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Teaching Writing Using Online Tools: An Experimental Study at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences

Elamparithy Selvarasu[1] ✉ **, Aju Thomas[2]** , **Iyyappan Sundareswaran[3]** , **Abdul Rahaman[4]** , **Syeda Farzana[5]** **and Meethiyan Kunju Pareli[6]**

[12]Research Coordinator, University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, Oman
[3]Senior Lecturer, University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Salalah, Oman
[4]Registrar, University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Ibra, Oman
[56]Lecturer, University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Ibra, Oman
✉ **Corresponding Author**: Elamparithy Selvarasu, **E-mail**: parithy@ict.edu.om

ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
	Teaching writing has always been a more challenging task for EFL teachers as a result of its innate structural complexities and the linguistic sophistication required to accomplish writing. The pandemic and the resultant online teaching has made it even more challenging. Motivating the students, making the online classes interesting and maintaining the efficacy of the offline classes are some of the daunting tasks that stare at the EFL teachers at this juncture. With a view to addressing these problems, UTAS-Salalah and Ibra jointly conducted a webinar i.e. Teaching Writing Using Internet Tools for the teachers. The online platforms and tools discussed during the webinar, the literature survey, and the participants' feedback form the core of this research paper. The literature survey deals with both the problems of teaching writing and the problems of teaching it online. Then, it also discusses various online tools suggested by other researchers to make teaching writing more effective and fruit-bearing. A feedback questionnaire with Likert scale has been used to measure the efficacy of the proposed tools. The findings appear to confirm the usefulness of the said tools in teaching writing from the teachers' point of view.

1. Introduction

The teaching fraternity has been summarily pushed into a new era of education i.e. the world of digital education. The outbreak of coronavirus has broadly initiated the rise of digital literacy and teaching is actively taking place over the online platform. Caught unawares, the response was lukewarm in the beginning. Nonetheless, much progress has been made as the majority of schools and higher educational institutions are already into virtual teaching. Various teaching and learning activities are being conducted online to provide meaningful learning experiences. Pursuing the globally trodden path, the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Oman has started conducting virtual classes and the university has been using various online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom and Moodle for the interaction between teachers and students depending on the needs of the students. This online learning phenomenon is certainly very challenging for any EFL language learners and the students of the UTAS are no different. Unlike other communicative skills, writing is more difficult to teach online by dint of its intricate intersectionality.

Westwood (2008) states that in this age of information, writing is paper-based and utilizes other forms of substantial media such as multimedia platforms. However, students require practical guidance and feedback from the teachers to improve their writing process. On top of that, online learning can make students feel less connected with their peers and teachers and frustrated because of failing to meet the technological expectations of online study (Holley and Oliver, 2010). Besides, students in the Middle East are generally less interested in writing. It seems the only reason they practice writing is to complete the classroom-

based activities. In reality, it is tremendously challenging for the teachers to make the students like their writing activities. Therefore, it is essential to use effective online writing tools to bridge the gap between learners and teachers by providing them with an interesting and effective learning environment in which students receive comprehensive input. Keeping that in mind, The UTAS-Ibra has been using the H5P plugin for creating interactive activities. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a group of researchers from the said institution conducted an action research experiment to explore the effectiveness of the H5P plugin and Moodle. The findings of the research show that the new H5P plugin is hugely successful in making classes interactive (Elamparithy et al., 2020).

In pursuit of effective methods and platforms to teach writing online, UTAS-Salalah and Ibra jointly conducted a webinar i.e. Teaching Writing Using Internet Tools for the teachers. The online platforms and tools discussed during the webinar, the literature survey, and the participants' feedback form the core of this research paper. The literature survey deals with both the problems of teaching writing and the problems of teaching it online. Then, it also discusses various internet tools suggested by other researchers to make teaching writing more effective and fruit-bearing.

2. Research Methodology
This action research project is an experimental study as it intends to study the efficacy and usefulness of the internet platforms and tools that help teachers deliver effective online writing lessons. The methodology adopted in this study is that of a pre-experimental design. The feedback tool would be a questionnaire based on Likert scale and the feedback of the participants would be used to gauge the efficacy of the said tools and make recommendations.

2.1 Location and Sample
The research took place in the UTAS- Salalah and Ibra. Sixty teachers from these universities took part in the webinar. Out of these participants, 41 teachers submitted their feedback and these teachers constituted the sample.

