Effect of LinkedIn as an ICT Tool on Iranian Post Graduate EFL Students' Writing Skill

Hamid Moeinmanesh[1*], Ehsan Rezvani[2]

[1]English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Najafabad Branch
Islamic Azad University
Najafabad, (Isfahan, Iran)

[2]Assistant Professor in TEFL, Sobhe-Sadegh Institute of Higher Education
Isfahan, Iran

[*]*Corresponding author's email: hamid_moeinmanesh [AT] yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT— *ICT has become an important part of students' life. Therefore, more and more university teachers accept the idea that it can also be used at an academic level and not just at a social level. Current study on LinkedIn use suggests that students primarily use it to develop educational purposes. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of using LinkedIn on Iranian post graduate EFL students writing skill. The participants were 100 MA students who were following their educational carrier at Islamic Azad University, Najafabad branch. They were placed in two groups, namely experimental, and control. The participants in control group received traditional writing class activities which included writing an essay and having the teacher correct it. However, the treatment for the experimental group was different from that of control group. The participants of the experimental group were all members of the LinkedIn network. The teacher prepared a common page in LinkedIn for experimental group that used to provide relevant information to the course and give opportunity for student's interaction. The outcomes of the study revealed that learning process was done quickly, not only did learners learn more vocabularies but also their witting skill was enhanced, they could recognize and treat their errors consciously. The study has educational implications that can profit either for learners to get familiar with new methods in learning language skills particularly writing skill or teachers to tranquilize teaching process.*

Keywords— ICT (Information and communication technology), writing skill, LinkedIn, social network sites

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on three reasons, writing is specifically significant for the instruction of second language learners. Initially, writing professionally is an important skill for educational or business success (National Commission on Writing, 2004), though this skill is particularly challenging for EFL and ESL learners to achieve. The second reason, as learners more readily discover advanced verbal or syntactic expressions in their written work, writing is supposed to be an influential instrument for the advance of educational language proficiency (Warschauer, 1996; Weissberg, 1999). The third reason, as written expression permits learners to excel their awareness of knowledge, writing can be so precious for learning a range of subject matters, separate problem-specific knowledge into plans that can be requested to other related subjects, and demonstrate intellectual representations of knowledge that can be more simply recovered. Moreover, writing permits teachers to comprehend better the students' state of knowledge and thinking process and therefore indicate instruction as its needed (Reeves, 2002).

On the other hand, with the recent advances in the realm of the internet and virtual world, writing instruction has taken a new trend. Due to such limitations of school setting as time restriction, lack of opportunity for students to reach a real audience or to satisfy their individual learning needs, it has been understood that effective writing instruction is not so easy in practice. This understanding has led to the integration of the new improvements of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in writing instruction.

ICT covers all forms of Computer and Communication tools as well as the software used to produce, supply, convey, obtain, interpret, and operate information in its various formats. ICT plays an important role in forming a new and enriched model of teaching and learning (Kaur, 2008; Salehi & Salehi, 2011). Many teachers use ICT to support traditional learning methods; for example, they use information retrieval in which students are "passive learners of knowledge" instead of "active producers." Educational reorganization contains effective planning and application of ICT in teaching and learning process, which is the key to success. Some patterns of such tools consist: automated writing

evaluation, wikis, and blogs and open-source netbook computers along with some particular social networks like LinkedIn.

Clearly, technological tools have altered teaching and learning processes. Teaching no longer involves the transmission of knowledge, but can provide a social constructivist approach. These features are included in the notion of a living curriculum, because learning does not occur only within the confines of lecture hours and homework tasks, or within and from the confines of an institution. Electronic and on-line applications and soft-wares can enhance the situation to be more rewarding and easier to handle. This is what seems to be ignored in Iranian context, and there is a missing link between writing instruction and the new technologies. The purpose of present research is the attempt to find out if teaching writing can be enhanced through the ICT tool LinkedIn.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 The Importance of Writing

The importance of English in the international community is attributable to the fact that it is the language through which international communications are conducted, scientific and technological improvements are spread, and news and information are distributed. As a communicative tool, English functions as a mediator between different socio-cultural and socio-economic paradigms (Crystal, 2000; Graddol, 1997). The multi-functional role of English enables this language to pass cultural, social and economic barriers as the medium through which achievements and innovations in the arts, commerce and technology are highlighted.

