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Online Collaborative Writing: Students' Perception

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the attitudes of an English writing class towards online collaborative learning activities. A 20-item questionnaire was used to assess the students' attitudes towards this experience. The participants of the study consisted of 55 students studying a Writing II course. There were two sections; one control and the other is experimental. The researcher investigated whether there were significant differences in the attitudes of the students pertaining to, group (experimental vs. control), gender, grade (GPA), access to the Internet and anxiety. The results indicated that the experimental group held positive attitudes towards the online collaborative learning experience. Moreover, the results showed that there were statistically significant differences between anxious learners and the learners who do not have anxiety towards online collaborative activities. In addition, students who had regular access to the Internet had better attitudes for the online collaborative activities. However, no statistically significant differences were revealed regarding the grade of the students. This means that low achievers and advanced learners held similar attitudes towards the online experience. Finally, no statistically significant differences were shown based on gender.

Keywords: online, writing, collaborative learning, learner-centred teaching, gender, anxiety

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses online collaborative learning within three major theoretical frameworks: social context, interactivity, and technologies. It is important to point out that interactivity and collaboration complement each other. In other words, collaboration and interaction are more likely to take place in environments where learners have authority over their learning activities and are socially engaged in a collaborative learning environment. New technologies are likely to facilitate this online interactive collaborative learning environment.

Online collaborative learning is deeply rooted in social constructivism. Hence, knowledge is socially constructed. Learners are viewed as active participants in the construction of knowledge and creative language users. Moreover, they work within teams of social groups that shape the learning process (Allwright, 1984, Gokhale, 1995; Brodahl & Hansen, 2014;

Aydin & Yildiz, 2014). They are involved in authentic communication. They learn in less stressful environments where learners collaborate with each other and support each other. They learn, reflect, teach, share and question. They learn from other students in a friendly atmosphere.

In this atmosphere, anxiety is reduced as learners interact with each other to solve tasks. They work on tasks collaboratively rather than competitively (Farrah, 2011; Farrah, 2012). The learners negotiate the meaning with real audience and authentic tasks and experiences. They get feedback from their peers and respond to this feedback. The more knowledgeable learners can help less knowledgeable learners and thus creating a conducive educational environment. Therefore, motivation and participation are maximized as learners apply active social interaction.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Learning is a social process means that for successful learning to take place it should be in conducive collaborative environments. Learners have authentic audiences and tasks similar to the real world. Collaborative learning theorists emphasized the importance of this type of learning. Johnson and Johnson (1986) deemed that when learners and teachers negotiate the meaning while listening to each other, they gain a deeper understanding of the content and thus creating necessary optimal conditions for successful learning. The principles of collaborative learning are based on the theories of Dewey (1938), Bloom (1956), Vygotsky (1986) who deemed that learning is a social act and cannot be successful in isolation. Other researchers discussed similar concepts like community language learning (Curran, 1976), cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991), and communicative language learning (Brown, 1994). All the above mentioned theorists and scholars believe that learners can not learn content and skills in isolation from their background knowledge and their life experiences. On the contrary, they learn new skills and concepts when they socially interact with peers and reflect on their own experiences.

Online collaborative learning is also strongly rooted in the interactionist theories. In this context of online learning, and according to Palloff and Pratt (1999) “it is the relationships and interactions among people through which knowledge is primarily generated”, p.15). One of the most essential requirements of successful collaboration is granting power to learners to facilitate the process of engaging them in online interactive collaborative learning activities. Online interactive collaborative learning activities are most likely to succeed when learners are granted the opportunities to have the maximum control over the learning process.

This paves the way for the educational process to move form teacher-centered to learner-centered. Learners learn in learner-centered learning environments that put them at the hub of instruction. Thus, there is a mutual responsibility and sharing for the authority over learning. This is achieved through the social interactive collaborative activities which transfer the authority and responsibility to the learners. Therefore, the teacher's role is not ignored. On the contrary, teachers have greater responsibilities to create the collaborative learning environment and to create opportunities that engage learners in group work activities. Learners in the various groups respect each other and share responsibility. They work collaboratively and engage intellectually, cognitively and socially to achieve their learning objectives.

