

The Effects of CMC Applications on ESL Writing Anxiety among Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of the CMC applications on the ESL/EFL writing anxiety. This is a descriptive study using a mixed-method that adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Three instruments were employed to answer the research questions of the current study which are Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), Semi-structured Interview, and Documents Observation. The respondents consisted of twenty eight post-graduate ESL/EFL students who enrolled in the elective course of Computer Application in ESOL (SKBI6133) at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, School of English Language Studies, National University of Malaysia (UKM). The findings showed a significant change in their attitudes toward writing after they had engaged in writing process approach and CMC applications in the course. In addition, the respondents perceived that there was a positive effect of on their writing performance and improvement on their writing anxiety level particularly through the use of CMC applications.

Keywords: CMC applications, second language writing anxiety inventory, post-graduate ESL/EFL students

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Writing, as one of the most important language learning skills, is considered a required activity particularly for second and foreign English language learners (henceforth, ESL/EFL). Thus, ESL/EFL learners have to fully comprehend the essence of the subject matter in terms of skill of usage and familiarity with the English grammar in order to control their writing and perform well in the activities of the writing process “which moves learners from the generation of ideas and collection of data through to the ‘publication’ of a finished text” (Tribble, 1996; Badger & White, 2000).

It is important to understand that writing as any other language learning skills (reading, speaking, and listening), which are influenced by the changes intervened on the pedagogy. Twenty years ago, the process and product approaches had dominated much of the teaching of writing that involves in the ESL/EFL classrooms. However, in the past ten years, genre approach has been probably most widespread in current classroom practices (Norah Ismail & Intan Safinas, 2012). The impact of technology influences on two different levels of composing in the ESL/EFL writing, i.e., word, sentence, and paragraph level as well as content level. There is a real monolithic relationship between the development obtained on the technology in both of the software and internet sources and the pedagogy of the second language (L2) instruction “technology has reached only so far into the L2 world” (Stapleton & Radia, 2009).

CMC activities might contribute directly by facilitating the process of writing through revision and editing in an online environment, plus the knowledge they can obtain through the discussion conducted on ‘Facebook’ (henceforth FB) e-forum. All of the reasons that contribute to the anxiety in the ESL/EFL writing might be unshackled within the online environment. This is because within such an environment, the ESL/EFL learners may also benefit from the teacher’s and peer’s feedbacks through such activities as drafting, revision, and editing freely in the process-approach of writing.

Nevertheless, we are unsure of what the best appropriate teaching practices are when the teacher employs the technological tools, such as, blog and e-forum in teaching writing to the ESL/EFL learners. Moreover we are uncertain whether the use of these tools would reduce the ‘writing anxiety’ among the ESL/EFL learners when they have to produce essays or project papers for their courses. For the purpose of this study, a post-graduate course, which employs several technological tools, was selected as it has a diverse group of students from several countries including Malaysia, Libya, Iraq, Iran, China, and Yemen. None of these students is a native speaker of English.

Because of writing a term paper is considered as one of the requirements in most courses, with the availability of technology, the researcher aims to find out how learners refine their writing skill, if any, especially when their lecturers use CMC tools such as class blog and class e-forum in the teaching of writing. In other words, the main focus of this research is to study what is happening during the process of interaction using CMC tools that lead students to refine their papers.

The current study which aims to investigate the impact of the CMC applications on the ESL/EFL writers’ anxiety is significant because it presents a proof of usefulness of these technological tools for writing instruction. In addition, because of its significant role in clarifying how ESL/EFL writing students interact with the use of the CMC applications in their approach to writing process tasks, the current study will contribute to increase knowledge in the field of ESL/EFL writing.

1.2 Past Studies

Early in the 1980s, the advent of the new school of thought in ‘constructivism’ changed the scene of language studies. Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky are considered as the dominantly associated scholars with the constructivism school of thought. Although, this school emphasized on the social interaction, it also placed the cognitive aspect as one of its main branches (Brown, 2007). In the cognitive aspect of constructivism, learners as individuals play a key role in constructing their own representation of reality. According to Slavin (2003), learners have to construct their own information individually, which means “learners must individually discover and transform the complex information if they are to make it their own”. In the social aspect of constructivism, social interaction and collaborative learning play a significant role in constructing the cognitive and emotional image of reality (Brown, 2007). Social constructivism, as an approach, clarifies the role of interaction in powerfully prompting the learning process through pedagogical practices. Mitchell and Myles (1988) in Huang (2009:174) stated that the learning process within the socio-cultural milieu sees learners as “active constructors of their own learning environment”.

