

EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Online Teaching of the Writing Skill using ICT Tools

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ABSTRACT: *The shift to online teaching has highlighted the important use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by faculty members. The objectives of this paper are to identify the current use of the technological tools to teach the writing skill in an online mode and to describe teachers' perspectives on the potential effect of using the different kinds of ICTs in the process of online teaching and learning of writing. This study employed a descriptive research approach using qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. A purposive sample of Six (6) Written Expression teachers from the department of Letters and the English Language at Frères Mentouri University participated in this study. Data was collected through a focus group interview, enabling in-depth discussions and insights into teachers' experiences and perceptions. The analysis revealed that teachers believe that technological tools such as Google Apps (Google Classroom, Google Meet, and Facebook) offer greater engagement and collaboration in the writing process, as well as encourage teacher and peer feedback on students' writings. However, teachers expressed only moderate satisfaction with ICT accessibility and use due to certain challenges and the necessity to possess both technological knowledge and pedagogical knowledge for effective teaching of writing. The present study extends the existing knowledge on online language teaching, particularly in the context of the writing skill. It highlights the technological requirements and pedagogical strategies employed by EFL teachers to optimise the use of ICTs and ensure effective online teaching of the writing skill. The findings of this study have implications for educational stakeholders, emphasising the importance of integrating ICTs into writing instruction in online environments.*

KEYWORDS: Information and Communication Technology, technological tools, online teaching of writing, technological knowledge, EFL teachers.

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Introduction

Education of the 21st century is steadily increasing the use of blended learning which led to the growth of online learning. The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected the educational system all over the world. This pandemic has presented many opportunities for the use of digitization in education; yet, put a considerable burden on universities to cope with the unpredicted shift from face to face to online learning. Teaching and assessment were both conducted online using ICT (Information and Communication Technology) technologies. The Ministry of Higher Education announced on March 2020 to suspend all presential teachings and recommended the release of educational technologies such as Moodle, Google apps and Zoom to support online learning. It is worth mentioning that both teachers and students found themselves exposed to ICT tools with no technological knowledge at hand and were obliged to use them in their teaching and learning. Research conducted by Koehler and Mishra (2009) emphasised on the importance of technological knowledge for an effective teaching using ICT tools either in face to face or virtual classroom.

It is germane that online teaching and learning cannot be effective without technological knowledge. Few studies have been conducted in Algeria to address online teaching and assessment of writing and the challenges that both teachers and students face when using ICT tools (Beleulmi, 2022; Ghouali and Benmoussat, 2019). Online teaching of writing is relatively considered a new mode of education in Algerian universities. The use ICT tools for teaching and assessment of writing skill was mandatory during the pandemic. Teachers and students were required to be aware of and adopt these technological tools to support online education. Moreover, written expression teaching like many other subjects established synchronous blended learning, where some theoretical notions are conducted online, while practical times are face to face adjusted. The majority of Algerian universities established a set of recommendations for their use and left the teacher to use any model or platform to teach online. It was challenging for teachers to abruptly substitute classroom presential teaching for online teaching. The major challenge faced by most teachers in general and written expression teachers in particular was to equip themselves with the necessary technological knowledge to teach online.

The main research questions of this paper are:

- How is ICT currently used to support writing in online teaching during the pandemic?
- How teachers perceived ICT tools in improving the writing skill during the pandemic?
- What are the different challenges faced by those teachers when teaching online using technological tools to support online teaching/learning of writing?

The main objectives of this paper are to identify the ongoing use and potential effect of ICT technologies on the teaching and assessment of the writing skill. It also aims at fostering understanding of the digital literacy in an online environment and presenting the challenges that ICT tools display. The study sets out to describe written expression teaching practices related to the different use of ICT tools in online writing instruction. It extends the existing knowledge on online language teaching, particularly in the context of the writing skill. By examining teachers' perspectives, this study seeks to identify benefits and limitations of using ICT tools in the teaching of writing. It highlights the technological requirements and pedagogical strategies employed by EFL teachers to optimise the use of ICTs and ensure effective online teaching of the writing skill.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Writing instruction and technology

Writing is one of the important skills in teaching English as a foreign language context. It is evident that writing is the biggest challenge for many students to learn because most of them could not communicate their ideas efficiently. In order to enhance students' mastery of the English language, developing the writing skill is vital because it enables them to edit adequate academic pieces of writing. Certainly, to improve student's writing, research findings have shown that the writing skill involves sufficient knowledge (input) on the topic assigned, grammatical aspects, construction of ideas and sentence formulation.