Of the four skills in English, writing is considered to be the most complex and difficult skill to master. This difficulty, according to Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 303)," lies not only in generating and organizing of ideas but also in translating these ideas into readable texts". The important role of writing is shown in its status in different situations within the teaching and learning environment. For instance, writing serves as an important tool of assessing proficiency as seen by its inclusion in the form of writing tests in major examinations such as the TOEFL and IELTS writing sub-test. Beyond the realms of assessment, the skill of writing is an essential feature of materials development (Cumming, 1997).

Unlike widespread research about second language writing methods, tasks, genres, and other characteristics (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), less is familiar with the role that writing plays in second language progress. Nevertheless, as Harklau (2002) quotes learners will tend to advance the linguistic structures that are related to written registers in that specific context, "If they work more through written […] sources of language, " (p. 339). When learners involve with problem-solving activities to mention their ideas in their writing, the potential value of interacting with a text is elevated. When second language writers try to match their linguistic knowledge to the demands of formal academic writing in conditions that require decision-making, they commonly come to distinguish their restrictions or gaps (Swain, 1985).

2.2 New Technology and Teaching Writing

Writing either on the paper or on a computer is one of the most important skills among other skills that learners use to communicate. These days' social networking sites or services are used by many learners (SNSs) such as what's app., Linked in, and My Space. With the development of the Internet, various tools (e.g. wikis, discussion forums, and blogs) have been redefining the way we teach writing. Individuals who share interests and activities use social networking service (SNS) is an online tool accustomed to found social networks or social relationships (Wikipedia, 2010). Greatest social networking services permit users to share their ideas, activities interests, and actions within their individual networks. Web based and supply tools for users to interact over the internet in various ways such as e-mail or instant messaging are the SNSs.

Based on Boyd and Ellison (2007), SNSs are online services that permit individuals to create a public or semi-public profile within a limited system, express a lot of other users with whom they share a link, and view the pages and details supplied by other users with the system. Ahmad (2011) demonstrated that SNSs have originated as a mixture of personalized media skill within social context of involvement. He makes a difference between SNSs and other types of computer-mediated communications because SNSs, profiles include publicly viewed, comments are publicly visible and friends are publicly expressed.

Furthermore, Boyd and Ellison (2007) demonstrated that social networking sites permit individuals to get familiar with others, allow users to express and make noticeable their social networks. They state that on many of the great SNSs, users are mainly interacting with people who are already a part of their extended social network" meanwhile they are not needed to seek to meet new people (p. 210). In general, social networking services are increasing in a remarkable quick speed and outstandingly make a link among individuals. The use of SNSs have advanced in a range of areas and domains. Meanwhile SNSs have received and demonstrated such a good attempt, it makes the possibility for us to argue how they will act around teaching fields.

2.3 Pros and Cons of Using ICT in Teaching EFL Writing Skills

Use of blogs is one of the common instruments usually specified in the teaching of writing skills. A blog according to Blood, Rebecca (2000) is a discussion or informational site published on the World Wide Web and consisting of discrete entries ("posts") typically displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs are personal online journals which have lately developed a cooperative technology, and are considered as a new system for people to express their opinions in public (Nadzrah, 2009). For internet users, this form of writing became well known. Blog can motivate students to write and change class's environment, especially writing class and made it more interesting and provide more cooperation between teacher and learners and also among students. Blogs have difficult potentials to use as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing class (Wu, 2005). Although blog was not originally created to use in EFL classes, it has great potential to serve as a valuable tool for teaching writing in a foreign language (Kavaliauskienė et al, 2006). However, most of the researchers in this field believe that the full potential of writing class blogs still needs to be learned and explored and also a lot of work needs to be done in order to efficiently use blogs in the writing class. Although using blogs is not common in Iran yet, it can provide opportunities to use and practice language beyond the classroom. A huge advantage of these social communities has a reverse side effect that is also a big disadvantage of social networking: they reduce or eliminate face-to-face socialization. Because of the autonomy afforded by the virtual world, individuals are free to create a fantasy persona and can pretend to be someone else. Also, the use of computer technology could cause the apathetic attitude among students. Furthermore, ICT tools divert students' attention in the classroom and provide a trend for the students to use short forms and informal abbreviations in their writing tasks (Yunus et. al, 2013). The existence of ICT tools in the classroom makes an uncontrollable atmosphere for the teachers (Yunus et al, 2013). In the present study, an attempt is made to compare the positive points of using LinkedIn, with its negative points or not. What follows is a brief look at the existing literature in the field about language learning and teaching through digital equipment and distance learning. reading using the ED is faster than reading using PD.

