

The Effect of Using the Internet on EFL Elementary School Students' Writing

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Abstract

This research analyzes the effect of using the internet on Arab EFL students' performance in English writing. The research design of this study used a pre-test/post-test to identify the influence of the internet on students' writing in English. The subjects were purposefully chosen from a private school in Irbid district in Jordan. They were instructed in the traditional way in the first semester and their writing was rated as a pre-test. In the second semester they were instructed using the internet as a mean of teaching/learning. Their writing was rated afterwards as a post-test to examine the effect of using the internet on their writing. The results showed that students' overall performance on the post-test improved significantly. The most significant improvement was on the use of vocabulary and the least was on the development of their paragraphs in general.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, Internet, Technology, Jordan, Vocabulary, Writing.

1. Introduction

Technology plays a significant role in our modern life as it is an indispensable part in almost everything around us such as work, banks, health, traffic, communication, and education. Technology improved and facilitated education in many ways including the use of computers and e-learning a matter that makes education available to everyone who seeks for it even if he/she cannot join a university for whatever the reason is. The Internet and computers provide many facilities at home and work place as anyone can share his experiences and thoughts with the entire world through blogs, Wikis and web-sites. Additionally, it has the ability to eliminate barriers of time, distance, and socio-economic status, so that the individual can take charge of their own continuous learning. (Hairston and Nafukho, 2011: 10)

From here stems the importance of the present study which tries to shed light on the effect of using technology and specifically using the internet as a mean of education on teaching/learning English as a foreign language for young learners since the youngsters are more attached to computers and the internet through the use of the new applications of this technology especially in communication. Children of this new generation have no boundaries at all, they have on line friends whom without the internet may have never seen and they can find the information about anything while sitting in their living rooms by goggling it through their mobiles which are connected to the internet. (Ashish, 2012:94)

Teaching a foreign language to young students who do not normally use it outside their classroom is certainly a very difficult task so teachers need to use a variety of techniques, activities, and strategies to create an interesting environment that attracts learners' attention and motivates them to learn better. Thus teachers are invited to use what could attract the learners most and addresses their needs.

Today's children are haunted by the use of computers and the new ways of communication so teachers should take the advantage of this fact and queer students to grasp knowledge from this technology and to look at it as a mean of teaching/ learning that could be helpful and useful for both the teacher and the student. Temple and Gavillet claimed that it is a general observation that the use of internet can lead to improve student's performance in thinking logically, formation of concepts, problem solving procedures and understanding relationships. (1990).

Many schools all over the world provide their classrooms with computers and they provide the service of the internet as a mean of education so that both teachers and students can make use of it. Unfortunately, this opportunity is not available to everyone as most students in developing countries do not have access to this facility in their schools. But some of them are lucky and have their own computers at home. Most of public and private schools in Jordan, a developing country, for example do not provide this opportunity to their students; however a great number of the Jordanian families have the internet service at their homes.

In this study the subjects are students from a private school and it has a computer lab but it is not sufficient for all the needs of the students at this school especially the language courses.

