Effectiveness of Using Collaborative Virtual Writing Platforms to Enhance EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Reflective Writing and Content Curation Skills

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Abstract

The current study aimed at investigating pre-service EFL teachers' reflections on their writing, and examining the development of reflective writing via using collaborative virtual writing platforms. The study participants were 30 pre-service teachers forming two groups (Control = 15, Experimental = 15) – enrolled in a semester of Practical Training Period – at Princess Nora Bint AbdulRahman University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia during the 2016/2017 academic year. A survey (one-on-one interview) and an in-depth document analysis constituted the tools of the study. Having developed and validated those tools, they were administered pre and post using collaborative reflections in PENFLIP platform to the experimental group, whereas the control group wrote their reflections in a routine individual way. Frequent instructor feedbacks were introduced to help the experimental group evaluate their reflections. One of the main study results revealed that 40% of the student teachers were non-reflective due to their inexperience of reflective thinking reflecton on wrting, and their lack of theoretical knowledge and course content.

Key words: Collaborative Virtual, re-Service Teachers.

Introduction:

As the Higher Education moves towards a more student-centered learning environment, new approaches to language teaching have emerged as a result of increasing advances in technology. Nowadays, many web-based platforms are produced as tools for supporting many vital skills, to 21st century literacies, research and instruction. A sustained emergence of interest and

research on the use of web-based tools tailored for teacher preparation. Today, students can be thought of as being "transliterate', that is, they can communicate and learn across the boundaries of different tools of technology (Mc Dougall & Potmitis, (2010).

The focus of what is meant by 'digital literacy can be viewed as a set of skills and knowledge that allows us to find, evaluate, and use the information we need, as well as to filter out the information we don't need' (Eisenberg, 2008).

This definition by Eisenberg links closely to the 21st century needs to make the transition of these skills through digital media towards more language development especially in the skills of texting that is required for communication in the virtual words. Taking this further, it is argued that if students are given written tasks to perform them on line, which in itself might not be always written in a grammatically correct way, rather than through speaking and listening, then they are unlikely to further develop their writing skills beyond that classroom.

The internet by this concept can help students to share and collaborate using some platforms that they look more enjoyable and involving in writing tasks. This kind of collaboration and sharing enabled by increasing tools of online technology is crucial aspect of online literacy and mostly dependent on a student's ability or capacity to collaborate with others through this medium (Weigerif & Dawes, 2004).

Theoretical Background:

EFL students' writing in the 21st century is not just about handwritten text; it includes all the affordances and possibilities of digital and multimodal texts. While writing is seen as act of design as students should care about linguistic, creative, visual and social choices in creating their texts, teaching needs to help students to develop repertoires for writing in a range of modes and formats.

Reflective writing in teacher education is an ongoing and developmental process, performed before and after teaching

episodes. Reflective writing frequently takes the form of reflective journal (Hatton & Smith, 1995) and these are typically used and studied in the context of pre-service teacher education programs (Borg, 2006).

In such a context, reflective writing is always structured in the early stages of reflective writing process to encourage the teacher to purposely reflect on significant thoughts and feelings hey have occurred".Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall (1998: 264)

The power of writing journals as a learning tool is perceived as mediating between existing and new knowledge, "breaking habitual ways of thinking, enhancing the development of meta-cognition, increase awareness of tacit knowledge, facilitate self-exploration and work out solutions to problems" (Kerka, 2002, p.1).

Achieving higher levels of reflective thinking are one of the major aims of reflective writing. Grimmet & Crehan (1987) and Clark, (1994) suggested that initiating dialogues based on questions may lead to different and higher levels of thinking. Ben Peretz (1998) emphasized analytic reflections, encouraging writers to analyze acts and learn from it.

Davis (2006) encouraged pre-service teachers to write integrative reflections, reflect on multiple aspects of teaching, hoping to develop through these practices a more complex view Australian Journal of Teacher Education 2012October ,10 ,37Vol 22 of teaching. She stated that pre-service teachers need support and practice in reflective writing or else they write "unproductive reflections", mainly descriptive, without much analysis: "listing ideas rather than connecting them logically" (Davis, 2006, p. 282b).

The above examples indicate that reflective writing in teacher education is perceived as a goal for better teaching, without examining a direct link between them. A similar tendency is seen in teacher's professional development where reflection is seen as an instrument for change, involvement in research, and self-assessment (Avalos, 2011).

