

**Developing EFL Major Student Teachers'
ESP Writing Ability and Attitudes towards
EFL Writing through Online Collaborative
ESP Writing Tasks**

By:

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Introduction:

Despite extensive research about L2 writing processes, genres, tasks and other aspects (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), less is known about the role that writing plays in L2 development. Yet, as Harklau (2002) claims, "*If learners work more through written [...] sources of language, they will tend to develop the linguistic features that are associated with written registers in that particular context*" (p. 339). The potential value of interacting with a text is increased when learners engage with problem-solving activities to express their ideas in their L2. In situations that require decision-making, L2 writers generally come to recognize their limitations or gaps when trying to match their linguistic knowledge to the demands of formal academic writing (Swain, 1985).

In attempts to develop learners' command of a foreign language, more focus has been frequently placed on using a wide variety of collaborative work to develop oral skills in the foreign language (FL) classroom. In EFL writing, however, peer response is the only form of collaborative work that has been widely adopted and studied since the 1990s (Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; Hyland, 2000; and Liang, 2010). In contrast, the practice of collaborative writing, two or more students working together to produce a document with group responsibility for the end product (Bosley, 1989), has only been rarely and cautiously trialed to date in EFL in general and in ESP in particular. Research into collaborative EFL writing has shown that this pedagogical approach has great potential; it demands reflective thinking, helps learners

to focus on grammatical accuracy, lexis and discourse, and it encourages a pooling of knowledge about the language (Donato, 1994; DiCamilla & Anton, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Hirvela, 1999; and Storch, 2002).

Likewise, with the rapid inclusion of information technology in higher education, educational research has demonstrated that different ways of integrating the use of technology into classroom teaching have different effects on learning. In many cases, learning can be enhanced through the experience of a shared environment for discussing and working together. Online collaboration, as an educational pedagogy, promotes students' autonomy, improves their writing skills and promotes students' learning (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Kaplan, 2002). Although still in its infancy, there is no doubt that technology "*put to the use of social networks can foster second language and literacy learning that is remarkably rich in social terms*" (Ortega, 2009, p. 248). Yet, little is known of the value of collaborative writing while using social tools on outcomes such as EFL development or aspects of writing for specific purposes. There is also a need to explore the benefits that EFL learners obtain when working together with similar tasks using these tools.

Background to the Study:

The study reported in this article was conducted at an EFL teacher education programme, Bisha University. Students who participated in this study had completed four graded courses of writing skills ranging from intermediate to advanced levels as a prerequisite for studying Writing for Specific Purposes at level five. So, it is presumed they have had the necessary capabilities to write lengthy texts in EFL. Due to traditional teaching methods that these student teachers have been used to throughout their academic career, they did not use to work together or collaborate to carry out certain tasks. During the

teaching a course in Writing for Business and Commercial Correspondence to these student teachers, the researcher found out that, when given individual tasks to work on, they feel disinterested, unmotivated and under pressure. Moreover their writing product is far below satisfactory. Recognizing that EFL student teachers are more interested and motivated when using emails and other social network media, the researcher decided to use these tools in teaching the course of Writing for Business and Commercial Correspondence. Every student teacher had free email account provided by the university to ease access to university services such as course registration, timetabling, course cancellation, term postponing, submission of assignments, etc. Throughout teaching the course of Writing for Business and Commercial Correspondence, the researcher could observe that students are not able to cope with the course activities and requirements. Throughout frequent examinations of their writing assignments, the researcher could observe that students had problems in writing business and commercial correspondence documents in addition to their reluctance to work together in groups in EFL writing classes. Reasons why students find language production difficult include: (1) students do not have the minimum language to perform a task; (2) there is no spontaneity in writing; (3) the topic or genre might also create some difficulties. Furthermore, conventions in their native language are frequently non-transferable to a second language. Common writing mistakes include poor organization, lengthy sentences and words, inadequate content, inconsistent usage, poor page layout, repetition, lack of structure and various grammatical mistakes.

Problem of the study:

Educators have started to notice the new technologies and explore their effects on student behavior and

performance. While there is supporting evidence to suggest that these technologies have a large influence on the social development of adolescents, an even more pertinent issue for classroom teachers is what effects these technologies have on the academic development of young people (Fogg, 2010).

Based on the researcher's experience of teaching writing in Saudi universities, a gap could be observed between the requirements of the writing courses and EFL major students' EFL writing ability and their attitudes towards writing. This could be clearly observed by the researcher while teaching a course in 'Writing for specific purposes' to undergraduate EFL major students in Bisha University, Saudi Arabia. At the outset of the course the researcher could observe students' reluctance to write in EFL in general and in ESP in particular. In order to gain more insight into the nature of the problem the researcher conducted a baseline assessment of their EFL writing proficiency, their ESP writing ability and their attitudes towards writing were assessed. Results of analysis indicated that EFL student teachers are having a far below average ESP writing ability and negative attitudes towards EFL writing. Side by side with examining their writing products, they were asked to respond to Self-Report Form (see Appendix 1) aiming to ascertain their articulations of the difficulties they had in writing English for business and commercial correspondence. Based on the feedback obtained, it could be concluded that EFL major student teachers in Bisha University are having problems in writing English for business and commercial correspondence. Thus, this study, therefore, tries to develop EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability and attitudes towards EFL writing through online collaborative ESP writing tasks. An underlining assumption of the study is that online collaborative writing tasks can help improve students' ESP writing ability and

develop their attitudes towards writing in EFL. Furthermore, they have the potential to enhance students' sense of audience, sensitize students towards the importance of revision and reduce their feeling of stress associated with EFL writing.

Research Questions:

Specifically, the purpose of the study is to find answers to the following five research questions:

1. What is EFL major student teachers' current level of ESP writing ability?
2. What is the current level of EFL major student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing?
3. What is the effect of using online collaborative ESP writing tasks on EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability?
4. What is the effect of using online collaborative ESP writing tasks on EFL major student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing?
5. What are EFL major student teachers' perceptions of online collaborative writing tasks

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Assess EFL major student teachers' current level of ESP writing ability.
2. Assess the current level of EFL major student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing.
3. Ascertain the effect of using online collaborative writing tasks on EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability.
4. Ascertain the effect of using online collaborative writing tasks on EFL major student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing?
5. Ascertain the EFL major student teachers' perceptions of participating in online collaborative writing tasks.

Significance of the Study:

The impact of this study is expected to be significant for a number of stakeholders including EFL student teachers, EFL teacher educators and EFL teacher course and curriculum planners. This is detailed through the following points:

1. The study's attempt to develop ESP writing ability of EFL major student teachers is expected to add to EFL student teachers' sense of professionalism and sense of self-efficacy. This is because it aims to develop future EFL teachers' capabilities. This also helps to enhance the learning outcomes of their future students.
2. The study's Endeavour to develop EFL student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing is of utmost importance taking into account the negative attitudes towards writing in EFL, as indicated by previous pertinent research in this respect. This would expectedly help these future EFL teachers to form positive attitudes within their future students towards EFL writing.
3. The use of online collaboration with EFL major student teachers by this study helps in the process of preparing EFL student teachers for the possibility of integrating technology-enhanced instruction in the teaching of EFL writing in general and ESP writing in particular while being on job. It also helps to orientate them practically with importance of including web 0.2 applications in their future teaching practices.
4. Using email communications in this study can be considered a step forward towards tuning future teachers towards the potential that e-mail technology holds for their professional development while being on job.
5. The collaborative mode of the online ESP writing tasks used in this study would help to orientate EFL student teachers about the significance of interactivity and

collaboration in language learning. Besides, they help to set the model for future EFL teachers so that they can use collaborative activities in the mixed-ability classrooms while being on job.

