

*From keyboard to Screen
Communication:
Teachers' Attitudes towards
the Use of Asynchronous
Collaborative Activities on
Developing the Writing Skill*

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Abstract

Within the tenets of the so-called Computer-Mediated Communication (henceforth, CMC), the "here and now" are no longer required since learning is now taking place through networked devices, either simultaneously "Synchronous" (SCMC) or at different period of time "Asynchronous" (ACMC). To this end, this study aimed to investigate the extent to which EFL teachers are ready to use such mode of communication in writing classrooms in order to urge the learners to critically discuss and evaluate their written performances. Hence, an explanatory method of research was conducted, whereby a questionnaire was administered to 60 EFL teachers from Badji Mokhtar University (Annaba/Algeria). For the sake of an in-depth analysis a focus group interview was conducted. Results revealed some positive attitudes towards such virtual forums. Findings also showed some apprehensions concerning the introduction of ACMC in an EFL context. Accordingly, some guidelines were conferred.

Keywords: ACMC, CMC, EFL, SCMC, writing

Introduction:

As the world moves into the second decade of the 21st century, the use of technology has changed the way of doing everything and education is no exception. Teachers are now able to make the learners more active by facilitating their engagement through the use of different online activities that call primarily for lifelong learning. In fact, in the present era, the idea of distant learning becomes something of stretch, on the one hand, teachers would have an ability to eliminate two main obstacles that usually hinder the learning process especially in the traditional way of teaching/learning which are "time and space", and on the other hand, they would manage chances by creating an online learning atmosphere through which they would foster communication and collaboration between the teacher and the learners and between the learners themselves. So, as the major focus of this research paper is the writing skill, and as we all know that learning to write requires deliberate attempts and practice which may not be occurred only in academic institutions, the learners are then, in need to practice their skill even outside the classroom walls, and this could be possible only through the use of CMC. Therefore, the researcher aimed to answer the following questions;

- How could Algerian EFL teachers perceive the idea of integrating APMC in writing classrooms?
- Do Algerian teachers perceive that the APMC supports their teaching?

Accordingly, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

- It is assumed that EFL teachers would be keen toward introducing some APMC approaches in teaching writing as it can assist their role especially in an EFL context.

Literature Review:

Writing:

Barbara Kroll (1990) said; "becoming a writer is a complex and ongoing process, and becoming a writer teacher is no less complex" (p. 1)¹. This preliminary reveals the paramount importance of the writing skill as a part of communication,

and the complexity of the nature of writing itself. This complexity requires both the learners and the teachers to handle such skill carefully, wherein the learners have to make an acceptable effort to convey their abstract thoughts into a written mode, and similarly, the teachers have to scaffold their learners' attempts in order to ensure satisfied outcomes. Since writing is an "ongoing process" (ibid.), it can be assumed that effective writing requires more practice, Grabe and Kaplan (1996), for instance, claimed that; "writing is a technology, a set of skills which must be practiced and learned through experience" (p. 6)². So, based on that quotation, a very important idea comes to one's mind, that is 'the more learners do experience their writing through practice, the better their writing is going to be improved'. Writing, then, is a skill which must be practiced (Patel & Jain, 2008)³, so like running, writing can be developed over time by practice (Bryan, 2015)⁴. It is obvious from what has been already said that the scholars have emphasized the complexity of writing where English is the first language, so one could estimate the complexity of such skill in an EFL context. Algeria, for instance, is a case in point, as English is considered as a foreign language. So, in this situation the degree of complexity will be twofold.

The Situation of Teaching Writing in the Algerian Educational Context:

Before the discussion moves on, it should be noticed that being a writing teacher at the university, the researcher discovered that although writing is not a skill that is restricted only for the written expression module, but it is rather used to achieve communication in different subjects and for different academic purposes, however, teaching it tend to be a neglected part in the teaching context. Based on the learners' level, it was found that the majority of them except a very limited number are very passive in the sense that they are entirely relying on their teacher. This is obviously can be explained by the teacher-centered approach that is followed by most of the writing teachers, and which values the learners' product over the process writing. Another important point to consider is the reluctance of some learners

