

Exploring the Effect of Arabizi on English Writing by Arab English Learners

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Abstract—The study explores the impact of the Arabizi phenomenon on English writing by Arab English Learners. Due to the popularity of social networks, Arab students combine Roman numbers and letters to produce a new writing code with unconventional rules. The study is significant because most researchers studied the impact of Arabizi on the Arabic language. In contrast, this study focused on the effect of Arabizi on English writing by Arab learners. The study sample consisted of twenty sophomore female students majoring in the English language at one of the Jordanian governmental universities. The main research questions are how Arabizi affects English writing and the justification behind the continuity of this new writing code. The researcher analysed samples of the intervention of Arabizi on writing in English to answer the first question. To answer the second question, the researcher interviewed the sample members to investigate the reasons for the continuity of this new writing code. The study results concluded that not all English foreign language learners use Arabizi, while others use it regularly for several reasons, although it affects their English writing. By the end of the study, the researcher presents recommendations for linguists and English language teachers.

Index Terms—Arabizi, English writing, Standard Arabic writing, Arab students, Al Balqa Applied University

I. INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological developments have increased the importance of the English language because it dominated all technological devices and applications such as mobile phones, online chat, WhatsApp, Facebook, and many others. As technology affected all people's lives, it influenced how people communicate with each other by using new electronic sources such as online networks. This transformational revolution in communication shortened distances and provided people with different types of applications, which became a common way to communicate with other parts of the world more accessible and faster. This new way of communication, an online Social Network, enables people to share pictures, ideas, and feelings using Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and others. Unfortunately, at that time (1990), many internet sites were not yet supported by Arabic keyboards, and the only available way to communicate was to use the English language script. As a result, Arabic speakers tried to find a way to communicate effectively and were forced to find an alternative means of communication by blending Arabic with Latin script. This means of communication is known as Arabizi (Bianchi, 2012; Yaghan, 2008). Young people have modified the language by mixing Arabic and English terminology and spreading vocabulary, which has stripped it of its beauty.

Arabizi is a kind of writing where Arabic words are written in Latin script without following any rules, leading to significant variation in the Arabic written word. The phenomena first appeared in cyberspace, propelled by the widespread adoption of cell phones that lacked sophisticated Arabic keyboards.

Nowadays, Arabic keyboards and scripts are available on social media, yet it is the most widespread phenomenon among young Arabs. This phenomenon, Arabize, has become very popular among Arab youth and has developed by them on social media since 1990 until the present time (Warschauer et al., 2002). The popularity of this phenomenon enabled Arab youth to chat by using non-Arabic-supporting technology such as Facebook, mobile phones, Twitter, and other social websites to achieve ease and quick communication between families and friends.

The researcher has noticed that students in English writing use this new linguistic writing phenomenon unconsciously. So, this study explores the effect of using Arabizi on English writing among Arab native speakers because this type of writing is used habitually among youth more than using Standard Arabic. Also, the researcher sheds light on the reasons and the justifications behind the continuity of using Arabize, although Arabic keyboards are supported in social media applications.

A. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the fact that most researchers investigated the effect of Arabizi on Arabic language writing. In contrast, this study investigated the impact of Arabizi on English writing. Arab users on social media frequently employ creative spellings of English terms to condense writing. This employment can make distinguishing between English and Arabizi more difficult.

B. Characteristics of the Arabic Language

Before discussing the Arabizi phenomenon, it is worth having a general introduction to the Arabic language. Like all other languages in the Semitic family, Arabic is written from right to left using rounded and connected letters.

According to Holes (2004), diacritics are used to express short vowels in written Arabic, which consists only of consonants and long vowels. Since The Glorious Quran is written in Arabic, the language and script are revered throughout the Arab world.

Most of the writing systems of all languages in the world are based on rules that link spoken language sounds to written symbols. The standards that relate symbols and sounds vary significantly between languages, and it cannot be very easy or different from the Arabic language. Most educated Arabs know standard Arabic, although they speak one of these vernaculars and use it in everyday communication (Palfreyman & Al Khalil, 2003; Taha, 2015).