6. Taking into consideration the potential of social-network media, course designers and curriculum planners for EFL teacher education can benefit from the purposefully developed ESP online writing tasks in building up new ESP courses or changing the paper-based currently used EFL teacher education courses into technology-enhanced ones. Moreover, mainstream education courses can be similarly tailored for both EFL student teachers.
7. The inclusion of technology in the development of ESP writing ability in this study helps to open the door wide for other ESP researchers to think about developing other ESP-related skills and sub-skills. Besides, the results of this study are expected to build upon research into how technology has affected the ESP writing process in the past and responds to a need in the literature for more research into the nature of the collaborative writing process.
8. The mode through which the 'ESP Writing for Business and Commercial Correspondence' is delivered in this study would encourage and motivate EFL student teacher educators of other subjects to make use of web 2.0 technology applications in their teaching.
9. This study responds to a tangible need in the literature for more research into the inclusion of Web 2.0 technology applications in the teaching and learning of EFL both at the higher education level and at schools, especially in the more promising Saudi Arabian context.

Definition of Terms:

1. Collaborative EFL Writing:

Lowry, Aaron and Rene (2004) defined collaborative writing as an iterative and social process that involves a team that is focused on a common objective and that negotiates, coordinates and communicates during the creation of a common document. The term 'collaborative writing' refers to projects in which written works are created by multiple people (collaboratively) rather than individually. In this study EFL collaborative writing is a social process that involves a group of EFL student teachers' are focused on a common task, and who negotiate amongst themselves, coordinate and communicate online for the execution of a common target which is the carrying out of a common document related to business and commercial correspondence.

2. EFL Major Student Teachers

EFL major student teachers are student teachers enrolled in an initial EFL teacher education program. They study a dual-stream course that combines subjects related to building subject matter knowledge (e.g. linguistics, literature, language skills, translation, ESP, etc.) side by side with subjects related to building their pedagogical knowledge (e.g. applied linguistics, methods of teaching EFL, research methods, etc.).

3. ESP Writing Ability

As far as this study is concerned ESP writing ability refers to EFL major student teachers' ability to write documents related to Business and commercial correspondence documents.

4. Attitudes

The measurement of language attitudes provides information which is useful in language learning teaching (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). An attitude is "*a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols*" (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005, p. 150). It is "*..a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a*

particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly, & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). In this study EFL major student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing are mean to refer to a set of beliefs or dispositions towards EFL writing that are manifestly expressed in the student's tendency to favour or disfavor EFL writing and its component phases (i.e. planning, translating and reviewing).

Delimitations of the Study:

This study is limited to ascertaining the impact of online ESP writing tasks on the ESP writing ability and attitudes towards EFL writing. Besides, the procedures and sampling of this study targeting and limited to male EFL major student teachers in Bisha University, KSA. Moreover, ESP writing ability in this study is limited to EFL major student teachers' ability to write business and commercial correspondence documents in English.

Review of Literature:

Introduction

In the last two decades, the internet has become an important tool of learning. The use of the internet by non-native speakers has become vital in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Researchers and practitioners now realize the important role that the internet plays in learning and teaching English as a second or foreign language and look for effective ways to integrate it into various types of English language courses for teaching different language skills including writing.

Writing, as the one of the four skills of language which indicates literacy, has often been slighted in language classes. One of the reasons for this partial omission could be students' dislike toward writing assignments which requires them to compose. Chastain (1998) believes that students are not in habit of doing this type of work and have little knowledge of

how to approach, preserve and complete (p.250). Chastain himself has given a solution which is considering carefully all students psychological and emotional attitudes. We are no longer looking at writing as a product but what is important for us is writing process during which students are engaged in the writing process. Process writing pays attention to the various stages that any piece of writing goes through. Besides, looking at writing as process writing can be seen as a cooperative activity in educational settings. Harmer (2007) believes that though people write on their own in their personal lives, language classes are places where students can take advantage of cooperative writing. Cooperative writing works well when the focus is on writing as a product or process. Apart from revising and editing the generation of ideas is best pursued by having more than one author. Harmer mentions that cooperative writing is immensely successful if students are writing on a computer or sending emails to each other (2007, p.329).

What makes cooperation essential is that in ESP it is claimed that *“knowledge of genre is a key element in all communication and especially significant in writing academic or professional texts”* (Dudley-Evans & Jo St. John, 1998, 87). Developing writing skills involves skills of planning, drafting and revising so that the end product is appropriate both to the purpose of the writing and the intended readership, things that are most essential in ESP.

ESL/EFL Student Collaborative Writing:

Writing in the real world is not a solitary act. It is the result of interaction among people. Researchers in ESL writing believe that if we want to prepare our ESL students for their life outside the writing classroom, we must provide them with opportunities to experience collaborative writing (Fleming, 1988 & Murray, 1992).

There is abundance in literature related to ESL/EFL students' collaborative writing experiences. However, as researchers have pointed out, most investigations into collaborative writing focus on peer-response activities rather than on students grouped to work together to "*plan, draft, and revise a writing assignment for a common grade*" (Sills, 1988, p. 24), and most writing groups in classroom settings are commonly conceptualized as peer-response groups (Highberg, Moss & Nicolas, 2004). Therefore, there is paucity of research studies on students writing joint texts.

One of the studies reviewed was constructed by Storch (2005), who had university ESL students choose to write a two-paragraph essay independently or in pairs. The final compositions of student pairs appeared shorter but more grammatically accurate and linguistically complicated than the work of the individual student's essays. Pair collaboration afforded the students with the opportunity to generate ideas, and although more time was spent, the pairs' final writing integrated different views. The joint responsibility over the creation of the texts led the students to be "*more receptive to peer suggestions and feedback comments*" (p. 168), while in many previous studies students were perceived as not being receptive enough to peer corrections.

Shehadeh (2011) also conducted a study on university students who were required to complete 12 writing tasks. Comparison of students' pre- and posttest writing scores indicated that the effect of the collaborative writing was significant in the areas of content, organization, and vocabulary. Yuko and Swain (2007) also examined adult ESL learners' collaborative pair writing experiences. The core students collaboratively composed a pre-test essay with their partner. After receiving feedback from an English native speaker "editor" who revised the pairs' text, the core students

worked with their partners again to discuss their original text as well as the revised text. This “noticing” stage was audio and video recorded to analyze student interaction patterns. Then all the students independently completed a post-test writing. Findings indicated that when core students worked with lower proficiency partners, they achieved on average higher scores in their writing post-tests than working with higher proficiency partners. Yuko and Swain stressed that it was the specific patterns of interaction (namely, the collaborative and expert/novice patterns) that contributed to the higher scores on writing performance. Yuko and Swain’s (2007) study differed from Storch’s (2005) and Shehadeh’s (2011) as it focused on the nature of students’ interaction. However, all three studies suggested that when students worked in pairs to compose a common text benefited from the collaboration and their writing showed improvements. While these inspiring studies focused on pair work, what has remained unexamined is larger group collaboration. As in the real world, people very often work within a group other than simply with one partner, so it is essential for the present study to address this under-explored area. This study, while examining student collaboration in groups of four to six, should help provide further understandings and therefore contribute to fill in the gap.

