RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Relationship between Computer-Assisted Classroom Discussion (CACD) Tools and EFL School Students' Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT

Computers and multimedia are currently the most used tools in any language acquisition because these tools can be integratedinside and outside classrooms.Consequently,Teachers can integrate these tools in different ways such as in CALL (Computer-Assisted-Language Learning, CAW (Computer-Assisted-Writing) or CMC(Computer-Mediated- Communication). And teachers can use all of them to develop motivation and increase interaction among learners in social environment. In addition, CACD can play many other functions like a stimulator, a tutor and a tool.

Some experts consider CACD (Computer- Assisted classroom discussions) instead of the use 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, more interaction and more interest.

CACDinvolves also the use of a variety of media, such as text, film, video, audio, animation, chatting and graphics ("Teaching English using multimedia," 2009;Warschauer, 1996). It can be represented by CD-ROM and DVD- ROM attached with online communication. What makes multimedia more powerful is its connection to hypermedia (Warschauer, 1996), i.e. linking the multimedia resources all together including video, audio, graphic and text (Lamper& Ball, 1990, p. 5).

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

Key Words: computer-assisted classroom discussions, CD-ROM, DVD-ROM, motivation, communication, interest, learning environment.

The writer of this article improved her topic basing on a scientific study, personallydone by her and she discovered that the EFL school learners' problems in using computer mediated interaction, online discussions and doing any formal or informal written text are numerous.

The researcher consulted a number of language teaching and information technology (IT) experts and specialists to verify the validity and reliability of the tools. Applied experimental method in collecting and analysing the data. The subjects of the study have been divided by the researcher into a control group and an experimental group which in

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

Statement of the Problem

Most of the EFLschool learners have no knowledge of using computer assisted classroom discussions, e-mail exchanges and Web-based writing properly. This article helps thesome EFL learners to be aware of the use ofCACD tools in developing their writing skills.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

This article aims to investigate,classify and verify the problems of using Computers-Assisted Classroom Discussion by some EFL schoollearners in developing their EFL writingskills.

It was hypothesizedby the writer of this article that:CACD tools help EFL classrooms students to develop their productive language skills. It is useful for the those learners to develop their writing skills may be because their teachers have no ideas in how to useCACD inside classroomsand do not have the enough knowledge to encourage their students to use CACD outside classrooms as well.Bothteachers and students can't understand the relationship between the importance of grammatical structure and stylistic structures of written texts and exchanging electronic messages among the students and teachers by using CACD tools. The researcher think also these previous problems can be according to the gender difference among learners.

To examine the hypothesis of the study, a treatment test was administered, it was found that most of the students used the tool of CACD weakly, and the main weakness

was observed in the tool of electronic composition writing process by using computers and the learners do not know how to use electronic dictionaries to check and correct either their spellings, syntax, semantics, or grammatical errors.

The paper explores how the use of CACD tools help to develop the writing skills of EFL learners. It discusses the role of the computers and some electronic multimedia and devices in developing English language writing skills for many foreign school language learners around the world.

The researcher conducted a study of computer-assisted classroom discussions, a paragraph writing, short story writing,an essay writing, an article writing, and a composition writing for the learners either online or offline. She also collected a data through a treatment test and according to the aims of the study as expressed through the specific research questions and hypotheses. Paragraph drafts, essay drafts, composition drafts, article drafts, andthe students' responses to the questions of pre-test and post-test have been discussed.

Literature Review

The researcher also 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 and designed tools for the study.

Using Email Exchange Inside EFL Classrooms

Margaret Gonglewski, Christine Meloni and Jocelyne Brant argue that e-mail, a form of asynchronous computer-mediated communication, has been called "the mother of all Internet applications" (Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni, 2000, p.3). Since the evolution of networks, computers can offer foreign language (EFL) learners more than drills: "they can be a medium of real communication in the target language, including composing and exchanging messages with other students in the classroom or around the world" (Oxford, 1990, p.79).

E-mail offers students a practical opportunity to interact with others in the target language. Students can create their own mailing lists or the teacher can set up a class e-mail list or listserv. Allowing interested outsiders to subscribe to a class e-mail list can create additional opportunities for authentic communication with other target language speakers beyond one's own familiar classmates (Gonglewski, 1999).