toward the collaborative writing activities. Those learners are mainly introvert who are usually shy and quiet during such social tasks. So, it can be said that since the teaching of writing has long been undergoing instructor-based strategy, in which the teachers focus more on content learning rather than practice, the learners have been familiarized with such mode of learning, in which they write just for "display" (i.e., for academic purposes) but not for "learning" (i.e., process writing) (Raimes, 1991, p. 415)⁵ and thus, they become reluctant to any further change. Thus, the situation at hand reflects the traditional way that the Algerian EFL teachers are still applying in their writing classrooms despite the fact that the new century has brought a fresh set of innovative means that could broadly affect the educational context and meet the requirements of the current generation of the digital natives.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC):
With the rapid development of world and technology, CMC is recently gaining popularity in language teaching and learning. This mode of communication includes any communication that takes place between "...individuals or groups separated in space and/or time" (Luppicini, 2007, p. 142)⁶, via "... the instrumentality of computers" (Herring, 1996, p. 1)⁷. Actually, the flexibility of CMC permits not only one way communication (one-to-one communication) but also ramified ways of communication (one-to-many communication). It therefore, gives an ample opportunity for larger audience, in that both teachers and students would be able to be active members in educational group discussions either interacting in peers or in groups (Kern & Warschauer, 2000⁸; Baron, 2008⁹).

Asynchronous vs. Synchronous CMC:

In fact, CMC envelopes two main dimensions or modes of communication "synchronous and asynchronous". The former, reflects some conditions which are closer to "real time" communication wherein the interlocutors must be logged on simultaneously and messages are exchanged instantaneously, hence, various modes of reality are characterizing the discussion, such as; receiving immediate

feedback. While the latter, takes place without giving too much thought to both time and place, so both the sender and the receiver need not be logged on simultaneously (Loannou-Georgiou, 2005¹⁰; Mills, 2006¹¹). This mode of learning (asynchronous) most often provides "a high degree of flexibility for both learners and instructors" (Campbell, 2004, p. xxii)¹².

The Relationship between CMC and Writing:

Generally speaking, CMC can have a direct impact in almost all areas of language learning including the teaching and learning of the four skills in general and writing in particular. Either in an asynchronous mode or in a synchronous mode, CMC has different dimensions, aural, textual, and visual. Given to the fact that this paper is interested in the writing skill, it would be congruent if it throws some light upon the textual dimension or the text-based CMC. When saying, text-based, the first thing comes to one's mind is typing on a keyboard, so, the communication is absolutely would take place in a written mode. It involves communication in which the individuals tend to transmit "... information between each other mainly through the medium of the written word along with other symbolic systems such as numbers and emotional icons" (Bodomo, 2008, p. 6)¹³. So here the interlocutors would use the writing skill in order to convey their messages in cyberspaces.

Data Collection Tools:

Although the use of CMC in language learning have sprouted like mushrooms all over the world, however, this concept is not commonly used by Algerian teachers since the field of educational technology still in its infancy in the Algerian educational context, that is the reason why, it was felt important to get a deeper insight concerning the subject matter before its wide implementation. Hence the aim of this small-scale study was to establish the generally held perceptions of teachers about the use of ACMC in EFL writing classrooms, in order to unveil what kind of hindrances that are preventing them from applying such brand new tool. Since, the researcher found that teachers' perceptions are of great importance to determine the success or failure of ACMC. Accordingly, this research paper falls within the

explanatory research method from the mixed research design which is concerned with the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by qualitative data which are going to explain further number data in a single study or in a series of studies (Bergman, 2008¹⁴; Creswell, 2014¹⁵; Creswell, 2015¹⁶; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018¹⁷). As for the quantitative data, the researcher used a questionnaire that was conducted mainly for the sake of collecting numerical data; it was carried out through Google Forms Applications and sent to the participants via emails. Following the analysis of number data, a focus group consisted of 10 teachers (mainly teachers of written expression) were interviewed so as to obtain data concerning their opinions towards using the ACMC as an alternative tool to teach writing. The interview takes approximately 20 minutes and it enclosed 4 open-ended questions. Their answers were recorded and then interpreted. For the sake of accuracy, the numerical data were calculated by Microsoft Excel 2010. As for the participants, they were 60 teachers from Badji Mokhtar University (Annaba/Algeria).

Discussion of the Results:

Quantitative Data:

From figure (1), it can be noticed that this item received a mixed result 60% see that the collaborative writing activities are not useful at all, while just 30% of them see that such activities are useful to some extent, and a minority claimed that it is useful. For those who have answered negatively, they have further explained that during the collaborative tasks, the students usually make use of (a) their L1 (first language interference), (b) the classroom becomes noisy, (c) a difficulty in assisting every single pair, or every single group especially in large classes which are usually between 35 and 45 students, they add that what matters most is that those activities are (d) time consuming especially when it comes to divide the classroom into equal groups, in terms of equating groups in order to gather nearly all levels (weak, average, and advanced students). So, owing to the aforementioned reasons the implementation of such activities becomes nearly impossible.