2.4 Some Related Studies on the Role of ICT in Teaching

It seems that no study has ever been conducted on using Linked in as a web-based tool to teach writing to Iranian EFL post-graduate students. Therefore, the following section deals with the existing literature on the other areas of ICT. One of the important ICT media which has attracted much attention is the blog. A number of studies have so far been conducted on the role of blogs in writing.

Md Yunus, Nordin, Salehi, Amin Embil and Salehi (2013) struggled to investigate how to use ICT in teaching the ESL writing skills in Malaysian secondary schools. This study is originated of a great project. This study concentrated only on the data collected from four English teachers who were interviewed by the researchers in a secondary schooling Kuala Lumpur. This study illustrated that there was a huge shortage of using ICT in teaching of ESL writing. Merits of using ICT were stated to be, enabling students' learning process, attracting students' attention, promoting meaningful learning and helping to develop students' vocabulary. Dismerits found consisted of the distraction, difficulty in controlling the class and the students' tend to use short forms in their writing. Moreover it proved the use of ICT in the teaching of ESL writing to teachers are weak in general to organize problems and planning activities.

Furthermore, Iyer (2013) investigated the impacts of blog on writing skill of Thai EFL learners. Twelve fourth year university students studying English as their major field of study were the members of the study. The participants wrote a total of eight blog tasks, accomplished two questionnaires, one at the beginning of the study, and the second after the process of research. Finally, an interview was also done. The outcome demonstrated that the concept of blogging was new to the participants since they had not written blogs in previous. The results clarified the fact that based on the four codes chosen for the study, namely critical thinking, creativity, voice comments and contributions of communicative skills in writing enhanced as a outcome of cooperative blogging.

Yunus, Tuan and Salehi (2010) used a semi-structured interview to investigate how English lecturers perceive using blogs to promote students' writing skills. Totally, they attempted to realize the merits of using blogs in pausing ESL students to write; they were also eager to seek the bends confronted by the lecturers in using blogs to elevate students' writing skills. The interviews revealed that the constituents and functions in blogs pause ESL learners in helping their writing skills. As specified by one of the interviewees, blogs can help to guarantee the link between the lecturer and the students. Moreover, it was found that blogs prepare a framework for evaluation, interlink age as following steps individual expression and back reader commentary up. They realized that there are many challenges that refuse the lecturers from encouraging ESL learners to use blogs for enhancing their writing skills, as far as the challenges of using blogs are encountered. Students' shortage of skills, the shortage of time, and fewer involvement from the students are considered as some of the available challenges.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Question

The present study attempts to answer the following question:

Is there any significant difference between the writing performance of Iranian post graduate EFL students who receive in-class writing instruction and that of those who receive the writing instruction via LinkedIn?

3.2 Research Hypothesis

This study attempts to test the following hypothesis:

There is no significant difference between the writing performance of Iranian post graduate EFL student who receive in-class writing instruction and that of those who receive the writing instruction via LinkedIn.

3.3 Participants

This study was carried out among 100 Iranian post graduate TEFL students who were chosen via convenience sampling procedures which "involve choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents" (Cohen & Manion, 1994 p.88). The participants were MA students who were following their educational carrier at Islamic Azad University, Najafabad branch. The participants were divided into two classes. One of the two classes of students served as the experimental group, and the other class served as control group. The participants in control group took the two credit course of writing which was compulsory for MA students of TEFL. However, the experimental group members did not take a writing course.

3.4 Instruments

In order to find out the possible effects of teaching writing via LinkedIn, as an ICT tool, this study made use of the following instruments:

3.4.1 Oxford placement test

One of the instruments in this study was a 60-item Oxford Placement Test (OPT) used to measure proficiency level of the participants to have a homogeneous sample. OPT is among the most common and standardized proficiency tests worldwide and the researcher does not doubt its reliability and validity. At the beginning of the study, 340 learners participated on OPT and the scores were announced in percentage. After calculating the mean scores, those participants whose scores between 40 to 50 were chosen and 100 students were selected as the sample of the study (60 female and 40 male).

3.4.2 Writing pre-test

The participants of this study were MA students, and they were deemed to be at the same level in terms of their general proficiency. However in order to set their homogeneity of at the outset of the study, a writing pre-test was run. The participants were required to write a paragraph on the topic they chose.

