Collaboration to improve descriptive writing facilitated by Padlet: an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) action research study

Colaboração para melhorar a escrita descritiva facilitada por Padlet: um estudo de pesquisa-ação do English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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Abstract

Introduction: This study was applied in a public technological institute in Guayaquil, Ecuador. It aimed at improving writing skills through collaboration among students using Padlet. Participants were 18 students enrolled in the first semester. **Method**: The application of the study focused on a constructivist approach where students were able to share ideas, give and receive feedback among their peers and teachers, and construct their knowledge and understanding. This investigation took place over twenty-four hours of class time. It employed a quantitative method. Different instruments such as pre, post-test, and survey were used to collect data. **Results**: After the practice, students exhibited an improvement of about 11 points in the posttest compared to the pretest. The outcome of this study obtained Cohen's d=1.22. **Conclusion**: The survey taken confirmed that students identified collaborative writing in Padlet as useful, and enriching. This research is addressed to teachers and directors involved in the field of EFL education who want to improve their teaching practices.

Keywords: Construtivismo; Colaboração; Redação Descritiva; Padlet.

Resumo

Introdução: *Este estudo foi realizado em um instituto tecnológico público em Guayaquil, Equador. Objetiva melhorar as habilidades de escrita por meio da colaboração entre estudantes através de Padlet. Participaram 18 estudantes matriculados no primeiro semestre.* ***Metodologia***: *A aplicação do estudo concentrou-se em uma abordagem construtivista na qual os alunos puderam compartilhar ideias; dar e receber feedback entre colegas e professores; e construir seu próprio conhecimento e entendimento. Esta investigação durou mais de vinte e quatro horas/aula. Emprega um método quantitativo. Diferentes instrumentos, como pré-teste, pós-teste e questionários foram utilizados para a coleta de dados.* ***Resultados***: *Após a prática, os alunos apresentaram uma melhora de cerca de 11 pontos no pós-teste em comparação ao pré-teste. O resultado deste estudo obteve um d = Cohen de 1,22.* ***Conclusão***: *O questionário aplicado confirmou que os alunos identificaram a escrita colaborativa em Padlet como útil e enriquecedora. Esta pesquisa é dirigida a professores e diretores envolvidos no campo da educação de EFL que desejam melhorar suas práticas de ensino.*

Palavras-chave: Constructivism; Collaboration; Descriptive Writing; Padlet

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of learning a foreign language is to be able to connect with other people and express emotions and thoughts using that foreign language (Lee, 2002). Writing is an outstanding communication skill that plays an important role in the learning of a foreign language (Simin & Tavangar, 2009). Hussin, Abdullah, Ismail, and Yoke (2015) sustained that writing is one of the main language abilities, useful for communicating in a foreign or a second language. It is considered important since it is broad for academics to assess their students intellectually (Tan, 2011). In research done by David, Thang, and Azman (2015) in a higher education institution, learners reported that the most demanding skill was writing. Widosari, Suwandi, Slamet, and Winarni (2017) mentioned that learning writing is not as simple as studying the three other language skills. According to Graham, Harris, and McKeown (2013), the process of writing involves the use of different components such as grammar rules, structure, organization, and understanding of its purpose. Citing DiCamilla and Anton as well as Storch, Harmer (2004), they mentioned that writing benefits learners to transfer their thoughts in a written way to communicate better. Academics in collaborative writing have shown that mother tongue and foreign language require reflective thought, grammar organization, and discourse. The participants in this research, before the implementation, were in an A1 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR)[1] . They faced difficulties writing about themselves with appropriate vocabulary, accuracy,

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[1] As of 2012, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education organized the curriculum taking a reference the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

and content. After a preliminary English Test (PET), applied to the participants of this study, the writing was shown to be the most challenging skill for the students. They showed low grades in the writing section. Most of the students had difficulties to structure and formulate a complete sentence. According to the results obtained, the objective of this study was to determine the improvement of writing skills by collaborative writing using Padlet. This technological tool works similarly to an online sheet of paper where students can add any text with titles and descriptions. Fuchs (2014) explained that Padlet offers a free, multimedia wall that promotes students' participation in and out of the classroom. Having detected students' difficulties in writing, this study posited the following research questions 1) To what extent will students' writing about their daily routine improve by collaborating on Padlet? 2) What are students' perspectives towards innovation? To this end, action research was developed, and quantitative instruments were applied to collect data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Constructivism

Constructivism is the method where learners create their knowledge from their experiences (Doolittle, 2014). Duit and Treagust (1996) agreed that constructivism also encourages the practice and incorporates the knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom. Bhattacharjee (2015) stated that constructivism as a didactic method leads students to create their knowledge where the educator acts as a coordinator of the class. Teachers create a learning environment. However, the students are the main protagonists in their learning process. According to Eggen and Kauchak (2010), constructivism has changed classrooms since this theory focuses on learners who construct their knowledge.