Now a days, developing technologies have influenced what we compose and disseminate texts to the extent that they very meaning the word 'writing' has been called into question (Sorapure, 2006). New technologies have created a growing convergence of modes and process of the writing with collaborative platforms raising more aspects of power and control of texts modification and creation. With this opportunity to read and write with high level of support from software-spell and grammar checks, offer tremendous support for digital texting.

For this perspective, Siemen (2005) proposes his contemporary theory of learning called connectivism that recognizes the impact of technology on the way of knowing. From his viewpoint, learning in the digital age relies on the connected learning opportunity while collaborating to create knowledge, and applying information to current context.

In the i-age, i-students can cope with complexity and can create and sustain learning communities and network, in a collaborative learning environment, where knowledge is shared or transmitted among students. Besides, collaborative learning processes assist students to develop higher order thinking skills and to achieve richer knowledge generation through shared goals, shared exploration, and shared process of meaning making (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

Current literature in collaborative learning has received increasing attention as it provides more chances to link the collaborative process to online technology. Engagement in the 21st century practices has brought changes in the way researchers conceptualized writing (Walker, 2010). Re-conceptualizing literacies in EFL education and in the way that can benefit teaching writing should involve the expansion of integrating technology performance on assignments (Alvermann, 2012).

Besides, the birth of social technology, such as wikis and chats, has brought a renewed attention to L2 collaborative

writing (Oskoz & Elola, 2010, in press). These applications facilitate authoring flexibility, content creation, and the generation of new knowledge. The open editing and review structure of wikis, for example, makes them a suitable tool to support collaborative writing (Parker & Chao, 2007).

A question that remains to be answered, however, is the extent to which collaborative writing and the use of these tools help EFL learners in their writing .By analyzing collaborative writing based on virtual platforms, this study will explore the use of virtual collaborative writing platforms on developing EFL reflective writing.

It will examine learner's reflective written interactions and practices on the platforms which support other aspects related to the performance of the writing tasks.

In addition, the study will collect pre-service teachers perceptions of the collaborative writing on platforms and to analyze their written reflections when using online platforms for EFL writing tasks.

Through the act of writing collaboratively in EFL writing tasks, the study will explore the reflective practices when the pre service teachers complete online tasks.

The study also will investigate the level of reflective writing that EFL pre service teachers can reach when using collaborative writing platforms on the tasks.

The Research Problem:

In the EFL classroom, tools such as chat applications and platforms are opening the doors to "more student-directed activities and the L2 learner's journey towards self-definition and identity as a multilingual/multicultural speaker" (Blake, 2008, p.220) .As these tools can "stretch the input and output limits of the EFL classroom" (Ortega, 2007, p.198) by providing environments that support collaborative writing (Hirvela, 1999).

Some collaborative writing platforms provide learners with tools to create, transform, and erase with built-in accountability.

Because the flexibility of this software of these tools which enable learners to communicate, shares, and re-shape their writing in a collaborative forms, they have attracted the attention of educators in general and English as a foreign language.

Although 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 online platforms on outcomes such as specific FL or 2L writing aspects (Ana Oskoz, 2014), such as the mastery of writing by benefiting from these tools.

Still, reflection tasks are common in teacher education field experience and seen by many as a tool that promotes professional development (such as Burton, et.al. 2009). Accordingly, pre service teachers are required to reflect and report on diverse aspects of their practice, such as promotion of professional development, peer instruction, as well as on personal issues, such as, their teaching dispositions, attitudes and awareness towards their ethnic, status-related and individual identity.

Although that tasks of reflection during field experience aims of promoting pre-service teachers' reflective abilities, but none of them show proven links between reflective acts and pre service teachers' planning and teaching acts. Since reflective writing is a demanding task for students and supervisors alike, (involving time, effort and personal exposure) (Etty & Fischl, 2012)

As Pre-Service Teaching Supervisors, we are required to encourage candidate teachers to reflect on their teaching. Although they practice some reflective writing tasks, In my experience, they frequently complain about being required to write these reflections. Given that there has been no research into reflective writing in collaborative virtual environment tasks in the Saudi EFL Context, the purpose of this study is to examine what pre-service teachers feel about it and to examine the development of reflective writing when collaboratively engaged

in a virtual platform. Therefore, this study is set out to answer these questions:-

Research Questions:

- How reflective is the content of EFL pre-service teachers writing using
- Collaborative writing tools according to Lee's (2005) Criterion ?
- What content curation skills that pre-service teachers develop when using collaborative writing platform to support their reflective writing?