Figure 1: The face-to-face collaborative Writing Activities

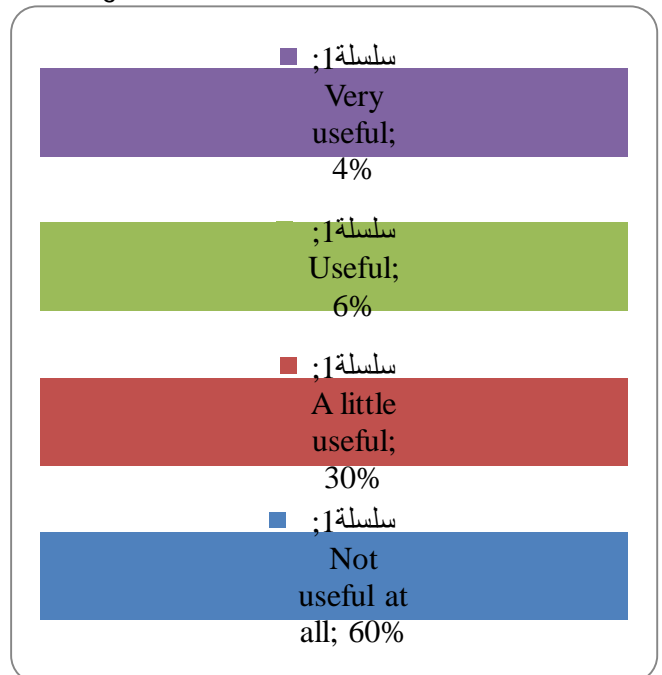
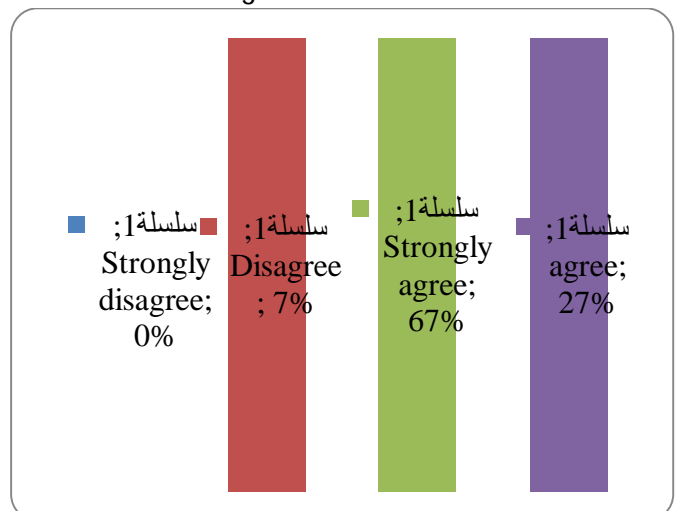


Figure (2), showed a strong consensus concerning the use of ACMC in writing classrooms, with just 7% who have responded negatively, this result shows the teachers' ultimate readiness to work in an asynchronous-student centered approach, the result supports as well the assumption that the teachers would be keen toward using an ACMC approach in their writing classroom.

Figure 2: Teachers' View concerning ACMC in Writing classrooms



Qualitative Data:

Teachers' open-ended answers were largely consistent with the numerical data from the survey instrument. They have been interpreted according to the content analysis approach, where the researcher opted for the coding

process, this process is known as “a qualitative research process in which the researcher makes sense out of text data, divides it into text or image segments, labels the segments, examines codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapses these codes into themes” (Creswell, 2012, p. 618)¹⁸. So, in accordance to the tenets of that approach the respondents’ answers are described as follow;

The Students’ Social Skills:

Though technology offers the educational milieu a plenty useful ways for fostering collaboration and interaction, still there are some unexpected drawbacks that may hinder the success of such online experience. When saying an online atmosphere, one directly thinks of a keyboard and a screen, so there is no room for pens and papers, and here lies the problem. Since there is no way for face-to-face interaction, the learners’ social skills could be decreased because of the lack of many parameters that usually appear in a face-to-face communication, such as; facial expressions, gestures, and eye-contact, which may have a direct impact in conveying the intended messages.