Technology in English Language Writing

Due to the current shift in educational paradigm, materials for teaching writing skills vary from the conventional textbook to computer technology. The emergence of the Internet as a medium for teaching and learning is an important revolution in education. Educators are greatly inspired to integrate technology applications in the teaching and learning of English language.

The mastery of e-mail in this information-based society is considered one of the most important skills that EFL instructors should have. According to Trokeloshvili and Jost (1997), the use of the Internet is gaining popularity in universities across the world. The introduction of the Internet has brought many changes in instructors' approaches to English language teaching, with the most significant changes occurring in writing instruction. At the beginning of the 1990s, many writing instructors moved their classes from the traditional classroom to the computer room.

In the EFL classroom, tools such as emails are opening the doors to "*more student-directed activities and the learners' journey towards self-definition and identity as a multilingual /multicultural speaker*" (Blake, 2008, p. 22). These tools also "*stretch the input and output limits of the EFL classroom*" (Ortega, 2007, p. 198) through the provision of environments that enhance collaborative writing (Hirvela, 1999) while providing valuable opportunities for interactive and meaningful practices. When applied to EFL writing, social media tools, such as, emails, Facebook, wikis and chats, stress the social dimension of the writing process by allowing learners to participate in a social process of writing (Brown & Adler, 2008). This has been underpinned and grounded in two main conceptual approaches. The first approach is based on the Neo-Piagetian concept of socio-conflict (Doise & Mugny, 1984). This theory refers to the mechanism through which an individual realizes that her/his thoughts or ideas are inconsistent with others' views. This internal conflict leads the individual to reflect on her/his thinking and may serve to initiate conceptual changes. From this perspective, collaborative writing situations can be observed as generators of discussions, leading to higher levels of thinking (Doise & Mugny, 1984).

The second theory is based on Vygotsky's (1978) view of social nature of learning. According to Vygotsky, learning primarily occurs at social and inter-psychology levels, and only secondarily at the intra-psychology level. This theory implies that knowledge is internalised not directly but by means of mediating psychological tools and especially language (Bonk & Dennen, 1999). Through this internalisation, communicative language is transformed into individual inner speech and verbal thinking. Vygotsky (1978) viewed that the distance between the learner's actual states of development is determined by independent problem solving and the potential level of development that she/he can reach through the guidance of adults or collaboration with more capable peers. This distance is known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). For Vygotsky culture gives learners more cognitive tools needed for development. These tools include cultural history, social context and language (Storch, 2005). Today, these tools also include electronic forms of information access (Rummel & Spada, 2005). Moreover, Vygotsky considered that the function of teachers and more able students is to aid less -able students master concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own (Schellens, Van Keer & Valcke, 2005). Following Vygotsky, sociocultural theorists, such as Donato (1994, 2000) and Swain (2000), have stressed the role of peer assistance and mutual scaffolding in collaborative dialogues.

Using Online Collaboration in ESL Writing:

Numerous studies have been carried out in an attempt to discover whether students with online collaboration opportunities learned better than students with traditional methods in ESL writing lessons. The use of online collaboration has focused largely on bringing about changes in student writers' attitudes and on writing resulting from the

use of information technology tools, such as email. Most of these studies have documented a number of favorable impacts on the use of online collaboration in the ESL writing context, including increased audience awareness, motivation and willingness to make revision. For instance, Ho's study (2000) on the potential of email exchanges to develop intercultural awareness and writing skills through examined the use of online collaboration in a writing project between primary level pupils from two schools, one in Singapore and one in Birmingham (UK). Her study shows that the use of online collaboration has helped to develop pupil's confidence, language skills, creativity and sense of intercultural awareness. Moreover, students were found to be more motivated and positive towards writing. Another study conducted by Jor (2000) with a group of Hong Kong university students examined the effectiveness of online collaboration in developing students' English proficiency, competence and confidence. The results showed that there was a modest rise in the writing scores of the students after they participated in the course. In addition, the students generally welcomed the use of collaboration and the increase of interactivity in the writing process. Greenfield's study (2003) found out that the majority of the participants made significant progress in writing, thinking and speaking through email exchanges. Results showed students' positive responses towards the use of collaborative writing model and the possibility of using collaborative exchanges in enhancing second language learning. Esnawy (2004) used both in-class and online instruction modes in a writing course for graduate students in an academic writing class at the American University in Cairo. The students were positive about the use of email for submitting their essays and communicating with the teacher and other students. Besides, combining in-class

and online instruction was beneficial for the students as there was more interaction both in-class and out of class, thus enhancing students' learning experience.

Another pertinent area of research has explored the usefulness and patterns of peer feedback and response in the ESL writing context, both within a class and between students in different classes. In assessing students' responses in the use of both online and face-to-face responses, DiGiovanni and Nagaswami (2001) conducted a study in two pre-college ESL writing classes at a Community College in Philadelphia. The results of the study showed that students found peer review process useful. They welcomed the use of both face-to-face and online peer review, and the researchers agreed that frequent online interaction could help students become more critical and effective negotiators. The researchers also found that "*computer conversation allows students to respond spontaneously, and offers them the opportunity to reflect on their ideas, rehearse their responses, and respond at their own pace*" (p. 269). In a similar vein, Tuzi (2004) studied the use of peer comments as an aid to revision in writing among 20 ESL learners in a college in Pennsylvania. The results showed that students preferred face-to-face feedback to online feedback, though they found that online feedback was useful in revision. In addition, Tuzi found that the training students received before the writing process was useful in enabling them to be more effective responders and to be more aware of some of the areas of concern in writing and giving feedback.

Method

Design of the study:

In order to investigate the effect of using online collaboration on developing EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability and attitudes towards EFL writing, the study adopted the two-group pre-posttest quasi-experimental

research design. The study examined two 'Writing for Specific Purpose' classes, which were used as control (n.22) and experimental (n.22) groups, Bisha University, Saudi Arabia. The participants of the control group were assigned to the following conditions: pretests, teaching the English for Business and Commercial Correspondence through conventional face-to-face sessions and posttests, whereas the experimental group participants were assigned to the following conditions: pretests, intervention (i.e. using online collaborative tasks), posttests. Both groups had the same conditions. The performance of both groups at the pretests was compared to their performance at the post tests.

Data collection

Sampling:

Participants were forty-four level 5 EFL major student teachers in the English department in Bisha University, Saudi Arabia. All of them were registered for the Writing for Business and Commercial Correspondence. This purposive sample was divided into groups: experimental (n.22) and control (n.22). The experimental group was exposed to the intervention which is represented in using online collaborative ESP writing tasks while the control group was taught the same course content through the traditional method.

