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Enhancing Collaborative Learning Through Online Writing Workshops

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Abstract ;

The main purpose behind the present work is to investigate the effectiveness of online writing workshops in enhancing collaboration and improving EFL learners' writing skills. The aim is to determine within technology-supported writing environments would help enhance students' awareness of the writing process steps and embitter their written texts, and whether engaging in online writing sessions, characterized by anonymity, had a positive effect on students' collaboration, motivation and perceptions. The subjects of the study are 30 Algerian university students, assigned to an experimental training group and led the experience of writing essays (anonymously) using Moodle platform, where collaborative feedback is exchanged among members of the experimental group. Students were asked to write an essay as an entry test at the beginning and did an exit test at the end of the study. They were also interviewed at the end of the study. The experiment consisted of a total of ten sessions (1h.30 each) of teaching writing skills. Results of both tests were compared, taking into account the interview responses. The findings revealed that online collaborative writing workshops resulted in many benefits for the students in terms of not only of their motivation but also the improvement of their writing. The experience also helped reduce anxiety and shyness among students since it was conducted anonymously. The overall conclusion is therefore involving students in anonymous online writing workshops helps overcoming psychological obstacles, enhances collaboration among students and results in improvement of their writing production.

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1. Introduction

Writing is believed to be the hardest skill for EFL learners to master; that is why teachers began to think about their approaches to teaching writing, especially with the introduction of technological tools, and started to explore approaches to improve students' writing skills with the use of technology.

The integration of technological tools into educational settings has shown different positive effects on learning, promoting learners' autonomy and improving their writing skills as well as online collaboration (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Kaplan, 2002).This study, therefore, tries to study the possibility of enhancing collaboration through technology-based writing workshops with the EFL students of a community university in Laghouat, Algeria. It attempts to examine if online writing workshops can help enhance students' collaboration and improve their writing through exchanged feedback in an asynchronous learning environment.

Regarding delivery methods, the writing skill has always been taught by the traditional teaching mode, which means face-to-face teaching. But the recent educational reforms have recommended the adoption of technological educational tools. Many experts, such as Torrisi-Steele, G. (2002), have recently called for the use of the online collaborative mode. However, little is known about how to arrange collaborative learning using the online mode in the field of language teaching since most programs are designed mainly by educators in the field of science.

2. Research Motivation

After a long career in the field of language teaching, 28 years, I have always been dissatisfied with the current teaching practices. This has generated a lot of reflection about the way of teaching writing to tertiary students. The current practices disregard the fact that writing should be an interactive activity (Porto, 2001) and "a process of collective inquiry" (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003) in which students can work together to discover, share and exchange information, or a collaborative venture in which students can help one another in the drafting, revising and editing process (Bekins & Merriam, 2004, p235).

3. Problematic and Research Questions

The difficulties encountered by EFL learners indicate the need for a strategic methodology that will impact cooperation and a better performance. Based on previous studies, if students are provided with an e-environment, students will cooperate, learn from each other and their writing performance will improve. Central to this present research work is the question: To what extent can electronic learning environments help enhancing collaboration among students and improve their performance?

The purpose of this study is to identify the effects of technology-shaped settings on students' collaboration as well as performance. In order to conduct an in-depth analysis and make inferences, varied questions were raised:

1. Do technology-shaped learning settings enhance collaboration? If yes, do they help

1.1 motivate them to write?

1.2 teach them the importance of revision?

1.3 reduce their stress in writing?

2. What are the limitations of the use of technology-shaped learning settings?

To answer these questions, it is hypothesized through the present study that online writing workshops can help enhance collaboration and improve students' writing skills by motivating them to write, teaching them the importance of revision and reducing stress in writing.

The use of computers has revolutionized educational settings. To draw on the benefits of this tool, educators have been looking for different ways to integrate them purposefully serving teaching and learning plans. While the traditional teacher-centered approaches are blamed to have resulted in deficient motivation and weak communication skills of learners, the integration of technology is thought to offer chances for enhancing collaboration in writing workshops, in which learners' autonomy can be cultivated.

