

Padlet Use for EFL Writing Activities: Case Study of a Pre-University English Language Programme in Australia

Puven Muthiah^{1*}, Patcharawadee Promduang², Kanjanarat Urairat³, Ying Gao⁴

¹ Lecturer, Trinity College Foundation Programme, The University of Melbourne.

² Lecturer, Department of English, Didyasarin International College, Hatyai University

^{3,4} Lecturer, Business Chinese Department, Didyasarin International College, Hatyai University

*Corresponding author, E-mail: dr.puven329@yahoo. com

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the usefulness of Padlet for collaborative writing activities in an EFL context and whether students perceived that their vocabulary and grammatical accuracy has improved. The sampling group was eight international students enrolled in a pre-university 20-week EAP programme in Australia. The students in the class had an IELTS overall band between 5.0 to 5.5. For the writing tasks, students were required to identify main ideas in a text, and share their views with the class. Padlet was a tool used to encourage students to collaborate in the writing tasks. The results of the study indicated that Padlet helped students to improve their writing skills as they collaborated with their classmates and indirectly their grammar and vocabulary by learning from their classmates. The teacher's feedback on the students' work confirmed the perspectives of the students.

Keywords: Padlet, Collaborative Writing, EFL

Introduction

Technology has become an integral part of life and learning of the 21st century. Education has undergone massive changes which is an attribution of the availability of digital tools, namely the Internet, blogs, smartphone and the like (Theyagu , 2016). Therefore, 21st century teachers should not only know how to use the technology, but they should also understand the role of technology in the learning process and how to integrate it to promote learning instead of distracting learners. Using technology in the classroom enables the creation of individualized technology-based instructional programs to meet teaching objectives (Johnson, Maddux and Liu, 1997) as in the case of the current study.

Web 2.0 technologies are becoming popular in teaching and learning environments (Brodahl, Hadjerrouit, and Hansen, 2011). Hence, students can work

collaboratively through the use of Web 2.0 technology such as blogs, social media, and so on because its major attribute allows students to work simultaneously and share information with others. Working collaboratively on writing was identified as one of several teaching approaches that could potentially help learners to develop as writers (Kelly, Soundranayagam, and Grief, 2004). Thus the present study has used technology (Padlet) as a teaching methodology in the writing class where students are required to work collaboratively instead of individually.

The Statement of Problem

With the widespread use of technology among learners, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to engage effectively with teaching and learning materials that require them to work on writing tasks individually in the classroom. Often, they produce weak/poor quality ideas with many grammar errors, their time management is poor and most of them are unable to complete the task assigned.

Objective

The purpose of this paper is explore the usefulness of Padlet for collaborative writing activities in an EFL context and to discover whether students think their grammar, vocabulary and quality of writing has improved when they write collaboratively.

Research question:

How useful is Padlet for collaborative writing activities in an EFL context and whether students' quality of writing has improved?

Literature Review

Broadly speaking, collaborative writing involves the production of a document by more than one author. In collaborative writing, each student contributes at each stage of the writing process: brainstorming ideas; gathering and organizing information; drafting; revising; and editing the writing (Barkley, Cross, and Major, 2005: 256). Several researchers positively accepted that online collaborative writing help improve EFL/ESL students' writing skills (Choi, 2008; Chao and Lo, 2009; Domizi, 2012; Alsubaie and Ashuraida, 2017, Selcuk, 2017; and Fisher 2017 cited in Ghufon and Hawa 2015) . Choi (2008) who studied an ESL writing class at a community college in Hong Kong revealed that online collaborative writing tasks created a supportive atmosphere as well as improved students' writing skills by increasing their motivation, awareness, reducing stress, and cultivating a positive attitude towards writing. Turning to an example of an EFL classroom in Saudi Arabia, Alsubaie and Ashuraidah (2017) revealed that online collaborative writing using Google docs -created a positive attitude among EFL learners, especially through the comment sections and feedback more than the face-to-face feedback. Similarly,

Zhou, Simpson, and Domizi (2012) employed Google Docs as a research tool in their study of collaborative writing activity in order to reduce any form of distraction from social media. Recently, Selcuk (2017) employed Facebook to promote collaborative writing of a short English story and writing exercises included giving praise, motivational phrases, the use of informal language and humour and it was found that this could develop student writing skills.

Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and its related metaphor, scaffolding, serve as the theoretical basis for the study of peer collaboration (Ranjbar and Ghonsooly, 2017). Vygotsky's (1978:78) states, "what the person can do with assistance today, he or she can do tomorrow alone". What makes scaffolding so effective is that it enables a teacher to keep a task whole, while students learn to understand and manage the parts, and presents the learner with just the right challenge (Clark and Graves, 2004). In other words, with guidance or assistance of an adult or peer collaboration, learners can exceed what they can attain alone. Ranjbar and Ghonsooly's (Yr??) study on scaffolding behaviours revealed that it improved the quality of collaborative writing processes and enabled students to work together and take into account joint efforts in the writing tasks. The findings also showed that learners' participation increased, they learnt evaluative feedback strategies, and benefitted from their co-mediators/authors

In order to encourage student collaboration, technology is a prominent tool to allow them to work together and contribute simultaneously to the task assigned. Brodahl, Hadjerrouit, and Hansen (2011) reviewed several online collaborative writing tools such as wikis and blogs which have been integrated into educational settings and research has been carried out on a wide range of subjects related to wikis, while other comparable tools like Google Docs and EtherPad remain largely unexplored in the literature.

Likewise, Padlet (see image below) is an online collaborative tool which provides a free, multimedia friendly wall which can be used to encourage real-time, whole class participation and assessment (Fuchs, 2014). Moreover, the app is a web-based application which is compatible with OS, Andriod, and IOS. Padlet was previously known as Wallwhisher provided a virtual wall and collaborative space accessible from any Internet enabled device (Fisher, 2017) and it allows instructors to integrate content and discussion on the same page (Orlando, 2016). A multitude of learners are able to simultaneously view and edit content such as text, image, multimedia, documents, etc.

