clear distinction between the formal language used in an academic context and that used in text messaging. Studying a younger age group, Plester, Wood, and Joshi (2009) have even found a positive correlation between knowledge and use of text

messaging abbreviations and good literacy attainment standards in British 10-12 year olds. Commenting on this correlation and on an earlier study by the same group (Plester, Wood, & Bell, 2008), Crystal (2008) does not think the finding surprising. He highlights the point that, in order to employ texting abbreviations successfully, the user needs to have considerable awareness of how language works in the first place, specifically of how graphemes and phonemes correspond and how words may have alternative spellings.

Against this growing background of more favorable assessments of the text messaging phenomenon in general, it may not seem so unreasonable for EFL teachers to consider exploiting it as a classroom exercise. Students find it is fun, it is an authentic means of communicating in the target language, and it makes the user reflect on correspondences between spelling and pronunciation and between written and spoken versions of their message in general. At the same time, users seem to be aware that the liberties the medium takes with the language are limited to that particular form of communication and are perceptive of the restrictions set by its informality. Ending on a personal level, I do find that students like to use texting language in their emails or notes to me for situations like explaining absence in class, requesting a missing handout, or inquiring about an assignment. However, I have not found that my students' formal term papers show any worrying intrusion of text messaging abbreviations.

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