4. Purpose and Objectives

The objective of this experimental study is to investigate the relationship between online writing workshops and students' collaboration and ability to write well, and its implication on their academic writing performance. In other words, the researcher attempts to highlight the need for a future research on the effects of ICT-supported writing instruction on EFL students' collaboration and writing ability. In this respect, the research at hand aims first at examining whether EFL students, if trained well, can effectively lead online workshops in a collaborative way. It aims also at measuring the effects of these online workshops on students' writing performance.

The research findings could serve teachers and course designers in conceiving an effective EFL writing course. It could be considered as a first step in the design of a course for EFL students that helps promote writing skills self-development through self-awareness raising and cooperative work.

5. Literaure Review

According to Piaget and Vygotsky, learners can learn better in an environment that encourages co-operation and interaction. For Piaget, learners can learn by constructing knowledge themselves, and new experiences can help in generating new knowledge (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998, p40). Besides, learners can perform at higher intellectual levels when working collaboratively (Vygotsky,1978). Thus, both cognitive constructivists and social constructivists emphasize that when learners interact with the environment, the creation of knowledge occurs for the first, and allowing discussion, interaction and collaboration among learners are the pillars for learning to take place for the second.

Positive social interdependence can allow learners to achieve more than they do in competitive and individualistic settings. Providing an environment where learners can work with other peers may maximize achievement among students (Johnson D. and Johnson R, 1999).

Previous research works have shown that the collaborative process can result in better motivation and higher performance (Bruffee, 1993; Slavin, 1996). In fact, online workshops may encourage collaboration in learning. According to some research findings, as communication can be facilitated by the use of computer-supported communication systems, collaborative learning has become an innovation to improve teaching and learning (Bielaczyc, K. (2001). Previous research results generally show that learners are more willing to collaborate and are more capable of

helping one another to achieve better results if they are allowed to engage in an online collaborative learning environment (Lee & Chen, 2000).

5.1 Collaboration and Group Work

The sociocultural theory of mind emphasizes the role of interaction and peer collaboration in L2 development. From a sociocultural lens, learning is a socially situated activity. Higher cognitive functions appear first on the social, inter-mental plane, and only later on the psychological intra-mental plane (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners, novices, construct knowledge in collaboration with more capable individuals, experts. Researchers applying sociocultural theory to the study of L2 learning maintain that learners can have a positive impact on each other's development because they can act as both novices and experts (e.g. Storch, 2004). Because no two learners have the same strengths and weaknesses, when working together, they can provide scaffolded assistance to each other and, by pooling their different resources, achieve a level of performance that is beyond their individual level of competence (Ohta, 2001). The collaborative dialogue that occurs in LREs, as learners collaborate to solve grammatical and lexical difficulties, constitutes an example of languaging (Watanabe & Swain, 2007).

In writing classes, in recent years, a number of studies have called attention to the benefits of collaborative writing tasks, which require learners to work in pairs throughout the entire writing process (e.g., Storch, 2004; Addisson, J., & McGee, S.J., 2010). Research from a sociocultural perspective suggests that collaborative writing activities push learners to reflect on their language use and work together in the solution of their language-related problems (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). By pooling their linguistic resources to solve the problems encountered, learners engage in language-mediated cognitive activities that are thought to facilitate the co-construction of language knowledge and a higher level of performance (Beauvais & Passerault, 2011).

5.2 Technology-shaped Learning Environment

With the advent of technology, the learning environment became even more powerful. The goal of an open-ended learning environment is "to immerse learners in rich experiences, using various tools, resources, and activities with which to augment or extend thinking" (Land & Hannafin, 1997, p 97). Student-centered learning and instructional technology seem to fit together well as one approach to enhance learning. The computer-enhanced environment supports the learning of self-regulation Skills7, active learning, and individual construction of knowledge so that individuals assume a greater responsibility for their own learning.

The World Wide Web provides a rapid access to information, but learning is self-directed. Computer-based micro-worlds give the learner a link between abstract concepts and understanding based on experience, providing artificial environments for exploration. The 7 Self-regulation is the ability to monitor and control our own behavior, emotions, or thoughts, altering them in accordance with the demands of the situation. It includes the abilities to inhibit first responses, to resist interference from irrelevant stimulation, and to persist on relevant tasks even when we don't enjoy them. Computer-enhanced

environment also combats rote memory and disassociation of knowledge.

