Research Article

The Effects of Online Texting on Moroccan EFL University Students' Writing Skills

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	With the rapid proliferation of ubiquitous ICTs, promoting technology-based learning has become a key element in educational discourse. The present study explores the effects of online texting on the writing skills among Moroccan university students. Based on the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the data were collected from a convenience sample of n=243 of first-year English department students. The research tools consist of a survey, a writing test and an interview to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of respondents' attitudes and lived experiences vis-à-vis online texting. The findings have revealed that online texting has yielded both positive and negative outcomes on students' writing skills. It was also found that online texting is positively perceived by students as it helps them develop vocabulary and provides great opportunities to practice writing in English. For this reason, online texting is an efficient and effective technique that should be exploited to develop proficiency in writing.

1. Introduction

Modern technologies have played an important role in facilitating communication in the globalized world. Their expansion and level of usage has become a worldwide phenomenon. Information Communication technologies have revolutionized the essences of the old basics of education by offering new opportunities for learning and teaching. Online tools such as social networks, Search engines, Blogs, chat rooms, mailing and web-sites have paved the way for new modes of learning and have thus smashed the borders of the classroom open to the world. These online tools offer personal spaces for users to generate and share information with other users and to interact with them synchronously or asynchronously by written and spoken word. Hence, the web-based learning is a convenient outlet that learners should take into account to support their learning process worldwide.

In terms of student centered education, the use of available ICTs is crucial in that it improves cooperative learning among students and eases communication with teachers and peers outside the class borders, paving thus the way to a self-directed lifelong learning. It is widely asserted among educators and scholars that these technologies pave the way, if rightly used, for an engaging mode of learning whereby students become active and lifelong autonomous learners (Saunders & Klemming, 2003; Smith & Craig, 2013; Lee 2016). ICTs have created a great learning journey wherein the learner sits 'in the driver's seat'. Today Learners are tremendously attached to the Internet and social networking. These technological tools offer learners a host of learning opportunities for using the language. The most important thing they provide learners with is that they promote authentic language use. They use digital technology every day and everywhere. Parallel to this, English is gaining more grounds as a foreign language because of its wide use at the international level (lingua franca). This term refers to English as a global means of communication. Due to the digitalized learners' affinity with digital technologies, the relationship between learning English language skills, notably writing and modern technologies has become quite inseparable. The present study is an attempt to empirically explore the effects of online texting on writing achievement on the one hand, and students' perceptions and attitudes towards online text-based chat on the other. It is based on the hypothesis that online texting positively impacts students' achievement in writing. Although previous studies (Reza Afroogh, 2003; Hassan, Uddin &

Akhtar, 2019; Mugableh & Khreisat, 2019; Siddiqui & Ahamed, 2019; Omar, 2019; DerKhachadourian, 2019; Mang'oka, Ogola, & Bartoo, 2019; Seyyedi & Amin, 2020; Hamouda, 2020; Shafiee, 2020; Moochi, 2020; Kabigting, et al., 2020; Jovari, 2020) conducted on writing skill have revealed interesting findings, little attention so far has been paid to *the effects of online texting on the writing skills among Moroccan university students*. Hence, this study aims to answer two main questions:

1. Is there a correlation between online texting and students' achievements in writing?
2. To what extent does online texting impact Moroccan university students' achievement in writing?

2. Review of the Literature
Over the past decade, it has been axiomatic to assert that the Internet is one of the greatest developments in history. The advent of the internet has dramatically altered human life and brought about changes in all aspects of life. Education, a socially oriented activity, is no exception, has been dramatically affected by the rapid advances in information and communication technology (ICT) and more precisely by the birth of social media that is gradually gaining momentum. ICTs have the potential to "accelerate, enrich, and deepen skills; motivate and engage students in learning; helps to relate school experiences to work practices" (Davis & Tearle, 1999; Lemke & Coughlin, 1998; as cited in Yusuf, 2005, p. 316).

