



Collaborative Writing on a Digital Platform: Measuring Gains of EFL Learners in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Writing is usually the last skill to be touched upon in language classrooms, and more so, in the EFL or ESL classroom. Even so, postponing or the tendency to avoid the writing task is a common hindrance created by the learners, but is definitely one that retards the learning of the skill. The current study aimed to examine the efficacy of working collaboratively on digital platforms to enhance learners' engagement with writing in addition to boosting their writing proficiency. The participants in this study are forty-eight advanced level EFL learners at Qassim University. The study used both questionnaire and pre and post tests to collect data from the sample. Intervention lasted eight weeks and comparative results were computed using descriptive statistics in the standardised IELTS pre and post-test components for writing proficiency. Results showed a raise of between 47.36%- 19.14 in group output from the first to the last week of the intervention. The paired sample t-value at 3.0402 suggests that the results support the null hypothesis that Collaborative Writing on a Digital Platform (CWDP) helps enhance writing performance in EFL learners since the difference between pre and post tests is statistically significant. Results obtained from a perceptions questionnaire evaluating learners' attitudes to CWDP clearly indicate a decided preference for the approach, both for its collaborative and tech value. The study concludes that collaborative writing in digital spaces contributes positively to enhancing Saudi university EFL learners' global writing proficiency and should be incorporated into the regular curriculum.

Keywords: Collaborative classroom; digital platform; enhance; EFL learners; proficiency; writing

1. Introduction

Most language learners find writing difficult because it is perceived to require more effort in production (Al-Ahdal et al., 2014; Algamal et al., 202; Bin-Hady et al., 2020), and thought than speaking does. In most cases, speaking is a spontaneous act whereas writing comes loaded with notions such as grammatical accuracy, appropriacy of expression, and considerations of implicature, all of which make it challenging for the learner, especially the L2 learner with his/ her limited exposure, in terms of effort and time. For the foreign or L2 learner, poor confidence in the ability to successfully communicate via writing further becomes a cause for distress. These learners tend to

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avoid writing tasks at all costs because they perceive it to be a task that each one of them must undertake alone, with no scope for discussion with peers or the teacher, having to spin coherent and cohesive language through the application of one's mind. Procrastination seems to be the only rescue for the thus stranded foreign language learner.

This study builds on the notion that writing is a process. Teaching L2 writing to learners who have already been in the educational system for a number of years goes way beyond the acquisition of the necessary motor-mechanical skills that one must possess to be able to write. However, with the teachers' idea of the smallest unit of writing as being the sentence, the focus automatically falls on grammatical correctness. While it is true that the ability to write a complete, coherent sentence in L2 is an aim of teaching writing, it is certainly not the aim of good writing. Focusing wholly on grammar as the goal, on the other hand, precludes concentrating on accuracy and correctness of the sentence, presumably the basic unit of writing, rather than on developing the ability to express oneself in the L2, an exercise that will likely go beyond a single sentence. This brings up the issue of the paragraph as the basic unit of writing, an assumption that shifts the teachers' focus to enabling learning in stringing together of sentences into a coherent, cohesive block of information expressing a single idea. Seen as a process of expression of an idea or a group of ideas, language takes the center as the means of expressing the idea(s), the paragraph or the discourse is targeted to have unity and flow of sentences structured around the idea or notion. The emphasis thus, is no longer on correctness essentially, though that is desirable, but on the flow or fluency of expression. Other features that are desirable are organization of ideas and sequencing of sentences for their ability to communicate. While efficient organization of ideas gives coherence to ideas (concretized as sentences) expressed in a logical sequence, cohesion is a linguistic process that uses linking and connecting devices to keep the sentences together.