Activities can be planned for use within a class or between two or more classes in different locations. Students can also join discussion forums outside of their regularly planned course. E-mail has been described as a conversational writing medium, a crossbreed language with elements of both written and spoken language (Moran &Hawisher,

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1998). Because it is separated from face-to-face contact, the high pressure of such immediate demand for production is lessened, and learners can take their time formulating their thoughts, much like they might do in written composition. As decelerated conversation, e-mail communication "provides an excellent first step to help students prepare for the face-to-face classroom discussions as well as the more carefully conceived and polished written compositions instructors ultimately expect from their students" (Van Handle &Corl, 1998, p. 129).

E-mail is ideal for preparing ahead of time for class discussions. Ramazani (1994) tells of an activity called "The Weekly Essay." A few days before the class meets, his students e-mail each other essays that they have written about a particular reading. In this way the students are better prepared for the class discussion of the essays. Ramazani (1994) uses another e-mail activity to prepare his students for class ahead of time. He asks them to submit short, one-sentence summaries of a reading. Next he organizes these ideas on a hand out that he then uses in class for both brainstorming and stimulating class discussions.

Bauman (2000) provides an example of how he extended a conversation activity into a second class session by using email between classes. During the first class session, he gave his students a hand out in which three criminal cases were described (including details of the crimes and suspects). In small groups the students discussed the cases and reached a decision as to the appropriate punishments for the suspects. As homework, he asked each student to write an original case and send it to him via e-mail. He then e-mailed two cases to each student with instructions telling them to study the cases and to decide the punishments before coming to class. In the second class session, students who had received the same cases got together and discussed their judgments and tried to come to an agreement as to the appropriate punishment. Overall, Bauman found the e-mail option effective. He writes, "By exchanging material between class, both the writing of material and the initial judgements about the material are done outside of class" (Bauman2000, p. 55).

Manteghi (1995) suggests another e-mail task to build on an in-class reading task. Students in her German class first read and discussed a German fairy tale, its features and linguistic structure. They then collaboratively created a fairy tale via e-mail, each student composing a new portion and adding it to the tale as his turn came. Here, a cooperative writing was made easy through this electronic medium, since writers could simply add their own text to the bottom of the story they received via e-mail and then forward it.

One such supplemental learning activity is a reading circle. Many teachers like to encourage their students to do as much extensive reading outside of class as possible but find that there is not enough class time to discuss the readings. A solution is to have the discussion take place outside of class via e-mail. The teacher can divide the class into small e-groups of four or five students each. Then the students are given a reading (groups may be given the same or different readings). After they have completed the reading (e.g., a magazine or newspaper article, a poem, or a short book) or a part of it (e.g. a chapter of a book), they can e-mail their reactions to it to the other members of their e-group (Ron Corio, personal communication).

MacNeill (2000) has his students submit weekly summaries of news stories to a class e-mail list. Students share their opinions on the issues raised in the stories and relate these issues to their own experiences and/or to society in general.

Van Handle &Corl (1998) report on an exchange between intermediate German learners at Ohio State University and Mount Holyoke College. The students in the two institutions exchanged e-mail over the course of one semester, to "promote participation and language skill development in the intermediate level classroom" (p.130). Students were assigned readings that they then discussed on a joint e-mail list. These e-mail contributions initiated and fed class discussion in the class periods and later became the basis for written papers.

Corio and Meloni (1995) report on the Guidelines Net Project that linked two EFL reading/writing classes at George Washington University and Virginia Commonwealth University. The classes had a common syllabus and common

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textbook, Guidelines: Strategies for Reading and Writing (Spack, 1990).

Ruth Vilmi, a professor of English at the Helsinki University of Technology, designed an ambitious e-mail project. Eleven teachers and 220 students from eight countries participated in the project. Students were divided into topic groups of eight students each (no more than two from the same university) and collaborated via e-mail on a research paper. Since then Vilmi has organized numerous e-mail and web projects for students around the world including the Robot Competition and the Environmental Project. (Complete descriptions of the projects that Vilmi has initiated can be found at her website

Junghans (1995) describes another collaborative project in which two groups of English and German native speakers jointly composed a bilingual slang dictionary via e-mail. Each group acted as the authority on its native language and learned a great deal about the target language in the process.