Low Information Technology skills (IT):

The interviewees have reported that since their IT skills are weak, (actually, they did not use this term, but they meant the fact of not being that much familiar with the technological gadget) they show some apprehensions, seeing that some technological training would be of great importance in order to be able to proceed in such experience. So, they claim that without being fully aware of how to use the different online forums, they could not ensure the success of the subject matter, since they will be unable to control the situation from a distant.

Safe-learning Space:

Usually the students’ psychological traits plays an important role during classroom discussions, and because in a virtual learning environment the students are not required to use their real names, this can boost their willingness to take part in collaborative activities in an online mode, because what matters most is the act of participation and not their identity. The students, therefore, can hide their real identity

behind their pseudonyms, and this latter could provide a less threatening learning environment. Digital Community:

The use of ACMC could have a potential to build a sense of togetherness between the students as opposed to face-to-face interaction which may create a hostile environment between the students. Thus, within the throes of a digital community the students could have an opportunity to practice their learning and be connected with each other at ease in a web-threaded space.

Fostering Engagement and Collaboration:

Responding to the 21st century demands, the fact of collaboration and engagement becomes as important as the process teaching itself, thus, within a digital dimension the students would have further opportunities to engage in classroom activities beyond the classroom borders, wherein, this mode of learning would provide chances to foster a virtual collaboration.

Raising the Critical Thinking Skills:

As opposed to the traditional way of teaching and learning, ACMC could provide an ample opportunity for the learners to critically negotiate meaning and reflect to each others’ writing performances. So, since their participation is going to be stored in the online forums, they would have an ability to retrieve their written performances for reviewing purposes at any point in time that best fits their schedule,. Subsequently, they would be no more restricted with time and space bounds which usually prevent them from thinking critically, and push them to tackle surface level features (grammar and mechanical skills).

From the obtained results, although teachers show some apprehensions toward the use of ACMC. However, they still show positive attitudes. They saw that this latter could have a potential in the writing classrooms as they could be empowered by that ability to overcome some of the challenges that might be encountered in a face-to-face classroom. It can be seen as well from the data obtained that the teachers have affirmed what has been already raised by the researcher in earlier title (time constraints and the reluctance of some introvert students).

To make a point, the result of this study show the teachers' flexibility toward change, seeing that in the 21st century a teacher is no longer "a sage on the stage", and no more time is going to be devoted for face-to-face classroom tasks, yet technology is not an ultimate remedy of education, but it could liberate the teacher to move towards a fully-asynchronous mode of teaching, wherein the learners would be the only owner of their learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In a nutshell, the use of technology which is seen as "a driving force" (Paul, 2000)¹⁹ has penetrated the way the students learn, interact with each other, and the way they interact with their teachers. So, responding to what this new era is dictating, teachers should give themselves a head start and keeping in pace with the 21st century demands in order to create modernized classrooms that may enable the learners as future citizens to survive in a globalized world. Yet, encompassing some technology in education does not necessarily mean that teaching and learning will be more effective, however, we should keep trying in order to bridge the gap that is left by the traditional teaching and why not to discover the real problem behind the learners' deficiencies.

Given the degree of subjectivity surrounding this topic, and since the researcher is novice in the domain of educational technology, it was found that there is little or no opportunity to provide some recommendations, so, reviewing some literature was the most ideally step forward. Thus, here are some useful guidelines to consider, and possibly could help to take some or most of that burden off the teachers, and other practitioners;

So, before deciding what type of CMC is more useful, in terms of its appropriateness for the learners, the module to be taught, and to the educational context in general, teachers, are required to take into account different factors that may contribute and guarantee to some extent the success of such experience, and thus, the teaching and the learning process can run effectively, examples of those factors can be; the learners' preferences, the aim behind implementing such mode of teaching/learning,

and the pedagogical objectives (Fitzpatrick & Donnelly, 2010)²⁰. Teachers as well, should be sufficiently capable as far as different competences are concerned; (a) "the functional competence", i.e., the knowledge of using the technological tool, (b) "the critical competence", which has to do mainly with what tools are good for a specific purpose, and (c) "the rhetorical competence", knowing how could those tools would alter the learning environment (Blake, 2008)²¹, in this case it was meant by rhetoric competence, the "skill in the effective use of technology in service of learning a foreign language" (ibid.).

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