Arabic is written cursively and consists of consonants, long vowels, and diacritics representing the short vowels (Taha, 2015; Panović, 2018). The absence of Arabic short vowels (diacritics) from most handwritten and printed Arabic texts becomes troublesome for readers who lack the appropriate grammatical knowledge of the Arabic language. Each Arabic letter represents a sound; digraphs and silent letters do not occur in Arabic. Moreover, each letter is written differently according to its place in the word. Accordingly, the forms of writing the alphabet may occur at the beginning of the term, in the middle, in the final position, or isolated. Moreover, some letters have the same shape, distinguished by several dots above the letters. Unlike the Latin alphabet, Arabic Alphabet does not use lower- or upper-case letters (no capitalisation). In addition, the similarities in the shapes of the letters and the need to distinguish between them using dots are seen as another primary concern of critics of the Arabic alphabet.

C. Arabizi Phenomenon

Arabizi is thought to have grown primarily because of technology and the internet. At first, it was a way to talk to each other in Arabic because the technology did not have Arabic keyboards. However, it keeps growing and improving even though the Arabic language is now widely available on social networks, computers, and other devices like mobile phones. Arabizi is a language with a phonetic system that combines Arabic and English. It can link the Arabic alphabet systems, and Latin has made it quite popular.

Users of Arabizi produce a new orthography by substituting English characters for Arabic letters, and they use numerals as letters to signify sounds not found in the English language. Some academics refer to this new spelling as Arabizi, a phrase that combines the two Arabic words (Englezi, Arabi), which stand for Arabic and English, respectively. This phenomenon (Arabizi) has many different terms used to describe this phenomenon. For example, Yagan (2008) states that Arabizi is slang and comes from merging the two languages englizi (English) and 3arabi (Arabic). In contrast, Aboelezz (2012) defines Latinized Arabic as an alternate orthographic representation of the Arabic language using Roman or Latin characters. Despite the different names to describe Arabizi, they all agree that Arabizi uses a mixture of Latin words and Arabic words and numbers. The Arabic text is transliterated in its Latin form, and the numbers are to replace untranslatable letters in Latin alphabets (Bjornsson, 2010).

D. Related Literature and Studies

Since Arabizi's rise in popularity rapidly among young Arab speakers, several scholars have been prompted to examine the benefits and drawbacks of the language for Arab nations. Arabizi combines the Latin alphabet with Arabic numerals to create a shorthand form of the Arabic language. It is mainly used as a chat language due to its convenience, quickness, and technological compatibility. These enhancements simplify surfing the web and sending texts from mobile devices. It has experienced rapid expansion and rising appeal, especially among Arab youth. Rapid developments in technical communication and the rise of English as a global language have all contributed to this expansion. As Arabizi continues to expand and spread, it is crucial to comprehend its positive and harmful effects on Arab students when learning a foreign language. Arabizi phenomenon has produced a significant gap among researchers, educators, and religious men. Most of them were against the widespread of this phenomenon because they claimed that it would affect Arab identity and promote practices of Western culture. Also, Arabizi has been criticised by Arabic language scholars, who argue that using this new linguistic code harms the Arabic language and the preservation of Arab identity. Opponents of using the Arabizi claim that users will grow to be illiterate in their mother language, Standard Arabic (Allehaiby, 2013; Al-Shaer, 2016). They add that using Arabizi in everyday writing will lead to losing the ability to read and write in Standard Arabic. Furthermore, Darwish (2014) adds that Arabizi lacks the essential characteristics or rules in the Arabic language taught at schools, such as structure, grammar, and spelling.

