



COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION TOOLS AND THEIR ROLE IN DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Different technology tools are used in the teaching and learning of a language. The Internet is the most used tool in language acquisition because it can be integrated with multimedia, mobiles or any other tool. With multimedia, in CALL (Computer-Assisted-Language Learning, CAW (Computer-Assisted-Writing) or CMC (Computer-Mediated- Communication), internet can be used effectively with mobiles to send and receive messages to teach learners writing skills. Internet can be used synchronously or asynchronously. CMC is used to develop motivation and interaction among learners in social environment in addition to other functions like a stimulator, a tutor and a tool.

Computer-mediated communication tools and applications have been considered to be instead of other tools of communication in many institutions and universities in world-wide because these tools and applications represent a number of good qualities in the enhancement of foreign/second language learning, such as higher levels of participation, more motivation, interaction and interest.

In classrooms CMC can be used in various ways. They can develop students' abilities in communication with each other inside and outside classrooms.

Secondly, all CMC tools and applications, especially internet can be used by teachers to support their students' abilities to write, send, revise messages among them or between the students and their teachers. The internet can be used to strengthen the learners abilities to exchange E-mails, open their teachers' Websites to see their classes, questions and create answers to the questions either online or offline.

CMC tools and applications can also improve fluency in English or any other language through chatting even with native speakers. Generally speaking, all technology tools can provide different instructional environment which meet the students' needs.

Key Words: computer-mediated communication, weblogs, learning strategies, critical thinking, motivation, learning environment.

It is observed by the authors of this paper that the EFL learners' problems in using mobile-based-writing, computer-mediated interaction, online discussions and doing any formal written text are numerous. Most of the EFL learners have no knowledge of using computer-assisted classroom discussions, e-mail exchanges and Web-based writing. This paper helps the learners to be aware of the use of CMC tools in developing the writing skills of the learners. This paper aims to investigate and verify the problems of using computers and the Internet by some EFL learners in developing writing skills.

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To analyze the problems of some EFL learners.
2. To probe the relationship between technology and foreign language writing skills.
3. To make computer-mediate communication awareness a reliable vehicle for better foreign language writing among non-native English speakers.
4. To investigate the reasons behind the EFL learners' difficulties and to suggest technical solutions to resolve the problems. Moreover, to draw out relevant suggestions which would help the students in learning writing skills via CMC tools.

Communication and interaction among people via computers and Internet is termed as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). There are different CMC tools and applications. These applications and tools can be classified as asynchronous CMC and synchronous CMC.

I) Synchronous CMC Tools help to exchange ideas between two or more than internet users. They are tools that can be used to make a real-time communication, such as instant messaging (IM), text chat, audio/video chat, audio conferencing, video conferencing, Skype, etc.

IM: Used to exchange instant text messages among Internet users.

Text chat: Online written communicative ideas and information among Internet users.

Audio chat: Users communicate, interact and speak to each other via microphones and earphones.

Video chat: Using microphones, earphones, and webcams to see each other while chatting.

Audio conferencing: Involves real time interaction among users to interact with each other via microphones and earphones.

Video conferencing: Involves real time interaction, allowing more than two Internet users to communicate with one another using microphones, earphones, and webcams.

Skype: Synchronous Internet tool. **Mubarak (2012)** claimed that with using Skype in EFL teaching, teachers can provide students with more opportunities to make online conversations in English even with native speakers and such a thing would not only develop their skills in English but also would develop their self-confidence to speak English and definitely develop their speaking skills. What is wonderful about Skype is that it is free. What one needs is to download Skype software in a computer or a cell phone connected to the internet, a microphone and a webcamera.

To make using these tools more effective in the classroom, the teacher can use Video Projector to show any of the conversations among teams or groups on a screen so that anyone can observe any of the online conversations. He can pop up and out of the group conversations in order to monitor their progress, **Clyde & Delohery, (2005, p. 59)**.

"The diffusion of computers and the Internet is likely to be as important for the development of writing as was the earlier advent of printing press" **Matsuda et al, (2003, p 164)**.

According to **(Li and Hart 1996)**, the web's multimedia capabilities and interactive functions have made technology an attractive medium to conduct instruction. Among the reasons for using the web in ESL learning, increased student motivation, authentic language, and global awareness have been cited **(Meloni, 1998)**. However, there are still many problems with the application of the Internet in the classroom including the reliability of the information on the web, the cost of the equipment needed to connect to the Internet, inequality of access between the haves and have-nots, and frustrating slow connections, **(Lyman, 1998); (Sussex & White, 1996); (Warschauer, 2000)**.