3. The Backdrop – Literature Survey
3.1 The Problems of Teaching Writing
Teaching writing skills to language learners in general and EFL learners in particular is the most challenging task due to various complexities that are inherent to the process of writing. Writing skills are vitally important for anyone in order to communicate and self-express. More importantly, writing is an inalienable part of academics. Stressing on the significance of writing skills, Harmer (1998) stated, "the reasons for teaching writing to students of English as a foreign language include reinforcement, language development, learning style, and most importantly, writing as a skill in its own right." The teachers of English face quite a few challenges as a second language.

Motivating the students continues to be a major hurdle in teaching writing. Beyond being disobedient, disinterest among the L2 learners is obvious (Mukminin, 2014; Moses et al., 2019).   Reluctance in learning reflects the lack of motivation among the learners (Abrar, 2016). Apart from the disinterested students, inappropriate teaching material and methodology could also cause problems in teaching writing. According to Brown (1995), "Material is any systematic description of the techniques and exercises to be used in classroom teaching". The appropriate teaching material, which meets the students' expectations and needs, may decide the success of the teaching and learning process. In other words, inappropriate material would hinder the objective of the process. A heterogeneous group of students is another challenge to teachers of writing skills. Not all students have similar writing ability. On the one hand, some students have higher efficiency in writing skills and hence they grasp and practice new aspects of writing skills like a duck takes to water. On the other hand, some students with lower efficiency take longer learning new aspects of writing skills and need more time and assistance. Hence, teachers of a heterogeneous group of students find it difficult to cater to the needs of students all at the same time. Using common teaching material or activities in the class becomes almost impossible (Mukminin, 2014).

One of the basic components of writing is vocabulary. Deficiency of this component leads to ineffective writing. Students who possess a good vocabulary repertoire do not find it difficult to use appropriate words to express their thoughts or ideas in writing. Nevertheless, students with limited vocabulary find it difficult to do so. Moreover, this deficiency affects the students' confidence to learn other language skills as well. As has been demonstrated by many researchers, an affective filter is the most significant factor that determines the students' motivational level. Therefore, this also tends to determine the pace of their learning. Another important component of writing is grammar, as it forms the skeleton of any language. By virtue of being the core element, grammar is mandatory for any language skills, especially writing skills. The objective of any writing is to convey an idea or thought to the reader effectively without ambiguity. Therefore, a lack of grammatical knowledge is quite an impediment for many students. Consequently, teachers of writing will have to keep in mind all these factors and address them all adequately while delivering their lessons.

3.2 The Problems of Teaching Writing Online

There are certain challenges for teaching writing online too. Even though there are many advantages to online teaching, the disadvantages cannot be disregarded. Instructors, who are engaged in teaching different writing courses in various levels of teaching, could understand the range of challenges. The range varies from linguistic issues to technological issues and these issues are to be dealt with due diligence and seriousness. Many experts believe that online teaching is entirely different from face-to-face teaching. The materials used in traditional teaching may not be suitable for online teaching, and thus, it may be difficult to adapt well to the new learning environment for both instructors and students. Susan Ko and Steve Rossen (2017) said "a strict translation of what you normally do on the ground into the online environment isn't always desirable." As traditional materials are not much of use for online teaching, there will be a lack of materials to teach online. According to Scott Warnock (2009), resources to teach writing online are rather insufficient. He says that materials specifically designed for teaching writing online and the teaching philosophy that accompanies online composition instruction are scarce.

New materials for teaching writing online are made by instructors to teach their students. However, the format of the material differs from that of the materials used in traditional teaching. As the format differs in its nature, some students are not able to cope with online learning. Mundy-Henderson and Callie Martin (2020) have mentioned that the new format is different from the traditional writing materials and it went contrary to what students wanted or expected. It is one of the main challenges of teaching writing online. Some instructors even believe that writing cannot be taught online for a group of classes as it is individual-centric and involves a person-specific process. In addition, feedback cannot be given as others may help the students. Besides, the students also lose interaction and peer critiques that go hand in hand with the writing process in the online class. As a result, students do not receive the normal level of writing instruction.

Instructors who fail to adopt new and appropriate teaching strategies for online instruction may not perform well in online classrooms. This is one of the biggest challenges in teaching writing online. Zamparini (2016) mentioned the principles formulated by the committee formed by "The Conference on College Composition and Communication" (CCCC) to tackle the challenges of online writing classes and among those principles, principle 3 is about teaching strategies and it strongly advocates adaptation in consonance with the local needs. Also, students should be given proper and general training on the technological aspects of learning writing online. Zamparini (2016) also pointed out by citing principal 10 of the committee that each course should offer a preliminary training session conducted by lab technicians and instructors where students can get familiarized with the technological aspects.