Teachers of writing in the conventional language classroom are accustomed to emphasize on grammatical correctness as a must in good writing. Indeed grammar is best taught through writing activities precisely because that places it in a context. The learner's dilemma comes when he/ she finds him/ herself looking to choose between form and meaning. But then, grammatical accuracy will fit into the picture only when the learner has certain concrete ideas that they want to communicate before attempting to communicate them correctly. While writing too, the learner has to be mindful to the reader, the one for whom the writing is intended. When working individually, the learner has to internalize, as it were, the reader and evaluate or anticipate how their writing will be interpreted, and make whatever alterations are necessary to make the piece clear. In conventional classrooms, the teacher plays the role of the reader, but with the deep inroads that technology has made into the educational process, every learner can be enabled to take on this role. This training of learners as readers of their peers' writing is, in a way, developing their critical awareness of their own writing skills, eventually achieving an autonomy in judging their own writing output. In a collaborative writing environment, this training of learners as readers comes in handy in accomplishing one of the most tedious steps in writing, viz. editing and rewriting the earlier production. It may be noted that the process of thinking the ideas prior to writing is not a linear, coherent one contrary to these features being central to the written product. Planning, therefore, is a must for good writing and collaboration in digital medium to accomplish this step is really easy. Many studies have been conducted on the Saudi context examining EFL learners writing skills (Al-Ahdal & Hussein, 2020; Al-Ahdal et al, 2014; Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021). However, this study explores the use of digital platforms in collaborative writing. It specifically checks whether technological tools and apps have made it a reality for learners placed far away from each other and the teacher, to work collectively on an assignment, participate in an activity, or accomplish a task. The actual job of accurate writing, on the hand, comes at the very end of this long process, not at the beginning.

2. Literature Review

In a learning style based approach to collaborative learning, Kuo et al., (2015) conducted an experimental study on EFL university learners. Group homogeneity has already been cited earlier in this study as one of the desirable conditions for collaborative learning to succeed. The findings also indicated that learners performed better when grouped homogeneously according to their learning styles. Another factor that this study established as central to performance success is online collaborative learning compared to the conventional pen-paper approach. The study rightly points out that to learn a language for communicative purposes, such as English is being opted by speakers of other languages, interactive and discussion platforms are indispensable. Both of these features are adequately offered by the online learning tools. However, the study did not specify which online collaborative learning platform was used in the experiment.

Virtual learning has expanded to include not only conventional lessons to the online mode, but also, learning activities designed for collaborative learning. Karaman and Ozen (2016) used a five-stage model (FSM) to demonstrate how such approach can be used in second language acquisition. The study noted that group communication in SL: i. Is more comfortable (Balasooriya et al., 2010) due to collaboration via multi-communication channels with immediacy of communication; ii. has students sharing common goals, successes and failures (Tsiatsos & Konstantinidis, 2012); iii. Offers tutors the flexibility to create suitable collaborative learning environments given the large number of collaborative learning tools available (Loureiro & Bettencourt, 2014). Taking social-constructivist approaches to learning, Liu et al., (2015) created language learning tasks for ESL teachers to use as teaching tools meant to engage learners in online collaboration and collaborative knowledge building. The aim was to give the participants opportunities to display the knowledge they internalized during collaborative learning knowledge building. The medium of learning were four social network sites (social network sites for language learning) and the objective was to see how far these social network could facilitate teaching and learning of ESL. Study findings indicated that the sites had potential as teaching and learning tools in SL and the features that rendered them useful were: heightened learner autonomy, opportunities for collaboration, and affordances of knowledge building experiences. Further, the sites offered the ‘knowledgable other’ to all the participants with native speakers giving feedback to non-native speakers, and the latter seeking feedback from more proficient learners. Using a socio-constructivist approach, the study establishes the use of social networking sites as teaching tools in SL. In a descriptive research with undergraduate students, Chandra (2015) concluded that as compared to individual learning, achievement means are much higher in collaborative learning in English. She added that the benefits of collaborative learning are many, including development of healthy attitudes towards collective work, wider range of thinking, long term knowledge retention, peer interaction, and teacher-student interaction. Lastly, small group collaborative learning comes with some added advantages such as sensitivity to diversity, interpersonal development, and immediate and individual feedback. In a study focusing on university learners’ reading skills, Khairunissa et al., (2019) used five of the nine reading comprehension (meaning-making) indicators viz., main idea, vocabulary, detailed information, inference, and reference. The study concluded that a collaborative approach significantly improved reading output of the learners. When the group sizes of 5 to 7 members were engaged in collaboratively learning, Sotto (2021) found collaborative learning had significant effect on learners’ cognitive dimension or their academic output. Under the affective dimension, sympathizing scored the highest weighted mean, followed by respecting, and assigning roles, in that order. The other dimensions of learning that were measured in the study were skill development and collaborative skills. The skill that was least affected by the intervention was the former. The skills measured in this study were psychomotor (origination, adaptation, mechanism, perception). The importance of feedback in writing development is undeniable. However, seen from