II) **Asynchronous CMC Tools** enable communication offline or over a period of time through a “different time-different place” mode, **Ashley, (2003)**. The following are Asynchronous CMC Tools:

Discussion boards are as **Erben, Ban, and Castañeda (2008)** claimed that the best place for EFL students to express their feelings and experiences. By reading the posting of others and working on their writing before posting, students can improve their language. However, to make use of them more effectively in teaching, teachers need to use them purposefully to meet the objectives of a specific course and to make them non-threatening in order to encourage students to participate, **(Teacher Stream, 2009)**.

Weblogs

Blogs enable users to create Web pages without having any knowledge of how to design it; in addition, blogs enable users to write about various subjects on these web pages and enable other users to add comments or suggestions to the written messages, **(Abdullah & Kuzu, 2006)**.

Blogs can give EFL students freedom for self-expression in English, providing them with opportunities of social interaction and with learning motivation and improving their writing and learning strategies and critical thinking skills as the study of **Noytim (2010)** indicated.

As **Karaman & Serpil (2005)** state weblogs enable educators to pre-screen and select hyperlinks and list them in a categorized format, and these hyperlinks and user entries can be archived for easy future access from the main weblog. Compared with e-mail lists and discussion forums, weblogs are more focused and easier to navigate since students do not have to search through complex folder menus. Thus, publishing on a weblog to the whole world means reaching beyond the classroom for a student, **Karaman & Serpil, (2005)**.

Campbell (2003) states that weblogs has some benefits:

- They can provide a bridge between lessons, teachers can post materials that recycle and review vocabulary and topics presented during lessons.
- They can save the teachers’ time because they give information about schedule changes, homework assignments etc.

For **Felix (2007)**, there are four communication patterns teachers perceive as a result of blogging:

- 1) Increased peer interaction among students.
- 2) Increased teacher interaction with the students.
- 3) Students exhibiting more positive emotions about learning.
- 4) Increased sharing of ideas among students and with the teacher.

Social Networking Sites

Facebook can play several instructional functions. Teachers can use it outside the classroom to post links of useful videos and files to students and to send them homework so that they can do at home. They can also create their own groups that include their students and use that for instructional purposes, such as developing writing skills through posting topics for the students to write on and collaborative learning through setting topics for discussion. In this way, teachers can expose their students to more English and provide them with more opportunities to improve their English skills, especially that EFL students do not get enough opportunities to use English outside the classroom, **(Mubarak, 2012)**.

Mills, (2009) stated that Facebook can be a valuable learning environment to practice and engage in learning a foreign language, indicating that Facebook could provide her students with an authentic environment for interaction and communication in French which helped them to meet the grammatical, functional, and linguistic objectives of her French language course. **Blattner and Fiori, (2009)** shows how Facebook can provide language learners with opportunities to develop their socio-pragmatic competence, an aspect of language acquisition, through authentic language interaction and can enhance a sense of community in language classrooms.

Kabilan, Ahmad, and ZainolAbidin (2010) indicated that, in the opinion of students of higher education, Facebook can provide a learning environment that can facilitate English language learning in relation to improving students language skills, increasing their motivation and positive attitudes towards English language learning, and building their confidence. Teaching is becoming more personal and artistic,

and it is up to the teachers' encouragement that students will take advantage of this new way of learning, (Keating M., Wiles J., Piazza M. W, 2002). Technology, especially the emergence of the Internet, is affecting every aspect of education and changing the way we teach and learn. "It is no longer a question of whether to take advantage of these electronic technologies in foreign language instruction, but of how to harness them and guide our students in their use", (Paulsen, 2001).

Email, a conversational writing medium, is a form of asynchronous computer-mediated communication which has been described by Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni (2000, p. 3) as "the mother of all Internet applications."

According to González-Bueno, the superiority of the written language produced in the email exchange over the traditional writing is attributed to the fact that learners typing their messages were able to take more time to consult references and edit their messages before sending them.

Wikis

wiki is a collaborative website that internet users can work on or edit. It allows a group of internet users to create and edit web page content freely, i.e. an online resources, photographs and video recordings can be embedded in a wiki.

Web Quests

Web Quests, created by Bernie Dodge and Tom March in early 1995, are inquiry-oriented activities in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Web. Dodge, (1998). The critical attributes of a Web Quest activity include:

1. An introduction that sets the stage and provides some background information.
2. A task that is doable and interesting.
3. A set of web-linked information sources needed to complete the task.
4. A description of the process the learners should go through in accomplishing the task
5. Some guidance on how to organize the information.

