The Effect of Using Electronic Dialogue Journals on English Writing Performance of Jordanian Students

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Abstract : *The study aimed at investigating the effect of using electronic dialogue journals on English writing performance of Jordanian students. (120) male and female first secondary school students in the literary, scientific, and information technology (IT) streams participated in this study. The experimental groups interacted with their English language instructor electronically by using E-mails, while the control groups used paper and pencil in writing about a number of writing topics throughout the experiment. The results showed that the experimental groups who used the electronic dialogue journals performed better than the control groups in all streams of study. However, the results revealed that there weren't significant differences attributed to the method of teaching and stream of study. Yet, there was such a difference due to gender in favor of males. The study recommends an expansion in employing the new technology in all fields of study in general and in teaching language skills in particular*

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology as well as the applications of Internet has created new ways of communication which have great impact on schools' practices, public sector policies, and education including learning and teaching English as a foreign language [22]. Jordan has realized the fundamental role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the global economy where knowledge is becoming the primary engine of growth and development [1].

Realizing the importance of ICT, the Ministry of Education provided schools with computer labs and connected these labs to the World Wide Web. It also developed the General Framework for Curriculum and Assessment and asked all curriculum designers to work in light of this framework which emphasizes teachers' use of computers to assess their students' progress and students' use of computers to communicate with other students in Jordan and other parts of the world to deepen their knowledge, do research, and broaden their self learning and to answer tests and write essays. [15]

In fact, many researchers noticed the importance of using dialogue journals in the teaching and learning process in general and in improving the writing skills of EFL students in particular. [13] stated that dialogue journals can all be considered as interactive writing. They state that while the teacher and the student write to each other, the teacher should put the student in the forefront. The student's agenda must run the correspondence and not the teacher's which means the

teacher's responses must be unique. The greater the foregrounding of the student's concerns and interests, the more likely it is that a teacher can create truly individual responses.

[16] believed that journal writing can provide opportunity to develop second language literacy because it encourages students to use language in meaningful and authentic contexts and also enhances learners' interest in developing communicative fluency. Journal writing provides language learners with a meaningful learning context that maximizes language and literacy development by prompting social interaction. Most of all, interaction occurs in conscious and obstructive way as language learners and teachers are engaged in the meaning-making process through the practice of reflection on their experience, knowledge, and learning/living contexts.

[5] mentioned that electronic journals provide a more personal, less structured, and less self-conscious writing opportunity for students learning highly structured academic writing. In addition, electronic journals help students to develop writing fluency and to take risks while taking charge of their own writing and allow the teacher and the student to develop a more intimate form of communication. [7] confirmed that the advantages of using electronic dialogue journals for both instructional and assessment purposes include individualizing language teaching, making students feel that their writing has a value, promoting students' reflection and autonomous learning, increasing students' confidence in their own ability to

learn, helping the instructor adapt instruction to better meet students' needs, providing a forum for sharing ideas and assessing students' literacy skills, using writing and reading for genuine communication, and increasing opportunities for interaction between students and teachers. [9] argued that using e-mail messages encourage integration of new vocabulary and forms and also discourages overuse of the dictionary which can lead to frustration and discouragement. They add that computer-mediated exchanges between two individuals can provide a very valuable language learning experience. [14] demonstrated that e-mail is the most appropriate choice formal assignments. E-mail encourages fast and personalized feedback, clear application of course materials, and active learning, and it offers a "structured dialogue" that encourages student-teacher appropriate boundaries. [6] reported that the success of online instruction will be achieved when instructors know how to make students aware of time requirements, explain assignments expectations clearly, and respond to students' e-mail regularly. [21] asserted that computer technology has resulted in a generation deeply and consistently immersed in writing. When students are writing online, they think of themselves as writers and find more pleasure in what they write in class. Students are more enthusiastic to write on screen than using paper and pencil and making use of the computer tools as spelling and grammar checkers. This study will attempt to find out the effect of using electronic dialogue journals on English writing performance of Jordanian students.

2. Statement of the Problem

In the light of the information revolution and the scientific challenges of the 21st century, there is a sweeping trend to use computers and internet communication in all aspects of life and education is no exception. On the other hand, the world is heading towards knowledge economy and a lot of money will be invested in electronic communication and computer assisted language learning instructional software programs. Therefore, It is worth investigating the effectiveness of electronic mail communication on the performance of learners in learning and teaching English

2.1. Aims of the Study

The main aim of the study is to find out the effect of electronic dialogue journals on secondary students' writing performance. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- Is there a difference in the first secondary students' EFL writing performance due to the method of instruction (traditional/ electronic dialogue journal?

- Is there a difference in the first secondary students' EFL writing performance due to stream of study (Literary, scientific, Information Technology (I.T)?
- Is there a difference in the first secondary students' EFL writing performance due to gender (male/ female?