The term Web 2.0, the second generation of the web, was originally coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 and refers to the second generation of the World Wide Web. It is an umbrella term that refers to a series of technological improvements and new patterns of actions on the Web (O'Reilly, 2005). Unlike the first generation of Web 1.0 technologies where users were confined to a mere consumption of content in a passive manner, Web 2.0 , the Read/Write Web offers a host of social media sites and social networking sites such as Facebook, blogs, Wikis, YouTube, apps where users can interact and collaborate with other online users (Nica & Grayson, 2011). Recent research indicates that the advent of Web 2.0 technologies has resulted in a collaborative networked mode of learning for many university students worldwide. As learners co-construct knowledge through social media, they are no longer passive consumers of information, such that learning becomes an authentic participatory process (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). More interestingly, the Web 2.0 trend has played a vital role in students' social and academic lives and has thus paved the way for formal and informal learning. Users, depending on their will, can avail themselves the opportunity to enhance their language skills via social networking and blogs. Language tools and services offer automatic assessment of writing, enabling the development of reviewing skills, so essential to improving writing (Godwin, 2008). Language teachers' challenge now is to expand their students' social networking cognizance and to urge them to take part in the online reading-writing virtual zone.

O'Reilly (2005) refers to Web 2.0 as a new generation of community-centered Web platform that encourages openness, participation and collaboration. Web 2.0 has turned out to be a global information room that hosts billions of worldwide users. The ubiquity and rapid proliferation of Web 2.0 technologies has evolved by leaps and bounds and has substantially exerted an impact on the nature of learners. Shiva (2015) asserts that:

> Students are already heavily immersed in Web 2.0 technologies (i.e. Facebook, blogs, twitter, podcasts, wikis, social networking, virtual-world, video and photo sharing). The only need is to properly channelize this attitude. They are making on-line lives that effortlessly blend with their off-line world. Undeniably, the internet is playing an increasingly significant role for not only students but also for an academic. Educators are now turning to Web 2.0 tools, drawing upon their talent to help in creating, collaborating on and sharing content. (p. 30).

Every human being is, by nature, a seeker and a transmitter of knowledge. In other words, human beings are information consumers i.e.: receivers and spreaders. To seek and share information, the present generation makes heavy use of social media or social network sites that comprise a wide array of activities that involve socializing and networking online via words and videos, etc. Learning in the context of social media has become highly self-motivated, autonomous, and informal, as well as an integral part of the college experience (McGloughlin & Lee, 2010; Smith, Salaway, & Caruso, 2009; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). Thanks to these social network technologies, users take charge of their own learning by communicating and sharing their concepts on various topics and issues.

According to Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi (2012), Facebook "can promote the Affective Filter Hypothesis and

Social Constructivist Theories" (p. 198). For example, when students use Facebook for educational purposes by spending time browsing profiles, meeting new people, and exchanging relationships using different languages, they avail themselves the opportunity to interact with a large number of people worldwide and thus exchange much comprehensible input in a meaningful context. This way of learning is likely to reduce the Affective Filter and enhance motivation and risk taking in language learning (Krashen, 1988).

The second point pertaining to the Affective Filter Hypothesis represents Krashen's (1981) view that a good deal of 'affective variables' such as motivation, self-confidence, anxiety and personality contribute to language learning. He also opines that highly motivated learners with a good self-image and a low level of anxiety are the ones who meet their learning objectives successfully. In practical terms, many students, in an ordinary classroom setting, shun speaking lest they would be deemed as fools. Such negative thoughts and feelings push them to be reticent, less participative and even daunted and panicky (Warschauer, 1996). On the contrary, chat rooms offer a stress-free atmosphere that prompts individuals to take part in numerous educational activities without fearing of making mistakes by posting comments, communicating with others and sharing videos and photos. In so doing, the Affective Filter diminishes to the minimum paving thus the way to affective language learning. In the same vein, Dawson (2008) affirms that Facebook kicks the door open for collaborative learning once they get engaged in communication with others. At this level, a zone of proximal development (ZPD) is constructed on Facebook. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of (ZPD) suggests that interaction between individuals and their peers or elders who offer skilled assistance improve their performance and productivity. The Vygotskian theory promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. Thus, the network of people on chat rooms can play the role of the teacher through giving feedback and suggestions on their written work. This helps students "move from their actual stage of development to their potential stage of development, a stage in which their grammatical and writing competence is enhanced" (Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi, 2012, p. 198). Overall, due to the potential benefits of digital technologies, students can hone their writing skills, maximize their learning opportunities and make of them great learning experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Respondents