Arabizi has been the subject of numerous studies examining it from various angles. Opponents of the phenomenon conducted studies on multiple concerns with negative results and claims of using Arabizi on these concerns. Some researchers investigated the effect of Arabizi on the performance of the Arabic language and culture. They claimed it is a Westernisation tool that will make people lose their Arabic language, identity, and culture (Al-Hawsani, 2014; Alsharafi-Taim, 2014). Others examined the users' attitudes towards using Arabizi (Al-Hawsani, 2014; Almandhari, 2014). In contrast, others explored the reasons behind using Arabizi (Abdel- Ghaffar et al., 2011; Asslaman & Haraq, 2014; Keong et al., 2015; Romaih, 2014; Srage, 2014; Yaghan, 2008).

Taha (2015) examined if Arabizi is considered a threat to Arabic identity and language. His study participants asserted and alerted that Arabizi is a dangerous phenomenon for the Arabic language. Moreover, Ghazal (2014), in his article in The Jordan Times Newspaper, investigated the effect of Arabizi on the Arabic language. The interviewees claimed that because of using Arabizi all the time, they no longer can write correct Arabic or English. Al-Shaer (2016) investigated the effect of Arabizi on Palestinian students' standard Arabic spelling abilities. The results showed that

those who frequently use Arabizi online tend to have poorer spelling skills in their home language. Moreover, the results of Bahrainwala (2011) indicated that the interviewers of her study asserted that this phenomenon is not valuable and refused to use it because it lacks rules and uniformity, which affects their writing.

On the other hand, advocates claim that it is a natural phenomenon and a simple language youth use to facilitate communication (Alshwuairekh, 2014). Others argue that Arabizi has nothing to do with identity and culture or strips the Arabs from their mother language (Mohd-Asraft, 2005). Another survey with 28 participants was carried out by Abdel-Ghaffar et al. (2011). It concluded that Arabizi allowed its users to exchange a one-of-a-kind code that connects them or, more accurately, forms their speech community. Most participants, however, reported that their feeling of Arab identity was unaffected using Arabizi.

E. Questions of the Study

- 1- How does Arabizi affect students' English writing?
- 2- What are the justifications for the continuity of using Arabizi?

II. METHODOLOGY

The researcher observed that Arab students who write in English use Arabizi by mixing English letters but Arabic words and blending some numerals as letters. To examine the effect of Arabizi on students' English writing, the researcher analysed samples of students writing in which they use Arabizi. Also, the researcher interviews the students to investigate the reasons behind the continuity of using Arabizi.

The researcher used a mixed method design because a mixed method helps the researcher to get a complete picture than a single quantitative or qualitative method and integrates the advantages of both methods (Daniel, 2016) as a standalone method.

The study sample consisted of twenty female sophomore students majoring in the English language at Al Balqa Applied University during the academic year 2022-2023. All participants enrolled in a paragraph writing course. To answer the first question, the researcher analyses samples of Arabic native students' English writing to examine the effect of Arabizi on their English writing. In contrast, the second instrument is an interview with one question on the reasons behind the continuity of using Arabizi from their points of view. All the participants attended face-to-face lectures, so it was easy to interview them and collect their answers directly. The idea of interviewing them face to face is to get an accurate impression when answering the interview questions.

The researcher interviews the students and records their responses on a tape recorder to present the interview in an objective and authentic recitation form. During the interviews, the students could respond in either English or Arabic and provide sufficient time to provide honest feedback regarding the factors contributing to the continued use of Arabizi. Each participant offered extensive information because of having ample time to answer interview questions and provide detailed information. The researcher had the interviews transcribed word for word into written texts so that they could analyse the participants' responses. Following the transcription of the interviews, the researcher arranged the findings according to the participants' points of view.

III. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

To answer the first question: How does Arabizi affect students' English writing? The researcher collected many writing samples submitted by the students, which they produced by the sample of the study during their writing paragraph course. Of the total sample, ten lack any Arabizi writing, whereas the percentage of using Arabizi varies in the rest samples. Table 1 shows the most common substitution words of Arabizi when writing in English.

TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF ARABIZI EFFECT ON ENGLISH WRITING

	English sentence	Substitution/ Arabizi	Sentence in Arabizi	Word type
1	Where are you from?	Enta, men, wain	“Enti men wain”	Wh- question
2	The weekend is boring	el	el weekend is boring	Article
3	Any news about the fire	ay	ay news about the fire	Determiner
4	But they left the country	bas	Bas they left the country early	Conjunction
5	She told me that the exam is difficult	Ana	She told ana that the exam is difficult	Pronoun
6	Hala is too young to drive a car	2	Hala is 2 young 2 driving a car	Adverb /preposition
7	They bought a car and house	wa	They bought a car wa house	Conjunction
8	A7mad was very angry because his mother cooked lentil	7	A7mad was very angry because his mother cooked 3adas	Proper name
9	In a minute	fe	fe a minute	Preposition
10	What did you buy from the mall yesterday?	u	What did u buy from the mall yesterday?	Pronoun
11	The homework was too much for him	kteer	The homework was kteer for him.	Quantifier
12	No	la	Giving an answer	adverb
13	You are the best friend ever	enta	u the best friend ever	Pronoun
14	I want you to buy me a dress because I do not have money.	U,2, cuz	“I want u 2 buy me a dress cuz I do not have money.	Subject/preposition/adverb

Some students in the paragraph writing course did not use Arabizi (n=10). Although they do not use Arabizi, the researcher interviewed them to discover the reasons behind their resistance. Ten of the participants use Arabizi all the time(n=10). The researcher used numbers instead of names to keep the information confidential.

A. Data From the Interview

To answer the second question, "What are the justifications for the continuity of using Arabizi from students' perspectives"? The researcher interviewed the students to find reasons behind using or opposing Arabizi.

(a). Findings From Non-Users of Arabizi

The interview finding revealed that some participants did not use Arabizi for different reasons and showed strong dissatisfaction. They opposed to use of the new type of writing.

Participant 1: “Arabizi is a mix of languages that do not make sense, and students should not use it.”

Participant 3: “This style of writing is hard to understand because it does not have any basic rules.”

Participant 7: “Destroys English and Arabic spelling as well.”

Participant 5: “It attacks the integrity of any language.”

Participant 9: “Affect English language skills, writing, for example.”

Participant 11: “Users of Arabizi would never get any better in English writing if they continued to blend English with Arabic letters and numerals.”

Participant 13: “It is the language of the losers as they cannot write in English.”

Participant 17: “Arabizi is a mix of languages that is neither necessary nor justified.”

Participant 19: “Arabizi could make it harder for us to learn English as a Foreign language.”

Participant 15: “Users of Arabizi know only half of the English language.”

(b). Findings From Users of Arabizi

Participant 2: “Arabizi helped me to write in English though I mix it when writing in English.”

Participant 8: “I use Arabizi when I do not know the word in English.”

Participant 20: “I mix Arabizi and English because English is difficult.”

Participant 4: “In Arabizi, I do not have to write correct English. Everything is accepted.”

Participant 16: “I usually have errors in English spelling even before I used Arabizi”.

Participant 18: “It is a habit, and I use it excessively because I am not good at English.”

Participant 6: “I tried not to use it when I write in English, but I failed since I use it habitually.”

Participant 12: “I mix between English and Arabizi unconsciously”.

Participant 10: “Having spelling mistakes is natural in learning English.”

Participant 14: “I use Arabizi instead of English when I cannot find a word as accurate as Arabic.”

IV. DISCUSSION

Many Arabizi words share the same script as English terms, which can confuse them. Constant mixing of Arabic and English might have unpredictable results, such as substituting native Arabic terms for English ones. As seen from Table 1 above, most substitute is related to articles, determiners, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, and pronouns; however, students replace them unconsciously. For example, the proper name “Ahmad” seems that the users chat with a friend’s

name “Ahmad”, and they substitute the H with the number (7) in English as they used to do when using Arabizi. They tend to engage in random jumps between the Arabic and English languages.