1.1. The Internet and Teaching Writing

Teaching a language implies teaching the four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Each of these skills needs a variety of techniques, strategies, and activities that facilitate and fasten learning. The light in the present study will be focused on the writing skill. Brown (2001:335) argues that “written products are often the result of thinking, drafting, and revising procedures that require specialized skills, skills that not every speaker develops naturally,..., writing pedagogy focuses on how to generate ideas, how to organize them coherently”. Thus the process of writing requires certain steps that evolve round introducing a final product that is comprehensible, and serves the goal and the message which is meant to deliver. In the case of teaching writing for academic purposes which is the case in the present study, (Brown,2001:339) also asserts that it is the major consumer of writing techniques, especially writing techniques that concern themselves with the composing process: development of ideas, argument, logic, cause and effect. From this point one could argue that today’s students are invited to make use of the new technology to gather the ideas and the knowledge required to produce a writing piece that comes up to their ambition and capabilities. In addition, the role of today’s teacher in the writing process is simply a facilitator rather than an authoritative as the teacher facilitates the process of writing by giving his/her students’ guidance and directs them to negotiate and argue instead of imposing his/her ideas on their own thoughts. Students can also exchange new ideas and information from their colleagues instead of their teachers. As Brown argues that one should not “buy into the myth that writing is a solitary activity! Some of it is,... but a good deal of what makes a good writer can be most effectively learned within a community of learners” (Brown, 2001:355). Moreover, media resources are part of the technology which can be helpful in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, literature on classroom interaction has shown a profound effect of the instructional materials in the learning process. Chance and Chance (2002: 165), for instance, asserted that “communication research proves the adage that actions speak louder than words,” meaning that learners must be involved in hands on activities in order for them to learn effectively.

In his effort to encourage EFL learners to use their individual learning strategies to improve their English, (Brown, 2002: 56) referred to a number of strategies. The first of these was the use of the internet and he claimed that “The internet is an amazing source for language practice. Today about 80 percent of all World Wide Web (www) sites around the world are in English, so wherever you are, if you have a computer, you can easily find English on the internet.” Mupinga and Busby (2011) in their study about online games and simulations as an instructional strategies for learning, even claimed that “...in the future, if children are sheltered from technology they will be left behind” (94). Thus the current challenge for teachers is to take advantage of the potentials of the internet and to determine when and how to queer it to match the benefits of the instructional purposes.

Today without any doubt we are in the center of a “monumental technological paradigm shift, one which will eventually change the way that all instructors teach and the way students learn” (Jensen, 1993). And as we approach the next century, it is essential that we make informed decisions about how the internet can be successfully integrated into the language classroom. Several researchers in the field of pedagogy have reported an improvement in student writing skills through the use of the internet (Beauvois, 1998: Cononelos &Oliva, 1993; Warschauer, 1996). According to Beauvois, students in the networked writing project displayed more fluidity of conversation, more use of complex sentences, and more self-disclosure. She believes that the elimination of strong teacher dominance freed students to express themselves, resulting in a larger quantity and better quality of communication. Moreover, Priemer and Ploog's (2007) research findings verified parts of the hypothesis that writing with external sources of information like the use of the internet has epistemic effects and that students with basic writing skills and little prior knowledge benefited most from writing tasks.

(Singhal,1997) also claimed that “In addition to the communication benefits of the internet, the internet can also be used to retrieve and access information. The World Wide Web is therefore a virtual library at one's fingertips; it is a readily available world of information for the language learner. While the internet offers numerous benefits to the language learner, a few such possibilities are examined here, in the context of language learning.”. Furthermore, (Singhal,1997) along with many other language instructors believe that the internet is a valuable resource to both language teachers and learners since language and culture are interrelated and combined so understanding the culture of the target language enhances the understanding of the language. Consequently the internet facilitates the use of the specific language in an authentic setting and it can also be used to acquire information from language resources that match their purposes; such as gathering the current information from countries around the world, or looking for geographical, historical, social/cultural, economic, and political information from the countries in which the target language is spoken.

Another study on computer-mediated instruction for English writing skills by Hartman, Neuwirth, Kiesler, Sproull, Cochran, Palmquist, and Zabrow (1995) concluded that the use of technology rearranges teacher and classmate attention so that less able students can become more active in the class. Additionally, the results of their study showed that the networked sections showed more student-teacher communication than traditional ones.

Warschauer (1996) in his research on the factors that affect student motivation provided by a technology-enhanced setting concluded that the students felt empowered in the technology environment. Students believed that the computer gave them certain kinds of control over their creativity.

Findings of a related study conducted by Davis and Chang (1994) on the effect of using technology and internet on learning a second language showed that over time, the students' reading and writing began to change and through the surveys and informal case studies of student writing during the conference, it was found that for the most part, students' writing had improved in both fluency and organization as well as students have shown a tendency to carry over to their study literature, and that they had a better understanding of English usage.