This research was carried out in Meknes at Moulay Ismail University, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences. The target population consisted of n=243 of Moroccan first-year university students from the English department. In order to meet the study's objectives, the researcher expressly targeted different groups of students enrolled in semester '1' only. As illustrated in the graph below, the respondents' age ranges between 17 and above 26. The majority of participants were between 17 and 21 years old. For instance, out of 243 surveyed Moroccan university students, 173 (71.2%) were between 17 and 21, 52 (21.4%) were between 21 and 26 while only 18 (7.4%) were 26 and older.
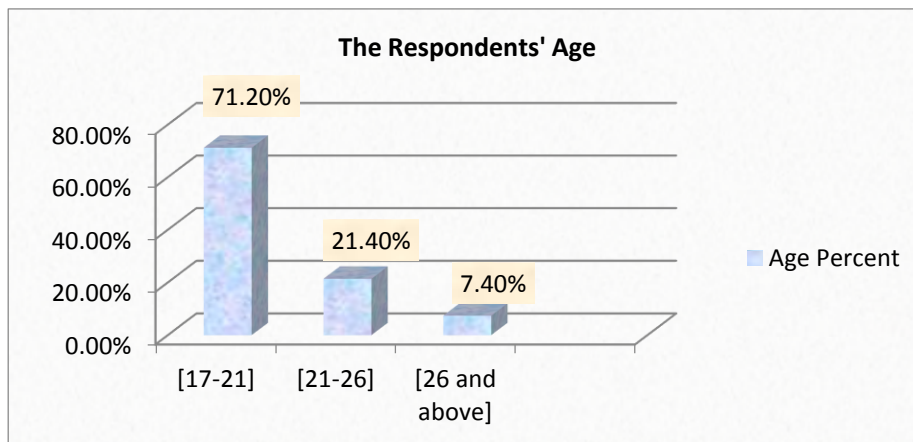

Figure 1: This Histogram Shows the Respondents' Age Distribution (N=243)

To answer the research questions, the researcher adopts an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach consisting of quantitative and qualitative phases. The chart below clearly illustrates the phases incrementally followed in this study:
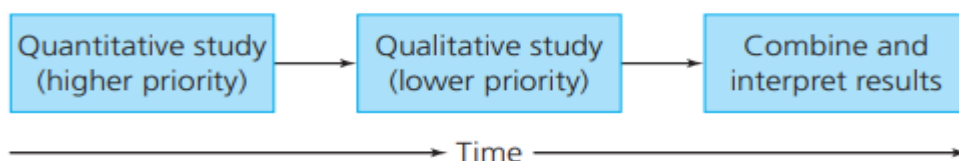
Figure 2: The Explanatory Mixed Methods Research Design of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012: 561)

This method of inquiry is adopted because the findings obtained from both quantitative and qualitative methods can complement each other in a way that helps the researcher to have an in-depth look into the relations between the two variables, namely online texting and writing achievement. As well, the quantitative and qualitative findings enable the inquirer to gain a deeper understanding about the participants' subjective experiences and perceptions and eventually come up with clearer and more insightful conclusions (Creswell, 2003)

In the quantitative phase, the researcher used a questionnaire and a writing test as the main data collection instruments to answer a set of interrelated research questions related to online texting and its effects on students' academic writings. Given that the respondents are active users of a WhatsApp group and that they keep texting each other through this application, the researcher invited them for a writing test, which was about writing a short paragraph on the advantages or drawbacks of a cell phone. The purpose behind this writing test was to gauge their written productions and see to what extent they discern between informal and formal writing. The researcher then went about assessing the respondents' pieces of writing using a checklist to obtain more consistent grading decisions. Students' productions were graded on a four-level scale, namely 'inadequate', 'adequate', 'good' and 'excellent,' which correspond to the values: 'a', 'b', 'c' and 'f,' respectively.