6. A conclusion that brings closure to the quest and reminds participants of what they have learned. Dodge, (1997).

It was hypothesized that:

1. Some EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners have no idea of using Computer-Mediated Communication to develop their EFL writing skills.
2. CMC tools help English language learners to develop their language skills. It is useful for the EFL learners to develop their writing skills.
3. Different levels of students' cognitive and comprehensive abilities lead to some difficulties and problems.
4. They can't understand the relationship between the importance of grammatical structure of sentences and writing messages to each other by using CMC tools.
5. Students are unaware of the importance of communication and interaction skills among them by using writing skills via CMC tools.
6. Because of gender difference, students have some difficulties and problems in using English writing skills via CMC.

To examine the hypothesis of the study, a treatment test was administered, it was found that most of the subjects used the tool of internet weakly, and the main weakness observed was in the tool of E-Mail Exchange and Chatting.

A study was conducted on some EFL learners to investigate the reasons behind those learners' problems in writing in English via Computer-Mediated Communication. This paper is based on this study.

The paper explores how the use of CMC tools help to develop the writing skills of EFL learners. It discusses the role of the Internet in developing English language writing for many foreign language speakers around the world. It also analyses the electronic e-mail exchanges, Web-based writing and electronic chatting either by using computers or mobiles.

Computer-assisted classroom discussions, computer-mediated communication like electronic e-mail exchanges, electronic chatting, and Web-based writing have been conducted for the EFL learners. A paragraph writing, an essay writing, an article writing, and a composition writing also have

been conducted for the learners. Data has been collected through a treatment test. Data collection was made, according to the objectives of the study as expressed through the specific research questions and hypotheses. Paragraph drafts, essay drafts, composition drafts, article drafts, and the students' responses to the questions of pre-test and post-test have been discussed.

The following steps were followed:

- I. The EFL learners were divided into two groups:
 - a. **Control group** attended a treatment test questions done by the authors, and this group did not receive any treatment course but directly undergone the treatment test.
 - b. **Experimental group** which attended the same treatment test written by the control group, received a treatment

course and appeared in a this test after the treatment course.

II. Reviewed the literature related to the topic of the research to get full understanding of the impact of using CMC tools in learning English as a Foreign language in different contexts.

III. Designed tools for the study.

IV. Consulted a number of language teaching and information technology (IT) experts and specialists to verify the validity and reliability of the tools.

V. Applied experimental method in collecting and analysing the data.

VI. The learners' errors in each mechanism and technique was marked in every single sheet and in every answer to a question involved in the treatment test.

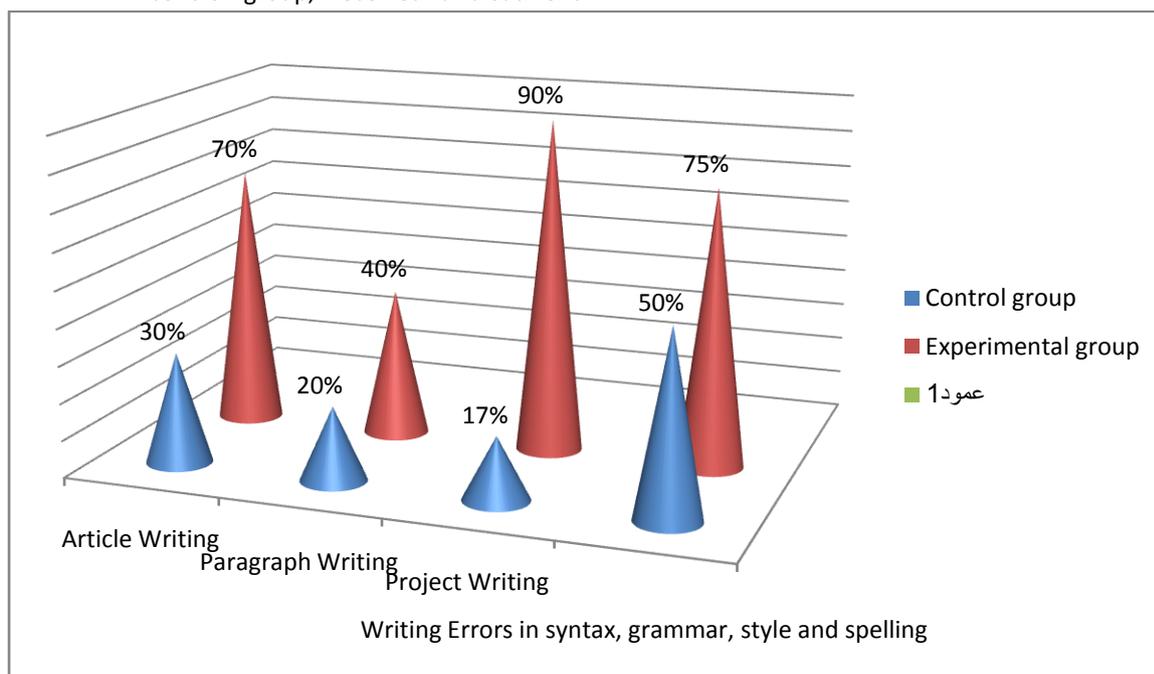


Figure (1): The percentages of the answers given by both control group and experimental group in English writing skills via CMC Tools and Applications in the treatment test.