Instrumentation:

Data were collected using triangulated design making use of both quantitative and qualitative procedures. The instruments used were: The ESP Writing Pre-Post Test; Attitudes towards Writing Scale; and semi-structured focus-group interviews. An overview of each instrument is given below.

A. ESP Writing Pre-Post Test:

The ESP Writing Pre-Post Test was developed purposefully by the researcher to ascertain the student

teachers' ability in writing for business and commercial correspondence both before and after intervention. The ESP Writing Pre-Post Test consisted of 6 tasks for respondents to carry out (see Appendix 2). Task (1) asked the student teachers to name the elements of a business letter. Task (2) asked them to write a "letter of request". Task (3) required them to write a "letter of quotation". Task (4) asked them to write a "Memo". Task (5) required them to write a "letter of complaint". Task (6) asked them to provide definitions for some business correspondence terms. The student teachers were allotted 2hrs to respond to the test. Answers to the ESP writing Pre-Post Test were rated by two trained and experienced tutors of ESP teachers of English for Business. Each student teacher was given a score out of a hundred, - which is the total test score -, which represented the average of the two marks given by the two raters. To achieve consistency and unity, raters got guidance from a model answer key prepared by the course tutor (i.e. researcher). Besides, a set of rubrics (see Appendix 3), which was face-validated by a group of language testing and ESP specialists, guided the raters in the marking process. The rubrics addressed five categories that represented the aspects to evaluate in ESP writing for business and commercial correspondence. These are (1) *Organization and Form*, (2) *Salutation*, (3) *Elements of Practical Business Writing*, (4) *Closing and Signature*, (5) *Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling*.

B. Attitudes towards Writing Scale (ATWS):

The study aimed to assess the impact of EFL major student teachers' involvement in online collaborative ESP writing tasks on their attitudes towards EFL writing. The ATWS consisted of 23 statements which stand for positive and negative feelings towards EFL writing and reflect

impressions of linguistic ease and difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. A 5-point *Likert* scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ was used. The twenty-three questions of the ATWS were categorized according to four sub-factors (i.e. thematic units), as follows:

1. General attitudes of students towards writing skills (10 questions):

This factor was assessed by 10 statements. It aimed to collect general dispositions about writing skills: for instance, ‘Writing essays’ is very difficult for me’; ‘I think writing is boring’; etc. This factor was divided into five sub-factors, as follows:

1. Ease and interest of writing skills.
2. Importance of writing skills.
3. Importance of the process approach to writing.
4. Priority of correcting grammatical and spelling mistakes.
5. Motivation and opportunity for practising writing skills.

2. Attitudes of students towards the pre-writing stage (i.e. planning) (6 questions):

The pre-writing stage was the second factor, and included six questions. This factor was concerned with various issues, such as planning a topic for the essay, collecting ideas and vocabulary, making an outline, organizing ideas and understanding the topic of the essays. This factor was divided into four sub-factors, as follows:

1. Taking enough time to understand the essay topic.
2. Difficulty of understanding the essay topic.
3. Planning for the topic mentally and physically.
4. Collecting and organizing ideas.

3. Attitudes of students towards the drafting and revising stages (4 questions):

Four questions were concerned with the students' perceptions of the drafting and revising stages: for instance, *'During writing, I normally do revisions before finishing my writing completely'* and *'During the writing stage, I usually follow the plan that I have written before writing'*. This factor was divided into four sub-factors, as follows:

1. Following the essay plan when starting writing.
2. Difficulty in starting to write the essay.
3. Making revisions before finishing the first draft of the essay.
4. Using the vocabulary supplied by the teacher.

4. Attitudes of students towards the editing stage (3 questions):

Only three questions were concerned with the editing stage of writing because this stage is a small technical area: for instance, *'During the editing stage, I make several revisions before submitting my final draft'* and *'During the editing stage, I concentrate on finding appropriate words and vocabulary'*. This factor was divided into three sub-factors, as follows:

1. Finding appropriate vocabulary during the editing stage.
2. Revising essays several times before submitting during the editing stage.
3. Correcting grammatical and spelling mistakes during the editing stage.

C. Semi-structured focus-group interviews

Interviews with the experimental group participants (n.22) aimed to ascertain their perceptions of the online collaborative ESP writing experience, thus providing answers to the fifth research question. Namely, they aimed to ascertain how the trainees construe their views of the world and make sense of

their experiences. Interviews were guided by a protocol (Appendix 4) and the participants were divided into four-focus groups (2 five-informant groups and 2 six-informant groups). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were respondent-validated for further analysis. Though interviews were guided by a protocol, interviewees were given full freedom to articulate their perceptions of the online collaborative ESP writing experience. They sometimes tended to remind one another of how the components of a writing task were carried out. Anecdotes were recurrent in their articulation of their perceptions, something that helped to substantiate and throw more authenticity on the collected data.

Validity of the instruments

The face validity of both the ESP Writing Pre-Post Test and Attitudes towards Writing Scale was assessed. A number of jury members, who are specialized EFL teacher educators and ESP teachers, checked the readability, understandability and wording of the two instruments. Their feedback proved invaluable in refining some items until they reached their final layout.

Reliability of the instruments

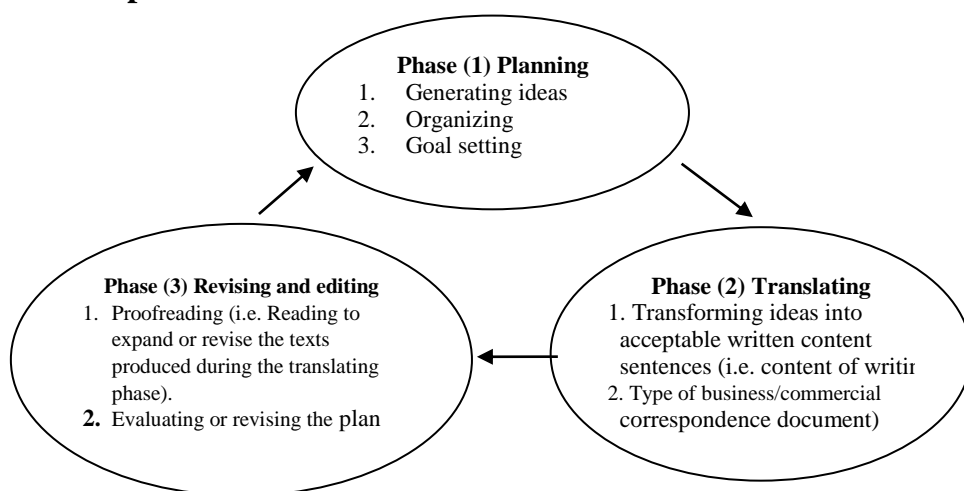
To assess reliability of both the ESP Writing Pre-Post Test and Attitudes towards Writing Scale (ATWS), the test-retest method was used. They were administered twice to a sample of EFL major undergraduate students similar to the participants of the study. An interval of five weeks separated the two administrations. Responses to both administrations were cross-checked and an Alpha Cronbach's correlation coefficients of .98 for the ESP Writing Pre-Post Test and 97.1 for the ATWS were calculated. To reliability assess inter-rater reliability of the marking process of ESP Writing Pre-Post Test, two independent researchers carried out the marking of the participants' answered tests. To ensure consistency the

raters made use of a set of rubrics purposefully developed in this respect and a correlation coefficient of .97 was calculated. Meetings between the two raters could help to reach full agreement on the final ratings. Besides, the protocol of the semi-structured interviews was tried out with two students.