Stein (2001), in the report of the National director of The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), identified four purposes in NIFL's essays for learners: Access, Voice, Action, and Bridge to the Future:

Access*: Learners gain access to information and resources so they can orient themselves in the world. They obtain physical, geographic, psychological or social orientation. They develop an understanding for the world and become better informed learners.*

Voice: *Learners develop their confidence through expressing their ideas and opinions to real audiences who take their voice into account. They are real reasons for communication and exchanging ideas.*

Action*: Learners develop the ability to become independent and responsible learners who solve problems and make informed decisions on their own, and act independently.*

Bridge to the Future: *Learners prepare themselves for lifelong and keep on learning in order to keep up with a rapidly changing world.*

Similarly, Salmon (2000) proposed a five-stage framework for collaborative online learning environment:

- Orientation: Becoming familiar with the environment
- Introduction: Getting to know one another
- Socialisation: Developing relationships
- Information: Sharing through interaction and participation
- Knowledge construction: Learning with others
- Collaboration: Working with others

Salmon's model tries to suggest progression stages for successful e-moderating. In each stage, the role of the e-moderator is highlighted along with the nature of the technology involved. In addition, the model emphasizes the importance of interaction and socialization in online learning. In this model, Salmon gives emphasis to a mixture of constructivist learning structure and e-moderating.). Similarly, Palloff and Platt (2005) emphasized the importance of maximizing the community teams in e-learning to promote creativity and critical thinking.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Writing is an important skill for learners as it is a means through which they develop their academic writing skills, stimulate their critical thinking and enhance their creativity in order to survive at the university level. Specifically, it is essential for university students as it enables them to write essays and conduct their research papers. The technological advancement can be applied in order to achieve better writing outcomes especially if it is built around constructivist principles that involve constructing knowledge in social interactionist environments. As there are a number of principles and concepts are involved in the process of writing, there is a necessity to

examine the attitudes of the learners towards online collaborative activities in such social constructed environments. Despite the time limitations of the study, one academic semester, it is expected that its outcome will contribute in some contemplations on the impact of collaborative online learning on the writing classroom.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to:

1. Examine if there are any statistically significant differences in students' attitudes in the experimental and control groups.
2. Examine if there are statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents based on their gender, and GPA towards online collaborative learning.
3. Examine if there are statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning and anxiety.
4. Examine if there are statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning and their access to the Internet.
5. Examine the general attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Are there any statistically significant differences in students' attitudes in the experimental and control groups between the pre and post questionnaires?
2. Are there statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents based on their gender, and GPA towards online collaborative learning?
3. Are there statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning and anxiety?
4. Are there statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning and their access to the Internet?
5. What are the general attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Educational institutions are currently in the midst of significant changes in the way learners and learning is delivered. Using technology for interacting in a social collaborative writing environment is, of course, an inseparable and significant part of this paper. Of course there are a number of factors and conditions that should be taken into consideration to enable this collaborative online environment to work successfully. This study is the first empirical study conducted in Palestine on the effect of using online collaborative activities in writing courses at the university level. This study is relevant and timely for the higher education institutions, curriculum designers, and Instructors. The contributions of this study would be of interest to

scholars in language learning who are concerned with social context, interactivity, collaboration and technologies particularly in teaching the writing skill. Studies on online learning, collaboration and social interaction are rare in this field, the thing that makes this study to be significant. The findings of this paper will definitely have important implications on English language teaching in general and teaching writing in particular as it is likely to engender extra worthwhile perceptions in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous research studies confirmed the educational advantages of online collaborative learning. Yoshida, Tani, Uchida, Masui and Nakayama (2014) found that online cooperative learning promotes learners' intrinsic motivation, interest and/or enjoyment. Similarly, Ezza and Bakry (2014) reported that learners held positive attitudes towards the use of educational technology to support traditional teaching and they encouraged to integrate it in all teaching practices.

Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) compared writing abilities of students who collaborated on writing assignments using Google Docs with those working in groups in a face-to face classroom. They reported statistically significant differences between the two groups' writing mean score after the experiment. The experimental group obtained higher mean scores than those working in groups in a face-to-face classroom. In addition, online students indicated that they had positive attitudes towards online collaborative activities and high collaboration in their groups.

Zhou, Simpson, and Domizi, (2012) assessed the effectiveness of using Google Docs in an out-of-class collaborative writing activity. They reported that Google Docs was a useful tool for collaborative writing and influenced student learning.

Ciftci and Zeynep (2012) conducted a study on two groups (control and experimental) to examine the impact of online peer feedback on the writing performance and perceptions of the participants. From one hand, they found that the learners in both the control and experimental group improved their writing in their revised drafts. On the other hand, they found that revised drafts of the learners in the experimental group were of higher quality. Moreover, they indicated positive perceptions on the use of online writing activities.

Chou and Chen (2008) implemented a two-week wiki activity in a programming language class. They reported that this new teaching method could motivate students to engage in collaborative learning and could support learning outcomes. Grami (2012) described a collaborative interactive online writing experience among seven Saudi students. Results showed that the experience helped the students to build a positive culture of collaborative writing and peer feedback. In addition to that, the experience also promoted critical thinking among the students and helped them to write to authentic audience. Finally, because the students had positive attitudes, they welcomed incorporating similar tasks in future ESL writing classes.
New technological tools and applications allow for such purposes to be achieved easily and rapidly. Jeon-Ellis et al. (2005: 121) describe a project oriented CALL that they perceive "a

holistic learning approach to act with words and create social realities in and out of the classroom, and thus facilitate learning".

Porter (2001) emphasized the role of online learning activities in facilitating interaction and collaboration among earners who share common interests. Khalsa, Maloney-Krichar, and Peyton (2007) listed a number of benefits for computer mediated interaction. The benefits included the following: authenticity, voice, equal learning opportunities, individual attention, and freedom of expression, convenience and accessibility, engagement, collaboration, and technological literacy (pp: 22-23). All of these benefits are very important elements in successful learning environment.

Using technology in language learning and teaching enables learners to adopt their own learning styles and strategies (Smith, 1989). Moreover, online collaboration provides greater number of opportunities for interacting with the teacher, classmates and the content (Bruner, 1985; Farrah, 2012). Collaborative online interaction is achieved through delegating autonomy to learners. However, this autonomy does not mean learning individually but within a community. Through democracy in education it becomes student-driven rather than teacher centered learning. Teachers should not leave learners to work alone. Teachers should set the learning goals, create the learning opportunities and work on achieving the learners' goals. It is a mutual process where learners are sharing some responsibility and teachers delegating some authority. Technology by itself doesn't promote learning. The tasks and activities and the ways of utilizing technology by the teachers and learners have greater effects on enhancing learning. As Sinclaire (2011: 11) concluded the satisfaction of learners "with online learning is linked to interaction a communication, course design, the learning environment, and individual student factors of computer self-efficacy and the ability to control an individual learning pace."

Online collaborative learning and gender

There are several studies that examined online learning and gender. Certain studies reported statistically significant differences in the attitudes or performance of the learners (Caspi, et al, 2008; Cook et al, 2001, Stewart et al, 1999). However, there are other studies that reported no significance (Torkzadeh and Van Dyke, 2002; Letchumanan and Tarmizi, 2011; Griffiths, 2003; Farrah, 2014; Yukselturk and Bulut, 2009). For example, Letchumanan and Tarmizi, 2011; Cole, et al. 2014).) found that gender appeared to have no significant effects either on perceived ease of use or perceived usefulness. Similarly, Torkzadeh and Van Dyke (2002) did not find gender differences seem to influence attitudes toward computer usage. It is hoped that the results of this study will contribute to the literature on online learning and gender.