It is worth mentioning that before the pandemic, teaching writing was done in the traditional mode where teachers were knowledge dispensers rather than facilitators, i.e., teacher-centred model adopting the 3Ps (presentation, practice, and production) approach; whereas, the modern mode of teaching involves interactive methods using digital tools. It is believed by many researchers that the effective use of technology will improve the writing process. "Applying technology in educational instruction assists students to improve not only English writing skills but also vocabulary skills." (Kawinkoonlasate, 2019, p.28)

It has been widely acknowledged in the literature that technology does not require new pedagogical practices, but rather tries to reinforce already existing pedagogical goals. As for the teaching of writing, teachers are supposed to add to their pedagogical knowledge about the writing process and the different technological tools available for teaching the writing skill to adapt to the new online environment. In other words, when teachers of writing possess a consistent pedagogical knowledge of writing, they are likely to be systematic, explicit and purposeful in their teaching (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2021). For example, Ghahri et al. (2015) suggest that the use of English correcting websites like spell check plus.com and online text correction as technology driven feedback when students perform their writing assignments has a positive effect on the quality of their writing and improving their writing skill than teacher driven feedback.

Moreover, Bakeer (2018) cited many research findings on the effect of integrating social media in English learning and teaching environments which highlight the dominant role it may yield to improve the writing and reading of the English language learners. Additionally, a systematic review of the literature conducted by Yee and Yunus (2021) on the most utilised collaborative tools in enhancing students' ESL writing during Covid-19 pandemic has shown that collaborative tools, such as Google Docs, Mind Mapping and WhatsApp, enable students to improve writing qualities and possess better cognitive skills when the online discussion between peers is allowed.

Despite the positive impact reported in the above studies, both teachers and students face a challenging situation of how to benefit from all the technological tools to develop the writing skill in this digital age. Most teachers reported the lack of skills to teach online and the lack of time to prepare online courses, besides some courses do not suit online teaching (Beleulmi, 2022; Gratz and Looney, 2020). Similarly, research conducted by Al-Senaidi et al. (2009) revealed that the main challenges of online teaching and learning in Oman are the lack of institutional support, distrust of technology benefits and competence, and lack of confidence, time and equipment. "Effective pedagogy needs to be responsive to the context of the classroom, including in this instance the available technology, the experience and confidence of the teacher, and the strengths and needs of the students." (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2021, p.14). Technology also encourages student's plagiarism since they often 'copy and paste' and download material from the internet without acknowledging sources (Purcell et al, 2013).

1.2. Using ICTs in online teaching of writing

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has recently become commonplace in all higher education institutions, especially during Covid-19 Pandemic. These institutions have to keep abreast with technology in order to cope with the changing educational practices to provide ideal e-learning. EFL teachers have to design, develop and assess learning practices on the basis of digital technologies because technological literacy is regarded as a source of innovation in an increasingly globalizing world. A bulk of research in the literature on the use of ICTs in education point that it has advantages and disadvantages.

Before the 21st century, the traditional teaching of writing was based on paper and pencil in virtual classrooms. Studies indicate that when ICT is incorporated in the teaching of writing, both student's engagement and enthusiasm are likely to increase (Bakeer, 2018; Zheng, Warschauer, Lin & Chang, 2016; Alharbi, 2015, Nobles & Paganucci, 2015). Another advantage of ICT is the findings of the case study conducted by Bakeer (2018) in Al-Quds Open university which showed that the integration of ICTs and social media had a positive effect in developing students' writing skill. Also, findings of a survey research conducted by Purcell, Buchanan,

and Friedrich (2013) suggest that ICTs are shaping students' writing in many ways and are helping teachers for teaching writing to middle and high school students. These teachers report that teaching writing is easier now because collaborative online platforms allow them to work together with their students and enable students to collectively edit their work.