3.4.3 Writing course

Writing course was taught to control group through traditional method which held each term to MA students. Teaching trend drew the teacher toward clarifying the whole career framework to students, meanwhile they had one week opportunity to find desired topics. The teacher demonstrated the constituents of article to students through making examples on the board from the second session on, also the teacher requested them to give their comments on the niceties, and students were given opportunity up to next session to search the related articles to write the relevant section. The teacher indicated each session to teach one section of the article and frequently asked some volunteers to read their writings to the others to give comments. Students could briefly mention their classmate mistakes, since the class was pressed in time, so at least 3 students were needed to read their writings. No time to the rest to represent, therefore, they emailed that section to the teacher to restrict, it was as the class score. Experimental group's trend was different. The members had no face to face interaction, the named MA group was made in LinkedIn initially by the teacher, and all became members of the experimental group. The first week was as an introduction to get familiar with LinkedIn that how it was used by the researcher. The experimental group had the same circumstance with previous group to demonstrate their desired topics, in this method the teacher shared one section of the article with making examples on LinkedIn tool every week. Students had opportunity to put their documents on LinkedIn as a picture or written form, the others needed to high light the mistakes with its reason. Comments were gathered however students could criticize on them, in this method the mistakes would be corrected by students, eventually the teacher announced the final comments.

3.4.4 Writing post-test

After the treatment, exactly the same task was repeated as a post test.

3.4.5 The LinkedIn social network

This network was used to teach writing to the participants of the experimental group.

3.5 Procedure

From among the post graduate TEFL students at Azad Universities of Najafabad and Khorasgan University, 100 male and female learners were chosen through convenience sampling. This kind of sampling let us choose the sample which was accessible. At the outset of the study, the participants were divided into an experimental and a control group; the number of participants in each group and their gender was identical. First, a writing pre-test was given to the participants and it was scored by the researcher. The treatment took place for a period of 6 weeks. At the treatment phase of the study, the participants in control group received traditional writing class activities which included writing an essay and having the teacher correct it. However, the treatment for the experimental group was different from that of control group. The participants of the experimental group were all members of the LinkedIn network. The researcher introduced LinkedIn project to the participants at the first week. They were asked to write articles on the same topics as the control group. The time for holding class sessions was set by all the participants. Therefore, the class time was not fixed. In order to prevent the side effect of writing classes, the participants of experimental group were chosen from among the MA students who were not taking some actual writing classes at the time being. The virtual sessions with LinkedIn last for 6 weeks, two sessions each. The control group passed the same writing course with the same procedures: selecting the topics, explanation of each article section in class by the teacher, students have one week opportunity to write the relevant section, reading some students writings as the outlines in the class, students reformed writings and finally the teacher did, obviously the participants took part in actual writing classes. After the treatment, a writing test which served as the post test was given to the participants and their gained scores were compared.

3.6 Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, the data gathered from the writing pre-test were analyzed using independent samples t-test. Then after the treatment, another independent samples t-test was run at the end of the treatment, and the performance of the participants in control and experimental groups was compared using another independent samples t test. In order to answer the second research question, it was necessary to analyze the gained scores based on their gender. Therefore, the participants' scores from both control and experimental group were divided into four subgroups based on their gender and they were analyzed using a one way Analysis of Variances (ANOVA). As one way ANOVA just shows if a significant difference exists between the scores and it does not show the source of significance, a post hoc test was run on the gained scores. This way it was found where exactly the source of significance exists.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Performance of the Participants in Two Groups in the Pretest

At the onset of the study, although the participants were considered to be all at the same level in terms of their general proficiency, in order to assess the effect of using Linked in as an ICT tool in teaching writing, it was also necessary to find out if they are all homogeneous in their writing ability; therefore, a writing pre-test was run among the participants of the two groups. The writing task provided the students with some topics they were supposed to write a paragraph about. Then, the tests were scored by the researcher using the rubrics used for scoring the writing section of the IELTS test. This test was administered and the obtained data were then calculated and analyzed.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the performance of participants in two groups in the pre-test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Pre-test	Exp group	53	57.9811	11.89294	1.63362
	Cont group	47	58.1915	9.3863	1.36889

As it is shown in table 1, there is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of participants in two groups. The mean score for experimental group was 57.98 and that of the control group was 58.19. However, to be more objective an independent samples t-test was run, the results of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The results of independent samples t test between the experimental and control groups' pretest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.861	.356	.097	98	.923	.21036	2.16158	-4.07923	4.49995
	Equal variances not assumed			.099	96.743	.922	.21036	2.13133	-4.01989	4.44060

According to the results shown in table 2, the level of significance is 0.923 which is higher than the critical value set at (0.05) (0.923>0.05); thus, it could safely be claimed that the participants in the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their writing proficiency level.