3.3 Online Tools for Teaching Writing

Different tools are used to teach writing in online classrooms. These tools are essential to make teaching easy, effective and hassle-free. Google apps assume a significant place among the applications that can be used for a virtual writing class. Afrianto Daud (2019) stated that using Google apps would be ideal for teaching writing. Gmail, Google Doc, Google Drive, Google Meet, and Google classroom serve the very purpose of teaching writing effectively, from typing a writing draft and storing it to creating a scheduled online class. Teachers can even mark students' works, provide feedback, and score for students' works.

Paragraph Punch is another application that can be extensively used for teaching paragraph writing skills. Fitri Handayani and Nurmadhona Handayani (2020) have mentioned that it provides students with writing steps such as pre-writing, writing, organizing, editing, rewriting, and publishing. Besides, ProWritingAid is another tool that helps teach writing more effectively. Ariyanto et al. (2019) said, "ProWritingAid is a new web-based program to evaluate a text". It gives assistance to correct grammatical errors, spelling errors, and punctuation errors in the writing draft. Many other tools are also available online; however, the selection of these tools should be decided based on the level and competency of students.

4. The Webinar on Teaching Writing Using Online Tools

The English Language Centres of UTAS- Salalah and Ibra conducted a webinar entitled "**Teaching Writing Skills Using Internet Tools"** on **23 September 2020**. More than 50 teachers from these two institutions attended the session. In the session, teachers were shown the practical use of several online tools and the tools are as follows:

H5P-Interactive Book
H5P- Dictation Tool
H5P- Free Writing Tool
ind Map, Concept Map, Character Map

KNOWORD & KAHOOT- GUESS THE WORD/ H5P- DIALOGUE CARDS
MICROSOFT TEAMS ASSIGNMENT

Fig 1. Online Tools for Writing Classes

Teaching writing involves a number of steps like activating prior knowledge, introducing vocabulary items, planning i.e. brainstorming and writing. Even while writing, different elements like grammar, punctuation and stylistics are at work. Therefore, the online tools ought to cover this entire spectrum in order for the teaching to be effective. Keeping this in mind, the research team chose a range of online tools. The first step is activating prior knowledge and it could be fun with tools like Kahoot and Knoword. While Kahoot could be used for any subject or topic, Knoword is extremely useful for vocabulary. Then comes 'introducing vocabulary' and H5P dialogue cards are really useful as the teachers could use relevant images to introduce the new vocabulary items. Once vocabulary items are introduced, teachers could use either 'Knoword' or 'H5P-Dicatation Tool'. Dictation tools help students remember and recall the vocabulary with the context. After that, the teachers will have to help the students plan their writing. 'Mind maps', 'character maps' and 'concept maps' would be invaluable at this stage of teaching. One online platform that helps draw quality mind maps is www.mindmup.com and another online platform is www.readwritethink.org. The latter could also prove to be of immense assistance while teaching email and CV as they help students draft them every step of the way. The next logical step after planning is writing. Teachers expect the students to use some keywords and discourse markers in their writing and 'H5P Free Writing Tool' would assist the teachers by automatically marking the writing based on the keywords and discourse markers. However, teachers ought to key in the expected keywords and discourse markers and allot marks before they assign the activity to the students. Though the writing activities are to be marked by the teachers themselves for grammar, punctuation and content deficiencies, the free writing tool makes their job a bit easier as the students are already informed of their mistakes with regard to the keywords and discourse markers. Another important tool that makes teaching writing a pleasurable experience is 'Microsoft Teams Assignment'. The MS Team assignment is a tool that would allow the teachers to practice collaborative writing. ESL teachers value collaborative writing, as it makes writing lessons more participative and interesting for the students. This tool helps them achieve the same in online writing classes. More importantly, it would be easier for the teachers to keep data and evidence on the same platform. Like Moodle, 'MS Teams Assignment' allows the teachers to monitor the writing of the students. This is a vitally important feature as it helps give the students constructive feedback while writing. Last but not least, the 'H5P Interactive Book' helps the teachers organize their presentation effectively. Though only H5P activities could be added in the interactive book, all relevant links could very well be added. After the presentation, there was a Q&A session and the teachers were visibly enthusiastic and positive about the webinar.