In the same vein the present study the researchers will try to shed some light on how the appropriate use of the internet as a mean of teaching could be of a great benefit for both the teacher and the learner.

2.1. Methodology

2.2. Hypothesis of the Study

The present study will investigate the following hypothesis:

There are no statistically significant differences at $\alpha \leq 0.05$ in the mean scores of the subjects' writing performance that could be attributed to the effect of using the internet as a mean of teaching/learning.

2.3. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of using the internet as a mean of learning/ teaching writing to young school students. Specific questions of the study were:

1. Are there statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the students' overall performance in their writing performance on their pre -and post- exposure to the internet as a mean of teaching/learning?
2. What are the areas of improvement in the subjects' writing that could be due to the effect of using the internet as a mean of teaching/learning?

2.4. Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were purposefully chosen from the students of Yarmouk University Model School in the academic year 2011/2012. The subjects were thirty female students of the sixth grade because they were the students of one of the researchers who taught them English during that year. Those students were asked to write some paragraphs in English as part of the requirements of their English curriculum without referring to the internet or any other technological aid in the first semester. Then in the second semester they were asked to write paragraphs in English and they were allowed and encouraged to use the internet to gather information and to enrich their writing tasks.

2.5. Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers collected samples of students writing at two phases. During the first semester the students were asked to write paragraphs in English during their English class and their free writing tasks were corrected by their teacher. The students could benefit from their English books activities or reading comprehension paragraphs to enrich their writing as well as their own ideas or sometimes they could work in groups or pairs to discuss and edit their writing tasks. In the second semester the students were able to use the internet as a mean that could help them to gather more information about the topics they were asked to write about and then they have to present their writing to their colleagues in the classroom by reading it aloud or using the data show to present it. Students did this as part of the requirements of the English language curriculum as they need to learn and develop the four skills.

The researchers chose randomly one writing assignment from the first semester to be compared with another one which was also randomly chosen from their writing assignments in the second semester where they used the internet as a teaching aid to write better and more authentically. In marking the writing assignments attention was given to spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary and paragraph development in general.

2.6. Rating

The writing assignments were marked by the two researchers at the same time but separately. One of the researchers is an assistant professor in TEFL and the second holds a master degree in linguistics and she is an English teacher at the school. Both researchers rated the written papers separately using the same check list. The total number of the points available on the test was (25) which was allocated as five marks for each category under study. They adopted the same rate if there was an agreement and took the average when there is discrepancy. Inter-rater reliability co-efficient was substantial (0.70). Table 1 shows this.

2.7. Statistical Analysis

The researchers computed the total average mean score and the standard deviations of the students' performance on each category; spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and paragraph development on the written assignments of the first semester as well as on the second one separately. Their overall writing performance in

the first semester and the second were also computed. The mean of the same category was paired and ANOVA t-test for equality of means was administered to determine if there was any differential significance.

3.1. Results and Discussion

In order to investigate the hypothesis and to answer the questions of the present study, the researchers computed the mean scores and the standard deviations of students' achievement on the five categories under study which were spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary and paragraph development in general. Table (2) below presents a summary data of students' overall achievement according to the five pre-mentioned categories on the pre-exposure to the use of the internet and on the post-exposure of the use of the internet.