In the control group 50% students by answered article questions correctly, 20% students answered paragraph writing questions correctly, 17% students answered project writing questions correctly and 50% students answered writing errors questions correctly.

In the experimental group were 70% students answered article questions correctly, 40%

students answered paragraph writing questions correctly, 90% students answered project writing questions correctly and 75% students answered writing errors questions correctly.

That is, the experimental group, which used the computers and mobiles for English writing skills during the study achieved higher scores in writing

via CMC than the control group which was instructed traditionally.

Findings of the study: I- Hypothesis one i.e. some EFL university students have no idea of using CMC tools to develop their EFL writing skills, has been accepted because there were statistically significant differences between the achievement of the treatment test results of the experimental group and the treatment test results of the control group. The findings show that the experimental group benefited from using computers and mobiles as tools of CMC in learning English language writing skills.

II- Discussion of the Results related to Hypothesis

Two: The experimental group, which learned English writing skills via mobiles and computers, achieved higher scores in writing than the control group. This supports the second hypothesis (the subjects of this study can't understand the relationship between the importance of grammatical structure of sentences and writing messages to each other by using CMC tools) which states that CMC tools have a significant effect on the students' writing messages skill in general. The fact that CMC applications and tools have developed the writing skill of most of the subjects of the experimental group was clear which is most likely because of the help of wiki as it helps in detecting writing errors and suggesting alternatives.

III- Discussion of the Results related to Hypothesis

Three: It is hypothesized by the researcher that different levels of students' cognitive and comprehensive abilities lead to some difficulties. This hypothesis has been rejected because the learners with different cognitive and comprehensive abilities did the same type of errors during the treatment course and the treatment test as well.

IV- Hypothesis Four: Students are unaware of the importance of communication and interaction skills among them by using writing skills via CMC tools. CMC tools enable the learner to get feedback about errors from linguistic repertoire available in the software word processor easily.

The results showed that there were significant differences between the results of writing a paragraph and correcting grammatical errors of the experimental group and those of the control group

in favor of the experimental group. The study shown that communicative and interactive tools such as Facebook, Online learning and E-mail and chat exchanges motivated and increased the ability of English writing skills of the experimental group which was learning via different CMC tools.

V-Hypothesis Five: The fifth hypothesis i.e. because of gender difference, students have some difficulties and problems in using English writing skills via CMC tools is rejected. In the course of the study, it was found out that there is no effect of gender difference on the different abilities of the Libyan university students in learning English language writing skills as a foreign language via CMC tools.

Conclusion

The study reveals that there remain important issues that must be taken into consideration for future computer interventions to facilitate improved access to education. Students using CMC to improve their writing social interaction abilities achieved significantly better results after the treatment when they have been taught through the CMC tools, and tested by using this test, representing that CMC is effective as a tool for writing any text (article, paragraph, essay, composition or project) and helps in correcting grammatical errors, stylistic errors, syntactic errors or spelling errors.

The findings of the present study were in contrast with what was reported by Tone and Winchester (1988) who found that computer-mediated writing instruction has given disappointing impact, and it is too early to adopt word processor as a helpful medium in improving students' writing.

The authors of this study agree with some authors like Owston & Wideman, (1997) who summarises a "study of children's writing in a high-computer-access setting compared to a setting with infrequent usage, conducted during a three-year period beginning with third grade, showed that frequent use of word processing contributed to improved writing skills". This study is in line with another study by Jones, (1994) on second-grade students indicated that word processing improved children's general writing skills and contributed to longer compositions.

The study shows that the problem springs from students' low achievement in writing part of

English language in the achievements of treatment test, lack of motivation and weak participation in class.

All these applications and tools play different instructional goals. English teachers can integrate them to give more chances for learners to use English which, in turn, will help them to learn or improve their English language writing skills. Teachers and instructors can also use these applications to arouse interest and to communicate and give feedback to their EFL/ESL students which can make the process of learning more interestingly.

Finally, this study gives an idea about how to write a paragraph, an essay, an article and a composition by using the Mobiles, Computers and an Internet as tools to develop EFL writing skills.

The results of this study may be relevant to researchers in other language skills as well as other fields of research. Further research need to be carried out to know whether EFL\ ESL learners using Internet will be motivated enough to depend on themselves or interact and work together. More studies into the attitudinal aspects of CMC would also be useful.

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