Moreover, in sentence (6), the problem appears clearly. Users used the same number 2 to substitute two English concepts from other grammatical categories. The first one is the adverb “too,” whereas the second one is the preposition “to” followed by a verb (to+ infinitive). In this case, Arab students use the same number for two different words in English, and it seems that they will not be able to differentiate between them in writing in English; otherwise, they use two different numbers for the two different words. In the Table above, for example, “Enti men wain”? Is the substitution of the question in English “Where are you from”? The word “men” is an English word, yet it has another meaning in English. In Arabizi, it substitutes the preposition “from” in English. This sentence (number 1) can cause ambiguity because users of Arabizi can practice writing the word “men” in English writing. By frequent use, students may mix the word's actual meaning and the other meaning in Arabizi since they use Arabizi unconsciously. Also, users tend to shorten text using non-English words to substitute the original one.

Moreover, in sentence number (14) (“I want u 2 buy me a dress cuz I do not have money”), the English letter u substitute the English word (You), 2 for (To), and cuz instead of (Because). Utilising this type of mingling can undoubtedly generate problems which affect their English writing. Yet, this has not prevented Arab students from learning and extensively employing Arabizi. In their study, Shehadi and Wintner (2022) provided an example of how Arabizi changed the word's grammatical category. The word *subtweet* in English is a verb, but adding the (a), an Arabic prefix (derivational morpheme), converts the verb into a noun. In sentence six, the number (2) has changed the verb drive into a noun when adding the number (2). This change is because of the effect of Arabizi on users when writing in English. The challenge facing Arab students is the low-performance level in English which decreases their self-confidence in writing in English. At the same time, they are obliged to use it with their peers since it is a trend among them. For example, scrutinising the Table above, in sentence number (8), the substitution appears in using the noun lentil, which users replaced with Arabizi letters. Accordingly, one of the reasons to shift to Arabizi is the familiarity with English vocabulary which creates difficulties in their English writing.

The internet's globalisation has affected all languages, including English, Japanese, Spanish, and Arabic. For example, the situation in the United States is identical to that in Jordan. Modern American teenagers' growing social media usage has made texting impact their spelling and grammar abilities (Brent & Lewis, 2013). In other words, there have been significant changes in writing, and when using social media and messaging apps, young people nowadays disregard grammar and spelling conventions. Beyond the scope of social media, young people might be impacted by this frequent usage of abbreviations. Social media informal communication leads to some dialects, discouraging young people from utilising traditional language. Using the proper English language is intimidating by all the Internet acronyms and new slang (Brent & Lewis, 2013). Researchers and English teachers in the United States are increasingly worried that young people will suffer from losing their literacy skills, which might have disastrous consequences like the loss of practical writing abilities.

A. Interview Findings From Non-Users of Arabizi

During the interview, a common thread of resistance and dissatisfaction with Arabizi among those who were against its use. The participants held the opinion that it would be resolved soon. They attributed this sentiment to various factors, including the fact that writing in Arabic on social media, different software programs, and platforms is now feasible. Teenagers only use it, and when those teenagers get older, they will stop using it. Additionally, it is simply a trend right now, and it will end soon because English education has developed, and people will start to use either English or Arabic instead.

The following are the justifications of the non-users of this type of writing provided their explanations for rejecting this type of writing style. Three students echo the same view that Arabizi is an unnecessary and unjustifiable linguistic blend, and deciphering this writing style is without any common framework provided (participants 1, 3, and 17). One significant comment from non-users is that Arabizi threatens the written Arabic and English language, so there is no advantage to utilising it. She added that she could express herself better in Arabic and English, so learning or using them is unnecessary (participant 7). Another participant asserted that users of Arabizi attacked any language's integrity and negatively affected English spelling. Arabic and English suffer from this incorrect writing style (Participant 5). On the other hand, one participant stated that users would never improve in writing English if they kept mixing English letters and numbers with Arabic, unlike the findings of Alghamdi (2018), where (7%) of the participants declared that Arabizi assisted them in learning English faster and improved their English writing and reading because they used English words regularly.