3.2 Data Analysis and Discussion

Investigating whether online texting would have an impact on students' writing achievement, the findings did reject our hypothesis, which stated that online texting positively impacts students' writing achievement. This hypothesis was tested using a Spearman's Rank Correlation. A negative correlation was found between the scores of the writing test and online texting ($r_s(243) = -.108$, $p < .05$). Unpredictably, the findings have disclosed that students who engage in online texting end up having a poor quality of writing production. This finding converges with that of the qualitative data analysis which revealed that students' exposure to much informal language exerts a drastic effect on their performance when it comes to academic writing assignment. Many interviewed participants reported that the writing rules on chat rooms are informal and that the text chat discourse is disadvantageous and rather disruptive. This finding is also consistent with the existing literature. For instance, Obi, Bulus, Adamu and Sala'at (2012) found that social media usage results in language deterioration in that students get unconsciously accustomed to using abbreviations while chatting with other users and hence reproducing the same errors in formal writings. Another 2015 study by Mingle and Adams (2015) found similar negative effects and that students witnessed a drop in grades due to their misuse of these online tools. Likewise, research by Osharive (2015) also supports our findings and suggests that students are accustomed to short forms of writing words on social media platforms and unconsciously get used to it thereby reproducing the same informal language in formal contexts. In contrast, many other studies have proved the opposite. For instance, Yunus and Salehi (2012) argued that online texting helps students to expand their vocabulary, enhance their writing skills and reduce their spelling mistakes. Similarly, Jafari and Chalak (2016) conducted a study in Iran and found that the online text-based chat helps students to improve their vocabulary stores. They concluded by stressing the key role online texting plays in developing the written communication skill. Another study by Ahmed (2019) found that online texting through WhatsApp helps students develop vocabulary, grammar reading comprehension and writing. Besides, students demonstrated more positive attitudes towards the WhatsApp group as opposed to the traditional classroom learning stating that online texting provided them with more time to practice writing and communicating in English. Equally important, this study proved that chatting and learning through social media platforms make the process of language learning more appealing and enjoyable. This study concluded that online texting is of great value in developing the writing skill, and that WhatsApp is an effective pedagogical tool which motivates students to improve their writing skills on a continuous process. A similar study was conducted in Saudi Arabia by Fattah (2015) to determine the effectiveness of online texting through WhatsApp in developing Saudi university students' writing skills. A group of students were taught writing via WhatsApp while the other group underwent the classical paper-based learning. This study found that the experimental group, who used the WhatsApp technique, underwent considerable improvements in terms of their

writing skills outperforming thus their counterparts. In light of these findings, it is intriguing to reiterate that chat rooms play a pedagogical role that assist learners achieve their learning goals. A similar pattern of results was obtained in numerous studies (Jafari & Chalak, 2016; Andujar, 2016; Safi & Fathi, 2009; Khabiri et al., 2013; Yousefzadeh, 2012 ; Bensalem, 2018). Another 2018 study by Hashemifardnia, Namaziandost & Esfahani (2018) stated that "online chatting improves English learners' motivation and vocabulary learning; it attracts students' attention; it helps those introvert students to express their ideas without shyness. Chatting via WhatsApp can enhance students' typing skill and self-confidence" (p. 265). Likewise, a study by Hashim, Yunus, Ibrahim, Jeri, Sukr, Ilahi & Hassim (2018) found that text-based communication on social media platforms exerts both positive and negative impacts on students' writing skills. Online texting enabled students to expand their vocabulary repertoire, generate new ideas for their essay writing and overcome writing apprehension. As for the negative side, students were used to replicating reduced forms of texting that characterize social media chat rooms. This led them to face troubles once put in a formal writing context as they failed to separate between formal and informal writing styles.

It is compelling to reiterate that the online world carries great learning opportunities. Online texting provides learners with more time for authentic contextual language use and ensures interaction and participation among all learners, including shy students. Writing is undoubtedly an important skill for language production, which demands of learners much practice on a regular basis. In effect, many educators agree that the more learners produce language, the better they enhance their writing skills. Online texting provides great learning opportunities for online users to develop good writing habits, overcome writing apprehension and build language awareness. Online writing is the new trend that should be embraced by teachers and students to promote the writing skill acquisition.