5. The Analysis of the Feedback

After the webinar, a questionnaire was administered to collect feedback from the participants. As many as 41 participants gave their feedback on the questionnaire and each question was to focus on one particular writing tool to get tool-specific feedback from the teachers who attended the webinar. The questions also mentioned when the online is to be used to make the feedback even more context-specific. The responses are to be registered using the Likert scale but for the last open-ended question. The questionnaire had the following questions:

1. THE INTERACTIVE BOOK ON H5P IS A VERY USEFUL TOOL TO TEACH WRITING SKILLS
2. DICTATION TOOL IS USEFUL DURING THE INTRODUCTORY PRE-WRITING STAGE.
3. MIND MAP, CONCEPT MAP AND CHARACTER MAP ARE HELPFUL DURING BRAINSTORMING AND ELICITING RESPONSES.
4. GUESS THE WORD AND DIALOGUE CARDS ARE GREAT TOOLS TO INTRODUCE AND REVISE VOCABULARY ITEMS NECESSARY FOR THE WRITING TASK.
5. THE KEYWORDS FREE WRITING TOOL IS VERY USEFUL WHEN IT COMES TO ASSESSING AND ASSISTING THE STUDENTS.
6. MICROSOFT TEAMS ASSIGNMENT IS EXTREMELY USEFUL FOR CONDUCTING COLLABORATIVE WRITING SESSIONS.
7. THE WEBINAR WAS USEFUL AND PRACTICAL.
8.YOUR INVALUABLE SUGGESTIONS FOR THE BETTERMENT OF THE WEBINAR

Fig 2. Feedback Questions

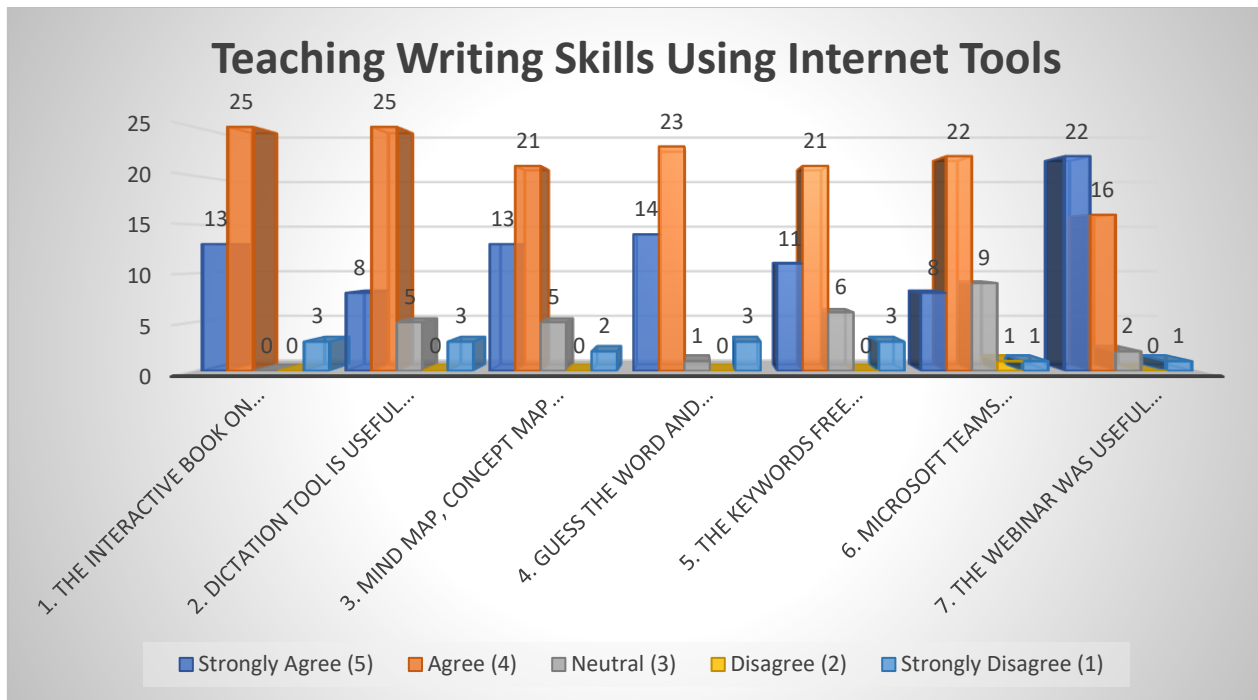**Teaching Writing Skills Using Internet Tools**

**Fig 3-
The Feedback of Individual Tools**

The analysis of the feedback showed that:

An overwhelming majority, i.e. 38 out of 41 respondents (92.68 %), think that 'the Interactive Book on H5P' is a useful tool for teaching writing skills. Moreover, 25 respondents (60.97 %) agreed and 13 (31.70 %) strongly agreed with the statement. As many as 33 (80.48%) respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that 'Dictation Tool' is useful during the introductory pre-writing stage. With regard to mind maps, 34 respondents or 82.92% expressed their view that 'mind map, concept map and character maps' are really helpful during brainstorming and eliciting responses. A majority of the respondents (37 respondents or 90.24 %) opined that 'Guess the Word and Dialogue Cards' are great tools to introduce and revise vocabulary items necessary for the writing task. A freewriting tool is available on H5P and 32 respondents (78.04 %) agreed that 'the keywords free writing tool' is very useful for assessing and assisting the students. Moreover, 30 respondents (73.17 %) agreed that Microsoft Teams Assignment is extremely useful for collaborative writing sessions.
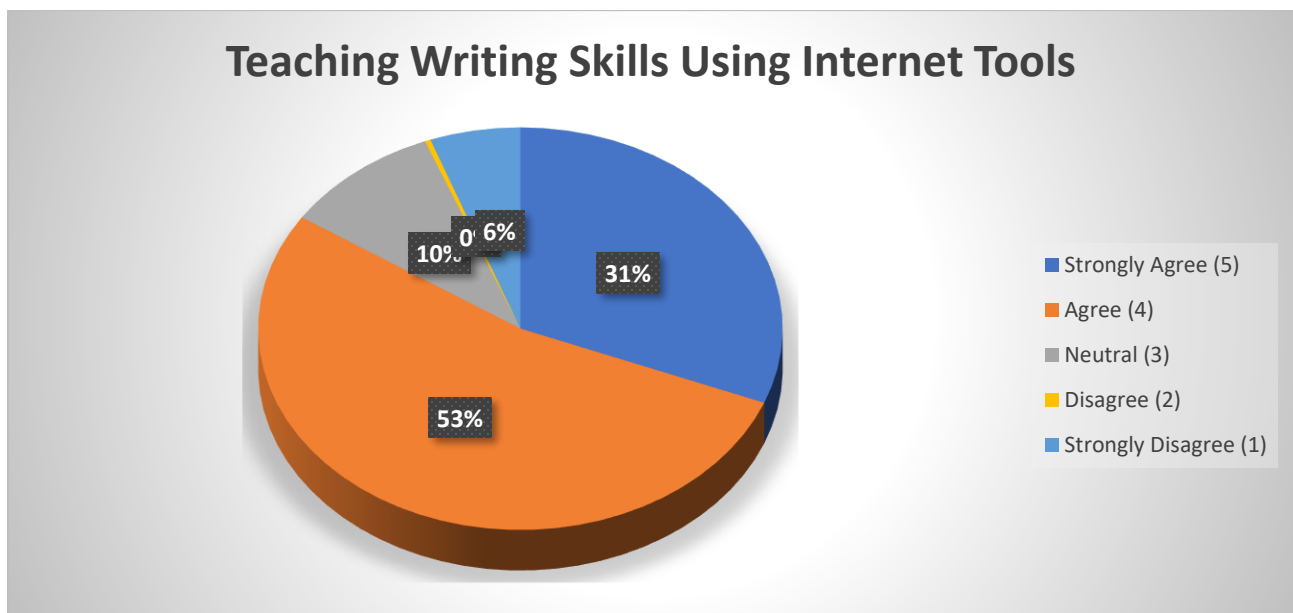
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F**ig 4. Teachers' Feedback on the Webinar**

A great majority of the respondents rated the webinar, on a scale of 4 and above, as useful and practical, where 5 strongly agree and 1 strongly disagree. As can be seen from the feedback results, 84%, i.e. 34 out of 41 respondents, had a positive view about the usefulness of the webinar i.e. Teaching Writing Using Internet Tools. Considering the constraints online teaching imposes on the teachers, a satisfaction rate of 84% appears to validate the efficacy of the webinar and the online writing tools discussed during the webinar.

6. Limitations of the Research Study and Suggestions for Further Research

This research study was done based on the feedback given by 41 teachers from two universities in Oman i.e. UTAS - Salalah and Ibra. Only a few tools were considered for the experimental study though there are many other online tools as well. This research study is a pre-experimental study by design and hence carries the limitations of a typical pre-experimental study. This research study only investigates the perceptions of the teachers. The same study could be conducted using the standard experimental design. The study could include all the UTAS teachers from Oman with pre-teaching and post-teaching feedback. The research study could be pursued with the students of UTAS from different levels. This study could be expanded by including different tools and then carrying out a repeated measures study involving the old and new tools.

7. Conclusion

Having carefully studied the feedback data, it is abundantly clear that the participants of the research study are overwhelmingly positive about the efficacy of the online tools in enlivening the online writing classes. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen how this webinar experience would enrich their actual teaching. Having said that, it is quite legitimate to conclude that the said online tools are expected to turn the online writing classes into a participative pedagogical phenomenon.

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