Methodology:-

The Study Context and Participants:

Data will be collected from College of Education pre service teachers at Princess Nora Bent Abdul Rahman University in Riyadh, in relation to specific writing tasks.

Data Collection Methods:

The study will be conducted as Experimental method and longitudinal, using mixed-methods : quantitative and qualitative, to examine changes in reflective writing and content curation skills when using collaborative writing platforms during one semester of pre-service EFL teachers during teaching training experiences.

The Study Tools:

- **Survey "one-on-one interviews":** To collect qualitative data from interviews (internal dialogue, and conversation) to investigate and collect the most frequently used methods for reflection.
- **In depth Document analysis** of reflective writing documents : To collect qualitative data by analyzing the reflectivity of in-service EFL teachers' writing as measured using reflective writing rubric.

The Study Objectives:

1. To promote reflection amongst pre-service EFL teachers in a collaborative culture

2. To highlight the benefits of the collaborative writing platforms in developing reflection in EFL writing.
3. To maintain 21st century critical thinking skills when engaging in technology to overcome the limitations or challenge that reflective writing may be viewed by the Pre-Service Teachers.
4. To foster a 21st century skills in the field of EFL reflective writing in Teacher Education to make links between practices in and out of schools to see their effect on critical thinking beyond the written texts .
5. To promote Pre-Service 21st century skills and knowledge building through collaborative reflective writing.
6. To illustrate the importance and necessity of English reflective writing by presenting new technology support.

The Need of the Study:

The benefits of reflective writing are noted by several studies to EFL in-service teaching in many concerns. There is also some evidence that teachers may find reflective writing challenging.

This study will go beyond the collaborative writing effectiveness that may appear in interaction and engagement with writing tasks, to explore the actual engagement in reflection to be promoted amongst pre-service teachers.

The study will examine applying the guidance and support by online collaborative writing tools in helping and encouraging the EFL Pre-Service Teachers to purposely reflect on thoughts and feelings that occurred in schools. Once there is no formal training in writing reflection and what teachers are expected to write in a collaborative free writing environment, this study introduces a free writing concept that is highly supported in the 21st century skills based on the need to develop a very important aspect of writing skills by reflection.

It is hoped that the recent study will bring some helpful enlightenments in the field of English teaching and to provide more motivational and encouraging results by using environment with multi-text support technology.

Terms of the Study

Collaborative Writing Platforms: are those, web-based collaborative writing tools supported by online technologies that facilitate the editing and reviewing of a text document by multiple individuals either in real-time or asynchronously. They offer flexibility in collaboration in writing tasks groups while supported by many tools that can provide mean to generate text exercises, research reports and other writing assignments in a full collaborative fashion. **(The LANCELOT Language Research Project : Language Competence II programme, 2014)**

In this study, collaborative writing platforms supported by many tools that supply basic writing features including the typical formatting and editing facilities of a standard word processor with the addition of live chat, live markup and annotation, co-editing, version tracking.

Reflective writing:

Reflective writing is defined as an ongoing and developmental process, performed before and after teaching episodes. Reflective writing is perceived as mediating between existing and new knowledge, "breaking habitual ways of thinking, enhancing the development of meta-cognition, increase awareness of tacit knowledge, facilitate self-exploration and work out solutions to problems "(Kerka, 2002, p.1).

In this study, Reflective writing will be presented as a series of simple-to-follow steps addressed to in service EFL Teacher who has not previously written reflectively online using collaborative writing tools. The steps will involve writing responses to a short series of essential questions. They are "What happened?", "How did it happen?", "Why did it happen?" and "What does it mean?" And other similar structured questioning processes that lead pre service EFL teachers to write reflectively in a collaborative learning environments.

Significance of the Study

- Exploring the benefit of platform over the more traditional written journal.

- Exploring the way that platform writing can be accessed and shared with others while it can remain private to the owner or creator of the platform, to create communities of learning through sharing reflections.
- Capitalizing on the 21st century skills by fostering on students desire to be online while developing their style of writing and the depth of their reflections: 'people like contributing and sharing ideas' (Rothberg, 2008).
- Joining the worldwide EFL writing platforms in a collaborative manner to go beyond the immediate pre service teacher groups, to engage in more deep forms of writing.
- Seeking out the collaborative platforms as a form of connective writing to develop deep thinking and compose and reflect on their contribution before uploading and sharing with others.