An interesting answer came from the participant (13), who described Arabizi as the language of losers, and writing in Arabizi is not a source of pride. Another student added that if Arabizi keeps going on, it could hurt the English language since it influences the vocabulary of Arabic-speaking countries. Beyond doubt, it could make it harder for students to learn English as a Foreign language (participants 9,11, 15, and 19).

B. Interview Findings From Users of Arabizi

On the contrary, users of Arabizi have their justifications. The following are their answers. Two participants who use Arabizi asserted that they unconsciously mix Arabizi words when writing in English because they use it more than in

English (participants 6 and 12). Other students stated that writing in Arabizi instead of English when they cannot find the right word in English because English is complex, and their English is poor for finding quick equivalence vocabulary (20 and 8). Other participants reported that Arabizi is not the reason behind these spelling mistakes. Even without using Arabizi, they suffer from learning the correct English spelling (16). Another participant noted that spelling mistakes are natural while learning a foreign language (10). Participant (4) claimed that during English classes, the instructors criticised our poor English spelling every time, so if the mistake is in English or Arabizi, the results are red blood ink. Participant (4) added, "Repeatedly, I used to apologise with a promise of not using Arabizi when writing in English, yet I always mix Arabizi when writing in English". At the same time, student number (2) defended Arabizi positively because it breaks the ice of using English. The participant added that before writing in Arabizi, "I was reluctant to write in English because my English is weak, yet Arabize encourages me to write in English". The answer of participant (2) was unexpected but exciting where the participant was sincere in justifying the effect of Arabizi in writing in English.

V. CONCLUSION

The entire study aims to investigate the effect of Arabizi on foreign language learners writing in English. While previous studies investigated Arabizi from different aspects (Alghamdi, 2018; Assalman & Haraq, 2014) among Arab youth, this study does not match any of the previous ones because it investigated Arabizi from different aspects, which is the effect of this new writing style affected English Writing. While teaching EFL students an English paragraph writing course, the researcher collected a sample of students writing in which students integrated strange words and letters with English paragraphs. Half of the participants in this study hold a negative attitude towards the effect of Arabizi on learning English in general. On the other hand, the other ten participants asserted that unconsciously mixing some Arabizi letters or words while writing in English is natural because any foreign language learner would have spelling mistakes without Arabizi.

The presence of this writing code has found its way outside the virtual world in Jordan and other Arab countries, creating a state of contradictions. For example, in this study, half of the learners believe that Arabizi is a new writing variety that haunted Jordan, which complicated the process of learning a foreign language. Other participants declared that this new type of writing was used among peers and family to facilitate communication. They strongly asserted that Arabizi did not affect their learning of English as a foreign language because they already faced problems learning it.

If the usefulness of Arabizi in English classes is considered, the situation becomes more of a dilemma. The student writing samples used in this research warn ESL instructors about a problem with which they may be unfamiliar. Whether or not Arabizi is a new writing style, it is nonetheless a fact that needs to be addressed, especially by those learning English as a second language. This study does not advocate for teaching English with the help of the Arabizi; instead, it provides a quick introduction to the impact of Arabizi on EFL classrooms (Jubran, 2023).

According to Saide (2019), losing proficiency in the native language can also result in losing ability in the second language. Students may acquire only a partial command of that language by ignoring grammatical correctness and spelling in English or another second language they are attempting to learn.

Therefore, English language instruction must be reconsidered significantly since most young people recognise the value of communicating well in English. Traditional approaches to teaching languages, such as Arabic and English, may no longer be applicable or useful. It's essential to remember this when interacting with the digital generation (Buckingham, 2013) of today's students. Teaching English to today's students requires considering the pervasive presence of technology in their daily lives. More frequent use of technology in the classroom is needed to keep the attention of young people in Arab countries where English is taught.

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