Collaboration in Writing

Storch (2005) stated that collaboration is determined as a reciprocal engagement among the members in a group when they work in an organized way to solve a problem together. Collaboration in writing is a process where there is a negotiation for the creation of simple texts. The use of this academic resource strengthens students' writing performance tasks. Challob, Bakar, and Latif (2016) found that this process advocates group work raises students' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and creates shared learning. Wang and Chen (2013) considered that some of the advantages of collaboration are the development of shared knowledge, understanding, and participation. It supports students' learning environment when students receive reinforcement from their peers. Ansarimoghaddam and Bee (2013) highlighted that it lets writers make meaning and build understanding as part of social exchange. Jafari and Ansari (2012) agreed that working in groups lets students create better pieces of writing than writing alone. Yan (2019) highlighted that collaborative learning helps to decrease students' fear of writing and to develop confidence in that skill, and at the same time, it encourages students to overcome their weaknesses through holistic help among peers. A type of collaboration in the classroom has seemed through peer-feedback. Wiggins (2012) sustained that feedback defines the different observations done after the fact, suggestion, and evaluation. Feedback is considered as a dynamic method to promote students' development as independent learners ready to assess and adjust their learning (Ferguson, 2011). The use of peer feedback contributes to creating autonomy in learners where they propose a change in a paper critically. Guasch and Espasa (2015) defined feedback as a process that includes steps such as producing the assessment, handling the information, and carrying out the task. Kim (2010) considered that learners convey their thoughts better by working with teachers and partners, as well as by sharing feedback and correction. Liu and Hansen (2002) pointed out that through peer feedback, students use information and interactions for each other to fulfill duties to comment on partners' drafts. Yu and Lee (2016) agreed that peer feedback increases learning since it constructs a social and collective setting to learn from partners. However, Tsui and Ng (2000) found that some students prefer to receive feedback from their teachers rather than their partners. The teacher is seen as the best and only person to do that activity. As a result, the preference for teachers' feedback was higher than the students' feedback.

Padlet

Currently, the teaching-learning process has been strengthened with the use of high-tech resources. Demirkan (2019) found that digital tools inspire students, increase their skills and their desire to learn. Padlet, as a technological tool, gives support to individual and collaborative learning in more than one physical place (Tomlinson, 2013). According to Krasnova and Ananjev (2015), students do not just have to be inside the classroom to be part of a learning environment. This conception is accepted since learners do not learn in the same way. For that reason, online learning is a good approach to solve the problems that the educational community may face. Padlet is a technological tool that is free and accessible to everyone. Both teachers and students can use it in the classroom to work together for independent or collaborative work (Algraini, 2014). This resource lets students work among classmates at the same time, creating opportunities to work cooperatively, where the changes and updates done by the students are saved.

Moreover, Lai and Hwang (2016) mentioned that Padlet lets students write about themselves and others, upload videos, recordings, texts, links, and files, and comment on them. Padlet has a variety of resources that empower

and ease the students' interaction in a didactic way. According to Putman (2014), learners can communicate, collaborate, and express their thoughts easily by using Padlet. Teachers and students can use this tool to do collaborative writing tasks, use class resources, ask for suggestions, and research resources (Zhi & Su, 2015). Due to the useful characteristics, Padlet has been selected to be used for this implementation to overcome students' writing problems.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was carried out using action research with quantitative instruments. Norton (2019) highlighted that, through action research, a problem is seen and treated with different procedures to take action and to deal with it. The problem detected in these participants were in writing. Thus, this study was conducted. A survey was applied to determine students' perspectives at the beginning and the end of the innovation. To start the research, a pretest was taken by the participants to get data that later were compared with a posttest.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 18 students in the first semester of a public technological institute who would be, at the end of their studies, technicians in graphic design. The sample included five male students and thirteen female students who were at the A1 English level based on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language). The level of the students was determined by the PET test taken in class. The age of the students ranged from 18 to 30 years old. Most of the students came from low and medium socioeconomic status. The study was conducted during the, 2018-2019 school year. The institution where the research was applied is in the downtown of Guayaquil, Ecuador.