The study, thus, will be the first in the researcher's knowledge to investigate the platforms in aspects of how they can be used in a collaborative way to encourage EFL students to work together to develop reflective writing skills online. It is hoped that it will spread the light in the possibility and profitability of sharing teaching experiences among pre service teachers during field visits to schools and what will invite more input to writing skills online, and what results they will offer in a higher level of meta-cognitive analysis and reflection.

Instrument Development:

The rubric that assesses reflective writing was examined. It was based on the *Written Reflection in Teacher Training* (WRITT) tool (Fund et al , 2002 Fund , Z ., Court , D . and Kramarski , B. 2002. Construction and application of an evaluation tool to assess reflection in teacher training courses. Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 27(6): 485–499.[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]) served for analysing the reflective writing. Construction and application of an evaluation tool to assess reflection in teacher training courses. Assessment

and Evaluation in Higher Education, 27(6): 485–499.[Taylor & Francis Online], [Google Scholar]).

The form dimension includes three categories: lower level reflections ('personal') that refer only to the immediate specific lesson, and two higher level reflections ('linking' and 'critical bridging') that extend beyond the immediate situation. Linking involves coordination between the topic at hand (the 'what', 'how' or 'me as a student'), and previous knowledge and experience. Critical bridging, the highest and most complex form of reflection, requires coordination and integration of multiple sources – personal, practical and theoretical (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987Bereiter, C. and Scardamalia, M. 1987. The psychology of written composition, Hillsdale, J: Erlbaum. [Google Scholar]; Gore & Zeichner , 1991 Gore , J . and Zeichner , K. 1991. Action research and reflective teaching in pre-service teacher education. Teaching and Teacher Education, 7: 119–136.[Crossref], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]; Hatton & Smith, 1995Hatton, N. and Smith, D. 1995. Reflection in teacher education: Towards definition and implementation. Teaching and Teacher Education, 11(1): 33–49.[Crossref], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]). This form provides a 'leap' from the specific experience or event into general principles and the formulation of personal and practical theories or beliefs (Mansvelder-Longayroux et al., 2007Mansvelder-Longayroux , D. D., Beijaard, D. and Verloop, N. 2007. The portfolio as a tool for stimulating reflection by student teachers. Teaching and Teacher Education, 23: 47–62.[Crossref], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]). Thus, higher percentages of linking and critical bridging indicate the beginnings of personal and professional development, hence are defined as 'better' reflection (Borko & Putnam, 1998Borko, H. and Putnam, R. 1998. Editorial.

Selection of Sample and Participants

Participants were English-teacher candidates The thirty teacher candidates in the present study were enrolled in a semester of Practical Training Period during the 2016–2017 academic year.

The study aimed to examine reflective writing development that was done as part of an assessment in a practical training course for student teachers in Princess Noura University.

It also aimed to describe how their use of collaborative writing platforms influences their reflection.

Therefore two groups were selected: one group that used traditional offline medium (handwritten journals) and another who had used an online format (PENFLIP) platform, to write their reflections collaboratively.

Fifteen students who had used the platform to perform their reflective writing were asked to provide a print for their forms during the semester of 13 weeks.

Procedure:

Student Teachers (30) submitted a weekly reflection concerning the previous lesson. They were aided by a suggested list of questions as prompts to guide them while writing reflections. They were also encouraged to write freely, even independently of that list. The reflective writing rubric was presented at the first meeting to serve as a model for analysis and to help direct their writing.

The instructor feedback was intended to help students evaluate their reflections, as well as to model purely, descriptive, low-level reflection and High-level reflection that serve as indicators in the tool.

Every week in the first semester of the study they submit the reflections to the researcher. The experiment group (15) students use a chosen platform –PENFLIP to collaborate in writing their reflections.

At the end of the course, the students were asked to respond to a self check interview asking about the content curation skills they acquire while the usage of the virtual platform when writing their reflections collaboratively.

The students in control group wrote their reflections, and the other group share the peers their reflection and write them collaboratively.

Results:

The experiment group conducted their reflections collaboratively in PENFLIP platform

While the control group performed the reflective writing individually.

It is found that in 40% of the student teachers reflections were coded as non-reflective if they communicated routine, procedural matters or simply described classroom experience ..They expressed concern that because of inexperience, they may struggle to reflect only depending on the guided questions provided as prompts.

Nonreflection:

Misunderstanding of a concept or an idea. An additional basis for coding a meaning unit as nonreflective is if it does not show evidence that teacher Candidates had sufficient understanding of the material or concepts about which they are writing.