In a literature review, different scholars pointed out the sources which might cause writing anxiety, such as, the individual’s writing ability and the degree of preparation to complete the writing task as well as the fear of being evaluated and judged on the basis of writing ability and proficiency (Cheng, 2002; Atay & Kurt, 2006; Öztürk & Çeçen, 2007; Soo et al., 2013; Noriah Ismail et al., 2014). Nevertheless, this anxiety can take different forms: the learners can suddenly suffer from a blank mind at the moment when they are given a writing topic; most of them consciously or subconsciously turn the process of writing into an inventive translating process. However, learners must have four major factors to be successful in writing which are the ability of self-expression, self-confidence, a good command of knowledge, and a great desire and pleasure of academic writing (Basturkmen & Lewis 2002). The phenomenon of the writing anxiety hides the awareness of the fact that it negatively affects the writing performance.

In a review conducted by Liu et al. (2003), the author stated that a set of positive components (such as comfortable and conducive milieu) could contribute effectively to stimulate students towards better learning outcomes. These components can be provided by email, online discussion forum, word press, and blog which make students more independent in expressing themselves.

According to Hirvela (2006), Computer-mediated communication in the educational context plays an effective role in linking students together via the computer. As the applications of CMC are concurrently diverse, they work jointly to place learners in a “networked environment through which they communicate with one another electronically in or outside the classroom”. This may take place in either synchronous applications (real-time, i.e. immediate communication) or in asynchronous ones (delayed communication, i.e. students being able to access and respond to messages at their leisure).

In terms of using blog as a tool to practice writing, Nguyen (2010) conducted a study to examine how Vietnamese EFL students thought of blogs as a tool to practice writing. The participants of this study were 11 students in an EFL class in Vietnam. The process of writing the first and the final drafts for two writing topics, the comments posted on the blogs, and their responses to a questionnaire were used to collect data. The results

indicated that students expressed positive attitudes towards the use of blogging as a tool of writing. The researcher recommended using blogging by the ESL/EFL learners to practice the L2 writing.

Consequently, in her blog theory, Simsek (2010) examined the effect of web-blog incorporated with writing instruction. She collected her data from Primary School students who participated in the study. She divided her participants into two groups, namely, a control group and an experimental group, to find the differences in terms of writing performance. The control group activities were limited to the traditional class while the experimental group was on the writing instruction integrated with the class blog activities. Finally, the research indicated that the web-blog which blended with the writing instruction had enhanced the students' outcomes.

In conclusion, the qualities and facilities provided by computer-mediated-communication contribute to make the education system more viable and effective. The collaborative and communicative qualities which may apply throughout the communicative interaction generally promote the learners to achieve the best results and particularly enhance the language learning outcomes. Furthermore, the qualities of time and geography proactively influence the ESL/ EFL learners' writing achievements.

2. Method

This is a descriptive study using a mixed-method that adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches. According to Creswell (2009) a 'mixed methods' approach is one in which the researcher "tends to use various strategies of investigation that engage with collecting data either concurrently or sequentially to best understand the research problem". Three instruments were employed to answer the research questions of the current study: Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), Semi-structured Interview, and Documents Observation. Hence, based on the objectives of the current study which aimed to investigate the effects of the CMC applications on the ESL/EFL writing anxiety, the respondents consisted of twenty eight post-graduate ESL/EFL students who enrolled in the elective course of Computer Application in ESOL (SKBI6133) at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, School of English Language Studies, National University of Malaysia (UKM). The interview samples, on the other hand, involved four respondents who were selected randomly from the total number of the respondents. As sampling design has been classified into different types, the research adapted simple random sample type whereas "each member of the target population has an equal chance of being included in any given sample" Hesse-Biber (2010).

3. Results

The data show that there are four different groups enrolled in (SKBI6133). The first group was Malaysian represented by 12 respondents (43%) so that they formed the majority of the class. The second group is represented Arab by 9 respondents (32%). Iranian group consisted of 5 out of 28 respondents (18%). Finally, 2 out of 28 respondents (7%) was the percentage of Chinese group. The findings revealed that 9 out of 28 respondents (32%) were male while 19 out of 28 respondents (68%) were female and they came from different cultures and educational backgrounds. Likewise, these findings indicate the heterogeneous nature of the respondents whether regarding the English language proficiency or the ICT knowledge. In reference to the numerical order of semester for the respondents, 1 out of 28 respondents (4%) was in the first semester, 22 out of 28 respondents (78%) were in the second semester, 4 out of 28 respondents (14%) were in the third semester, and 1 out of 28 respondents (4%) was in the fourth semester. The findings revealed that the majority of the respondents were in their second semester.

Based on the above analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, there are some major findings found in this study. Firstly, the respondents perceived that using blog and e-forum were useful in enhancing their schema as well as in helping them to feel more comfortable and confident. Further analysis of data revealed that the majority of the respondents expressed positive attitudes towards working in groups and they stated that they would continue to collaborate with other students. The findings of this study indicated that the quality of group interaction which is represented by the participations in the discussion on blog and e-forum enhance their schema as well as their writing ability. This takes us to the second major finding.

