



*Challenges to Digitize the Writing Classroom:
Teachers' Perspectives*

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Abstract:

Playing a crucial role in language learning, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) seized the spotlight during the last two decades. Accordingly, researchers' traditional focal point has always targeted the way learners perceive CMC. However, this study examines EFL teachers' attitudes towards using CMC to obtain a closer view of the challenges they encounter when using technology to teach writing. The research opts for a descriptive method wherein a questionnaire was administered to 26 teachers of writing at Badji Mokhtar University, Algeria. The findings indicate that technical training, students' potentials, and lack of material impede the integration of CMC features in the writing classroom. In light of the results, some pedagogical recommendations are provided.

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Introduction

Moving towards the second decade of the 21st century highlights the overuse of digital devices, which reshaped how we act and react, and education is no longer an exception. Calling for enduring learning practices, teachers can now engage their learners in different online activities, especially that they have immersed themselves with technology. Thus, the challenge of "time and space" is not an impediment for learning anymore in which using technological features facilitated the spread of information, and thus, teaching and learning can occur anywhere at any time. Accordingly, any interaction that occurs through a technological device refers CMC (Metz, 1994).

CMC, then, is an invaluable tool for communicating and connecting people across the world. CMC activities can be asynchronous, such as composing emails or responding to online discussion, or virtual synchronous like video conferencing and interviews conducted in chat rooms. Computer technology advancements have produced new language learning options that are not available in old-fashioned classes. Adopting technology in classes became inevitable that it would foster interaction, collaboration, and interpersonal relationships between learner/learner and teacher/learner, which may develop the language skills appropriately.

Asynchronous CMC features may help to promote EFL learners' writing skills as being deliberate by providing the learners with various platforms to practice the language, check vocabulary and grammar, and provide others with feedback. Computed programs may provide the language learner with specific attention. CMC serves as a tutor, reviewing the student's answers, storing them, highlighting the mistakes, providing

details, and guiding them to coherent writing. Accordingly, learners' achievements in writing may be enhanced.

1. Significance of the Study

Teaching writing has always been challenging for both teachers and learners since most students find it complicated to produce a coherent whole. There are different reasons behind the learners' failure in writing. Some of the challenges that impede the writing performance are due to the learners themselves, the teachers or the teaching methods and strategies used in the classroom. The problem in teaching and learning writing has limitless effects on the development of the target language. The major problem for teachers is to bridge the gap between their learners' knowledge about the writing components and strategies used to empower the students' abilities to produce a well-structured coherent written account.

Consequently, teachers must arrange appropriate learning situations to demonstrate how both learners and selected materials work according to the learning environment, which may help the teacher capitalize on the learners' prerequisites and current learning. Since educators manifested the use of technology in EFL classes and CMC features sprouted in the educational field, teachers may take advantage of it to help the learners overcome their weaknesses in writing. However, the concept is still baffling for many Algerian teachers. Thus, this article attempts to uncover the challenges that may face EFL teachers in their way to incorporate CMC features in the writing classroom to help the learners develop healthier writing practices. To achieve the objective of this article, it is crucial to answer the following questions:

1. What are the attitudes EFL teachers have towards the integration of CMC in their writing class?
2. What are the difficulties that face teachers when using CMC to teach writing?

2. Literature Review

Romiszwski and Mason (2013) stated that CMC refers to the interaction between individuals separated by time and place utilizing network-based devices. Thus, CMC defines how people generate, share and interpret information via networking telecommunication systems, and it encodes, transmits, and decrypts messages. CMC features include textual, video, and audio types of information that users utilize to save time and to perform certain tasks (Bubas, 2001).

In this regard, CMC has three main components: computer, medium, and communication. Romiszowski and Mason (2013) argued that the term "*computer*" does not only refer to the computer as a tool used for communication, but rather any technological device like smartphones and tablets, which eases the interaction. They further argued that a "*medium*" in communication is the channel through which the sender transfers a message to the receiver. Thus, "*communication*" encompasses the process by which an individual exchanges information using verbal and non-verbal messages with another individual or a group of people.