Online collaborative learning and anxiety

Numerous studies reported that Internet anxiety seems to be a crucial factor that may have an impact on online learning (Elasmar & Carter, 1996; Farrah and Tushyeh, 2010). For example, Wang, Newlin, and Tucker (2001) reported that many internet users expressed feelings of anxiety about the technology.

METHODOLOGY

The section discusses the population, research instrument, procedure, developing the questionnaire and its reliability.

Population

Fifty five Hebron University sophomores (46 females and 9 males) enrolled in the second semester of the academic year 2012/13 served as the participants for this study. They came from two sections of undergraduate Writing II class taught by two different instructors.

Research Instruments

In order to achieve the objectives of the study and answer the stated research questions of the study, a questionnaire (see Appendix A) was developed based on the literature review conducted by the researcher. The questionnaire aimed to examine attitudes towards online collaborative learning.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements with a 5 point Likert scale, (strongly agree, agree, neutral, tend to disagree and strongly disagree). A pre-treatment questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the spring semester of the academic year 2012/2013 and a post-treatment questionnaire was distributed at the end of that semester. Quantitative data was analyzed statistically by using the SPSS program.

Procedure

Throughout this semester the students were divided into groups consisting of five to six students per group. Then, they were asked to write essays throughout the spring semester and to work on them online within the established groups. There were face-to-face sessions in the classroom but the students continued their work in groups online. They were instructed to write about different topics such as Combining work and college/marriage, description of a favorite place, comparing two instructors/cities/universities restaurants, studying for a final exam, etc.. They were encouraged to work online and within groups to brainstorm, free write, revise drafts until they reach the final stage of editing.

Reliability of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire reliability was examined. The result showed that the overall Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the questionnaire is (r=0.89) indicating a very high degree of internal consistency. In other words, the questionnaire is considered a reliable instrument. To make sure that the students in the experimental and control groups have the same attitudes towards online collaborative activities, a t-test was carried out using the pre-questionnaire. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
t-test for Equality of Means

	Group	N	M	SD	T	Df	Sig.
Attitudes	Experimental	29	3.91	.40635	.891	53	0.377
	Control	26	4.00	.33301			

The t-test reveals that there are no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) on pre-attitudes results due to the group (experimental and control), which means that the two groups are quasi-equivalent in their attitudes towards online learning activities as shown in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section aims at answering the following research questions:

Question 1: Are there any statistically significant differences in students' attitudes in the experimental and control groups between the pre and post questionnaires?

A t-test was carried in order to see if there are statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups using the post-questionnaire. The results are shown in Table: 2.

Table 2
t-test for Equality of Means

	Group	N	M	SD	T	d.f	Sig.
Attitudes	Experimental	29	4.01	0.37	-4.6	53	0.000
	Control	26	3.48	0.48			

As shown in Table 2, there are statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0.005$ in students' attitudes between the control group and the experimental group. This is in line with Ciftci and Zeynep (2012) who found that the learners in the experimental group indicated positive perceptions on the use of online writing activities and their revised drafts were of higher quality. Similarly, El-Dali (2015), reported that his subjects considered technology very important in foreign language learning and teaching.

Question 2: Are there statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents based on their gender, and GPA towards online collaborative learning?

Online collaborative learning and gender:

In order to examine whether there were significant differences between the male and female students and online collaborative learning, a t-test was carried out and Table 3 shows that there are no significant differences at 0.05.

Table 3
t-test for Equality of Means

	Gender	N	M	SD	T	df	Sig.
Attitudes	Female	46	3.74	.51947	-.825	53	0.412
	Male	9	3.88	.38115			

This means that female and male students held almost the same perception of online collaborative writing activities. This is in agreement with several studies that investigated the students' attitudes towards online collaborative environment (Al-Jamal (2009, Sulisworo, 2012; Griffiths, 2003; Farrah, 2014; Yukselturk and Bulut, 2009; Ezza and Bakry, 2014, Torkzadeh and Van Dyke, 2002; Letchumanan, and Tarmizi, (2011). For example, Al-Jamal (2009) and Sulisworo (2012) found that gender does not affect the learning motivation. Similarly, Ezza and Bakry (2014) reported no attitudinal differences attributable to the students' genders toward the use of technology in the classroom.