Instruments

The data of this research were collected with these two instruments: pre - posttest, and a survey. They were used to answer these two questions: 1) To what extent will students' writing about their daily routine improve by collaborating on Padlet? 2) What are students' perspectives towards innovation? To answer the first question: *To what extent will students' writing about their daily routine improve by collaborating on Padlet?* a pre-test was applied at the beginning of the implementation to identify students' background on the present tense structure, and a post-test at the end. This post-test provided evidence of how the students improved their performance. In the pre and post-test, the students wrote a paragraph about their daily routines. During the innovation, the students received instruction about how to write the sentences. To assess students' writing, an analytical scoring rubric was implemented. The rubric covered topics such as sentences, the use of simple present with adverbs of frequency, organization of ideas, and vocabulary. Three experts graded the pre and post-tests and also verified the rubric for validity. They suggested changes to the rubric to avoid misinterpretations. To answer the second question *What are students' perspectives towards the innovation?* a survey was employed to determine students' perspectives towards the application of this study about using collaborative writing facilitated by Padlet. The survey utilized a Likert scale with these items: strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). The statements were written in the learners' mother tongue and English because of their proficiency level. To know the reliability of the survey, Cronbach's alpha was run. The survey showed .895 that is considered a good reliability.

Data Analysis

The application of this action research included an analysis of quantitative instruments. It was necessary to measure the impact of the implementation of the study through descriptive statistical data analysis. The data was tabulated, entered, and encoded in an Excel spreadsheet and transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) application was used to get the descriptive statistical information (maximum, minimum, mean, and standard deviation). The effect size was obtained using an online calculator. Also, the reliability of the survey was given by Cronbach's alpha.

Ethical Standards

The researcher asked and was granted permission from the institution to conduct the research. The participants were students of a public higher technological institute whose participation was voluntary and strictly confidential. The researcher informed participants about the purpose, benefits, and the system they would work with at being part of the study. Moreover, the data collected were coded and kept private.

RESULTS

The present study involved quantitative instruments. The information obtained was transferred to excel tables. The results of the application of the innovation were: For the first research question, *to what extent will students' writing about their daily routine improve by collaborating on Padlet?*, quantitative results are shown in Table 1

which demonstrates the improvement of the participants from the pretest to the posttest, after the application of the action research. Cohen's d 1.22 showed a large effect.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std deviation
Pretest	18	1	11	7.33	3.12
Posttest	18	7	16	11.11	3.03

Table 1. The pretest and posttest results

N= Sample.

Table 2 shows the results obtained from the rubric applied in this action research. It presents four different items that students used to write their work accurately and to provide feedback to their partners when working collaboratively. The components of the rubric were: sentences, use of simple present tense and adverbs of frequency, organization of ideas, and vocabulary. Every component had a high score of four points, for a total of 16 points. There is a large effect size in all components. According to the table, the highest improvement was in the *use of simple present tense and adverbs of frequency*.

Components	N	Pretest mean	Std. Deviation	Posttest mean	Std. Deviation	Cohen's d
Sentences	18	1.94	.998	2.89	.758	1.07
Use of simple present tense and adverbs of frequency	18	1.50	.857	2.50	.924	1.12
Organization of ideas	18	1.72	.958	2.61	.979	0.92
Vocabulary	18	2.17	.786	3.06	.725	1.17

Table 2. Results of the rubric components used to evaluate the pretest and posttest results

The second question: *What are students' perspectives towards the innovation?*, the instrument administered was a survey consisting of ten statements about the employment of collaborative work to improve writing and the use of the technological tool Padlet. Results showed that students had a good attitude towards the present study. Table 3 presents the ten components of the survey applied to the eighteen participants of the study. Students indicated a high score regarding the perspective of collaborative writing and Padlet.