Romiszwski and Mason (2013) stated that CMC provides its users with different interaction processes to combine written and oral-aural modes with limitless possibilities for communication and feedback. They further claimed that the CMC environment is flexible and more prosperous than in other forms of computer-based education. Similarly, Haddad (1998) highlighted the importance of network-based devices as

powerful tools to teach language skills, to store, recall, and transfer large amounts of data for formal or informal settings. He also asserted that CMC features shape new approaches to language teaching and learning involving more interaction, collaboration, problem-solving situations, critical thinking, and construction of new knowledge. CMC encourages teachers to break out the isolation they experience within their schools, to develop a sense of connectedness with other colleagues, and to pursue their professional development through online communities of practice to enhance teaching and learning (Haddad, 1998).

Today's learners are digital natives, and possessing digital devices is no longer a luxurious status. Indeed, technology contours pedagogical practices that the teaching and learning of writing should develop (Hadariana, 2017). Graham and Perin (2007) argued that using CMC features improves the ability to write and makes the learners as it supports all stages of writing - planning, transcribing, and revising. Moreover, technology can endorse learning the writing components as mechanics, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and organization (Peterson & Parette, 2007). Although teachers of writing are aware of the significance of using technology to teach writing, they lack technical support, sufficient training, and confidence to digitize their writing classroom (El Aggoune & Ghaouar, 2019).

3. Methodology

This research aims to identify the problems EFL teachers have when integrating CMC modes into the writing classroom. The study, then, opts for a descriptive design for research as it tries to answer the "what" question and describes the main problems hindering the use of network-based tools to improve learners' writing abilities.

According to Gay and Diehl (1992), the descriptive design includes collecting data to find answers about the actual status and to determine how the case is. Accordingly, an online survey was administered to 26 teachers who teach writing at the English Department of Badji Mokhtar University of Annaba. The study was conducted during the university year 2018-2019.

Creswell (2009) identified a survey as "providing a quantitative or numeric description of a population's attitudes or opinions by studying a sample of that population" (p. 112). All participants showed consent to take part in the study. The survey of this study comprises three main sections. The first section includes: (1) personal information, (2) experience in teaching writing skills, (3) competency of using information and communication technologies (ICTs), (4) the use of ICTs for entertainment, and (5) the use of ICTs for professional development. The second section, however, involves statements about the teachers' attitudes towards the use of CMC features and the impediments of using CMC to teach writing. The final section is an open-ended question for teachers to add further comments that are coded, and then numerically counted later.

4. Results

The results revealed that all participants (100%) showed consent to take part in the study. As far as their personal information is concerned, (19%) of them are aged between 21 and 25 years, the majority (46%) is between 26 and 30 year-old, (8%) of the correspondents' ages range between 31 and 35 years, others' age (19%) is from 36 to 40, and the rest of teachers (8%) are more than 40-year-old. The participants' experience in teaching the writing module at university varies in which (7%) of them are still in their first year dealing with writing, the majority (46%) have been teaching writing for 1 to

five years, others (30%) have been teaching it for 6 to 10 years, (15%) are teachers of writing for 11 to 15 years, and (2%) had a broad experience tutoring Written Expression for more than 15 years.

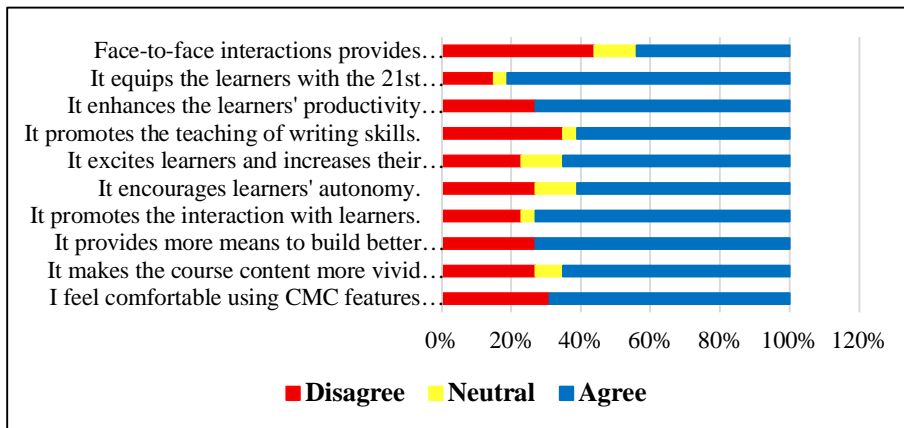
Teachers' answers show their differences concerning their competencies to use CMC features wherein (15%) expressed that their proficiency in using information and communication technologies (ICTs) is minimal, others (23%) of them have insufficient to average competency to use them unlike the rest (62%) who claim that they are skillful users of technological devices. Additionally, (58%) of teachers asserted that they used CMC features for entertainment, but others (42%) did not. Accordingly, the majority (84%) said they used digital aids for professional development, whereas the minority (15%) claimed they did not.