2.2. The Importance of the Study

Studies about the use of computer – based and internet communication instruction in Jordan are not so many. Particularly, a few studies about the use of electronic journal in teaching writing to Jordanian EFL learners have been conducted. It is anticipated that this study will shed light on the benefits of using electronic journal via E-mails in language learning in general, and writing in particular. This study also attempts to bridge the gap between the theoretical and practical sides of using electronic communication in teaching writing.

In addition, the findings of this study may be functional for different categories of people; it may help EFL curricula designers and EFL methodologists develop teaching materials which suit various ways of teaching and match students' level of achievement in English language in general and writing in particular.

2.3. Definition of Terms

The terms below, wherever seen, have the following definitions:

- **Electronic Dialogue Journal:** According to (20), the electronic dialogue journal is a weekly written dialogue between the teacher and the student through the use of e-mail. According to (2), the electronic dialogue journal is students' use of email in sending and receiving journals. In responding to students' journal, teachers focus on what their students write rather than how it is written. For the present study, the researcher adopts Peyton's definition (17) which states that the electronic dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and a teacher communicate regularly over a period of time. Students write as much as they can about a topic and the teacher responds to the students' writing regularly.

- **Writing Performance**: For the present study, this term is defined as expressing oneself on a certain topic through the written word with good quality and enough quantity.

- **Traditional Teaching Method** is students' use of paper and pencil in writing compositions. The instructor then reads and corrects each student's mistakes. Each student then receives his/her own composition to rewrite corrections.

2.4. Limitations of the Study

- This study is confined to the first secondary students in the literary, scientific, and information technology (I.T), in the academic year 2010 – 2011, in Al- Zarqa Directorate of Education.
- The results of this study may be confined to the first secondary students in the literary, scientific, and information technology (I.T) only.

3. Review of Related Literature

Many studies were conducted to find out the impact of using CALL in learning/ teaching English in general, and the effect of using electronic journals on the performance of EFL learners in writing. [8] investigated the effect of using email on the development of students' writing skill. Subjects in this study were fifty students in Montana State University. During the Fall and Spring semesters of 1994 and 1995, one group of students were asked to write compositions via email whereas the other group was asked to write on paper. The major finding demonstrated that students made improvements in their general writing skills, particularly free writing, prewriting, paragraph formation, idea mapping and spelling.

Also, [3] explored the effects of using electronic e-mail on first and second year Japanese English major's writing at Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute (MFWI). His findings showed that e-mail enabled an exchange of dialogue journals between teacher and students. He reported that e-mail dialogue journal writing enhanced communication between the teacher and the students and interaction was not limited only to the classroom but was expanded outside the classroom setting. He further reported that e-mail built students' confidence as mistakes were tolerated.

[19] examined the effects of dialogue journal on his students' writing at Miyazaki International College. He asked his students to write dialogue journal to their secret assigned partners. His findings showed that the students enjoyed the activity and their journal entries revealed improvements in terms of writing fluency. He concluded that as the students continued exchanging e-mail messages, they tended to write longer as mistakes were tolerated and they had more ideas to share with their partners.

[12] explored the utility of electronic mail as an instructional tool for limited-English-proficient adult females who had make little progress in learning writing in English as a second language. Six subjects, aged 30-50 years, enrolled in a university ESL program produced 25 email exchanges over a five week period. Electronic messages were analyzed in terns of number of messages, word counts, acquisition of new vocabulary directly related to comprehensible input, and syntactic complexity resulting from the use of connectors in the subordination of clauses. Results indicated that supervised email had a positive effect on the writing skills of adult learners who had few opportunities to interact with target language speakers.

[10] studied the effects of e-mail dialogue journal on Spanish students' writing. Her findings revealed that dialogue journal writing via e-mail could serve as a tool for the students to practice using the English language and communicate without fear of making mistakes. This was because mistakes were tolerated and the emphasis was more on idea development. She reported that the students' journal entries showed improvement in the quality of the target language produced compared to the ones done on paper. The students also enjoyed the activity as they received positive feedback for each entry sent and were confident in presenting ideas, as their entries were not graded.

[4] searched the effect of electronic dialogue journals on children's to write interpretively. Throughout a two-year project, data were collected by compiling the e-mail correspondences that took place weekly between the adults (the researcher and five graduate students) and six children from September through April of each school year. The result of the study revealed that the use of language via e-mail had a positive effect on children's writing abilities.

[11]) looked at the effects of dialogue journaling on the language produced by learners of Spanish as a second language, compared with the paper-and-pencil method. The electronic method was found to have a positive effect on the amount of language generated and on students' attitudes towards learning the target language but did not have a significant advantage on lexical or grammatical accuracy.