Instead, the learner understands through the refinement of experience and exploration. As in any learning environment, the student needs a facilitator who identifies and provides access to resources, creates problem contexts, refines and extends those contexts, and provides a human resource. The learner makes, or is guided to make, effective choices through student-centered learning. Over time, technology leads the learner to understand and surpass the benchmarks previously achieved. The learner can "make sense" out of what he/she knows, develop insight into the "why" behind experiences, create a deeper understanding of thorough exploration, and establish an anchor on which further information can be added. Approaching the learning process as a developer of critical thinking and problem solving skills through the idea of student-centered learning would enable the student to experience success as a self-directed, life-long learner --- the type of worker that today's job market requires.

5.3 New pedagogical models

According to the European Language Network, ICC (2015), the digital era imposes a definition of traditional pedagogical models and the roles of teachers and learners. According to them, new organizational and pedagogical models need to be exploited by teachers so that they can offer a cooperative, collaborative and life-long type of learning to the citizenship of the future. It is argued that the utilization of ICT learning settings and tools in educational processes evidently leads to radical changes in the role of both teachers and learners and to the emergence of new teaching and learning environments and methodologies as well as new training modalities.

Finally, new virtual training settings aimed at facilitating tools and resources to favor communication and interaction and distributing teaching materials through the web will emerge in order to encourage and promote collaboration and co-operation among the participants in teaching and learning processes (Grenville, 2001).

5.3.1 The Teacher's Role

The impact of the Internet on education in the recent years fosters the vision of an open, global and flexible learning, as authors such as Cabero (1998) state, leading to radical shifts in the teacher's role and competencies. In the framework of this educational landscape, the role of the teacher is that of acting as a guide and instrument to assure a comprehensive learning process via the Internet, managing the student's learning process by creating - at the same time- new instructional models set in newly-created virtual environments. Land & Hannafin (1997) understand knowledge manager as the person who is able to manage the student's skills, abilities and knowledge, motivating and taking benefit of the student's both individual and collective learning possibilities. Thus, the teacher's role is multiplied and shifts from being a single transmitter of knowledge to become facilitator and guide of the learning process, integrator of new ICT media, researcher and designer of suitable learning scenarios, collaborator (with other teachers and students), orchestrator, learner, and evaluator. The ICC report (2002), especially devoted to the role of teachers of foreign languages, determines the skills and

competencies a teacher has to master in order to integrate ICT in a successful way. Thus, the report mentions the acquisition of technical, organizational, and conceptual skills together with the new literacies: technical, scientific, digital, critical, linguistic, cultural and mediation literacies.

Similarly, referring to the role and function of teachers who develop their activities in ICT-based settings, Lufti, Gisbert and Fandos (2001) point out "five main functions a teacher should compile: information consultant, group collaborator, facilitator, critical generator of knowledge and finally, academic supervisor." (p. 70). The authors add that the teacher's profile is shaped in three dimensions: cognitive-reflexive, active-creative, and affective-communicative. Thus, teachers are regarded as assessors and guides of the autonomous learning process, resource facilitators, designers of new technology-rich learning environments, adapters of different materials, producers of new didactic materials in ICT-based settings, and evaluators of the different processes in which these environments and resources are involved. Finally they will have to be able to acquire a professional viewpoint on ICT life-long learning.

5.3.2 The Learner's Role

The learners, citizens of the 21st century, have to be given access to didactic and technical strategies so that they can become competent users of new tools and resources. They are autonomous and responsible for their learning. Moreover, they have to acquire skill and ability to cope with technological demands, but also the capacity to use them effectively at technical, rational and critical levels. Thus, the great challenges a teacher would have to face regarding the student's instruction would be: teach to search, teach to understand, teach to use critical thinking and teach to communicate, putting emphasis upon the different educational needs and qualities of the student. Cabero (1998) puts it straight: "the final goal is to enable learners to manage themselves in the society of the future, which -as it seems- will be the society of learning, and it will be a life-long learning. Just like the teacher, the learner definitely has to adjust to a new role in the learning process." (p. 5). The learner must take on new responsibilities, often working without any supervision whatsoever.