3.3 *Students' Perceptions of Their Own Writing Skills*
Given that the writing skill is one of the two main dependent variables in this study, a straight question was directed to the respondents at the beginning of the questionnaire to explore their assessments of their own writing skill and to have an idea on how they go about judging it. As clearly illustrated in the graph below, 45.7 % of the respondents reported that they are good, 21.8 % are fairly good, 11.1 % average, 9.1 % very good, 5.8 % poor, 4.5 % excellent and 2.1 % very poor. It can be inferred from the findings that only 19 students out 243 have problems with the writing task.
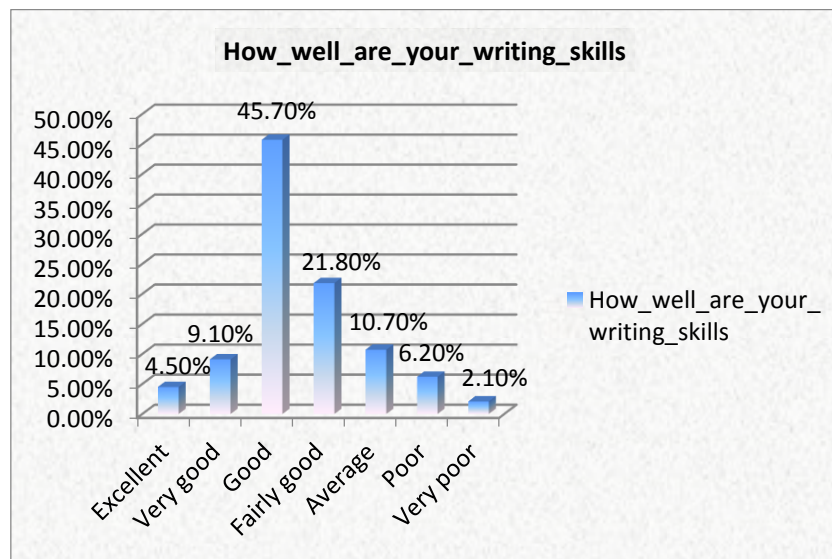

Figure 3: This Histogram Shows the Distribution of the Students in Terms of How They Perceive Their Writing Skills.

The respondents were further asked if they think that online chatting or texting improves their writing skills. The overwhelming majority confirmed that online chatting improves their writing skills. As the graph below shows, 69.1 % answered favorably while 30.9 % responded negatively.
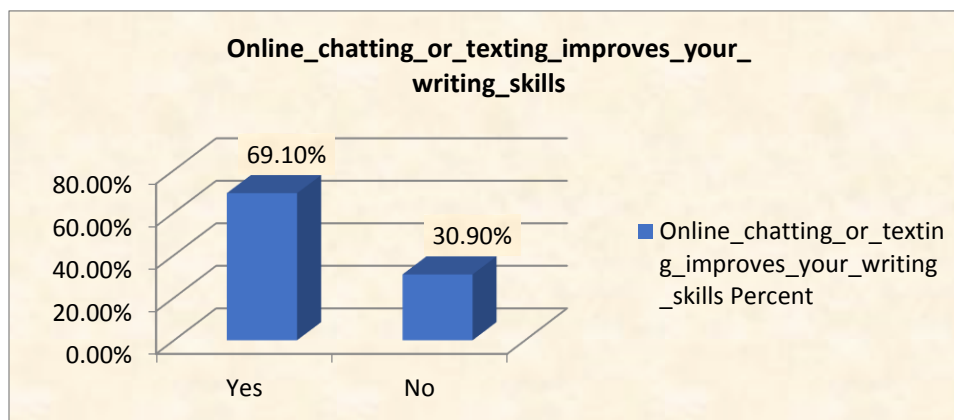
Figure 4: This Histogram Shows the Distribution of the Students in Terms of Whether Online Texting Improves Students' Writing Skills.

In order to investigate how the students perceive texting in social network sites, the researcher asked students if they believe that texting affects their formal writings. The findings, as the graph below highlights, indicate that 73.7 % of the respondents answered positively while 26.3 % of them claimed that they do not believe that texting in SNS has an impact on formal writing.
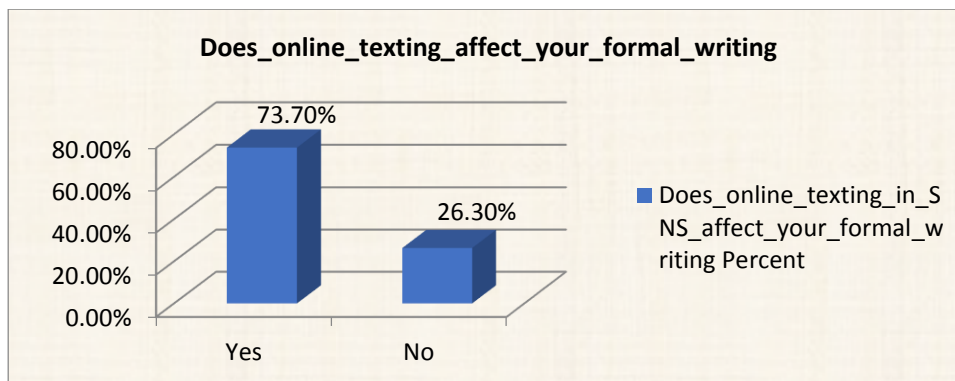