the teacher's vantage, it may not always be possible, even if necessary, to give prompt feedback. But peer feedback or collaboration in groups can solve this deadlock. This also considerably reduces learners' anxiety towards individual performance and enables them to take an objective viewpoint of the inadequacies of the writing output. Though inconvenient, collaborative writing whether as a group endeavor or as a peer activity, can enable learners to gain critical thinking. Using computers has added to the possibility of collaborative participation in writing with ease of focussed attention on organization in writing using the numerous possibilities in the edit function. Tileston (2014) enunciated that even in physical classrooms, encouraging collaborative learning ensures that learners are being prepared for the job market with heightened abilities of articulation and listening skills. Further, that cooperative and collaborative learning strategies help "solidify" and practice what they learned, aiding individual assessment since the learning is available in the long-term memory. In another study on collaborative learning in higher education, Scager et al., (2020) evaluated the learning potential of the approach as an instructional method. Interviews with nine focus groups showed that factors that ensured effective collaboration were learner autonomy and self-regulatory behavior alongwith adequately challenging group tasks. Kirschner (2001) clarified that collaborative, cooperative, and team-based learning are fundamentally the same though sometimes defined differently. Finally, the study summarized that there were eight factors that positively impacted the success of collaboration: Autonomy, task in terms of density and caomplexity, rewards, group size, team and task regulation, positive interdependence, constructive interaction, and mutual support and motivation. The role of teachers is just as significant in ensuring the success of collaborative learning as is the role of learners. Azar et al., (2021) analyzed using thematic analysis the views on collaborative learning of five randomly selected teachers at a private university in Malaysia. The perceptions of students were evaluated using a questionnaire. Results showed that both were positively inclined to the use of collaborative learning, students felt it was beneficial to their learning and teachers were certain that it encouraged students to use their social skills in the interactive environment that the approach offered in leadership skills classroom. The study contradicted findings of an earlier study (Barron, 2003) that ran contrary to it such as, that the collaboration was poor quality among members in collaborative groups, and that group members were not attentive to the views of others in the group. As far as the teachers' perspectives in earlier studies are concerned, this study contradicted the previous finding that CL is a big challenge for teachers (Gillies & Boyle, 2010) because they encounter issues in monitoring learner progress while they work in groups, fail to monitor them closely, and face obstacles in designing tasks conducive to collaborative learning.

3. Google Docs: A Sharing and Collaboration Tool

With technology finding deeper inroads into classrooms, learners everywhere are familiar with Microsoft Word as a word processing tool. Beginner to advance level learners use Word to prepare notes, create assignments, and in general, as a technological replacement for pen and paper. Functions like editing, formatting, and designing of documents were all availbale at a click in Word. Google Docs fills in on an important function given that a great deal of learning is now in the online mode: Sharing the documents in real time with peers and teachers. It enables multiple users to create, edit, and share documents online and access them from any computer with an internet connection. These functions can also be achieved on smartphones by using its mobile app. This collaborative feature of Google Docs makes it a great tool for remote learning especially when learners need to work in tandem in pairs or groups. The app allows all users to see whatever changes others make on a document which they can download or email at any point of time without bothering to save it as this is an automatic function in the app.

3.1. Research Questions

The study focused on two main research questions:

1. Does CWDS enhance advanced EFL learners' group and individual writing proficiency on a standardized writing test?
2. What are the perceptions of advanced university EFL learners on the use of collaborative writing on a digital platform?

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This research used two quantitative tools to collect data: a self-report questionnaire and pre and post tests to analyze learners' perceptions on collaborative writing on a digital platform and to measure the direction and magnitude of change in learners' writing proficiency. With the available literature on collaborative writing and use of technology in group learning as enumerated upon earlier in this study, ideas central to CWDP were culled to prepare a twenty two item questionnaire to evaluate participants views on CWDP. The other source of shortlisting the specific content areas for the questionnaire, a small scale quantitative study in the form of a focus group interview was conducted as suggested by Dörnyei (2003). This was followed by elimination of indirect questions which were not of primary interest to this research. The design for the instrument used multi-item scales based on the two research questions. The questionnaire response options were numerically weighted using the five-point Likert Scale where 1 represents Strongly Disagree and 5 represents Strongly Agree, and all negatively worded items had reversed scores. The preliminary questionnaire was validated by three language teachers with experience in collaborative teaching to language learners, though their subject areas were English, their experience was gained with non-Arabic mother tongue learners. Consequent to their validation, eight items were dropped or merged into the others, making the final questionnaire with fourteen items long. All items were closed-ended to rule out chances of ambiguity in the responses. The final item analysis was facilitated by administering the questionnaire with a pilot study of four EFL undergraduate learners not included in the final survey. Only a few minor changes to ensure absolute clarity in the items were made consequent to the pilot testing.