Moreover, a study reported by Nobles and Paganucci (2015) suggest that students perceive their writing to be of higher quality when writing with digital tools versus using a pen/pencil and paper and that writing in online environments improves writing skill development. A study undertaken by Ahmad et al. (2021) using Learn Social Platform indicates that this LMS platform gives a significant effect on students' writing skill as it facilitates interactions among student-student and lecturer-student related to editing and revising processes of writing, but it has at the same time some challenges.

Regardless of the advantages of ICTs revealed in the literature, the use of ICTs in teaching and learning writing has many barriers. In the same vein, the study by Umunnakwe&Sello (2016) investigates the effective utilization of ICTs in 1st year EFL students' reading and writing skills and reveals that these students faced many challenges, among them difficulty in downloading and uploading course materials using LMS platforms as Blackboard and Moodle, besides problems with engaging in online discussion forums on these platforms. Students, for example, often 'copy and paste' and download material from the internet without acknowledging sources (Beleulmi, 2022; Purcell, Buchanan, and Friedrich, 2013). Also, the use of some LMS platforms reduces face-to-face interaction between teachers and students.

In a nutshell, the use of ICT's in teaching the writing skill has certainly brought about advantages and disadvantages. They help EFL students to share their ideas and develop self-directed learning. It has been widely proved that "digital technology, when combined with teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge, has the potential to transform writing, promote the development of writing skills, encourage creativity and offer new channels for quality feedback from both students and teachers." (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2021, p. 19) In other words, both teachers and students need to develop digital literacy skills in English language writing instruction.

2. The study

2.1. Design of the study

To address the posed research questions, a descriptive analytical approach is used and a qualitative data was collected via focus group interview for teachers of writing designed to provide clear evidence of the teaching practices, teachers' attitudes and challenges related to the different usage and accessibility of ICT tools in online writing instruction. We opted for a focus group interview because, according to Hennink (2007), focus group methodology is becoming one of the central tools of qualitative research incorporated in the social sciences. It gives the interviewees greater control of the topic raised in the discussion, since they are discussing the topic between themselves rather than directly with an interviewer. "The context of a group discussion is thought to create greater spontaneity in the contributions of participants as it replicates everyday social interactions more than a traditional one-to-one interview." (Hennink, 2007, p.5)

2.2. Data collection method

The focus group interview is organised online via Zoom cloud platform, in January 2022. A purposive sampling technique was used choosing six (6) Written Expression teachers teaching the different levels of graduation in the department of Letters and the English Language, Frères Mentouri university, Constantine1 were invited to sign into a Zoom meeting; only one teacher couldn't join the meeting because of internet connection. All the participants have more than ten years' experience teaching the writing skill. Prior to the process of collecting data, an invitation was sent to all these teachers via e-mail to ask them to voluntarily participate in the study

explaining its purpose and the tool used. In an effort to ensure anonymity, no attempt was made to identify the name of the interviewees.

The focus group discussion was guided by a semi-structured interview guide to probe and explore in depth the interviewees' perceptions and challenges of ICTs in teaching the writing skill during Covid-19 pandemic. It lasted in 1 hour 19 minutes.

3. Results and discussion

Teacher's focus group interview was conducted to provide a descriptive image of their teaching practices relating to the use of ICT in online teaching of writing. In this section, results from the analysis of the focus group interview are reported. After transcribing the interview, all the transcripts were organised and analysed thematically. Responses from teachers on focus group interview were grouped into four major themes with subthemes in each category: mastery and practices, attitudes, challenges and perspectives

Theme 1: Teacher's mastery and practices of ICTs

The analysis showed that:

- **Mastery of ICT tools**

Within the first category, when asked about their abilities in using technological tools to teach writing, results indicate that all written expression teachers claim that their mastery of ICT tools is quite satisfactory; they got formal and informal training of ICTs. Only one teacher learned about using these tools in a formal way, "I learnt it as a practical course of Computer science using software's Word, Excel and PowerPoint. I also had a blended learning course of ASIT (American School of International Training) on the use of some educational platforms." Others went even further, saying that their mastery was the result of self-exploration, self-learning and through experience with no formal training.