Procedure:

A priori face-to-face session was presented to the experimental group participants to orientate them on the three phases of writing: planning, translating and reviewing. The planning aimed to take the information from the task environment and from long-term memory to establish a writing plan to meet the goal of writing. The translation process aimed to enable the participants to take ideas from memory under the guidance of the writing plan and to transform them into acceptable written sentences. The function of the reviewing process was to improve the quality of the written text by reading and editing. The participant writer reads through the text either to expand or revise the text produced during the translating process. This is represented in Figure (1) below.

Figure (1): Phases of writing business and commercial correspondence documents



As indicated in Figure (1) above the participants carried out a set of tasks necessary for building up the business and commercial correspondence document. In the planning phase they generated and organized the ideas and set the goal for each task. In translation phase the ideas were transformed into acceptable written content sentences which represented the body of the document in hand. In the reviewing and editing phase they proofread and revise the text of each document and check the document against the plan initial set by them for the business document.

The students and the researcher met in their regular face-to-face English lessons every week for three hours, in which they were taught the regular syllabus (Writing for Business and Commercial Correspondence). However, the textbook was changed into a theme-based hybrid format for this study for fourteen weeks: a mixture of classroom teaching and web-based activities.

Setting the scene before intervention:

Prior to the start of the online writing process, which made use of an email system provided to the student teachers by the university, two face-to-face sessions on the basics of the writing genres of the tasks, related language items and criteria for good writing were given. The six tasks were formulated based on the learning outcomes of the syllabus that the student teachers were studying.

Divided into four groups, the online collaborative ESP writing tasks were allocated to them. Then, the student teachers were presented a simulated task, which was '*Writing a Short Memo*'. They were asked to finish a short and informal memorandum (or memo) individually for the staff members in the English language department, summarizing the views of their college mates on the learning facilities and the English language department. To make the writing task

authentic, the student teachers had to collect real data through interviewing at least ten of their colleagues in department and then compiling these views in a memo format. The student teachers were then asked to send their first draft to at least two of their group members for comments via emails. All email messages had to be copied to the researcher so that he could monitor the student teachers' progress. The final output was a result of the collaborative work of the writer and the comments of his peers within the same group.

In the following session the student teachers were orientated with the concept of online collaboration. They were asked to work in their groups and plan for a face-to-face meeting to discuss issues related to the organization of the *Annual Students Activities Ceremony*. They adopted the roles of students, staff members and college administration. They had to conduct a meeting (for about 20 minutes) in front of the instructor (i.e. researcher) and one observer group consisting of four to six of their classmates (chosen randomly from the class). They communicated with their group members by email. Each of them had to comment on the points given by others. Then, the leader allocated each member the responsibility. The observer group needed to take notes of the meeting after which each member had to submit the main points they noted down for writing up a draft for part of the minutes in the form of a paragraph, which they had to send to their group for comments. Based on the comments of group members, the writer of the particular sections could make amendments, and the final drafts were then forwarded to the leader for compilation. The final work was sent to members for comment once again, before being submitted to the instructor. Finally the instructor gave comments and a grade.

Intervention:

The student teachers in the experimental group worked collaboratively online to carry out the syllabus tasks. There were six writing tasks in total for the students throughout the semester. These were (1) Writing internal business correspondence, (2) Writing external business correspondence and cover letters, (2) Writing a CV, (4) Writing a job/ college application, (5) Writing a business fax, (6) Writing electronic business correspondence. Procedures are given below.

Procedures:

Developing and conducting the collaborative ESP writing tasks via email discussion was not a simple endeavor at the outset. It required the integration of a set of elements. These included: (1) the teachers' role and course requirements; (2) learner's role; (3) learning setting; (4) assessment; (5) task structure; and (6) task content. An overview of each element is given below:

1. Choosing partners:

The first major consideration in applying this online collaborative writing method was whether to have the participants choose their own partners. The researcher could facilitate learning by preventing homogenous pairing. However, since the class was composed solely of Saudi students, that was not a consideration for the researcher. Besides, since the researcher had a better idea of which student would complement or be more compatible with another, allowing them to choose for themselves helped to foster a fundamental basic of collaborative learning. Consequently, a poll was taken in class for participants to choose or change their own partners for each ESP writing task.

2. Learner's role and learning setting

Some participants needed training to equip themselves with skills in the area of email correspondence. A workshop could be conducted to enhance participants' skills in email correspondence before the actual implementation of the online collaborative ESP writing tasks. The aim was to make sure that participants were cognizant of email messaging features, including 'ending an email'; 'responding to an email'; 'sending attachment files via email'; 'forwarding a message', etc. All students had access to the internet service through the university WiFi service on campus and the smart touch phones. This could enable the students to overcome problems of time management.

3. Teacher's role and course requirements

Collaborative learning via email discussion required conscientious preparation and arrangements on the part of the teacher in order to develop activities and devise an appropriate course framework which helped to guide students through the ESP writing class. Developing activities and devising a course framework involved the selection of topics, group discussion, the writing approach, guidance and regulations, duration and facilities for the whole task to be conducted via email discussions.

4. Task Content

The task content focused on the writing genre and the theme chosen to challenge the students' discussions. Additionally, it included the assessment of the writing assignments which entailed five criteria (see Appendix 3). Further, at each stage of writing process, the students were asked to complete specific elements of the writing assignment. Each task-content was determined collaboratively between the researcher and the student teachers.

5. Task structure

The task structure embraced elements of a constructivist learning environment, which promotes interaction and collaboration, focusing on the student-centred and the process-oriented approach. These were incorporated with a detailed framework together with precise email instructions at each stage of the writing process approach. The task structure could be enhanced with more detailed elements in order to promote the efficacy of conducting collaboration via email discussions in ESP writing.

6. Steps of the task procedure

To minimize any confusion, students were provided with an outline of the entire process beforehand. The steps of the procedure were as follows:

- a. Students chose their partners themselves, and exchanged email contact information to facilitate online communication meeting outside of class;
- b. In class, groups brainstormed ideas about the target task and organized the information into coherent groupings;
- c. Groups arranged to exchange emails to do information-gathering to support their paper;
- d. In class, groups did outlining, planning, and crafting of the first draft. Students were required to hand in a detailed outline before submitting the first draft;
- e. The researcher handed back the outlines with pertinent comments;
- f. Work on the first draft commenced.

7. Assessment

For assessing student teachers' participation in the online email-based writing tasks the researcher used a marking scheme for the email to assist in the allocation of marks of individual student teachers for each task. Both their email discourse and their individual work produced from their

discussions were assessed. This helped to ensure their being effective online collaborators.