Items for Collaboration in Writing	N	Mean	SD
1. Improve the organization of my writing.	18	3.61	0.778
2. Gave me more opportunities to participate in class actively.	18	3.33	0.840
3. Helped me to produce quality writing.	18	3.33	0.840
4. Improved my vocabulary.	18	3.50	0.618
5. Helped me write accurately (correct grammar and punctuation).	18	3.44	0.705
6. Made me realize my own mistakes.	18	3.67	0.485
Items for Padlet for Collaboration	N	Mean	SD
1. Made classes interesting.	18	3.50	0.707
2. Was an easy way to comment on someone else s work in groups or individually.	18	3.00	0.840
3. Allowed me to be aware of mistakes without only the teacher s help.	18	3.17	0.618
4. In Padlet I can post all the information I want to share.	18	3.17	0.514

Table 3. Survey of students' perspectives about collaborative writing, writing, feedback, the use of Padlet.

In general, the results of this survey reflect that students have positive perspectives on the variables of the study: collaborative writing, and the use of Padlet as a resource to provide and receive feedback. The highest means were for items 1 and 6 of collaboration in writing.

DISCUSSION

Question1: *In what ways will students' writing about their daily routine improve by collaborating on Padlet?* As cited by Graham et al. (2013), writing requires the use of grammar structure, organization, and understanding. The participants of the research were exposed to patterns of present tense used to describe someone's daily routine. The practice was conducted by contextualizing grammar to students' reality to raise understanding. Also, Challob et al. (2016) highlighted that collaborative writing raises students' understanding since participants improved their writing skills by collaborating, processing the information, and participating. These three aspects were observed in this study. Through reading and providing feedback, students collaborated to improve their

writing pieces. This interaction between peers assisted in twofold. First, it aimed at raising awareness of their own mistakes. Second, students processed the information from different standpoints. Lastly, their participation was required during the process. Additionally, Jafari and Ansari (2012) established that students make better pieces of writing working in groups. The writing improvement was measured from the students' work in Padlet when they used the rubric. The participants increased their writing skills, shown through a test after the implementation of the innovation. In the beginning, the lowest score of the participants was 1 and the highest 11. After the process, the students got 7 as a minimum score and 16 as the highest.

Question 2: *What are students' perspectives towards the innovation?* As Fuchs (2014) indicated, Padlet promoted students' participation not just in the class but also outside of the classroom. Students could build their knowledge and experiences by interacting several times with their writing and by commenting on their peer's descriptive texts, as Duit and Treagust (1996) stated. As Bhattacharjee (2015) reported, students were in charge of creating their understanding since students were the center of the learning process. Data taken in the survey from participants demonstrated that they liked working collaboratively with Padlet. Besides, as Putman (2014) mentioned, participants were able to communicate and collaborate through the facilities provided by Padlet. Despite the lack of resources (laptops and internet service) and based on the survey taken by the students, the results showed that the participants were satisfied with the collaborative work done to improve their writing when using Padlet.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study demonstrated how effective collaborative writing was for the students in the first semester of a public technological institute. The first question of this research aimed at identifying the way students' writing about their daily routine improved by collaborating on Padlet. The information collected in this study demonstrated that participants developed a better performance in their writing skills, especially in vocabulary and grammar use of simple present tense. The study carried out a student-centered approach where the students played an important role, collaborating by constructing knowledge, sharing experiences, understanding, and giving feedback. The second question of the research focused on students' perspectives of using Padlet in the collaborative writing process. Students indicated that working collaboratively helped them to learn from each other, to improve vocabulary, and to interact with different peers through giving and receiving feedback. As a result, they could write more accurately. All in all, the results of this study have shown that the implementation of collaboration in writing improves students' work in this skill despite their beginning level of English (A1). It may also aid in improving other skills. Thus, further research can explore the impact of collaboration in other language skills.

Limitations

During the implementation of this action research, some students dealt with some limitations due to logistics and economic issues. Another limitation was the resources. The public institute did not have enough computers or laptops. For that reason, the students worked in classes with their own devices, such as cellphones and tablets. Furthermore, the internet service was not powerful enough for the number of students, so the participants did not have enough time to finish the assigned activities in class.

Recommendations

Some recommendations that arose from the study follow: To replicate this study. The time of the implementation should increase, so students have more opportunities to put their learning into practice. Also, the place to pilot the research should provide easy access to equipment and resources like the internet, laptops, or tablets to apply the study. Further research can consider including qualitative data to triangulate information and get a deeper understanding from to explain the positive quantitative results. Another consideration would be to implement field notes to describe the process in terms of difficulties and how they were overcome by the teacher and the students.

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