[18] examined the overall effect of using email on the writing performance in aspects of syntactic complexity, grammatical accuracy and lexical density. Subjects in this study were forty non-traditional EFL students enrolled in an intermediate reading class at a university in Taiwan. By applying qualitative and quantitative research methods, the major finding demonstrated that students made improvements on syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy. An increase in lexical density, however, was not observed in this study. Another finding suggests that when students exchanged e-mail messages with their peers at least four times might have a greater overall improvement on their writing performance. Findings from students' self-report revealed that the e-mail writing was a positive strategy that helped improve their foreign language learning and attitudes towards English.

To conclude, many studies were conducted internationally on electronic dialogue journal. All the above studies indicated that using electronic dialogue journal is of great help to students writing performance. It is also obvious that there is a scarcity

of research on electronic dialogue Journal in Jordan. Therefore, this study aims at filling this gap.

4. Methodology and Procedures

4.1. Sample of the Study

A total of 120 first secondary male and female students from the literary, scientific, and information technology(I.T) streams were selected purposefully from two male and female schools in Zarka directorate of education during the second semester of the academic year 2010/2011.The schools were selected purposefully because the teachers of English in these

schools were former outstanding M.A students of the researcher who trusted them to thoroughly implement the experiment as planned   by him. Also, the experimental groups in each school were selected purposefully to ensure that students have access to internet at home to communicate with their teachers. The distribution of the sample students was as Table 1 shows. These classes were purposefully assigned to an experimental group using e-mail for writing dialogue journals and a control group using paper and pencil for writing composition.

Table 1. The distribution of the Sample Students.

Stream of study	Gender	Number of students	Experimental group	Control group
Literary	Female	20	10	10
Scientific	Female	20	10	10
Information Technology	Female	20	10	10
Literary	Male	20	10	10
Scientific	Male	20	10	10
Information Technology	Male	20	10	10
Total		120	60	60

4.2. Research Instruments

To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher used the following instruments:

4.2.1. The Writing Performance Test

A writing task for first secondary students was chosen from the textbook *"Jordan Opportunities 2",* which is prescribed and adopted by the Ministry of Education for first secondary students in all streams in Jordanian schools to be a writing performance test. Each unit is concluded with a writing lesson. The chosen writing topic which is a writing task in Unit 11 should have been discussed by teachers in regular classes and students have practiced writing on such topics. Therefore, the writing topic is suitable for the students' level and should not pose a problem for students since they are familiar with it and   could measure their writing performance.

4.2.2. Test Validity

 To ensure the validity of the performance tests, consultation with colleagues who are experts in TEFL were consulted along with the researcher who is also an authority in the field and a trainer of teachers for more than thirty years and it was agreed that the writing topic should highlight an issue that is real in Jordan and relevant to students' daily life. The task in the textbook asked students to write an open letter to a person who could help protect or improve an environment issue like global warming , water shortage

etc. It was agreed that the writing performance test must be worded as follows:

Write an open letter(of 125_150 words) to the Minister of Water expressing your concern about water shortage in Jordan and your suggestions to reduce the consumption of water in our homes.

4.2.3. Test Reliability

To ensure its reliability, the writing performance test was administrated to a sample of ten first secondary students out of the sample of the study in the first week of the first semester 2009-2010 and was repeated ten days later on the same sample to assess its stability over time. Pearson correlation coefficient was found to be (0.89). This indicates that the test scores were stable over time.

4.2.4. The Marking Scale

The researcher adopted El-koumy's (1991) scale for marking students' compositions. This scale is divided into five components: content, organization, word choice, grammar and mechanics. Three rates marked the students' compositions and focused on the above components. The researcher took the average of the three rates' scores for each student.

4.2.5. The Writing Topics

The researcher overviewed the prescribed textbook unit seven through unit twelve in *Jordan opportunities 2* for first secondary students and its supplementary materials. The same writing topics were used with both the experimental and control groups as they are part of

the unit and should be taught to students in their English regular classes.

The researcher visited the targeted schools and met the head principals as well as the English language teachers who are going to implement the study. He explained to them the procedures that they will follow to implement his study and provided them with the writing performance test to be administered and discussed with them individually the writing topics in the prescribed textbooks to be used with the experimental and control group throughout the experiment.

For the experimental group, the assigned teachers to conduct the study accompanied the students to the computer lab, available in their school, in each writing session. They made sure that every student was able to use the internet and had an email account before starting the experiment. They also gave them the email they were going to use for writing their journals. The teacher and the students interacted electronically by using the email for writing about each topic in the writing section of each unit. They first wrote to the teacher who then responded to their entries. Each topic took about two weeks. As for the control group, the

assigned teachers to conduct the experiment asked students to write about the first selected topic in their regular classes using pencil and paper using the traditional method of teaching writing . Then, they collected the students' compositions, corrected them, paying attention to grammatical, punctuation, spelling errors. After that, they gave them back to the students and asked them to rewrite their compositions. Then, they asked them to write about the next topic and so on. Each topic took about two week

5. Results, Discussion, and Recommendations

5.1. Results

The study aimed at investigating the effect of electronic dialogue journals on Jordanian secondary students' English writing performance. In particular, the study aimed at answering the following questions:

5.1.1 Is There a Difference in the First Secondary Students' EFL Writing Performance Due to the Method of Instruction (Traditional/ Electronic Dialogue Journals?