According to Cabero (1998), to succeed in technology-rich environments, learners have to develop certain key abilities and skills such as adaptability to an environment which is in constant change, work in team in a collaborative form, and lead new initiatives and be independent

The ICC report establishes many of the new settings' advantages. The learners have the possibilities to publish and distribute their own productions for a wider audience (ICC, 2002). Activities will encourage learners to become inquisitive, rather than becoming solely passive recipients of knowledge, thus furthering the idea of the learner as an active participant in the learning process (ICC, 2002, p. 14). Set in new technological environments students are given the possibility to work in an autonomous way, becoming more conscious of their own learning process and of the knowledge they acquire, thus becoming more aware of the contents and objectives to be achieved. The inclusion of ICT into the English classroom favors, above all, communication: "Learning on-line is different

from learning off-line in another important way: there is much more learning and much less teaching (…) at least there is much less teaching as it is typically done in off-line settings" as stated by Peterson and Facemyer (1996, p. 55).

Cabero (1998) and other authors support the importance of the apparition of these new learning scenarios for amore participative and extended communication which makes us aware of these learning scenarios that allow both individual learning with collaborative group work.

According to Mir, Reparaz and Sobrino (2003), "there coexist three types of teaching and learning approaches: "on-site learning, traditional distance learning and on-line or virtual learning." (p. 24).

6. Methodology

This research has an experimental nature that comprises one independent variable (online instruction) and two dependent variables (Collaboration among students and EFL learners' writing performance). It involves comparing students' production before and during the intervention to test a causal hypothesis. Before the experiment, students received writing instruction within the traditional method (the teacher as central element of the learning teaching operation). During the experiment, learners cooperated online to accomplish the writing tasks set by their teacher. Thus, writing assignments were exchanged on due time, and then students were instructed to work as a group, revise and evaluate their peers' drafts using checklists.

In order to collect the necessary data for the research questions of the present work, the researcher planned an experiment which involved entry and exit writing tests (Appendices 3 and 4) to assess students' performance before and after the treatment. The purpose was to discover if there would be any difference in the results of the entry and exit tests. The researcher carried out fieldwork which extended for eight (8) weeks, and involved actual teaching in the university these EFL students were attending.

The results should give the researcher strong evidence to decide if the group trained to use online writing workshops performed better. The hypothesis being questioned is that students, when leading a group work within a technology-shaped environment, would outperform showing high level of collaboration that results in better performance.

Finally, the researcher used a task-based, semi-structured interview (Appendix) to supplement the data gathered from the intervention (Issroff, 1994; Hacker D. & Sommers N. 2010). The multi-methodological triangulation achieved by applying both quantitative and qualitative measures serves the purpose of validating the results (Cohen & Manion, 2000). In fact, the interviews gave respondents more space to comment on their beliefs and experiences.

The study is led in an urban university in southern Algeria, Laghouat. Participants are 30 first year LMD students at the English Department. Students will have the opportunity to receive about 02 sessions (1.5 hour per session) of in-class training on how to work in cooperation (review and evaluate a peer's draft, using the checklists they will be provided with).

Data collection started at the beginning of the 2017-2018 academic year. Students first underwent a detailed writing pretest whose

tasks focus on punctuation and capitalization, word order, use of tenses, subject verb agreement, use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, use of prepositions, coherence, cohesion, word choice, organization, thesis statement and topic sentence, supporting ideas and concluding sentences.

Given access to the electronic environment (Moodle platform) with anonymous accounts, students started the 10 online sessions (1.5 hour per session) that focused on essay elaboration through the writing assignments (Figure 1). Students shared their drafts with their peers for review and evaluation. Drafts would be submitted to the group members, and receivers would also anonymously and review and evaluate the producers' writing works according to the checklists provided by their instructor. These reviewed drafts would anonymously be returned to their writers with the readers' comments. These comments were expected to be taken into account during the second draft. This period would end in a detailed writing post-test that focuses on the above mentioned criteria to see whether students' writing had improved and collaboration had given its fruits. Participants were interviewed at the end of the experiment to know about the perceptions and attitudes towards the experiment.