Asked in focus group to clarify what, specifically, they consider the type of ICTs adopted to deliver lessons, activities tests and assignments and assess students' written drafts during the pandemic are: google classroom, Facebook learning groups, Messenger, E-mail, and Zoom. Surprisingly, no teacher used Moodle platform.

- **Practices/experience with ICTs**

Three Written Expression teachers had previous experience of teaching online before COVID-19. They made frequent use of different ICT tools to teach writing online. They indicated that they mainly used social networking like Facebook learning groups and Messenger to send materials as a support to in-person classrooms. Teacher R reported, "I created Facebook learning groups because students find it easier to access and share material instead of photocopying and printing issues." Teachers use a combination of ICTs and paper pencil assignments to support their teaching of writing in an online setting.

Teachers reported that during the pandemic, they mostly relied on both Google classroom and Facebook and sometimes deliver live sessions via Zoom platform. Teacher W advanced "I send the material on Facebook, write a post about the task, students interact with their classmates and wait for my feedback and comments."

Nonetheless, they see some downsides, discussed in the following section, to teaching writing online at the beginning of the pandemic. For example, teacher H revealed, "I think the most difficult and tiring experience was to turn the lessons I share into images so that students can download because they don't have computers and smart phones." Teacher R added, "I posted the assignments on Google classroom, but I couldn't manage the number of works posted by students, who even fail sometimes to upload since it's their first time to use it."

Most teachers further explained that the use of Google classroom was simpler and more convenient than Moodle. Teacher H noted "because students keep complaining about using Moodle, google classroom was more comfortable and easier for them. It was very interactive for students." Another teacher K added "it was manageable and an effective social networking tool to support the online teaching."

Theme 2: Teachers' attitudes towards ICTs

This theme is further divided into positive and negative attitudes.

- **Positive attitudes**

Positive attitudes of the potential for digital tools to aid teachers in teaching writing are reflected in practice. The analysis showed that teachers believe that online teaching of writing was necessary and helpful, especially during the pandemic lockdown. For the increasing availability, teachers reported that "because of the pandemic, students have access to a variety of platforms and are encouraged to use them for their writing assignments". Teacher K added that "ICTs enabled students to write on Microsoft Word and type their essays; by this they acquired a skill". ICTs enhanced students written communication, "students started to write formal correct e-mails." Additionally, ICTs enabled teachers to provide useful and interesting input materials, "we used to suffer from the lack of available printed materials for students. In order words, ICTs made it possible to share a big number of texts and activities and provide a variety of materials for each lesson during the pandemic." In fact, teachers appreciate the chance to interact with students via the medium of Google Classroom and Facebook.

These teachers realized that ICTs during the pandemic was a must, both teachers and students should develop critical awareness towards digital literacy related to issues like copyright and reliability of sources, let alone technological knowledge.

- **Negative attitudes**

The negative attitudes reflect that the movement to e-learning was not prepared. Teachers reported that they did not have the experience to teach online before, and even teachers who were familiar with technology found it hard. They were not familiar with technology and did not possess the mastery of the technological tools. Both teachers and students were not trained for online education. They were moderately satisfied with ICT accessibility due to some problems such as internet connectivity, students' difficulty logging in...etc. Eventually, from the results above, there was larger inclination for online teaching using ICTs, but still most teachers assert that online teaching with ICTs would be "enjoyable, successful and fruitful if all the barriers are considered."

The results show that teachers agreed that online teaching of writing was a must and useful during the pandemic, but at the same time, they are still reluctant due to the different challenges that are exposed in the next theme.

Theme 3: Teachers' challenges using ICTs

In the focus group, teachers gave a multitude of examples of the challenges they faced during the pandemic.

