

## A Reappraisal Study of IT and the Development of Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Skills

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**Abstract**—The transformation from a traditional to an information-based society is occurring rapidly throughout the world. The transformation is also occurring in education and the world is witnessing the globalization of education.

Over the past few years, the Internet has emerged as a prominent new technology which can be used in language teaching situation.

Although during the long history of language teaching a lot of materials and various types of activities as teaching aids and techniques in teaching writing have been proposed by many instructor, little attention is paid to their effectiveness. The only assumption generally accepted by most practitioners, but not testified yet, is that educational technologies are more effective.

This study attempted to investigate the positive effects of the Electronic Mail (e-mail) and Text Message, i.e. SMS on Iranian students' writing abilities. The e-mail provides a number of characteristics that can help Iranian EFL learners to improve their abilities as well as promote their confidence in the writing of English compositions. Writing is often considered a process that involves four main stages i.e., planning, drafting, revising and editing. These four steps seem to be applicable for paper-based writing as well as for e-mail writing. Although there are some limitations, the findings of this study revealed that the advantages of the electronic tutorial using the e-mail and SMS to enhance writing skills in English overshadow the shortcomings.

**Keywords**- *E-learning, E-interactions, writing skills, online instruction*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Many efforts have been carried out to improve the English writing skills of Iranian EFL learners, either through the printed-based learning materials, or through learning materials that make use of various technologies including those of the electronic mail (e-mail) and SMS. Electronic learning or e-learning incorporates all forms of online instruction using electronic devices. Among the many forms of E-learning, m-learning or mobile learning and email are the new addition to its vast possibilities. M- Learning and E-mailing are facilitated by the use of portable computing devices, like mobile phones, PDAs, palmtops, smart phones, and tablet PCs.

### II. ELECTRONIC MAIL

The usage of an electronic medium is not restricted by time, space or distance. Thus, the e-mail proves to be rather effective in many respects, especially in improving the writing skills of students on an individual basis or in a group. Reference [7] investigated the advantages of the e-mail for two different groups of students in Singapore and Canada respectively. Both groups used the email as a tool of communication. The students involved in the study discussed stories from two novels from the two countries. The findings of the research are the following:

1. The students had opportunities to cross-check their writing.
2. They learned how to write clearly, purposefully and effectively.
3. They tried to understand more about their lives and cultures.
4. They had a better understanding about the usage of the computer as a tool for communication as well as a means for more effective learning.

Another relevant research was conducted by [5] who studied the effectiveness of the email in teaching English, especially in the writing of compositions, to overseas students in San Francisco. Reference [5] revealed that the writing ability in English and the self-confidence of the overseas students subsequently improved significantly.

As far as the learning of English as a foreign language is concerned, there are four language skills that need to be acquired: listening skills, reading skills, speaking skills and writing skills. These skills, particularly the writing skills, should continuously be improved so that the degree of proficiency in the skills approaches that of native speakers of English however difficult this may be. One of the key issues to be kept in mind in order to succeed is the aspect of practicing. With a great deal of practicing, a learner can improve his writing skills since the writing in itself involves a process of planning, draft writing, reviewing and final writing Reference [3].

Besides, the proportion of writing in a student's learning process is relatively low, compared to the other three skills (i.e., reading, listening and speaking). It is therefore necessary to enrich and improve the learner's writing through practice in the form of intensive tutorials. In addition, there is a limited amount of time available to review the writing tasks in the classroom. In contrast, the email facilities play a

significant role as the tasks, including the feedback requirements, can be referred to by learners at their own pace. As such, the e-mail makes it possible for the learners to learn independently, an approach that is very much in context with distance learning. Apart from this, the learning materials provided via the e-mail are likely to be learner-centred rather than teacher-centred.

In addition, the e-mail seems to be an ideal solution to the students studying in a group regardless of age and interests [10].

### III. MOBILE PHONE

Basically, a mobile or cellular telephone is a long-range, portable electronic device for mobile communication. In addition to the standard voice function of a telephone, current mobile phones can support many additional services such as SMS (Short Message Service) for text messaging, e-mail, packet switching for access to the Internet, MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) for sending and receiving images, rich text, audio, photos and video and EMS (Enhanced Messaging Services) which allows user to integrate text, audio, pictures, video and animation.

### IV. M-LEARNING

M-learning is the exciting art of using mobile technologies to enhance the learning experience. It refers to the use of mobile and pocket IT devices, such as PDAs, mobile phones, Pocket PCs, laptops and the Internet in teaching and learning process. It helps people to learn and gain information just from their pocket devices. M-learning offers an effective way to communicate:

- With the learners who are widely dispersed,
- In promotional and awareness campaigns,
- For emergency employee training,
- In collaborative projects and fieldwork.