Figure 5: This Histogram Shows the Distribution of the Students in Terms of Whether Texting in SNS Affects the Formal Writing.

Similarly, to measure the degree of the impact of texting in SNS on students' formal writing, the students were asked if they use short forms while doing written assignments. The results of the data revealed that 51 % of the students answered favorably while 49 % reported that they do not use short forms in formal writing.
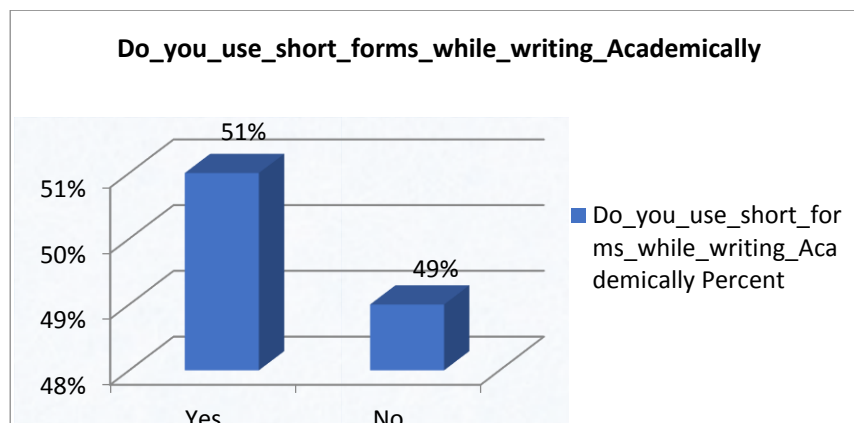

Figure 6: This Histogram Shows the Distribution of the Students in Terms of Whether They Use Short Forms in Academic Writing.

Last but not least, the researcher asked the students to specify the types of mistakes they make when they write. This question was meant to investigate the nature of problems that characterize students' writings. The findings, as the table highlights, indicate the following: 30.5 % of the students reported that they have problems with spelling; 25.1 % with verb tenses; 10.7 % with punctuation; 5.3 % with plural forms; 2.5 % with capitalization and 25.9 % claimed that they have other problems.
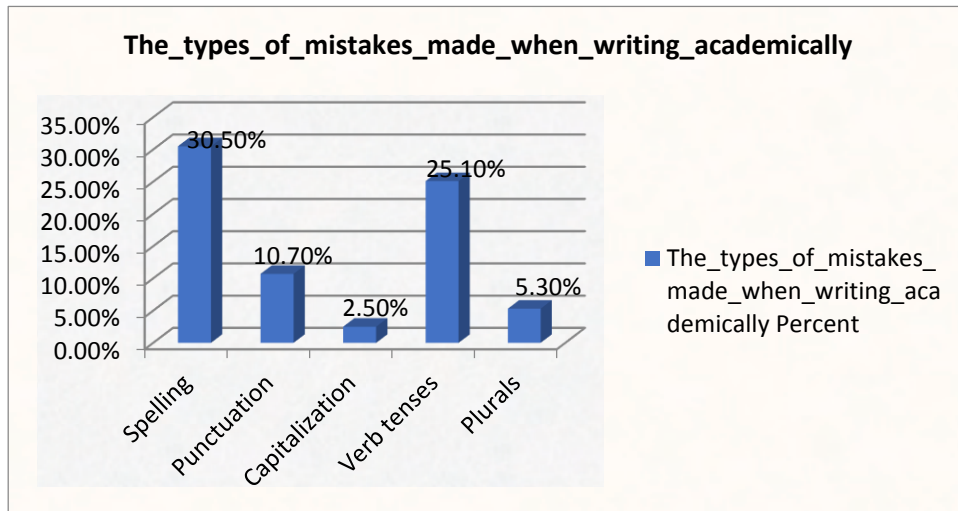

Figure 7: This Histogram Shows the Distribution of the Students in Terms of the Types of Mistakes They Make in Academic Writing.