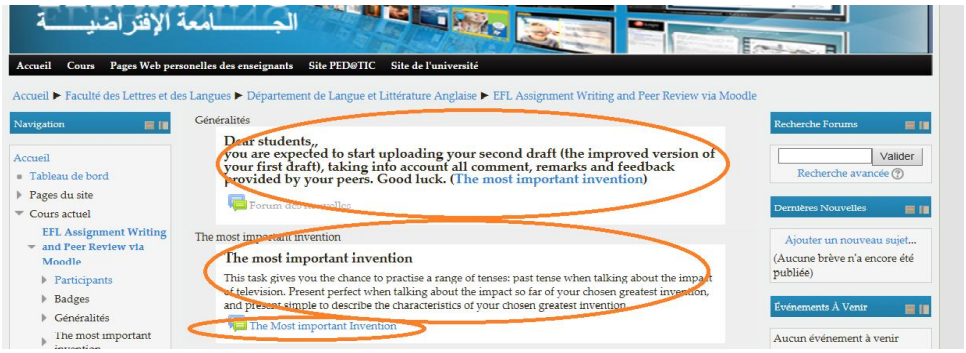

Figure (1): The First Online Writing Assignment: Instructions & Objectives

Results

Students' responses (Figure 2) to the interview questions revealed that students enjoyed the experience, showed interest in it, and seemed very satisfied because of the many benefits gained and reflected in their performances. The intervention the researcher used helped bring about change in students' attitudes towards collaboration and their writing skills.

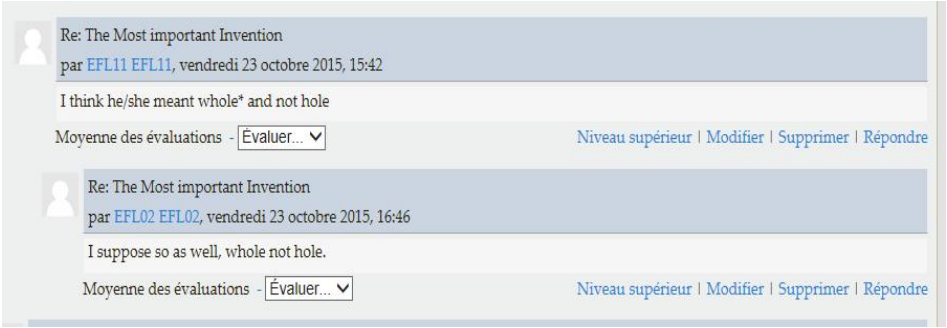

Figure (2): Samples of the first responses provided by participants

Results from the interview revealed that the students who engaged in the experiment revised not only their essays but also their grammar notes. Moreover, the interviewees' responses showed that online workshops allow the students to experience what it feels like working in groups, which, according to them, helps collaborate and share. These results seem to vouch for the usefulness of online collaboration as a technique in developing good writing skills and creating a motivating atmosphere among peers.

In order to analyze the effectiveness of the intervention, student writings were analyzed. It should be noted that students had the chance to practice the new experiment in the language laboratories where internet connection is available. They wrote essays on specific topics in the first week of the study and shared their production. The teacher provided students with coaching and guidance during all sessions.

	Word length	Grammar	Spelling	Punctuation	R O Sentences
Mean	90.44	9.53	7.42	6.17	7.42
Standard Deviation	26.02	3.19	2.93	2.48	2.80
Assymetry Coefficient	0.79	0.12	0.36	0.93	0.63

Table (1): Entry test results

When the T.test was applied on the results obtained by the students, it was concluded that there is a significant difference between pre and post-test results (Error Frequency: 17.9 versus 24.9) (Table 1 &2).