Online collaborative learning GPA
A t-test was carried out in order to examine whether there are significant differences between the high-achieving students and low-achieving students regarding online collaborative activities. Table 4 shows that there were no statistically significant differences at 0.05.

Table 4
t-test for Equality of Means

	GPA	N	M	SD	T	df	Sig.
Attitudes	Less than 80	23	3.82	.53132	-.741	53	.462
	More than 80	33	3.72	.48122			

This means that low achievers and high achievers maintained similar attitudes towards online collaborative activities.

Question 3: Are there statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning and anxiety?

In order to examine whether there were statistically significant differences between students attitudes towards online collaborative activities and anxiety, a t-test was carried out and Table 5 shows that there are statistically significant differences at 0.05.

Table 5
t-test for Equality of Means

	Anxious	N	M	SD	T	df	Sig.
When the instructor asks me to do collaborative online activities I become nervous	Yes	24	3.52	.49563	- 3.490	33	.001
	No	31	3.95	.42066			

This means that there were statistically significant differences between anxious learners and the learners who do not have anxiety towards online collaborative activities. This is in line with several studies that reported association between anxiety and online learning (Farrah and Tushyeh, 2010; Elasmar and Carter, 1996, Farrah, 2014). This means that less anxious students are more likely to be satisfied in a collaborative online learning environment.

Question 4: Are there statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning and their access to the Internet?

In order to examine whether there are significant differences between students attitudes towards online collaborative activities and access to the Internet at home, a t-test was carried out and Table (6) shows that there were statistically significant differences at 0.05.

Table 6
t-test for Equality of Means

	I have access to the Internet at home	N	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
Attitudes	Yes	42	3.85	.46949	2.229	53	0.030
	No	13	3.50	.52315			

This means that the students who have regular access to the Internet have better attitudes towards the online collaborative activities.

Question 5: What are the general attitudes of the respondents towards online collaborative learning?

In order to answer this question, descriptive statistics were calculated to examine the views towards online collaborative activities as perceived by the respondents. See Table (7) for the calculated means of items and their standard deviation for each statement).

Table 7
Means and standard for all items in the questionnaire

No	Statement	No.	M	SD
20	Working online in groups is a waste of time	55	4.25	0.90
10	Collaborative online activities should be encouraged	55	4.21	0.78
5	Collaborative online activities help me to have a greater responsibility - for myself & my group	55	4.14	0.65
6	Collaborative online activities enhance my communication skills	55	4.09	0.61
12	Collaborative online activities enable me to learn new ways to plan & edit my essays	55	4.07	0.66
2	Collaborative online activities make problem-solving easier	55	4.07	0.76

18	Collaborative online activities help me acquire relevant computer knowledge and skills.	55	4.05	0.67
1	Collaborative online activities foster exchange of knowledge, information & experience	55	4.01	0.59
17	Overall, collaborative online activities is a worthwhile experience	55	4	0.60
13	Collaborative online activities give me the chance to express my ideas in the group	55	3.96	0.69
4	Collaborative online activities help me to receive useful feedback	55	3.96	0.71
11	Collaborative online activities enable me to have more confidence working with other students	55	3.94	0.65
19	Collaborative online activities make me a better user of computer and technology.	55	3.92	0.66
8	Collaborative online activities enhance my Interpersonal skills.	55	3.90	0.61
9	Collaborative online activities improve my performance	55	3.90	0.64
16	Through the collaborative online activities we write better essays	55	3.85	0.80
7	Collaborative online activities enhance my negotiation skills.	55	3.83	0.68
3	Collaborative online activities stimulate my critical thinking skills	55	3.8	0.77
14	I enjoy writing more than I did before due to collaborative online writing	55	3.8	0.80
15	I get more work done when I work with others	55	3.49	0.95

The above table reveals that the students have very positive attitudes towards the collaborative online learning experience. Great numbers of students regarded the experience a rewarding one and not a waste of time as seen in item 20 (4.25, recoded). And due to this rewarding experience they agree with item 10 that *collaborative online activities should be encouraged*.