Data analysis:

Quantitative analysis using SPSS Software (version 22) was carried out to analysis participants' responses to The ESP Writing Pre-Post Test and the ATWS. The semi-structured focus-group interview data representing the experimental group participants' perceptions of the online collaborative ESP writing experience were analyzed using the grounded theory approach.

Findings of the Study:

Presentation of findings in the section below will follow the same order of the research questions of the study. Quantitative data are presented in tables and accompanied by short explanations where possible. Tables of descriptive data are

Research Question no. (1):

What is EFL major student teachers' current level of ESP writing ability?

The scores of the student teachers in the ESP writing pre-test were placed on a continuum ranging from Zero, as lowest, to a hundred, as highest. Analysis of their performance in the ESP Writing Pre-Test indicated that their overall level was poor since most of the scores (77%) fell far below the middle point which is 50. Almost all the scores (97%) fell below the pass point of the university exams which is 60 and only one student passed. Their scores are more or less similar. A mean of (39.5) strongly confirmed this. The highest writing score was 56 out of 100, with the majority of the scoring between 23 and 56 (*see Appendix 5 for the participants' Scores in the ESP Writing Pre-Post Test*).

To assess whether there was statistically significant difference between both groups at the ESP writing ability before intervention, participants' scores were further processed statistically using the 2-sample independent t-test.

Figures in table (2) below show no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of both groups in their ESP writing ability. These results clearly show that the study participants have a low ESP writing ability.

Table (1)
Equivalence of Both Groups in ESP Writing
Ability before intervention

	Mean	Std. deviation	t-value	df	Sig.
Control group	43.50	6.62	1.09	42	.283
Experimental group	38.50	8.28			

Research Question no. (2):

What is the current level of EFL major student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing?

Responses of both groups to the ATWS before intervention are given in Appendix (6). Figures show that the overall low average mean scores are far below the middle point. This means that they held negative attitudes towards EFL writing. To assess whether there was a statistically significant difference in attitudes towards EFL writing between both groups before intervention, participants' scores were further processed statistically. Figures in table (2) below show no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of both groups in their attitudes towards EFL writing. This means that participants of both groups have similar negative attitudes towards EFL writing.

Table (2)
Equivalence of Both Groups in Attitudes towards
EFL Writing before Intervention

	Mean	Std. deviation	t-value	df.	Sig.
Control group	56.77	6.49	.186	42	.853
Experimental group	56.41	6.48			

Mean 56.59, SD= 6.41, min. = 45 & max. = 65.00

Research Question no. (3):

What is the effect of using online collaborative writing tasks on EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability?

At the post-intervention stage the ESP writing ability of the participants of both groups was assessed. Every participant was given a number in the first trial of the ESP writing Pre-Post Test so as to trace them more easily and compare their pretest scores to their posttest scores. The raw posttest scores of both group participants at both trials of the ESP writing Pre-Post Test are given in Appendix (5). Comparing their pretest scores to their posttest scores, figures clearly show that the experimental group participants outperformed their control group counterparts. This highlights the positive effect of using the online collaborative ESP writing tasks on the experimental group participants' ESP writing ability.

To assess the extent to which this impact is statistically significant, the 2-sample independent t-test was used. As shown in table (3) the significance value ($p < .01$) indicates a high statistically significant difference in the ESP writing ability between both group participants. The average mean scores of both groups indicate a big difference between the control group participants and their experimental group counterparts in their performance in the ESP writing posttest in favour of the experimental group.

Table (3)

Differences between the Control and Experimental Group Participants' ESP Writing Ability after Intervention

	Mean	Std. deviation	t-value	df	Sig. (p.<.01)
Control group	46.50	6.14	-18.06	42	.000
Experimental group	79.50	5.98			

Research Question no. (4):

What is the effect of using online collaborative writing tasks on EFL major student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing?

After intervention, which lasted for 10 weeks, the Attitudes towards Writing Scale (ATWS) was administered again to all participants of both groups in order to assess the possible change that might have occurred in participants' attitudes towards EFL writing. Since every participant in the first trial of the ATWS was given a number, it was easy to trace them in the second trial so as to compare their scores in both trials. The posttest scores of both group student teachers at both trials of ATWS are given in Appendix (7). Comparing their pretest scores to their posttest scores, figures clearly show that the experimental group participants outperformed their control group counterparts. This highlights the positive impact of using the online collaborative ESP writing tasks on the experimental group participants' attitudes towards EFL writing.

To assess the extent to which this impact is statistically significant, the 2-sample independent t-test was used. As shown in table (4) the significance value ($p < .01$) indicates a high statistically significant difference in the ESP writing ability between both group' participants. The average mean scores of both groups indicate a big difference between the control group participants and their experimental group counterparts in their performance in the ESP writing posttest in favour of the experimental group. This emphasizes the positive impact of online collaborative writing task on participants' attitudes towards EFL writing.

Table (4)
Differences between the Control and Experimental Group Participants' in Attitudes towards EFL Writing after Intervention

	Mean	Std. deviation	t-value	df	Sig. (p<.01)
Control group	56.86	5.91	-9.686	42	.000
Experimental group	81.14	10.16			

Research Question no. (5):

What are EFL major student teachers' perceptions of the online collaborative ESP writing tasks

EFL major student teachers' articulations of their perceptions of the online collaborative writing experience are provided below. The presentation is guided by the more recurrent to the least recurrent themes emerging from the data, as follows:

A) Enhancement of Sense of Audience

Analysis as shown that through online collaboration on writing students generally become more aware of the importance of audience awareness after engaging in the course. This highlights a positive change in attitudes among students towards writing in EFL. An exemplar comment said;

“As audiences are my classmates, which are at the same level as mine. Therefore comments given by them will be useful in helping me to improve my writing skills.”

Through the process of collaborative evaluation and writing, students can become more aware of a sense of audience. The cultivation of sense of audience among students in their collaborative writing process can be regarded as a feature of the online writing course. Nevertheless, there were students who still regarded the teacher as the real audience that could give grades and marks (as revealed in the interview). A recurrent comment said;

“When I send my email forward, I’m scared that it might go through the teacher first before my colleagues could see it and correct my mistakes. But every second, I remind myself that I work with a group like me and nothing will go directly to the teacher until all is OK.”

B) Peer-feedback

Peer feedback from colleagues is one of the positive aspects of collaboration. It is an escape from the name-and-shame traditional style of teacher-based feedback. One of the informants favourably commented on this by saying;

“Before we used to hand the assignment out teacher and he is supposed to mark it and discuss our mistakes in class for public benefit. So, I used to feel scared when my turn comes and my written mistakes spread to the whole class.”

C) Convenience

Informants tended to compare the online mode of collaborative writing to the traditional individual solitary mode of writing. Most informants expressed their satisfaction with the email exchanges and favoured them for their ease and convenience in terms of time and location. Exemplary comments include the following.

COMMENT (1)

“I can open my email anytime suitable for me during the day and respond to other emails from my group or send my written documents to them both in the body of the email message and by attachment.”