### V. SHORT MESSAGING SERVICE / TEXT MESSAGE

Cell phone SMS are software applications that lets one get in touch with other SMS users via short text messages. Messaging is a common feature on cell phones, today. Nearly every phone in the market, today, can send and receive text messaging [2]. S-M-S, was defined as the part of the GSM series standard in 1985 as the means of sending text to and from GSM mobile handsets. When it was conceptualized, no one thought it would be used for sending text messages. In fact, the first text message was sent as late as 1992. Soon, it became a popular means of communication and gave a cell phone a different dimension altogether. By early 2000, it became one of the most used applications in a cell phone [6].

This research was conducted to analyze the scores or the participants' writing achievement in undertaking the intermediate level of writing tasks that could be monitored or assessed continuously. The monitoring instruments used were a journal of observation and a questionnaire. The achievement obtained by this experimental group was compared with the achievement gained by a control group

using the face-to-face traditional mode. Both groups were treated equally during the training.

## VI. METHODOLOGY

Two electronic instruments were used in this study, one of which was Electronic mail (email) and the second one was Mobile phones, i.e. Short Messaging System (SMS). The former was applied to elicit data regarding the participants' writing tasks and the latter one was used for correcting the grammatical mistakes of the participants.

At the beginning of the study participants underwent a placement test in order to determine whether they belonged to the intermediate English level; in addition, all the participants were given an IT Questionnaire to determine which of them had IT literacy. The purpose of IT questionnaire (Adapted from Greenwich University Website: available at: [www.staff.bath.ac.uk/pssrj/IRN/LTSN%20questionnaire%20\(Gre\).doc](http://www.staff.bath.ac.uk/pssrj/IRN/LTSN%20questionnaire%20(Gre).doc)), including 58 items, was to distinguish between IT literate participants and those with no or low level of IT literacy.

After analyzing the collected data, only 23 participants were selected. During the training the participants never met each other in the face-to-face situation.

The independent variable investigated was the participants' writing ability using the electronic facilities such as e-mail and SMS. This variable was then assessed by making a comparison between the indicators associated with the types and the number of grammatical mistakes found in each of the writing tasks set forth. The dependent variable being investigated was the improvement of the self-confidence of the participants in writing English essays. Data were taken from the participants' writing involving the ten writing tasks. An observation log was also published which contained both the tutor's and the participants' experiences and their impressions during the training.

### VII. THE ELECTRONIC MAIL AND SMS

Before the commencement of the training, an email, [h4852ghaemi@gmail.com](mailto:h4852ghaemi@gmail.com), was created by the researcher and was introduced to the participants. The e-mail software used in the current study was The Outlook Software which is a Windows – based email system. This facility was one of the communication facilities used during the training process. The researcher also used another facility available that was Short Messaging System (SMS).

The researcher prepared a set of writing tasks and distributed it to all participants. The writing tasks were in accordance to the training curriculum planned beforehand. Then the participants were given three days to write their essays and send it to the researcher. During these three days, the participants were also given another kind of facility mentioned above to improve the quality of their writings. First, they could communicate with each other through each one's email. They could send SMS to the researcher and ask about their grammatical problems as well. Each participant was permitted to send only five SMSs. All the participants were told that their SMSs should contain only one sentence

which showed their grammatical problems, and then the researcher corrected the sentences and re-sent them to that individual. Therefore, the facilities provided two opportunities for participants to have interactions with each other, one through email another one via SMS.

### VIII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Although the participants were not provided with grades for this training, their writing assignments were assessed on the basis of three main ratings: expert, very good, and modest. Below were the approaches used to provide feedback to the participants:

Identify errors and do the required Correction (represented by ID).

The researcher first sent each task to all participants via the e-mail. Three days later, the researcher received the participants' writing assignments. After analyzing the e-mail messages, the researcher then replied to them. Feedback on the assignment was sent within one or two days. The extract of the e-mail below indicates a sample of the feedback provided to the participants.

From: Hamed Ghaemi <h4852ghaemi@gmail.com>

To: Ali Zahabi <ali-zahabi@hotmail.com>

Subject: Feedback on Task 3

Date: Wed, 14 Sept. 2009 11:22:39

Dear Ali,

Below are some comments on your writing (Task 3).

I = In 2009, America has the best leader in his history.

[TENSES]

Corrected form = In 2009, America will have the best leader in its history.

I = She can build clean environment. [ARTICLE]

Corrected form = She can build a clean environment.

I = They can work satisfactorily every day, and there are no displays again. [ADVERB + FUTURE]

Corrected form = They can work satisfactorily every day, and there won't be displays anymore.

I = Every countries respect to its government, they would like to help their country. [SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT]

Corrected form = every country respects its government; they would like to help their country.