Table2. T Value, Means, and standard deviation between the traditional and the computerized method of teaching.

Method of Teaching	Mean	SD	T-Value	Df	Sig.
Traditional	69.95	4.22	12.857	59	.000
Computerized	77.52	4.24			

Table (2) shows that there is no statistically significant difference ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the mean scores of Jordanian secondary students' EFL performance in writing due to the method of instruction. However, the results show that the experimental groups performed better with a difference of (7.57) and a standard deviation of (4.24) between the means of the experimental groups and the control groups on the post-test in favour of the experimental groups who used the computerized method in writing. The results indicate that the use of the electronic dialogue journal was more effective in improving students' writing performance than the traditional method of teaching

writing. The results are in agreement with [20, 3, and 18]. All agreed that the students' journal entries showed improvement in the quality of the target language produced compared to the ones done on paper.

5.1.2 Is There a Difference in the First Secondary Students' EFL Writing Performance Due to Stream of Study (Literary, Scientific, Information Technology (I.T)?

Table 3. ANOVA Analysis for Jordanian Secondary Students EFL performance due to Stream of study

Group		Sum of squares	Df	Mean squares	F	Siq.
Control	Between groups	48.100	2	24.050	1.367	.263
	Within groups	1002.750	57	17.592		
	Total	1050.850	59			
Experimental	Between groups	46.233	2	23.117	1.293	.282
	Within groups	1018.750	57	17.873		
	Total	1064.983	59			

The ANOVA analysis in Table (3) shows that there is no statistically significant difference ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the mean scores of Jordanian secondary students' EFL performance in writing due to the stream of the

study. However, The results show that all streams of study, i.e., literary, scientific, and IT in the experimental groups performed better with a difference of (7.57) and a standard deviation of (4.24) between

the means of the experimental groups and the control groups on the post-test in favour of the experimental groups who used the computerized method in writing. The results indicate that the use of the electronic dialogue journal was more effective in improving students' writing performance than the traditional method of teaching writing. The results are in line with [12], [10], and [18]). The previous studies supported the results of this study in that the use of electronic journal by the students made Improvements in their general writing skill.

5.1.3 Is There a Difference in the First Secondary Students' EFL Writing Performance Due to Gender (Male/ Female)?

Table 4.T- test, means and SD for Jordanian secondary students' EFL performance in writing due to gender.

Groups	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t Value	df	Sig.
Control	Male	30	69.30	3.354	1.197	58	.236
	Female	30	70.60	4.910			
Experimental	Male	30	76.17	3.621	2.576	58	.013*
	Female	30	78.87	4.455			

Table (4) indicates that there is a statistically significant difference ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the mean scores of Jordanian secondary students' EFL performance in writing due to gender. The results show that there was a difference of (6.26) between the means of males in the experimental groups and males in the control groups in favor of the males in the experimental groups. Also there was a difference of (8.27) between the means of females in the experimental groups and males in the control groups in favour of the females in the experimental groups. The difference in the mean scores was statistically significant (t=2.576, p= .013).

5.2. Discussion

It is obvious from the above results that the experimental groups in all streams of study i.e. .literary, scientific, and IT streams performed better in their writing performance. This achievement could be attributed to many reasons. First, electronic dialogue journal writing might have individualized the learning process and thus accommodate to the needs, interests, and the learning styles of the participants in the experimental group. Second, electronic dialogue writing might have removed the fear of making mistakes which in turn could increase students' confidence and consequently their fluency in writing. Third, electronic journal writing might have developed a relation between the participants and the instructor which in turn could have motivated students and thus performed better in their compositions .Fourth, The participants in the experimental groups might have enjoyed exchanging their compositions via E-mails. Finally, students' use of spelling and grammatical checkers has improved the accuracy of their writing.

5.3. Recommendations

In light of the results of study, the researcher presents the following recommendations:
- Encouraging instructors to employ electronic dialogue journals in teaching writing.
- Expanding the use of electronic communications and e-mails in teaching other subjects.
- Expanding the application of electronic interaction among schools and provide the infrastructure
- Conducting further studies regarding the effect of using electronic dialogue journal on other language skills.

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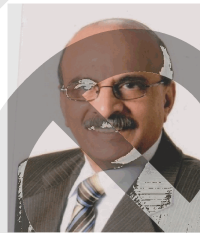
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