Understanding:

24.6 % of Writing coded as demonstrating understanding shows evidence that that the teacher candidate understood the material and concepts but did not relate this understanding to experience. Experiences may be described in light of theoretical knowledge and course content. The teacher candidate may also identify relationships between methods and theoretical knowledge or course content. However, writing that demonstrates understanding, short of being coded as reflection, lacks analysis of how an experience could shed light on the teacher candidate's future educational practice.

Reflection:

Writing coded as reflection shows evidence that relationships are made between conceptual knowledge and the experience of 35.4% student teaching. Reflective writing demonstrates that field experiences are being used to shape student teachers' educational philosophy and practice. Direct application is made between field experience observations and future practices as a teacher. In the experiemnt group student teachers emphasized that collaborative work on PENFLIP was

helping students commit to their own learning through focusing on that engage students in inquiry and dialogue while preparing them for increasingly complex activities.

Table 1: Frequencies of English-Teacher Candidates who Received Depth-of-Reflection

Description candidate Reflection name Reflection	Nonreflection misunderstanding critical	Nonreflection routine	Understanding

Level of reflective writing:

Personal:

Opinion 0 (0.0%) 98 (69.0%) 35 (24.6%) 7(4.9%) 2 (1.4%)

Linking 7 (5.7%) 33 (27.0%) 63 (51.6%) 19 (15.6%) 0 (0.0%)

Critical

Bridging 0 (0.0%) 78 (73.6%) 21 (19.8%) 7 (6.6%) 0 (0.0%)

Table 2. Four-level framework for reflective writing.

Level of reflection	Example and assessment guidelines

D1: Purely descriptive

Example

'The lesson went for 75 minutes and the first 30 minutes was a combination of some direct instruction and student activities'.

Assessment point

The student only describes the action within the classroom without explaining the impact or effect of this action.

D2: Descriptive and evaluative

Example

'I felt I knew the content well. I am getting better at pausing to regain students' attention'.

Assessment Point

The student describes the classroom event and evaluates the action.

R1: Low-level reflection

Example

Typically identified by phrases which begin with 'as …' or 'because …'. E.g. 'I felt my introduction was good as I questioned students about the outcomes for the lesson which enabled them to tie the learning together'.

Assessment point

The student describes the action and evaluates with a qualitative reflection.

R2: High-level reflection

Example

Students struggled with the introductory task because they did not know all of the pre-requisite knowledge. I should have started by determining what they knew. In future I will make 'assessment for learning' a priority in my lesson planning.

Assessment point

The student describes the action, evaluates with reference to principles of quality teaching and includes suggestions for adjusting future instruction.

Discussion Our framework shares a number of features in common with the models of reflective practice developed by Bain et al. (1999), Fund et al. (2002) and Davis (2006). Like these models, the framework in Table 2 differentiates between simple recall of classroom events and more sophisticated analysis of teaching (Davis, 2006) which demonstrate reasoning (Bain et al., 1999), linking and critical bridging (Fund et al., 2002). In this way, the framework promotes depth in reflective writing which previous research has identified as being readily and positively responded to by preservice teachers (Bain et al., 2002). Rather than simply categorising responses as 'descriptive' or 'reflective',

another key advantage of the framework produced in the current study is that each level provides a finer-grained analysis of pre-service teachers' reflective responses than that of Davis (2006). This is achieved by recognising that there are qualitative differences in the way they 'describe' and 'reflect on' events in the classroom. In doing so, the framework provides a more detailed scaffold for pre-service teachers in developing more sophisticated and nuanced approaches to their reflective writing.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of collaborative writing platform that can provide more reflection toward the documentation of teacher candidates' reflective thinking. As shown in this study, the Kember et al. (2008) protocol can provide guidance to document reflection.

Teacher-education programs are accountable for demonstrating that teacher candidates

Examine reasons for the progress made by students or lack of progress. Teacher

Candidates in this study engaged in reflective thinking, and the Kember et al. Framework

Provided guidance, illuminating ways teacher candidates considered their beliefs or

Knowledge in the light of evidence. Currently there is no widely accepted protocol in

Place to determine levels of reflective thinking demonstrated by teacher candidates. This

Is a problem in need of further attention, given that teacher-education programs tend to

State that a key goal of the program includes encouraging teachers to be reflective

practitioners When the aim of a teacher-education program includes developing teachers who will be reflective practitioners, it would help programs to use a validated virtual platform to

assess depth of reflection in student writing to monitor and report progress toward that goal.

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