The second major finding showed that the majority of the respondents perceived that there was a positive effect of using CMC applications upon their writing performance, particularly through the use of process approach methods. They reported that the use of editing and teacher and peer feedback practices were of great help in improving their writing performance. They seemed to prefer using peer reviews and teacher's feedback within CMC applications more than 'face-to-face'. Consequently, they expressed comfortable attitudes and self-confidence while they were posting their writings on e-forum or blog. Thus, they reported that they got more benefits from the application of process approach within the online environment and supported by the group work interaction. This leads us to the final major finding.

The final major finding in this study revealed that the Paired t-tests which were carried out on the pre-post total mean scores showed a significant difference between them i.e., p-Value = 0.009 (**p<.009). This result revealed that the majority of the twenty eight respondents showed a decreasing tendency to suffer anxiety in their writing through using CMC applications.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Effects of CMC Applications

The findings of this study showed that the respondents felt more comfortable and confident while they were using blog and e-forum. Moreover, these aspects play a significant role in increasing the level of motivation and in turn, smooth the way to improve learners' outcomes. In a previous study, Cicognani (2000) stated that the ability of being able to engage in discussion through synchronous and asynchronous activities encourages learners to do well in their writing process. Almost all of the respondents believed that using e-forum and blog encouraged them to interact with other classmates and their teacher as well. They perceived that the interaction encouraged them to write more, especially when they looked to their classmates' writings. Nevertheless, the respondents of this study found the substantial opportunity to improve their writing performance through using the methods of writing process approach within CMC environment such as the use of teacher's and peer's e-feedback. The following section will discuss the effects of using the methods of writing process approach found out in the present study.

4.2 Students' Attitudes toward Writing Pre and Post of Use of CMC Applications

L2 writing anxiety is defined by Atay and Kurt (2006), as the tendency to experience high degrees of anxiety when asked to write, the difficulties that learners face in ordering their thoughts and achieving ideas while writing in L2. Kroll (1978) in Siti Hamin (1989) claimed that "positive attitudes lead to more willing writing, and it is only by practicing writing that one can learn to write well", and she added that "attitudes definitely influence growth in writing". The findings of this study found out that the majority of twenty eight respondents showed a tendency of decrease in their writing anxiety level through use of CMC applications. This was proved through the statistical operation of Paired T-Test to the total mean scores of pre (63.05) and post (65.68) questionnaires. The Paired T-Test result showed a significant difference between the total means of pre-post questionnaires at the end of the study (**p<.009). This result indicated that the use of CMC applications had a positive effect on the students' attitudes toward writing which in turn contributed influentially in improving their writing ability "These kinds of social network such as blog and FB, is something interesting.

4.3 Writing Performance after Using Teacher's and Peer's Feedbacks

The great merit of process approach is that it offers various features which in turn can be assembled to enhance L2 writing competency (SitiHamin, 1998). She considers these features as, group work interaction, peer evaluation, and teacher and peer feedback. These three features mentioned above and in addition to other aspects of L2 writing such as, revision and editing are considered as phases of collaborative writing which are based on co-operative and collaborative learning theory and in turn are considered as being part of social-constructivist notion. Respondents of this study found an authentic opportunity to apply these methods in their course (SKBI6133) wherein this study took place.

This study found out that the respondents expressed positive attitudes towards working in groups and they stated that they would continue to collaborate with other students, principally doing peer-reviews and critiques on their peers' writing assignments. They agreed that the process of editing was of great help in improving their writing performance. Regarding teacher's and peer's e-feedback, the data revealed that the respondents prefer peer's review through CMC (blog) rather than face to face one and they reported positive attitudes towards teacher's and peer's feedback used through CMC (blog); despite one of the respondents who preferred face to face teacher feedback. They admitted that they got much benefit from this method and they applied their teacher's and peer's advices. Ferris and Robert (2001) indicate that "students who received feedback significantly outperformed students who received no feedback".

Moreover, all these positive effects have an impact on students' attitudes toward writing pre- and post- use of CMC applications. This will be discussed in the following section.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, writing anxiety is a common phenomenon among students when it comes to writing assignment. However, with CMC applications, such as Facebook and blog, used in process writing approach course, students' anxiety was seen reduced in this study. Consequently, students perceived that they performed better in their writing. Additionally, they reported their desires to continue using these applications. Findings also showed

a significant change in their attitudes toward writing after they had used CMC applications. In brief, students are have more opportunities to practice the language, polish their language competency, increase confidence to improve their writing skills, and enjoy meaningful learning experience when engaged in the learning process using CMC applications.

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