5. Sample

The sample of study was strictly purposive and convenience based since it evaluated the progress and attitudes of only the high achieving advanced learners (N= 48) enrolled in an EFL program at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. All the participants were Saudi male students sharing similar demographic status (the inclusion criteria in this study) including type of education, number of years of EFL education, and comparable CGP scores in the last exam conducted at the university. Thus, the entire sample was largely homogenous. Participation in the survey was voluntary and only those learners who fulfilled the inclusion criteria were asked to participate in the survey. The apps used were Google Docs, Grammarly, and CorrectEnglish. While the participants worked in groups with Google Docs, they also worked individually to improve the group output using the latter apps

Tileston (2014) noted that cooperative learning is one of the "best practices" in teaching students who are comfortable around technology as it gives them the leverage to stay connected with others at all times and in all places. At the same time, homogeneity and eye contact amongst the group members are specific requirements for true cooperative learning. In the model of this study, given the exclusively app-based design, though homogeneity within the group was ensured, close contact for the

learners to observe body language and hearing others' opinions could not be ensured. However, the other desirable elements as suggested by Tileston (2014) include:

- a. Reflection: Time and opportunity to reflect on individual and group work;
- b. Individual achievement: Opportunities for individual learner evaluation;
- c. Collaboration: Accomplishment of meaningful work and its sharing;
- d. Higher order thinking: Adequate opportunity is there for every individual to think and share;
- e. Emotional realm: Learner bonding is encouraged and fostered;
- f. Social skills: Social skills are demonstrated within the groups.

The intervention in this study was planned such that the collaborative writing assignments were not hurried tasks, but such that allowed learners to think a great deal, share their ideas freely on Google Docs, help peers and be helped by their ideas, perceive the activity as group effort and its success as collective achievement, and generally build an atmosphere of camaraderie. In short, the study instrument was designed to test learners' perceptions on the elements that Tileston (2014) suggested as being desirable in collaborative learning.

The group size was kept at four following Marzano (2007) who summarized the results of studies on cooperative learning. Results showed that discussing the learning not only affords learners a learning environment that is "brain-friendly", it also makes connections in the brain for them to remember the knowledge by forming schema. Another significant conclusion arrived at by Marzano (2007) was that group size is an important factor to endure optimization of the benefits in collaborative learning, while group size of upto four shows gainful learning, larger groups affect learning negatively.

This study followed a free writing strategy on Google Docs in which the two elements of writing that is, the *what* and *how* of writing are both decided by the learners. Free writing is important for developing learners' creativity. To start the learners in the process of collaborative composition, the researcher provided each of the groups with between ten to twelve hints on the topic arrived at together with the group members. The hints were then enhanced through a single brainstorming session where the participants were free to add points to the hints document. At first, the hints or ideas were randomly saved on Google Docs, but once the brainstorming was over, the researcher left it to the group to organize the points into a logical sequence and go ahead with the actual writing process. Participants were, however, encouraged to use their senses of sight, hearing, smell, and feeling to add authentic information. The aim was to elicit careful observations from them which would have required precise use of language. Each group (code named A-L) was to compose three short essays in the eight weeks long intervention, using Grammarly and CorrectEnglish to check for sentence construction and grammatical accuracy. Subsequent to every submission (maximum duration for which was twelve days), three days were allotted to collective evaluation with the researcher's participation only on the third day, and finalization of the changes suggested. Throughout the composing and writing periods, the researcher observed each of the groups for participation by the members and maintained a record of first-hand observations. The focal areas for these were: ideas generated during brainstorming, organization of ideas in a logical sequence, identification of topical sentences in writing, development of the topic, cohesion of sentences, coherence of ideas, and language accuracy. As a facilitator in the learning process, the researcher only intervened for positive feedback by nudging reticent participants for greater involvement, ensuring the prevalence of a positive learning atmosphere, and offering help with writing when specifically asked by any of the group members.

