

Teachers' Perceptions of Computer Use to Enhance EFL Students' Writing Skill

تصورات الأساتذة عن استخدام الكمبيوتر لتحسين مهارة الكتابة لطلاب اللغة
الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Received in: 15/07/2020

Accepted in: 23/09/2020

Abstract:

This study aims at investigating teachers' perceptions of computer use in EFL classrooms in general, and more specifically its use in developing the students' writing skill. A descriptive study was conducted where data was gathered through a questionnaire to teachers at the Department of English, at Laghouat University during the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018. The sample of this study consisted of a number of 12 teachers among them 5 written expression teachers while the remaining teachers have had an experience in teaching written expression in the past few years. The two hypotheses set to this study are: the use of computers, or some computer software, may help in overcoming the students' writing difficulties at the different levels, i.e., sentence, paragraph, and the essay levels. The second hypothesis is that most teachers have positive attitudes towards using computer in the FL classroom. The findings of this study revealed that computer and computer software can help in

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enhancing EFL students' writing skill and that teachers do welcome its integration into their classes.

Key Words: English as a Foreign Language; Computer software; Writing Skill.

الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تصورات الأساتذة حول استخدام الكمبيوتر في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بشكل عام، وبشكل أكثر تحديداً استخدامه في تطوير مهارة الكتابة لدى الطلاب. من أجل تحقيق هذا الهدف، أجريت دراسة وصفية حيث تم جمع البيانات من خلال استبيان قدم للأساتذة بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الأغواط خلال الفصل الدراسي الأول من السنة الدراسية 2017-2018. كما تكونت عينة هذه الدراسة من عدد 12 أستاذ من بينهم 5 أساتذة مكلفون بتدريس التعبير المكتوب في حين أن الأساتذة المتبقين كان لديهم خبرة في تدريس مهارة الكتابة في السنوات القليلة الماضية. الفرضيتان اللتان تقوم عليهما هذه الدراسة هما أن: استخدام أجهزة الكمبيوتر، أو بعض برامج الكمبيوتر، قد يساعد في التغلب على صعوبات الكتابة لدى الطلاب و ذلك على المستويات المختلفة، أي الجملة، الفقرة، ومستويات المقالة. أما بالنسبة للفرضية الثانية فهي تقوم على أن معظم الأساتذة لديهم مواقف إيجابية تجاه استخدام الكمبيوتر. و في الأخير، كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن الكمبيوتر وبرامج الكمبيوتر يمكن أن تساعد في تعزيز مهارة الكتابة لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وأن المدرسين يرحبون بدمجها في صفوفهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ برامج الكمبيوتر؛ مهارة الكتابة.

Introduction

Writing as a skill that teachers do believe all students need to master has been at the core of foreign language teaching and research. To help students become effective writers, different studies have been conducted to realize this objective. Hyland (2003), in the preface of one of his books stated that “Writing is among the most important skills that second language students need to develop, and the ability to teach writing is central to the

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expertise of a well-trained language teacher'' (Hyland 2003 p. xv). Elsewhere, he added that ''Its complex, multifaceted nature seems constantly to evade adequate description and explanation, and many forms of enquiry have been summoned to help clarify both how writing works and how it should best be taught'' (Hyland 2002, p.1). In other words, writing is thought of as the leading characteristic which indicates that FLL students have grasped the system of how the FL works.

To become an efficient writer has always been one of the most ultimate aims of both native and foreign language learners (FLL). However, unlike learning and/or mastering any of the other three skills, writing is regarded by most students as the most difficult and complex skill. Writing, in this respect, does not simply require learners to memorize written symbols and put them on a given order to write a paper. It involves the writer's high order of mental thinking abilities in order to come up with a good piece of writing. For that reason, Hyland, (2003, p. xiii) stated that ''Learning how to write in a second language is one of the most challenging aspects of second language learning''. Furthermore, Nunan (1989, p.12) strengthened this point when he said that ''it is easier to learn to speak than to write, no matter if it is a first or second language''.

Computers can be used as a supplement tool in order to teach and enhance the students' writing skills, i.e., the use of computers, does help both teachers and students alike in various areas of their teaching/learning processes. Furthermore, its integration can assist students in the progress of the four language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. It can

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provide immediate feedback when needed and give suggestions when a problem exists. Hence, it is up to the teacher to know how to make an effective use of them. Computers can be used as complementary teaching aid and, if effectively used, they can save time by motivating students.