VERY GOOD!

Best regards,

Hamed Ghaemi

It was expected that the participants could learn from the feedback provided. If they wanted to know more about the grammatical aspects raised in the feedback, they were encouraged to contact with the researcher (their teacher) via e-mail or look up the suitable grammar books independently. The feedback, as expected, would refresh their understanding or knowledge about aspects of English grammar that they might have learned before.

The point was that some grammatical factors could have been forgotten because of infrequent usage. One of the advantages of this training was that it improved language competency and self-confidence in writing.

Below is an analysis of the participants' writing associated with the types and the number of grammatical

mistakes they made. The mistakes are divided into five categories as follows:

1. Errors in the use of English
2. Errors in subject-verb agreement
3. Errors in the use of pronouns
4. Errors in the use of tenses

Task 1 was not analyzed because it was the easiest one in which the participants were not asked to write but to rearrange some sentences to construct a short story. Apart from this, it was also intended to make them feel at ease. All of them completed this task. The analysis revealed that there was a significant improvement on the participants' writing performance, particularly in the use of subject-verb-agreement, article and tenses.

Another fairly interesting finding that emerged in this research was that writing assignments such as on re-telling a story (Task 2), describing yourself or someone you know well (Task 3), and comparing two people you know well (Task 7) gave the participants a strong inspiration to write a longer piece of writing, regardless of the number of mistakes they made. This can be considered a positive point in relation to the environment of learning a foreign language in which motivation is greatly required.

Another instrument, apart from the writing tasks, deployed in this research was the questionnaire sent via the e-mail. The feedback from the questionnaire revealed that the usage of the e-mail and SMS in the English training programme, especially the writing aspect, was positive. The SMS and specifically e-mail, as perceived by the students and tutor, had two major advantages. First, the e-mail enabled the students to engage in the process of writing—planning (i.e., the step where ideas were formulated), drafting (i.e., the step for writing and organizing the writing structure), revising (i.e., the ideas were organized and classified and their quality improved), and editing (i.e., the step where expressions were widened and the vocabulary became more varied) as naturally as possible. They could accordingly stop writing using the e-mail at a certain point of the writing process, whenever they wish as a draft of the work could be saved to be resumed at a later time. The communication between the students and the instructor via SMS and e-mail was much quicker than in the normal classroom condition. Besides, the student's identity would be kept confidential. As for the tutor, the e-mail was also user friendly. He could forward a good piece of writing written by a student as a model for other students to view and this would enhance the teaching and learning process. The students could also share their own experiences and improve their writing skills. Considering SMS, almost all the students were satisfied with using SMS, since they found it completely friendly. They believe that they have never had such kind of experiences and opportunities to send SMS to their teachers and ask for their difficulties. In fact they were not permitted to do so. Therefore, using SMS caused students to feel relax and made them feel at ease.

### IX. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research objectives, the researcher has undertaken a study to determine the effectiveness of the e-

mail and Short Messaging System, i.e. SMS, facilities to help students to improve their writing skills. This was done by comparing the improvement gained by the experimental group. Both groups were given several writing tasks at the intermediate level. The analysis revealed that the achievements obtained by the two groups were, to a certain degree, different. The number of mistakes associated with certain aspects of the language decreased as students worked with e-mail and/or SMS. Most students believe that sending SMS provided an excellent opportunities for them to ask their writing or grammatical problems whenever they need, so it is apparent that the number of mistakes has decreased in some certain areas.

One outstanding factor that made the two groups different was motivation. The classroom group seemed to have a weaker motivation in learning, compared with the e-mail group. This could be seen from the number of participants in the former group who managed to complete all the writing tasks. This was not so in the classroom group. This, of course, does not mean that the English training programme via the traditional classrooms cannot be recommended. However, there are physical constraints as not all students have access to computer facilities and where some of them are concerned, this technology is still considered as something rather expensive [3]. However, this accessibility problem has been alleviated to some extent due to the existence of the warnet (i.e., cabin for Internet users) that can be found in big towns. The students in these towns can make full use of this public facility to participate in the electronic tutorials.

If a high degree of participation and self-discipline can be incorporated into the e-mail assisted tutorials and the tutorial involvement be integrated into the final grade, the Iranian EFL learners who are spread across the country and even into remote areas, would be able to improve their writing

skills within the context of self-study and distance learning. The current situation has improved greatly as there now exists a big number of wartel which also provide services for the users who need access to the Internet, including a free e-mail subscription. The most important factor is the students' strong will and their seriousness at undertaking the tasks.

Where the advantages of the e-mail facilities in relation to the rate of student participation are concerned, it is necessary to conduct further research involving other subjects within the context of EFL learning. It is nevertheless to be expected that these findings will be beneficial to EFL learners.

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