6. Data Collection, Analysis, and Results

Group scores for the free writing samples (n= 36) generated by the twelve Collaborative Writing groups on Google Docs over the intervention duration marked on a scale of 70 with 10 points for each of the seven criterion of evaluation stated above.

Table 1. Group scores in collaborative writing on Google Docs

Group	CWDP score 1	CWDP score 2	CWDP score 3
A	43	51	57
B	39	44	52
C	47	52	56
D	41	49	55
E	44	53	57
F	42	51	58
G	45	49	54
H	38	44	56
I	40	47	57
J	44	53	59
K	41	47	53
L	43	52	58

Group scores in the three free writing exercises on Google Docs with the assistance of Grammarly and CorrectEnglish tools showed an increase in performance in all the twelve groups, though no fixed pattern of hike could be deduced from the data. At the beginning of the intervention, however, the lowest performing group was H at a score of 38, whose performance rose into 44 by the end of the second CWDP output, followed by 56 by the end of the intervention, which is an increase of 47.36%. The highest scoring group was C at a score of 47 at the beginning of the intervention, by the end of which the group scored 56 with an increase of 19.14%. Thus the range of improvement in group-wise performance in collaborative writing on Google Docs is wide at 47.36%- 19.14%, but in none of the cases was a drop in performance registered. This clearly establishes the efficacy of CWDP in the case of advanced EFL learners in the study. The data is depicted graphically in Figure 1 below.

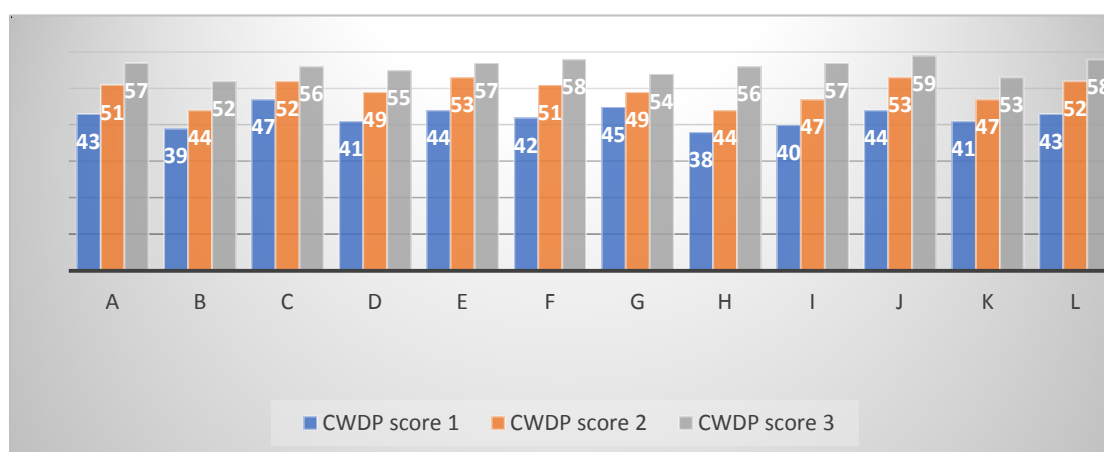


Figure 1. Group scores in collaborative writing on Google Docs

The first part of the study was completed with the post test: a standardized IELTS writing proficiency free test similar to the pre test was used in this stage. The aim of the study as stated earlier was to examine the effect, if any, of CWDS on learners' individual performance in English writing, which justified the use of the IELTS test for the purpose. This finding answers the first RQ of this study.

The paired-samples t-Test was used in this study to compare the pre and post-test scores of the same group on the IELTS writing proficiency to check the effect and extent, if any, of the CWDP exercise on individual performance. MS Excel was used to compute the t-Test results for all the 48 participants whose paired results (obtained from pre and post tests) were the core data. The group mean pre test score was (9.4227) and the post test mean score was (17.9361), the number of persons in the analysis being 48, the t-value is 3.0402. This suggests that the results support the null hypothesis that CWDP helps enhance writing performance in EFL learners since the difference between pre and post tests is statistically significant.

The second stage of the study comprised the survey which was conducted in a single sitting during the class time with the respondents and all data were collected immediately. Frequency distribution was used to organize the responses for analysis. Table 2 below depicts these data.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of questionnaire responses.