In 1994 Holliday and Robb created the SL-Lists: International EFL/ESL E-mail Student Discussion Lists. The purpose of these lists is "to provide a forum for cross-cultural discussion and writing practice for college, university and adult students in English language programs around the world" (Holliday & Robb,2000) Students may sign up for one of the nine lists that currently exist: two general discussion lists (one for low level and the other for advanced students) and seven topic lists including business, current events, learning English, cinema, music, sports, and science, technology, and computers. Teachers can sign their classes up for the lists or, with permission, students can sign up independently.

An exchange with the teacher "may serve as a transition toward the use of foreign language in a real-cybernetic-world context" (Gonzales-Bueno,1998, p.55). Gonzales-Bueno (1998) points out that in addition to building up learners' confidence in their language skills, "the initial opportunities to interact in the foreign language via electronic communication, as offered to students by their foreign language teachers, may provide the necessary first steps to render the learner capable of navigating the Internet autonomously in a foreign language" (p.55).

Gonzales-Bueno (1998) notes that "students benefit from the advantages of a safe writing environment to communicate their messages while maintaining a conversational format" (p. 58). Another advantage to intensive communicating individually with the teacher at the early stages of language acquisition is the extent of authentic input and corrective feedback learners receive in this context as contrasted with the type of input learners would receive from the language and content their peers might send (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998).

While the benefits of individual e-mail exchange with the teacher are obvious, the potential problems with such intensive e-mail communication must also be acknowledged. To begin with, student-teacher e-mail interaction might give the teacher a nearly impossible amount of work (Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni, 2000). The e-mail exchange can be very closely integrated into the course by basing the topics for discussion on the content of the curriculum. The partners would engage then in discussions that would further their understanding of course materials as well as improve their language ability. The exchanges can also be structured so that students have specific tasks to carry out with their partners that are not specifically tied to course content but that assist the language learning process and are enjoyable and challenging. Thornton (1997) suggests information gap activities. She describes one such activity: "Give each partner a different picture. Have the partners write and e-mail sentences or questions to find the similarities and differences between two pictures" (p. 73).

B-Web Quest Writing Instruction

WQWI is designed to provide input, elicit interaction, and encourage output. Input, interaction, and output are widely regarded as three vital elements for second language acquisition (Chapelle, 1997; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, &Morgenthaler, 1989). Input in WQWI comes from the web resources in the target language—English. Interaction takes place through multiple channels: between learners and the technological medium,

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between learners and the instructor, and among learners themselves. The WQWI output is a completed writing assignment in English. WQWI also incorporates a "reading to writing" approach. According to Krashen (1984), the best way to learn to write is to receive rich and comprehensive input from reading. From the perspective of the reading to writing approach, there is no source other than the Internet that is capable of providing such a wealth of easily accessible reading materials for writing input. In addition, WQWI aims to appeal to students' affective domain by creating feelings of security as well as interesting and meaningful activities through an attractive means of instruction—the Web.

Teacher evaluation of Web-based language activities, including those using Internet resources, has shown that students perceived more advantages than disadvantages (Aida, 1995; Mak&Mak, 1995; Shetzer, 1995; St. John, 1995). Advantages reported the most often included the provision of rich, authentic, and current information, exposure to colourful visual elements, enhanced flexibility of individual learning pace, reinforced learning of the subject matter, heightened motivation, and increased interest. Disadvantages included the encounter with some shallow or confusing information, frustration from slow or failed access, and lack of mastery of technology use on the part of the teacher or students. A number of empirical studies have also indicated that students had an overall positive attitude towards learning in a computer-assisted language learning environment (Felix, 2001; Liou, 1997; Osuna&Meskill, 1998; Shen, 1999). In addition, research has revealed that students perceived Web-based instruction as effective for their language skills in general (Osuna&Meskill, 1998) and for the development of specific language skills related to reading, speaking (Stepp-Greany, 2002), and writing (Frizler, 1995).

Integrating (CACD) by Teachers Inside EFL Classrooms

Al-Mekhlafi,(2004);   Chen,(2008);and Ertmer, (1999) argue that if they decide to integrate technology into our EFL classrooms, it is important to consider such major factors as teachers' attitudes, beliefs, willingness, and concerns. Kersaint, Horton,Stohl, and Garofalo (2003) argue

that teachers with positive attitudes toward technology feel more comfortable and confident in using a technology. They would like to include that technology into their teaching practices. Woodrow (1992) also maintains that a positive user attitude toward the new technology affects the success of educational reform.