The data obtained from Table 2 show that there are statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the mean scores of the subjects' writing performance due to the effect of using the internet as a mean of teaching/ learning. The overall mean score of all the five categories on the pre-test was (14.62) while on the post- test was (18.35). This shows that there was a significant improvement of students performance on all categories . The highest improvement was in vocabulary as the difference between the mean score on the pre- and post tests was (0 .91). The next improvement was on the use of punctuation with a difference that equals (0.89). Then came the improvement in spelling with a difference of (0.81) points. This was followed by grammar with (0.77) and the least improvement was in the paragraph development in general with a difference of (0.35) points. These findings go in the same line with the findings of other studies such as Mike's (1996) who asserts that the use of the internet has also been shown to promote higher order thinking skills. A language teacher, for example, may instruct learners to search for specific information. Searching the Web requires logic skills. Once information has been obtained, the results must be reviewed which requires scanning, discarding, and evaluative judgment on part of the learner. The information obtained from the internet must be put together to make a complete and coherent whole which entails the synthesis process. This might explain why vocabulary was the most improved category since the students had the opportunity to surf into the internet and get the words which they need to express their ideas in the target language. The same explanation may be applied to the improvement in spelling as they could find the correct spelling on the internet easily. This of course has a positive impact on students' writing not only on the post –test but on their writing in general as it is supposed that whenever they learnt a new vocabulary item or the spelling of a certain word it should be recorded in their memory and they could recall it when the need it.

In order to see if there were any significant differences between the mean scores of the students' performance in both the pre-and post- tests at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) the researchers used t-test for equality (see Table 2). The data proved that there were significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between students' writing performance on all the categories in the favor of the post-test except for the category of general development of their paragraphs. This could be due to the fact that the subjects' who participated in the present study are still young as they are in their sixth grade and most of them are solely exposed to English in their English classroom, in another words, they do not use their English outside their English class. And to develop their paragraphs there are certain elements like coherence, cohesion, unity, and balance that they should learn and practice using to improve their writing and this needs time and practice.

4.1. Recommendations

This study sheds some light on the effect of using the internet as a mean of teaching/learning a foreign language. Based upon the conclusions of the study, the following recommendation are offered. First, the internet is a technology that will absolutely have significant implications for both teaching and learning since it offers a great amount of information and opens new avenues in communication a matter which could enrich the language learning experience. Therefore, both language teachers and learners are invited to be more familiar with the use of the internet and its numerous functions. This could be obtained by attending workshops and courses that should be offered by the ministry of education for the teachers who are in the field and through courses at the universities for those who are studying to be teachers in the future. As the more knowledgeable language teachers are the more successfully they can implement the internet service in their language classroom. (Singhal,1997)

Second, it is recommended that all the schools should integrate the services of the internet into the language classroom as the language teacher could prepare what suits the curriculum and enriches it through what s/he could find on the networked sites that are prepared and designed by experts who give the teacher a variety of ready prepared exercises and tasks and enables him/her to choose what suits the goals or the age of his/ her students.

Third, educators and stakeholders should bare in mind that they are dealing with a new generation and that they should equip them with all what is needed to foster their learning and prepare them to face the future with the

means of new and updated technology. By doing this they are empowering students with the tools to be more effective and independent.

Finally, it is recommended to repeat this study using a larger sample over a longer period of time to ensure the validity of the conclusions, a matter that would lead to a more representative and reliable results.

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Table 1: *Inter-rater Reliability Correlation Values.*

no	Variable	Correlation value	Sig
1	spelling	0.54*	0.001
2	grammar	0.76**	0.00
3	punctuation	0.66**	0.00
4	vocabulary	0.53*	0.001
5	development	0.30	0.00
	total	0.70**	0.00
*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Table 2: *Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Overall Achievement in Writing on Pre-Post –tests.*

variable		means	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig.
spelling	Pre	3.09	1.17	3.13	0.003
	post	3.90	0.85		
grammar	Pre	2.68	0.82	3.37	0.001
	post	3.45	0.98		
punctuation	Pre	2.86	1.02	3.79	0.00
	post	3.75	0.81		
vocabulary	Pre	3.05	0.78	5.16	0.00
	post	3.96	0.60		
development	Pre	2.94	0.86	1.62	0.11
	post	3.29	0.82		
total	Pre	14.62	3.88	4.17	0.00
	post	18.35	3.12		

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