1- Literature Review

Over the last few decades, and due to the great developments in technology, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has gained a prominent place in the educational field and has become an important part of the language learning process. Levy (1997, p. 1) provided this definition of CALL as: “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning”. Elsewhere, Beatty, (2003, p 7) defined CALL as “any process in which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his or her language”. Meanwhile, Egbert, (2005, p.3), gave another definition to CALL as “using computer to support language teaching and learning in some way. This definition applies to all languages, skill areas, and contents”. Thus, through the different definitions given above it becomes clear that the term CALL covers three important words; computers, language and learning. The term computer-assisted language learning which came into favor in the early 1980’s is mainly used to refer to the use of computers by learners in order to help them learn languages better.

Though it has been a very long period of time since computers have been integrated and used in the teaching/learning of both native and foreign languages, many teachers are still reluctant to use them. In this perspective, Egbert, (2005),

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provided a good justification of why educators always find it hard to accept new changes in educational settings. She said that in the very beginning books were not welcomed and were even thought of as a threat or a big damage to the human memory. However, and as time passes by, people began to accept them and this is the same story with computers.

2- Advantages and Disadvantages of CALL

The advent of technology has given computers a major role in teaching and learning a FL. Nowadays, thanks to the Internet both teachers and students can have access to a limitless number of books, articles, journals...etc. There are other uses of the computer that made teaching much easier than it was years ago. The computer brought several advantages into the area of language learning when CALL programmes are implemented in language classrooms. The computer helps develop the students' four language skills. It can help them enrich their vocabulary and improve their pronunciation. According to Nunan, (1999, p 26), "interactive visual media which computers provide seem to have a unique instructional capability for topics that involve social situations or problem solving, such as interpersonal solving, foreign language or second language learning".

When it comes to writing, the use of computers proved also to be of great help. Numerous computer programmes, such as the paragraph punch can be used to help students increase their awareness of the different stages of the composing process, like the pre-writing, and how they can create an outline of ideas (Gunduz, 2005). Furthermore, Healey, (1999) agreed that computers can be of great help in developing the students'

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reading skills. He pointed out that through using computers students can use different reading techniques such as scanning, skimming, recognizing details, main ideas, topic sentences, and predicting what will come next.

Moreover, Ravichandran, (2000, p. 82-98) stated that the use of CALL can raise students' motivation and make them more interested in the process of learning a FL sine it provides them with novelty. Learning the language, thus, becomes more interesting, more attractive as language is presented through games, animated graphics and problem-solving techniques. Many other studies which have been conducted about the advantages of computers in language learning revealed that using the computer increases the students' motivation (Dunkel, 1987). Students' level of motivation increased as they were introduced to the use of fun and games which were brought into the classroom (Lee, 2000).

Nonetheless, computers have some disadvantages that teachers and instructors need to be well aware of Gunduz, (2005); the high cost of hardware and computer equipment is one of these disadvantages mainly low-budget schools. (Gips et al. 2004; Lai & Kritsonis 2006). Gips, DiMattia, & Gips, (2004), believed that the bad side of computers and computer-assisted language learning programmes is that they increase educational costs and harm education. In other words, if schools and/or students cannot afford computers this will lead to unfair educational conditions especially that some computer software and hardware are too expensive. For that reason, Mike, (1996), stated that having no or less opportunities of getting access to

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technological resources and the Internet had been frustrating for both teachers and students alike. However, and according to Vi, (2005), having no access to computers and the Internet is not the only disadvantage for there are teachers who seem to lack training and support from the school.

Therefore, a good integration of computers into the teaching process is necessary to counter these disadvantages. There is no other option for the student to know how to use the computer if he or she lacks sufficient training. However, since teachers themselves lack training, they are often unable to guide their students in a class where the computer is being used as a means of doing different tasks. As a consequence, the benefits of computer technology for those students who are not familiar with computer are inexistent (Roblyer, 2003).

In sum, it should be stated that although the application of computer technology is still regarded as something new in the field of FL teaching, the use of technology has both advantages and disadvantages for language learning and teaching. However, the computer's advantages seem to be more significant than its drawbacks. An effective use of CALL depends on how much the teachers are willing to use them and on whether or not they have positive attitudes towards their use in FL classrooms. Teachers should not be worried about the use of computers in their classes because they are not meant to replace them, but assist them in their task. Therefore, teachers should try to apply CALL programmes in order to improve the students' learning process and get maximum benefits from technology.

3- Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Being a teacher at the department of English at Laghouat University in charge of teaching written expression for almost three years raised my attention towards several issues that teachers in general and, written expression teachers in particular, were not aware of. Whenever a meeting is held between teachers, especially after exams to discuss the problems faced by students, the teachers seem to agree that most students did so badly in exams due to their poor writing skill. Among the other points which were at the core of these discussions was that teachers of all the modules, not only written expression, felt pity for some students who show great abilities in oral expression, who always participate in class, have serious problems when writing. The writing skill seems to be the most difficult skill.