Similarly, Chen (2008) in his study investigated three issues: (1) the use of the Internet by 311 EFL teachers in Taiwanese higher education institutions, (2) the factors affecting the use of the Internet by the teachers, and (3) the participants' problems or concerns about integrating the Internet into their classrooms. He indicated that more than half of EFL teachers in Taiwan made use of the Internet facilities such as search engines, emails, chat messages, and online dictionaries. The participants used the Internet facilities for teaching such language skills as reading, listening, and writing because most of them had training on the application of the Internet technology into their classrooms.

Thus, it can be said that previous research findings reveal that such factors as teachers' beliefs, attitudes, willingness, and concerns about the technology use affect the successful implementation of particular technologies (Albirini, 2006; Migliorino& Maiden, 2004). Another factor is that teachers with positive attitudes towards using the Internet have greater willingness to use the Internet in their classrooms. However, for teachers who get used to the traditional teacher-centered approach, uncertainty and fear may hinder them from using the Internet in the classroom (Fullan, 2001). More crucially, factors like lack of technological knowledge and skills could raise teachers' anxiety and lack of confidence; consequently, they may feel uneasy and reluctant to use technology in the classroom (Finley & Hartman, 2004).

Discussion of the Results

There were statistically significant differences between the achievement of the treatment test results of the experimental group and the results of the control group which did not receive the treatment. The findings show that the experimental group benefited from using computers in learning English language writing skills.

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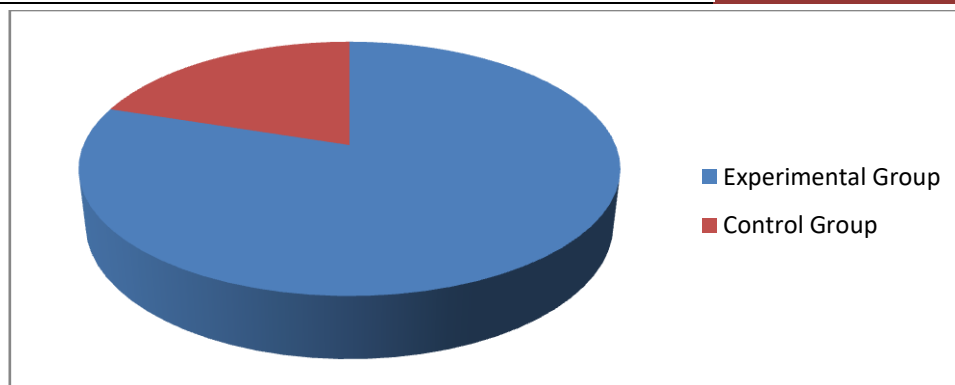
The experimental group, which learned English writing skills by using some electronic devices, achieved higher scores in writing than the control group. This supports one of the hypothesis which stated that CACD tools have a significant effect on the students' writing messages skill in general. The fact that CACD 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 multimedia as it helps in detecting writing errors and suggesting alternatives.

Students are unaware of the importance of communication and interaction skills among them by using writing skills via CACD tools.These 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 CACD tools.

It was found out that there is no effect of gender difference on the different abilities of the EFL school students in learning English language writing skills as a foreign language via CACDtools.

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 CACD to improve their writing social interaction abilities achieved significantly better results after the treatment when they have been taught through the CACD tools, and tested by using this test, representing that CACD 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.

Conclusion and RecommendationsThe findings of the present study were in contrast with what was reported by Tone andWinchester (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.

Further, based on his findings (2008), Chen argues that two factors like teacher training and institutional support have significant implications for teachers' positive attitudes towards the use of technology (i.e., the Internet) in the classroom. Teacher training in particular has great impact on technological integration (e.g., the Internet) in the classroom because the teachers will gain awareness of the benefits of the Internet technology for their students' learning resources. In his study, Chen found some impediments to the application of the Internet in the classroom that included limited time, feeling of uncertainty, lack of peer mentoring/cooperation, appropriateness of course content, and lack of planning for technology integration in the classroom. These findings corroborate with Chen's other findings in the same year (2008). Chen concludes that teachers should be equipped not only with "technology knowledge, but also with the methods for connecting technology knowledge to pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge" (p.

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1026). These ideas are compatible with Zhao's ideas (2003).

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 CACDwould also be useful.

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