COMMENT (2)

Wherever I am I can read my emails and respond to all the message in my free time even in the breaks between classes while in the college. I do everything using my mobile and the Wi-Fi facility while in college.

COMMENT (3)

"...writing online is better coz in the traditional lessons we have to finish the tasks within a short time. We were constrained by time and so, the quality of writing was not good enough".

D) Reduced sense of anxiety and stress

Online collaborative writing tasks and its accompanied peer-review and delayed teacher-correction contributed to a reduced sense of foreign language writing anxiety. Informants expressed their relief and easygoingness in this respect, as shown by the following exemplar comments:

"I'm not under pressure anymore. Before I used to feel stressed by the hectic business of submitting my written assignment to the teachers who used to spread my mistakes to everybody, and in my case he used to refer to my mistakes all through his classes. Nothing like this anymore. We're a team and we learn together".

Anonymous correction of errors is one of the benefits pertinent to creating a reduced feeling of anxiety.

"When we do a task together we're more at ease. Do you know why? because I find I'm not the only one who makes writing mistakes. Also, by the end of the task I can see my mistakes are corrected by the whole team. This makes you more relaxed"

E) Cultivation of positive attitudes towards writing in EFL

Most of the participants stated that they enjoyed the online writing lessons more than traditional ones and that they liked doing the writing tasks online. In addition to the benefits of being more interesting and getting comments from peers, the majority of participants appreciated the "convenience" given by the online learning mode.

“Submitting works online is very convenient, and I can get the responses from group mates on the spot. Therefore I think this way of learning is very efficient and can save time”.

Besides, participants reiterated the desire to carry out collaborative writing tasks in the future. An exemplar comment in this respect says;

“From now on writing for me is not hard anymore as long as we do it together. It has become my favourite. Before that it was a nightmare. I used to have very low score in writing. Last year I repeated writing”.

The experience to work in a team has positively affected the desire to work individually. It helped students to work independently. Informants expressed their readiness to produce written texts on their own.

“Yes, now I know how to do it. My writing has improved a lot. Now I know what it is like to write about any topic in English. Do you know why? The final term test will be individual. We won't work together in a team in the final exam”.

F) Sense of collegiality and interactivity

Using email exchanges helped participants to collaborate at their own pace. They expressed a feeling of collegiality, something that adds to the social aspect of learning experience. Pertinent comments in this respect include the following:

“Whenever I feel that I have a problem I find someone to help and correct my mistakes. I stay online and send further emails to him asking and answering and taking his opinion until I know my mistakes”.

“Our emails helped us to exchange ideas, views and problems. This is language you feel that you give and take. We share with each other the information that we

have". By the way, we are used to email but our emails are not always for an academic reason. Now, there is a very important purpose".

Discussion

Conducting a study on online collaborative writing in the Saudi context has been a challenge for the researcher. This is because writing has traditionally been considered by the students as solitary activity which students are used to do in an individual fashion (e.g. Al-Eid, 2000; Creswell et al., 2003; Al-Ghamari, 2004; Al-Hazmi, 2006; Alhaysony, 2008; Al-Mazrooei, 2009; Alnufaie & Grenfell, 2012; Al Khateeb, 2013; Javid, & Umer, 2014; Alsaleem, 2014; Deraney, 2015; Alluhaybi, 2015; etc.).

The researcher's decision to delve into the realm of EFL writing in general and ESP writing in particular came out of the desire to reinforce students' EFL writing and ESP writing abilities through an innovative approach. It can be considered innovative for two main reasons. The first is that this study assessed the potential of using collaborative ESP writing tasks in developing students' ESP writing ability and their attitudes towards EFL altogether. The second is that the study used a mixed research method, which comprises the characteristics of both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, the mixed method takes the research problem as its fundamental concern and also matches the researching techniques to deal with the relevant problems (Creswell et al., 2003).

In view of the data reported by the study participants, it is evident that the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and social-based learning, relating to writing and written-based communication, has created new possibilities for pre-service EFL teacher educators and inservice EFL teachers to expand their skills in the area of teaching writing. The interview data indicated that the EFL student teachers valued this new

experience due to its potential to enhance their keenness to work autonomously, their sense of audience, collegiality and interactivity, cultivate their attitudes towards EFL writing and work collaboratively. All of these affordances contribute to the usefulness of email messaging as a pedagogical tool serving to construct more enhanced collaborative compositions, as it reduces the fear of sharing drafts or receiving a large amount of criticism through teacher-centred name-and-shame feedback. This is supported by the findings of a local study by Bani Abdelrahman (2012) which used dialogue through e-mail technology to develop EFL writing skills for English major university students.

The findings of this study emphasized the positive role that using online collaborative ESP writing tasks can play in developing EFL major student teachers' ability to write business and commercial correspondence documents. This finding coincides with the findings of other research studies which have demonstrated that when learners have been engaged in collaborative writing tasks, their knowledge, experience of writing and the outcome of the written pieces were seen to improve gradually (Fung, 2010). Hodges (2002) also points out that collaborative writing promotes the linguistic accuracy of the written language and considers exchanges for the collective knowledge that is given by learners. In addition, it proliferates writers' motivation to redraft, identifies the characteristics of various external written texts and leads to profound reflections that can be employed in the writer's work (Barkley et al., 2005). Collaborative writing also affords writers with an opportunity to develop the writer-reader dialogue, as writers begin to anticipate their readers' expectations and needs (Clark & Ivanic, 1997). A study by Albeshar (2012) aimed to investigate the effectiveness of using collaborative learning to

improve the writing skills of students of English as a second language. More specifically, it aimed to determine whether students who were involved in collaborative learning produced better written texts in terms of organization, development, coherence, structure, vocabulary and mechanics than students who wrote individually, and whether engaging in collaborative learning had a positive effect on the attitudes and perceptions of learners. Other studies from the Saudi context include Al-Menei (2008); Lee (2010); Al-Khateeb (2013); Morris (2011); Alwehaibi (2015); Jiang & Yu (2014); etc. For example, Al-Menei's study (2008) aimed to assess the effect of computer-assisted writing on Saudi university students' writing skill in English. The findings of the study revealed that computer-assisted writing has a significant effect on EFL Saudi learners' writing skill. Also, Al-Khateeb's study (2013) assessed the effectiveness of integrating and blending wiki-mediated writing into a different course plan, with tasks that fit with the normal syllabi used for teaching writing skills. Alsaleem's study (2014) attempted to determine whether WhatsApp electronic journaling as a new application in smart phones has a significant effect on writing vocabulary word choice and voice for undergraduate Saudi students. Results indicated a significant difference between the overall writing scores of the pretest and posttest of the students. The study can raise a positive social change by helping teachers understand the prospective benefits of WhatsApp electronic dialogue journaling to improve the vocabulary word choice and voice writing skills of their students. Morris's study (2011) focused on how the incorporation of technology helped to lower the affective filter and enhance learning in EFL classes at Al Yamamah University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Alwehaibi's study (2015) aimed to ascertain the effect of integrating YouTube technology into English as a foreign

language (EFL) instruction on EFL college student teachers' learning of observation skills and teaching skills during a practicum course, as part of Elementary EFL initial Teacher education at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the Faculty of Education at Princess Noura University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The findings showed positive gains for the experimental group students' outcomes as a result of the integration of video technology in instruction.