S. no.	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Collaborative writing on Google Docs helped me pick important cues on good writing.	00	01	04	09	34
2	It is difficult to focus on my work when I work in a group.	27	11	01	03	06
3	In CWDP my thinking process is enhanced.	01	03	03	39	02
4	I get to do more when I work with others.	03	01	02	25	17
5	My anxiety is heightened in online collaborative writing.	26	14	00	03	05
6	We work constructively when we work together using technology.	04	00	04	15	24
7	Others in the group do not allow me to share my ideas in CWDP.	06	28	02	08	04
8	Collaborative online writing gives me confidence to write individually.	03	06	05	21	13
9	Collaborative writing in Google Docs generated more ideas for me to work upon.	02	03	03	23	17
10	Writing is fun in online collaboration than my previous experience of pen-paper method.	00	01	01	31	11
11	I feel connected with my peers in CWDP.	04	06	03	17	18
12	CWDP is a waste of time.	33	8	01	00	06
13	In CWDP it is good to know that performance responsibility is shared.	00	04	05	21	18
14	I enjoy getting to know about the ideas of my peers.	00	02	05	29	12

The data summarized in Table 2 above shows that learners have positive experiences and perceptions towards CWDP. Participants' responses showed high agreement on gains in social skills in CWDP as reflected in responses to items: 6, 7, 10, 11. Thirty-nine of the forty-eight respondents reported agreement to item 6 which linked constructive work via the use of technology; thirty-four disagreed that there is poor opportunity for sharing one's ideas in the group (item 7); preference for online work rather than conventional pen-paper learning is voiced by as many as forty-four respondents (item 10); and connection with peers (item 11) is reported as a benefit by thirty-five of the participants. This finding contradicts an earlier finding of Barron (2003) which concluded that collaboration among the members in a group was not as desirable.

Shared responsibility has been reported in many previous studies as one of the attractions of collaborative learning. In this study, too, questionnaire item 13, got the agreements of thirty-nine respondents that learning anxiety, (questionnaire item 5) is tackled by the factor of shared responsibility in collaborative learning. This finding is similar to that of Shahamat and Mede (2015) which concluded that students in K-5 EFL classrooms liked working in groups because responsibilities were shared in a group and tasks were also accomplished faster than otherwise. At the same time, every group member has a responsibility to do their best. The data showed that individual opportunities for learning are available in CWDP with thirty-nine respondents agreeing to statement 1 of this questionnaire. In an ESP context too, Mesh (2010) concluded that online collaborative learning activities stimulate motivation for adult learners, prompting them to exploit their hidden, undiscovered talent as seen in responses to question 4 in this study. As enumerated by Tileston (2014), one of the benefits of collaborative learning is the development of higher order thinking. Furthermore, Bin-Hady (2019) mentioned that whenever students got the opportunities to select their learning style in cooperative learning, creativity is the result of such learning. In this study, participants reported reaping this benefit as seen in the responses to item 3, with which 41 of them agree. Enhancement of social skills is visible in this study in responses to question 14 where forty-one participants expressed positive perceptions to hearing the ideas of the peers. CWDP is also shown in this study to enhance learners' confidence and proficiency in writing (items 8, 9) with thirty-four and forty participants respectively supporting the idea.

7. Conclusions

The present study set out to examine the efficacy of collaborative work on a digital platform, Google Docs in this case, in enhancing advanced EFL learners' individual writing proficiency, the factors that are perceived as the most beneficial in CWDP, and their performance in a standardized test. The findings are decisively in favor of online collaborative learning with many benefits being recognized by the learners as accruing from the use of Google Docs. The paired sample t-test showed that the results support the null hypothesis that CWDP helps enhance writing performance in EFL learners since the difference between pre and post tests is statistically significant. Frequency distribution of the questionnaire responses show that the learners are well aware of factors that reduce learning anxiety and enhance writing performance.

8. Recommendations

Given the success of the intervention, the study recommends that teachers incorporate digital learning opportunities in their EFL classrooms. However, technology today offers a wide range of options that can be used for enhancing the different language skills, and their potential needs to be explored scientifically. Lastly, studies with varied learner groups, both in terms of gender and achievement, should be undertaken to make the results of this study more broadly applicable.

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