Item 10 is given a very high rating (M=4.21). The students encouraged this type of experience as they felt that the collaborative online activities help them to have a greater responsibility - for myself & my group as expressed in item 5 (M=4.14). They favored this approach to learning as it enhances their communication skills, enables them to learn new ways to plan and edit their essays, make problem-solving easier, helps them acquire relevant computer knowledge and skills, and fosters exchange of knowledge, information and experience as expressed in items 6, 12, 2, 18, and 1 that got very high ratings.

Table 7 also reveals that collaborative online activities have the following benefits:

- Learners get the chance to express ideas in the group
- learners receive useful feedback
- learners build confidence while working with each other
- learners become better user of computer and technology.
- learners enhance their interpersonal skills.
- learners improve their performance
- learners write better essays
- learners enhance their negotiation skills.
- learners stimulate their critical thinking skills
- learners enjoy writing more than they did before due to collaborative online writing

All these benefits make the experience *worthwhile experience* as expressed in item 7. This is in agreement with several studies that indicated that students held positive attitudes towards online collaborative learning and it improved their learning outcomes (Zhou, Simpson, & Domizi, 2012; Chou & Chen, 2008; Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014; Brodahl & Hansen, 2014; Aydin & Yildiz, 2014). For example, Gokhale (1995), Palloff and Platt (2005), and Grami (2012) reported that such environments promote creativity and critical thinking. Moreover, Grami (2012) indicated that students had positive attitudes and welcomed the idea of incorporating similar tasks in future ESL writing classes. Similarly, Chou and Chen (2008) maintained that online collaborative learning motivates learners to engage in collaborative learning and could support learning outcomes. Finally, Ciftci, and Zeynep (2012) reported that their students showed higher quality in revised drafts and indicated positive perceptions on the use of online writing activities.

However, students gave lower ratings to item number 15 which discusses performing more work (I get more work done when I work with others). As the table shows, this item got a relatively low rating. Students think that working with others online does not help them to conclude more work. This is not strange since one of the main disadvantages of the communicative approach is that it is time consuming. As such it is not strange to see that the students don't feel that the online collaborative activities help them to do a lot of homework. Nevertheless, looking at the great benefits that can be achieved from this experience, allow us to tolerate these minor disadvantages. Most of all, the advantages are more than the disadvantages and quality is more important than quantity.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, online collaborative writing is one of the main factors to enhance learning motivation and to improve the learners' performance. The collaborative online learning experience gave an indication that the learners' motivation increased. The participants held positive attitudes towards this experience as it helped them to develop their personal communication skills, express ideas in the group, receive and offer useful feedback, improve performance by writing better essays, and stimulate their critical thinking skills. All these factors contributed to the fact that collaborative online learning was perceived to be an enjoyable and a

worthwhile experience. It is necessary to present learners with collaborative learning environments inside the university and outside the university. The participants in this study revealed an enthusiasm to learn from each other through the online collaborative environment and recommended that such learning environments should be encouraged. Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends the following:

- As there is an encouraging outcome of using online collaboration in writing classes, communication, it should be implemented and supported in EFL learning and teaching contexts.
- Online collaborative activities should be incorporated as an essential ingredient in skill-based courses, such as oral communication, writing, and integrated language skill.
- Collaborative online activities should be stated as course outcome and learners should be trained on how to collaborate and how to interact online.
- Palestinian universities should be equipped with technological facilities and infrastructure to promote online collaborative activities.
- Palestinian universities should train English department instructors who teach English skill-based courses on the use of the technological facilities and online delivery.

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