Despite the availability of computers in the English Department laboratories at Laghouat University, they are only used to teach listening comprehension and sometimes oral expression. None of the teachers ever tried to use them in written expression courses. I have even witnessed teachers handing in their students some copies to do some tasks which could have been done on the computer screen much easily and in a shorter time.

Several questions can be raised with regard to this topic. The following two questions seem to be the most prominent ones:

- 1- What are the teachers' perceptions of the integration of computers into FL classrooms in general?

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- 2- What are the teachers' perceptions of the use of computers, computer software in teaching the written expression?

4- Hypotheses

The hypotheses set to this study are:

1. The use of computers and/or some computer software could be helpful in overcoming some of the students' writing difficulties and can enhance their writing skill.

2. Most teachers hold positive points of view about computer use in FL classrooms in general and its use for teaching the writing skill in particular and are, thus, willing to use them in the future.

5- Aims of the Study

The present study attempts to investigate whether the use of computers may help in getting over some of the difficulties faced by students when writing in English. It also seeks to see if computers can enhance the students' writing performance. It is also meant to bring some suggestions and guidance for teachers as well as students as to the most appropriate ways of using technology in the FL classroom.

6- Methodology

We opted for the descriptive research design since the nature of our study requires direct contact with and observation of our respondents. Knowing about the teachers' perceptions of the use of computer technology in the written expression course can only be dealt with using a descriptive method.

7. Population and Sampling

The population of this study consists of 19 teachers at the department of English, including 5 teachers who are in charge of teaching written expression. In order to collect the information needed for this study, a questionnaire was administered to a number of twelve teachers (12) who have already taught written expression before, among them five (5) teachers in charge of teaching written expression at the Department of English at Laghouat University.

8- Data Gathering Tools: The Questionnaire

A three-section questionnaire is administered to the teachers in order to collect the necessary information. The type of questions being asked are of a mixed nature, i.e., multiple choice questions, Likert scale questions through which participants were asked to choose the best answer according to their opinions. Some 'yes' 'no' questions. There are also questions that require teachers to give a full explanation of their attitudes and perceptions.

9- Data Analysis and Interpretation

The findings of the study affirmed that approximately all teachers are not satisfied with their students' level of writing and that many students seem to encounter difficulties when composing. Teachers added that students are struggling to write in English. In this sense, teachers' answers revealed that nearly almost all of their students regard writing skill as the most difficult one compared to the other skills. Furthermore, with regard to the question of how teachers do perceive the use of

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computers in FL classrooms, teachers showed great interest in integrating them as they all thought they can be very helpful. The teachers seem to agree that the use of computers can raise students' level of motivation and make the teaching/learning atmosphere more convivial. The computers can bring innovations to the traditional classroom and can also help teachers as well as students gain time. Teachers seem to ignore much about the computer software that can be used to teach writing with the exception of only two teachers since one of them has already tried to use the computer in her classroom and it proved very effective with her students.

Teachers added that using the computer can be very effective and helpful in enhancing the students' writing skill. The computer can be useful with some writing conventions such as checking grammar, spelling, punctuation ...etc. It also helps students distinguish the stages of the writing process before coming with the final version of their writing product. Nevertheless, teachers complained about the accessibility to computers in the Department of English.

Last but not least, almost all teachers declared they are willing to use computers in their future sessions and that they recommend that other teachers in the department start using them. Teachers' comments were very positive with respect to this question as they all pointed out that we are living in a world wherein the use of technology has become a necessity and ever teacher needs to cope with these changes.

10- Recommendations

With regard to the results obtained from this study, a number of recommendations are pointed out. These could be of great help to both teachers and their students in future writing sessions when teaching writing skill takes place in a more advanced setting wherein the computer is used and, thus, can help in improving EFL students' learning process of the four skills in general, and in enhancing their writing skill in particular.

1. Teachers as well as students should be trained in using the computer.
2. Teachers' attitudes towards the use of the computer should be more positive for it represents a valuable aid.
3. Students should be encouraged to use computers for developing their writing skill.
4. Teachers should be ready to abandon the traditional teaching techniques and be open to use technology in their classrooms.
5. The University needs to make more investments in computer-assisted teaching.
6. Computers should be used to teach all the four skills and not just listening comprehension as the case is here in the Department of English at Laghouat University.