3.4 *Results of the Writing Test*

One of the most critical research questions the present study is trying to answer is whether online texting positively impacts students' achievement in writing. To achieve this goal, the researcher hands out questionnaires to the respondents and assists them in filling them in without affecting their thoughts or viewpoints as regards whether they use social media for learning purposes or recreational ends. Subsequently, a writing test was administered to the participants who claim to use social media for academic reasons and those who use it for leisure purposes. The researcher's objective was to prove whether social media users for academic purposes score higher or less in writing than nonusers. The graph below shows that 66.70% got a B grade for their writings, 27.40% had C, while 3.80% and 2.20% obtained F and A respectively. These findings clarify that a large proportion of students who use social media for academic purposes achieve satisfactory results in writing.
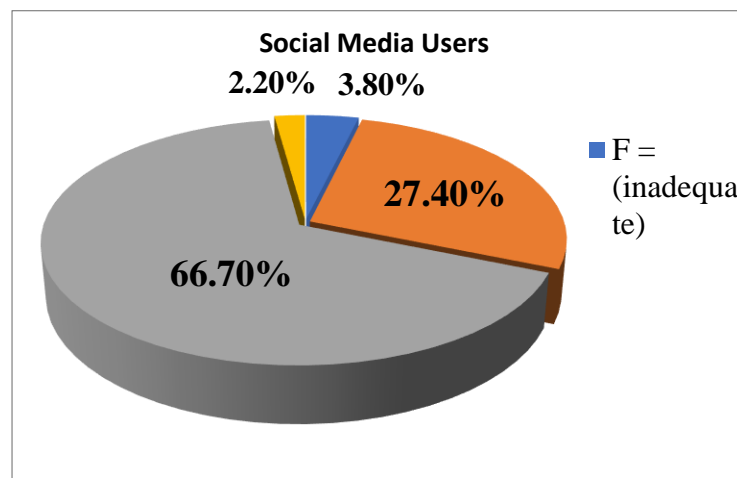

Figure 8: This Histogram Shows the Distribution of the Writing Test Scores in Terms of SM Users for Academic Purposes.

As for the results related to the respondents who claimed that they do not use social media for academic aims, it was found that 75.04% of nonusers got a C grade, 12.30% obtained B and F while none of them managed to get an A.
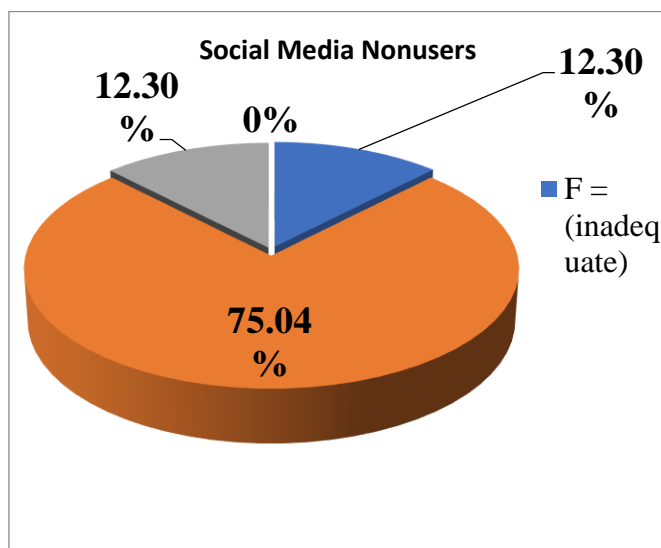

Figure 9: This Histogram Shows the Distribution of the Writing Test Scores in Terms of SM Users for Recreational Ends.