- **Technical challenges**

Most of the challenges faced by both teachers and students were about technical problems. Teacher R stressed "we cannot talk about e-learning if we don't have decent network and, students belonging to disadvantageous environment with little access to technological tools would present a double challenge." The first challenge raised by all the interviewees was "poor and unstable internet connection." This challenge was widely covered in the literature. Besides, the lack of available ICT tools or equipment at the universities and even with students, like computers, smartphones, interactive whiteboards, etc, adds a serious barrier to online teaching of writing during the pandemic. Teacher H emphasized, "universities should provide the necessary educational/technological material to ensure a good teaching of writing." Teacher R reported that "students should access computers and internet facilities on university campus."

All teachers recognised that their students are not enough trained to use ICT tools, "they are not trained to use the different ICTs.... they need to be taught how to use them properly." Teachers found themselves spending time explaining to students how to use these technological tools before engaging in teaching the

writing skill. One teacher added that “students should be given lots of practice on the use of ICTs and computer skills for effective performance in their assignments.” It is evident that both the problem of internet connectivity and ICTs availability and mastery would frustrate and affect confidence of teachers and students alike. In fact, teachers who are well trained, with the availability of technological tools and technical assistance, will not find any difficulty while teaching writing online. They will find teaching less tiring, easy and stress-free.

- **Student’s interaction challenges**

Students, in fact, lack computer knowledge skills. Training programmes should not be limited to teachers; they should also involve students. Teacher W adds, “this process [teaching of writing] requires well-structured strategies that facilitate interaction among teachers and students, including peer and self- feedback techniques to get students actively engaged in online activities.” It is challenging to develop appropriate methods of students’ engagement in online environment because this latter does not really guarantee students’ interaction and collaborative learning. Teacher K added, “students lack the competitive spirit and creativity in virtual classrooms.”

- **Effective feedback & assessment strategies**

Teachers presented concerns on how students should be assessed in online environment and how to provide effective feedback. Teacher R stated “because of the outnumbered classroom, I couldn’t manage to assess my students and provide detailed feedback of their written essays.” Teacher W mentioned that “assessing students’ interaction online and the amount of effort they’re putting on the writing process was problematic.” Providing feedback to students written assignments was difficult. Teacher H complained “I had to scan students sent pictures of their essays and write my feedback and all the comments on a separate paper and send them back on their e-mails or google classroom.”

- **Academic dishonesty challenges**

Plagiarism and dishonesty question the reliability and credibility of online teaching of writing using ICTs. Teacher R claimed that “students send most of the time copied materials instead of authentic production.” Teacher H added, “when they felt the pressure, they resorted to copy and paste and sent copied materials which gave me a headache to decide which was authentic and plagiarized.”

In a nutshell, the results of this study showed that the difficulties and obstacles outweigh the positive perceptions on online teaching of writing using ICTs. Despite some challenges, these written expression teachers say that internet and digital tools make it easier for them to teach writing during the pandemic; while just few say digital technologies make teaching writing more difficult.

Theme 4: Teachers’ expectations

Teachers presented some expectations for a better use of ICTs when teaching the writing skill, they include the following:

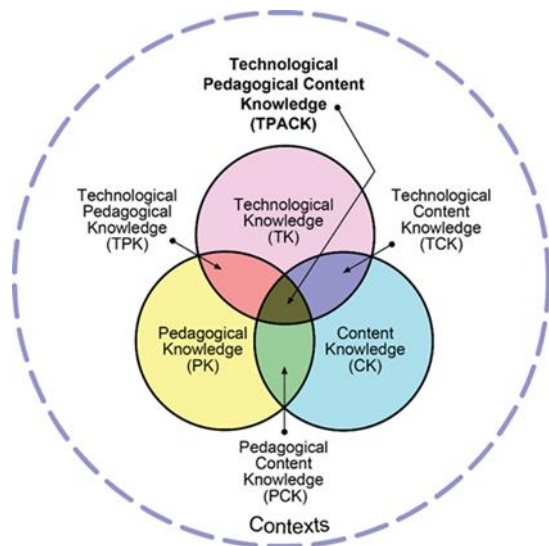
- The availability of ICT tools and equipment inside and outside the classroom, especially in remote learning and the improvement of the internet quality.
- Promoting interaction and collaborative learning through designing collaborative group activities instead of responding to individual assignments.
- Moving smoothly from traditional teaching approach of teacher centered classroom to a more student-centered autonomous learning.
- Developing writing laboratories or centers working with students’ writing difficulties and training them to use the different ICT tools.
- The reinforcement of new legislation and policy to integrate ICTs in online teaching of writing in a better organized and homogeneous way.