11- Suggestions for Further Studies

Other studies in the future can be conducted with students only or both students and teachers alike to see what their perceptions are. Furthermore, though we tried to shed some light

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on computer use in the development of all language skills, in this study we specifically dealt with the teaching of the writing skill. Future studies can be carried out about the use of computers in teaching other skills where the focus can be on the students' level of motivation, attitudes, anxiety, autonomy, ...etc, and the effects of the implementation of a given computer software can have on the development of the students' skills. Further studies can be investigated based on a completely different research design such as an experimental study associated with the use of other data collection tools such as interviews can lead to different findings for there are always some limitations to the use of the questionnaire. In very few words, the findings of our study are limited and cannot be generalized. Accordingly, more studies can be conducted under different conditions and may reveal different results.

Conclusion

Throughout this study and the analysis of the teachers' questionnaire, we were able to come to the conclusion that both teachers and students still face difficulties with the writing skill. Teachers are doing the best of themselves to improve the Writing skill of the students and the students are struggling in order to come up with a good and acceptable piece of writing. The kind of difficulties that appear in students' writings' are not only at the level of the sentence structure, but at the level of the paragraph and the essay as well. Moreover, though teachers assign written home works, students need more practice to improve their writing skill. Teachers are often not satisfied with the students' writing performance which most of the time lack

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organization, coherence, and cohesion. Furthermore, teachers seem to agree that the integration of computers into the FL classrooms can be very beneficial for the students' mastery of the four language skills. The computer can change the nature of teaching and bring some innovations into the classroom which is likely to make students more interested and motivated to learn the target language in an enjoyable way. In this respect, they all agreed that overcoming the students' writing problems can be achieved by the use of some specific computer programmes. They also suggested that it could be of a big advantage to the students to have a mixture of computing and regular classes. Finally, many teachers seem to be convinced to introduce computer technology in their written expression classes.

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Appendix

Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear Colleagues,

This study seeks to investigate how the use of computers can be helpful in enhancing EFL students' writing skill. We are aiming at discovering teachers' perceptions of the use of computers in order to enhance EFL students' writing skill. Getting your answers back, we hope we would be able to come up with some future suggestions to enhance the students' level in writing and help them overcome their difficulties.

Would you please tick (x) in the appropriate box or give a full answer when required. Your honest answers would serve us a great deal.

- 1) According to you, how important it is to teach the writing skill?

.....

- 2) Are you satisfied with your students' level of writing?
- Yes
- No

Please explain why?

.....

- 3) How is your students' performance in writing :
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- 4) Do you ask your students to write at home ?
- Yes
- No

If 'yes', is it for

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- Pleasure
- To pass examinations
- Others

.....

5) Do your students approach any writing task with great ease?

- Yes
- No

Please explain why?

.....

6) Do your students have any difficulties when composing?

- Yes
- No

If 'Yes', are these difficulties at the level of:

- Sentence structure
- Paragraph
- Essay

Please explain why?

.....

7) Do your students face difficulties when writing paragraphs?

- Yes
- No

If 'yes', please describe those difficulties?

.....

8) Are your students paragraphs well developed, organized and coherent?

.....

9) In order to write good paragraphs, your students must show good mastery of:

- Style

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- Grammar
- Coherence
- Spelling
- Punctuation
- All of these
- Others, please specify

.....

10) What sort of problem do you often face during teaching writing?

.....

11) In your opinion, do you think that it is a good idea to integrate computers into foreign language classrooms?

- Yes
- No

Please explain why?

.....

12) Have you or any other teacher in the department tried to use computers in your classes?

- Yes
- No

If 'yes', please explain for which purposes? Is it for:

- Writing English papers
- Chatting with friends using English.
- Getting information.
- Exchanging e-mails.
- Others

.....

If 'no', please explain why?

.....

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13) What do you think about the use of computers in a writing class?

.....

14) Do you think the use of computers can help in overcoming some of your students' writing difficulties?

- Yes
- No

If 'yes', please explain how helpful this could be for your students?

- Very helpful
- Quite helpful
- Helpful
- Not helpful at all

15) Do you know about any computer software that can be used to teach writing?

- Yes
- No

If 'yes', please mention them.

.....

16) There are many computer software that could be used to teach writing, will you be willing to use them?

- Yes
- No

Please explain why?

.....

17) According to you, will there be any advantages of using a mixture of computing and regular writing classes?

- Yes
- No

Please explain why?

.....

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18) Would you go for writing sessions in which you can use the computer?

- Yes
 No

Please explain why?

.....

19) Do you plan to try and teach writing through the use of the computer?

- Yes
 No

Please explain why?

.....

20) Would you recommend that writing teachers start to teach writing skill through the use of computers and/or any other computer software?

- Yes
 No

Please explain why?

.....

21) Please feel free to add any comments?

.....

cooperation

Thank you for your