Worldwide, a study by Jiang and Yu (2014) aimed to assess the effectiveness of internet-based peer feedback on Chinese EFL college students' writing error correction and their writing proficiency improvement. The findings of the study showed that internet-based peer feedback had positive effects on the improvement of EFL college students' writing. Another study by Lee (2010) used Wikis, as one of the Web 2.0 social networking tools, to promote collaborative writing for university students. The results showed that creating wikis had a positive impact on the development of students' writing skills through collaborative engagement. Scaffolding through peer feedback played a crucial role in the L2 writing process through which students not only helped each other organize the content but also made error corrections for language accuracy.

Part of the intervention of the study was to assess the impact of using online collaborative ESP writing tasks on the participants' attitudes towards EFL writing. The experimental group participants' exposure to the online collaborative ESP writing tasks in this study proved beneficial in inducing a positive change in their attitudes towards EFL writing. This finding is consistent with the findings of research studies related to using online web .02 technology applications in EFL and ESL contexts (e.g. Lee, 2010; Morris, 2011; Alsaleem, 2014; Jiang & Yu, 2014; Alwehaibi, 2015; etc.)

This study assessed EFL major student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing. Assessment of this essential affective factor is essential due to its impact on writing skill. Analysis of the participants' responses to the ATWS before intervention indicated that they do not have positive attitudes towards EFL writing. This finding resonates and supports findings of other research studies conducted both in the Saudi context and in other similar contexts elsewhere (e.g. Jahin & Idrees, 2012; Alluhaybi, 2015; Yingjie, 2016; etc.). For example, Alluhaybi's (2015) study focused on exploring the writing attitudes, apprehension, and self-efficacy beliefs of Saudi female undergraduates EFL learners in three higher education institutions. Though initial analysis of the data revealed that participants possessed positive attitudes towards writing in English, the participants were moderately apprehensive about EFL writing. In the Chinese context, Yingjie (2016) investigated high school teachers' and students' attitudes towards EFL writing. Using a mixed research method, 25 participants were involved in the study. Findings showed that EFL writing was ignored in EFL class. Furthermore, the results observed from a paired t-test quantitatively indicated that these teachers and students considered EFL writing as a difficult and important skill and they believed that it is possible to improve their EFL writing skill.

Findings of the semi-structured focus-group interviews emphasize the benefits of the online collaborative writing experience that the experimental group participants went through. Benefits included. Cultivation of positive attitudes, sense of collegiality and interactivity, reduced feeling of anxiety and stress, etc. These benefits were recorded by previous research studies conducted in different contexts, something that emphasizes the role of online collaboration in

EFL major student teachers' language proficiency and attitudes towards language learning in general and writing per se. Examples of these studies include Mahmoud (1997); Al-Hamshary (2006); Naeem (2007); Widodo (2013); etc. For example, in Egypt Al-Hamshary (2006) used a multimedia computer program to develop five EFL writing skills for secondary stage students. Naeem (2007) used a CALL program to develop EFL major student teachers' mechanics of writing in English in Kafr El-Sheikh University. Also, Widodo's (2013) study assessed the impact of implementing collaborative process-based writing in the EFL college classroom in Indonesia.

Recommendations:

The findings of the study pose a set of recommendations for a variety of stakeholders. These include EFL teacher educators, ESP course designers, EFL teacher trainers, and EFL major student teachers themselves. The findings of the study indicated that using the online collaborative writing ESP tasks could induce a positive change in EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability and attitudes towards EFL writing. This would encourage EFL teachers and ESP teacher educators in different specializations (i.e. English for Science and technology, English for Medical Purposes, English for Aviation Purposes, English for Hoteling, English for Vocational Purposes, etc.) to integrate the use of email technology and other web 2.0 technology applications in their teaching. Thus, online collaborative ESP writing tasks used in this study can be used as a stepping stone towards integrating online technology in teaching of ESP writing courses. Using this technology by teacher educators in their teaching with EFL pre-service teachers would help to sensitize future EFL teachers towards using or integrating online technology in their teaching at their schools in the future.

The use of online collaborative ESP writing tasks in this study proved possible. In this respect it is highly recommended that ESP course developers be encouraged to tailor their courses in the form of online tasks that can be convenient for both ESP students and teachers. In the same vein, more task-based ESP courses in different areas (e.g. English for Science and Technology, English for Technical/Vocational purposes, English for Medical Purposes, etc.) should be developed for both EFL student teachers and inservice teachers so as to satisfy the needs of ESP learners.

The findings of the semi-structured interviews indicated that students benefited from the experience they undertook. Most benefits were due to the scaffolding atmosphere that dominated the execution of the ESP writing tasks. What made it more possible was the nature of the mixed-ability groups. They collaborated together in the stages of collaborative writing process, such as planning and organizing ideas, translating ideas into meaningful sentences and reviewing. It is thus recommended that EFL teacher educators adopt more humanistic teaching approaches with EFL student teachers so that their teaching can be more rewarding.

Suggestions for further research:

This study made use of email technology as a medium of online social network communication to develop EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability. In this respect further research is needed to try out and the assess the potential of using other web 2.0 technology applications, such as Web Quest, Wikis, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc. for developing EFL writing skill in general and ESP writing in particular. In the same vein, further research studies are needed to investigate the role of using online technology applications in developing other main language skills (i.e. reading, speaking and listening) and sub-skills (vocabulary, grammar and

pronunciation) both in general English and in ESP. Moreover, research efforts can be made to make use of online technology applications to develop EFL student teachers pedagogical skills.

The results of the study showed that online technology could help to induce a positive change in student teachers' attitudes towards EFL writing. In the same vein, more research is needed to ascertain the role that online technology can play in student teachers' attitudes towards other language skills, such as speaking, reading and listening, and sub-skills.

The use of online ESP writing tasks purposefully designed for this study proved beneficial though they were used on a small-scale basis. Thus, further studies are required to develop wide-scale online courses that can be accessed both synchronously and asynchronously by both EFL student teachers and inservice teachers. They can be accessed and studied at the pace and convenience of the target learners.

Intervention in this study was limited to online writing task in English for Business and commercial correspondence. Further pertinent research is needed to develop and try out online writing tasks in other branches on ESP, such as English for science and technology, English for vocational purposes, English for journalism, English for hoteling, etc.

Last but not least, due to gender segregation in Saudi universities, this study was done on male EFL major student teachers. Thus, female researchers are encouraged to replicate this study with Saudi female EFL student teachers and ascertain the feasibility of collaborative online ESP writing tasks on female EFL major student teachers' ESP writing ability and attitudes toward writing ability and attitudes toward writing.

Conclusion:

As the study draws its data from only a small group of EFL student teachers, it does not claim much generalizability. The goal of the investigation reported here is to describe the process, results and participants' feelings about this particular online collaborative ESP writing experience. The results of this report attempt only to stimulate thinking by researchers into how a more appropriate application of online collaborative ESP writing tasks might be possible for EFL student teachers.

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