4.2 Performance of the Participants in Two Groups in the Posttest

Having assured the homogeneity of the participants in two groups, the participants in the experimental group were exposed to the treatment which included teaching writing skill via LinkedIn. At the same time the students in the control group were taught the writing skill through traditional method. After the treatment the participants in both groups sat for a test, as the post-test. This test was administered and the obtained data were then calculated and analyzed.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the performance of participants in two groups in the post-test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Pottest	Exp group	53	64.4681	11.80954	1.62216
	Cont group	47	59.4681	9.76429	1.42427

According to the statistics depicted Table 3 it can be seen that the mean difference of the post test is 5.17 (the mean for the experimental group is 64.64 and that for the control group 59.46) which is considered a significant difference. In order to ascertain that the mean difference between the scores of the post test of the participants in experimental group and control was significant, an independent samples t-test was run. Table 4 illustrates the results of this t-test.

Table 4. The results of independent samples test for the experimental and control groups' posttests

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	1.404	.239	-2.369	98	.020	-5.17342	2.18342	-9.50635	-.84050
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.397	97.545	.018	-5.17342	2.15869	-9.45753	-.88932

According to the results displayed in Table 4.4, the level of significance is lower than the identified level of significance. (.020<.05). Therefore, the difference is statistically significant revealing that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the writing post-test.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The ability to write well can have profound impacts on our life, when compared with other fundamental skills for English language learners such as listening, speaking and reading, writing is the most difficult skill because it obliges learners to have a great deal of lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as principles of organization in L2 to produce a good writing.

Writing is one of the four skills that students use to communicate, whether it is on paper or on the computer. Nowadays, many students use social networking sites such as Facebook, My Space, Whats app, and Viber. With English being used as a global language for communication in education, business and technology, it is essential that students be able to communicate in English. Therefore, good writing skills are, important in today's world of technology where people want to share ideas and communicate over the internet. However, it should be mentioned that even at post-graduate level some Iranian EFL learners have problem with writing properly. Electronic and on-line applications and soft-wares can enhance the situation to be more rewarding and easier to handle. This is what seems to be ignored in Iranian context, and there is a missing link between writing instruction and the new technologies.

Thus, it can be concluded that writing teaching methods can be combined with new methods to be more influential. Based on the main objective of the study which was to investigate the effects of LinkedIn as an ICT Tool on Iranian post graduate EFL Students' Writing Skill, three research questions were addressed in this research.

Bearing in mind the question of this study about the effect of LinkedIn on the writing performance of Iranian post graduate EFL students, it was found that, the experimental groups outperformed the control group in writing skill and it was revealed that LinkedIn affect learners' writing skill. In other words, LinkedIn had a positive effect on the writing performance of Iranian post graduate EFL students who receive writing instruction via LinkedIn.

After conducting different analyses, it was made clear that using LinkedIn as a social network service to teach writing can lead to better outcomes compared with traditional methods. In addition, LinkedIn helps students to improve their creative thinking skills. Social networking services provide a better opportunity for interaction, planning and getting more information. The findings of the present study are in line with those of Ozgur Simsek (2010) who investigated the effect of weblog integrated writing instruction on students writing performance. Results indicated that weblog integrated writing instruction improved students writing skills.

This finding is also in line with that of Purnima Iyer (2013) who explored the effects of collaborative blogging on communicative skills in writing of Thai EFL students. The findings brought to light the fact that the communicative skills in writing, based on the four codes chosen for the study, namely creativity, critical thinking, voice, comments and contributions, improved as a result of collaborative blogging.

The findings of the present lend further support to those of Tse, Yuen, Lo, Lam and Ng (2010) and Dawson, Drexler and Ferdig (2007) who investigated motivation among students from the feedback received as a result of the blogging process and the impact of blogging on students' the reading skills. The results of these studies have been positive and have shown the positive effects that the collaborative blogging can have on the students' communicative skills in writing.

This study was not out of limitations. First of all, this study did not have a large sample size. As it was pointed out in chapter three, the participants of this study consisted of 100 post graduate EFL students. Due to this fact, a word of caution should be taken into account in generalizing the results. Secondly, it should be noted that this research has provided an overall picture of using LinkedIn on Iranian post graduate EFL students' writing skill and does not claim to have provided a perfect picture of the post graduate EFL students' positive improvement in writing skill and it requires further research in this area. The third problem refers to participants' language proficiency. All the participants in this study were post graduate EFL students. As such, the efficacy of LinkedIn on writing skill cannot be generalized.

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