The analysis of data, as indicated in the Table below, reveal that students who use social media for academic purposes had higher writing scores than their counterparts who do not. Precisely, 66.7% of social media users got a 'B' grade, compared to only 12.3% of nonusers. Also, 12.3% of social media nonusers got 'F' outnumbering thus their counterparts with 3.8%. One possible explanation for such score-related differences lies in the nature of engagement in social media applications and how users use technology. That is to say, the way in which users use technology is a determining factor which impacts students' productivity. Certain uses do undoubtedly result in academic deterioration while other uses lead to good productivity. It is up to the individual user and how s/he perceives technology use.
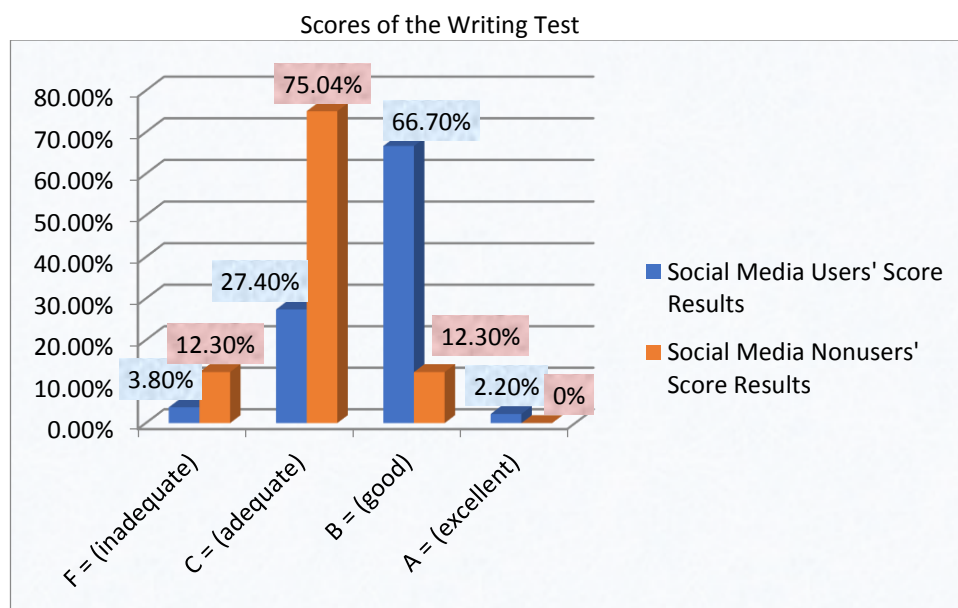

Figure 41: This Histogram Shows the Distribution of the Students in Terms of their Writing Test Results – SM Users for Academic Purposes versus SM Users for Recreational Ends)

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4. Implications and Recommendations

In the light of its findings, this study has important implications for teachers. Given that teaching and learning are two faces of one coin and that they both trespass the classroom borders, teachers are encouraged to incorporate web-based technologies in and out of the classroom and thus engage students in online educational activities that enhance students' writing skills.

It is hoped that the findings of this study would inspire teachers to use online texting in English language vocabulary development and enhancement of students' writing abilities. Vocabulary and grammar are key components that pave the way for an accurate language production. Chat rooms are undoubtedly fertile grounds that provide learners with great opportunities to develop vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and written communication skills. This study recommends teachers to exploit online texting as a teaching technique and to arouse students' interests in developing not only the writing skill but also each of the four language skills. Teachers are advised to adapt their teaching practices and techniques by incorporating available ICTs in the teaching learning process to improve students' proficiency in writing.

5. Conclusion

Writing is a fundamental language skill that enables success in students' academic and professional lives. This crucial skill can be enhanced through online chat rooms on a daily basis. Today's youths are surrounded by information technologies. They spend a considerable amount of time texting online to the extent that it becomes part of their daily lives. Despite the availability and abundance of information on ICTs, only a minority of university students are knowledgeable and skilled enough to write effectively using appropriate academic style. This clearly shows on the crude language and the millennial jargon they use while interacting with their online peers and which they tend to use bluntly in formal contexts. Our findings suggest that these youths need guidance from teachers or experts with regard to judicious use of the written word through online texting. Unguided learning exerts drastic effects on millennials. They need to discern the difference between good and bad English, grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, and formal and informal language use. Online texting plays a major role in enhancing the writing skill taking into account the fact that students practice this language skill only when it is classroom-bound. Students may use online platforms and develop good writing habits and daily practices while conversing with their peers. Learning how to write on chat rooms would make the learning experience meaningful, fruitful and appealing for the digital natives.

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