	Grade A	Grade B	Grade C	Grade D	Err M	T.Test
Pre T	6	11	11	5	17.9	0.2541
Pos T	3	13	9	7	24.72	

Table (2) : Students' Grades during Entry and Exit Tests

		Word length	Grammar	Spelling	Punctuation	R O Sentences
Pre test	***Moyen***	92.27	9.85	8.39	7.00	2.52
	Mediane	85.00	9.00	9.00	6.00	2.00
	Ecart Type	24.09	3.59	2.98	2.91	1.47
Post test	***Moyen***	93.91	9.18	7.70	5.67	2.23
	Mediane	90.00	9.00	8.00	5.00	2.00
	Ecart Type	24.12	2.26	2.21	2.26	1.53
T.Testpre test		**0.03**	**0.41**	**0.27**	**0.03**	**0.03**
T.Test post test		**0.03**	**0.39**	**0.24**	**0.24**	**0.04**

Table (3) : Entry and Exit Test Results

The linguistic (local) errors recorded according to their repetition per paper were grammatical (9.8), spelling (8.3), punctuation (7), and almost no run-on sentences. It is noteworthy to mention that the minimum number of every type of error is 'nil' as shown in Table (3) which in other words means that many papers did not actually

commit certain types of errors at all. To be more precise, a great number of papers did not contain run-on sentences, punctuation and spelling errors during the exit test. The experimental group reached an SD of 0.25 which shows that the results are consistent.

Analysis of the peer-editing forms revealed that the editors had little difficulty at the beginning of the experiment. Worth to be noted, responses in general were relevant as they addressed the spotted errors and corresponded to the checklists the students were provided with. Also, the students sometimes indicated the existence of some fallacies but did not mention their line numbers in the essays. With respect to many responses, the spotted problems involved some missing sentence components that needed to be added. Editors often asked writers to change a certain idea, example, or statement without explaining why it needed to be changed; they sometimes even offered a suggestion as to how to change it.

The findings revealed that students who are trained on this specific cooperative study skill would be better reviewers in collaboration and evaluation of their peers' drafts, and when a collaborative approach is applied, EFL teaching will be more learner-centered and will positively impact learners' writing performance; thus, hypotheses were confirmed.

To what extent are online learning environments an enhancement tool conducive to effective collaboration? A comparison between the pre- and post-test essays of students in the experimental online writing group in terms of the mean difference found that the involvement in evaluation and review of peers' drafts within the electronic learning platform had positive effects on collaboration and the development of writing skills. The findings suggest that there was some improvement in the editing stage of writing (checking mechanics and revising) after involvement in the new experience. Moreover, it could thus be suggested that students needed a motivating atmosphere which was guaranteed by the electronic-based environment. This result showed that the experience benefited the students a great deal in terms of motivation. These findings are similar to earlier studies that have investigated the impact of the practice of collaboration using technology on improving students' writing skills, such as that of Kaminski (2005). Besides, during the interviews, the students expressed their joy, interest and high motivation to the new practices; thus hypothesis was confirmed.

In summary, with regard to the findings for the research questions, the present study has provided additional insights to those of other studies that have investigated the effectiveness of technology-shaped learning environments in enhancing collaboration and improving students' writing skills.

7. Conclusion

With the current movement towards learner-centered instruction, the way is paved for the teacher to target learner autonomy. It is worthwhile to consider carrying out more extensive research that includes other possible factors likely to affect the final results of the present study. Such a study could be executed in environments different from the one it was carried out in. It is also possible to have a wider range of students involved in the project, students of different ages, levels and backgrounds. In geographical terms,

participants can be drawn from different contexts to help generalize the findings of the research. In other words, the fact that most participants were students who lived in the campus and had no internet facilities may have affected the final results at least for the access frequency.

It could be equally important to make use of other different research tools such as classroom observation which enables to deeply observe and investigate how students interact and perform during sessions.

All in all, there was a general agreement upon the usefulness of the experience. For students, working anonymously in an online group makes one discover many things and leads one to share knowledge with the others. To conclude, the findings of the interview questions give support to the efficacy of technology-supported writing workshops in enhancing collaboration and improving the quality of students' revised and new essays, thus encouraging teachers to use this technique in their writing classrooms.

To end with, a professor and dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology took a leave to start a radical, new nonprofit university that she says will have no majors, no lectures, and no classrooms. The basic idea is to start a university from scratch for today's needs and with today's technology. Then it's high time we thought of an educational revolution that aims at modernizing the system by adopting new innovations and adapting them to our context.

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