The findings show that teachers under investigation generally have positive attitudes towards using CMC features in their writing classrooms. In this regard, (69%) of the participants expressed that they were comfortable with the idea of integrating technological innovations into their class in which they (65%) claimed that technology would enhance the course practicality as it would provide (73%) of writing teachers with more means to build better class discussions, corrective feedback, and support in a way it might increase to interaction with the learners. The majority of correspondents (61%) stated that using CMC to teach writing would encourage the learners' autonomous learning and would increase their motivation to write, wherein writing is a total deliberate activity. The teachers (61%) believe that using network-based tasks would promote writing pedagogy because it would intensify foreign language learners' productivity and typing skills, equipping them with 21st-century skills. Although technology is utile in

teaching the Written Expression module and teachers expressed their satisfaction regarding its use, (44%) of the participants claimed that face-to-face interaction would be more robust to tutor writing and provide better results. Accordingly, the sample is

aware of the importance of using CMC features to teach writing and its potential role in supporting their teaching practices. Figure N° 01 depicts the attitudes of teachers towards the use of CMC features in the writing classroom:

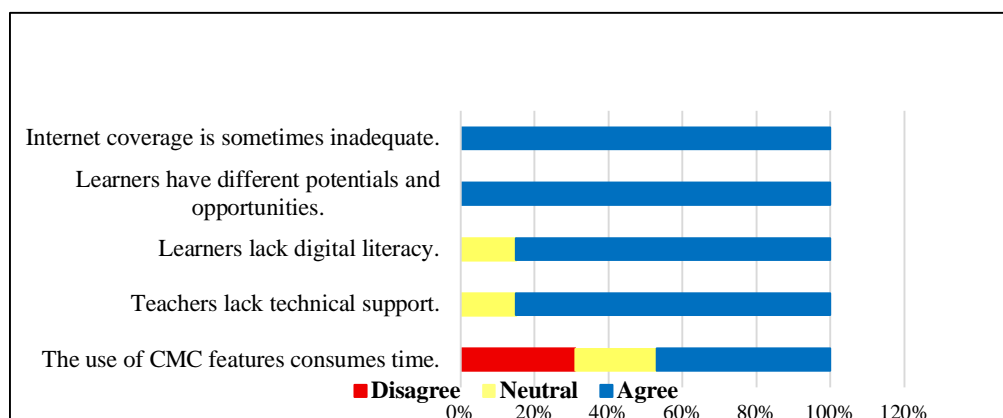
Fig.1. Teachers' attitudes towards the use of CMC in the writing classroom



Results revealed that teachers of writing had some impediments when using CMC to teach writing. All participants (100%) agreed that network coverage was sometimes inadequate, and they faced problems connecting, posting, commenting, or searching materials. They also stated that learners would have different potentials and opportunities possessing technological devices like smartphones, tablets, and computers. Thus, most teachers (85%) claimed that many learners lack knowledge about digital literacy. Concerning the teachers themselves, (85%) of the

participants stated that integrating CMC features for educational purposes would necessitate considerable training and technical support that technology might be time-consuming. The challenges teachers face to enhance learners' writing abilities are beyond the teachers' level in which the teachers showed their awareness concerning the importance of CMC, but the obstacles related to the learners, the network, and the availability of materials. Figure N° 2 below shows the challenges that teachers face in using CMC to teach writing:

Fig.2. Challenges in using CMC to teach writing

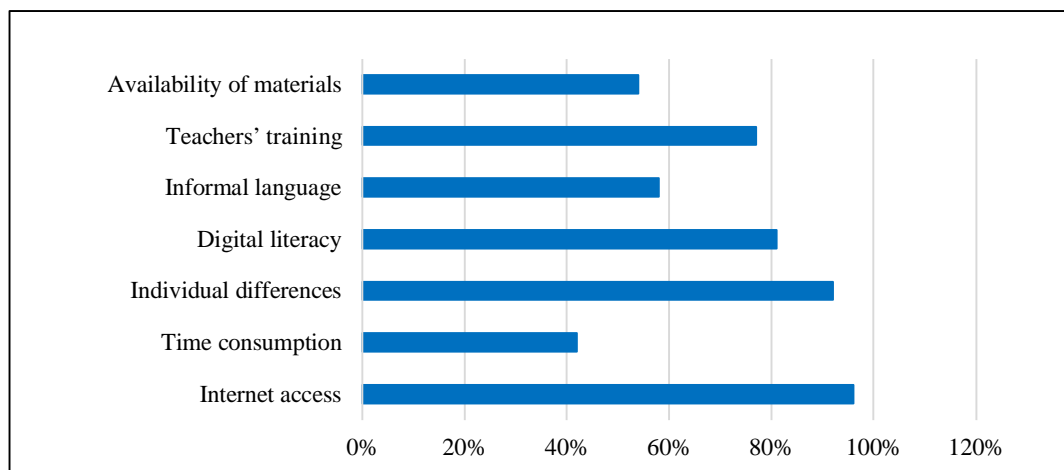


The qualitative results collected from the open-ended question tackling the teachers' challenges when incorporating CMC features in the Written Expression module confirmed the quantitative results. Teachers talked about different issues related to using ICTs. They all (100%) admitted the instability of internet coverage which deters both learners and teachers from logging in, publishing, providing feedback, or even developing suitable materials for the course. Accordingly, some teachers (42%) mentioned that using the Internet might be a time-consuming task.

The majority of participants (92%) stated that learners are not alike. They differ in terms of capacities, skills, attitudes, wants, lacks, and interests. Some learners might be unable to cope with the different technological devices or sometimes

unconcerned with them. Teachers (81%) also considered the learners' lack of digital literacy and found it challenging to interact through electronic platforms. One prominent issue teachers of writing (58%) referred to was the informal language style like abbreviations, slang, inappropriate vocabulary, and incoherent sentences. Teachers' training was a shared thought within the majority (77%) in which they highlighted the point of getting prepared to use the technological facilities. They (54%) also stressed the unavailability of materials at the level of the university. The respondents pointed out to the fact that decision-makers should provide them with rooms supplied with technological devices, as they are beneficial to enhance learning. Figure N° 3 explains difficulties writing teachers face when integrating CMC features into their classes:

Fig.3. Challenges to incorporate CMC in teaching writing



5. Discussions:

The use of technology shapes how the teachers and learners interact. According to the statistical data, EFL teachers have positive attitudes towards incorporating CMC features to teach writing. They have good digital skills in which they are accustomed to using technological devices with notable access to interacting for

professional development and enjoyment. However, CMC implementation in the Written Expression module is still challenging, and teachers feel hesitant to use it since they face different obstacles for successful practices.

Concerning the findings, the most onerous barriers for teachers are the lack of technical support, insufficient training, learners'

differences in digital literacy and potentials, and unavailability of materials. These challenges necessitate serious action for educational improvements.

6. Conclusion:

This research investigated the obstacles facing the teachers of writing to incorporate CMC in their classroom. Teachers of writing at Badji Mokhtar University showed a moderate willingness to use CMC features when teaching writing. However, they expressed specific problems that deter the smooth transition from the old-fashioned method of teaching writing to a more advanced one using technology. In light of the results, decision-makers, teachers, and learners should consider the following suggestions to overcome the challenges of integrating CMC in the writing class:

1. Providing adequate support to learners and teachers through intensive training sessions on what/how to use CMC for teaching and learning.
2. Supplying institutions with the necessary equipment as a working internet, computer rooms, tablets, and interactive boards.
3. Striving towards adaptability in which teachers should be aware of the different roles they play when using CMC to teach writing skills.
4. Sustaining the students' writing process and providing them with corrective feedback to enhance their achievements.
5. Encouraging and motivating the learners to use technological facilities for writing productions.
6. Attempting for learning autonomy in which learners get engaged in the learning process.

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