4. Pedagogical implications

The findings of this research can be helpful to faculty members to adopt and adapt to online teaching in the future and can face the different challenges to design a roadmap to overcome them and ensure an effective online teaching and assessment of writing. The teaching of writing is rather in its way to be technology-driven so teachers need training in ICTs to support an effective teaching and assessment of the writing process. By combining both synchronous and asynchronous teaching, it will increase digital literacy among teachers and students. This will reduce paper usage and will help in embracing technology in teaching the writing skill.

To overcome technical infrastructure problems and internet connectivity, government and technical companies should collaborate with higher education institutions and reinforce new legislation and policy to integrate ICTs in online teaching of writing in a better organized and homogeneous way. We recommend the use of some apps by teachers to support the explicit teaching of grammar, vocabulary and spelling and provide timely and responsive feedback on students' written drafts; besides the use of various online collaborative writing tools like **Google Docs**, **Microsoft Word Online**, **Dropbox Paper**, **Draft**. Through collaborative writing, learners' ability to discuss, argue and negotiate ideas with classmates would be obviously improved.

All universities are now aware of the importance of ICTs and try to implement the different technological tools for successful teaching and assessment of writing. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) should revise their pedagogical policies and design new frameworks like TPACK (Technological, Pedagogical and Content Knowledge) to assist teachers of writing to embrace ICTs to deal with any future crisis. Teachers, through this study, will be able to know the need for developing and updating their technological knowledge via training for online teaching and assessment. So, we suggest the application of Koehler and Mishra's (2009) Technological, Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework to design written expression curriculum.



Technological Knowledge (TK): teachers' ways of thinking about and working with all technological tools and resources to support their students' writing.

Pedagogical Knowledge (PK): teachers' deep knowledge about the processes and practices or methods of teaching and learning and assessment of students' written texts.

Content Knowledge (CK): teachers' knowledge of the craft of writing, knowledge of visual literacy and content knowledge of curriculum subjects' writing requirements.

Figure 1: Technological, Pedagogical and Content Knowledge Framework (TPACK) (Koehler and Mishra, 2009)

Koehler, Mishra & Cain (2013, p. 13) admit that effective teaching is reflected from different fields, including 'knowledge of student thinking and learning; knowledge of subject matter; and increasingly, knowledge of technology'. when these fields intersect, they give us the technological pedagogical content knowledge framework to design any writing lesson content. In a similar vein, "when teachers combine knowledge of technology and writing, they judiciously select the appropriate technology for the writing purpose

and can use the technology with flexibility and creativity.” (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2021, p. 7).

Conclusion

Online teaching and learning are now widespread throughout the educational sphere. The integration of ICTs in online teaching and assessment of writing has a big potential. Research has shown the effective use of the different technological tools for the writing process. This paper provides insights into the effective use of ICT tools in teaching writing online. Results indicated that teachers of writing use different digital tools to support their online teaching, but their effectiveness depended on their availability and teachers' and students' abilities in using these tools. It also suggests professional learning for teachers to provide a flexible use of the different technological tools; in other words, to develop both technological and content knowledge (or digital literacy) among teachers in the teaching of writing. Digital literacy helps both teachers and students to demonstrate their skills in teaching and learning the writing process.

As aforementioned, using ICTs in teaching writing is mandatory in online environment. It developed teachers' technological knowledge, can have an effective impact on the student's writing skill and can enhance students' engagement and interaction.

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