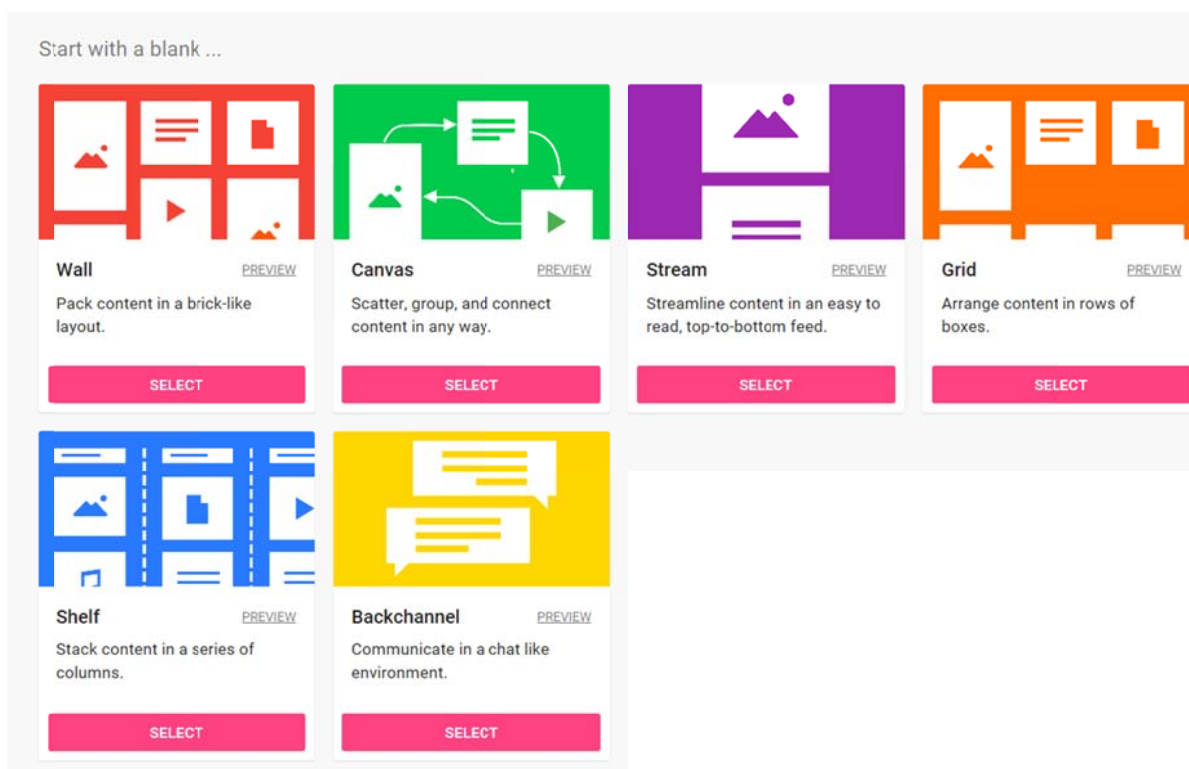


Figure 1: Padlet

The Padlet can be used for preclass preparation, in-class activities, and post class consolidation. For pre-class preparation, students can be assigned to respond to questions pertaining to articles they have read prior to the class. The questions must reflect key elements and linkage between the article and students' background knowledge. This is to ensure students have read the articles before the class and are ready to engage in the lesson prepared by the teacher. For in-class activities, Padlet is an excellent tool to engage students namely during brainstorming because they can post their ideas simultaneously without waiting for their turn. Furthermore, Padlet allows learners to remain anonymous if the teacher wishes to in order to encourage participation from all class members. Another good function of the Padlet is that it keeps a record of discussions or posts which students can revise. It can also be used to replace the whiteboard and for icebreaker activities. Finally, for post class consolidation, the posts are available for a semester so that students can use them as a fruitful resource to study for their exams and for teachers to track the progress of their students. Alternatively, teachers can assign students to create their own virtual wall.

To promote students autonomy, Atherton (2018) pointed out that flipped classroom model is worth pursuing in order to illuminate the potential of Padlet in terms

of pedagogy and assessment. Moreover, he also indicated that using Padlet can foster self-efficacy required to stretch and challenge, leading to working collaboratively.

Methodology

Teacher-initiated action research was carried out with eight international students enrolled in a pre-university 20-week EAP program in Australia. The students in the class had an IELTS overall band between 5.0 to 5.5 and they were all teenagers from China. Writing was one of the 4 skills taught in the program. For the purpose of this paper, two writing tasks assigned to students that will be highlighted are:

- 1) Identify main ideas in a text assigned for homework.

Topic: Social networking

- 2) For homework, read several articles on the topic: Graffiti.

In class, they were asked to Google graffiti images and orally share their views with the class.

Then, they were asked to share their views on the Padlet virtual wall that the lecturer had created for them. The question they had to respond to was: Is graffiti a form of Art or Vandalism. Using Padlet, the teacher planned the lessons and shared the students' version with her students before and during the class. This is based on flipped classroom (Atherton, 2018) or blended learning models of teaching.

Data collection and analysis

A qualitative approach was employed to collect and analyse the data generated by the case study. The teacher-researcher analysed the students' written work quality when it was displayed on the Padlet wall, as she commented on their work. She offered comments on the quality of their ideas, grammatical accuracy and their ability to complete the task assigned on time. She also obtained verbal feedback from the students regarding the three aspects.

Findings

Students generally felt that collaborative writing using the Padlet had helped them learn how to manage their time in completing the writing tasks assigned. Second, they learnt correct grammar and vocabulary from their 'better' classmates. Third, they learnt how to work in teams and were confident in giving their feedback to others in class although at times their feedback was not correct. Fourth, the collaborative writing activity broadened their thinking as they were able to read the perspectives of their peers and learn from them. Fifth, they were able to evaluate their own performance

with respect to their peers and this helped them improve the quality of their writing and their grammatical accuracy including vocabulary.

The lecturer's feedback on the task overall is explained. First, the collaborative writing activity by using the Padlet trained students to think on the spot and respond to a prompt in a short period of time. Second, Padlet gave students the opportunity to read their classmates posts and this indirectly helped them gauge/evaluate the quality of their own contribution and informed them of their gaps in knowledge. Third, students were able to learn from their peers aspects such as style of referencing, new vocabulary, correct grammar and formal style of writing. Fourth, for most students their level of engagement was high, especially when their contributions were seen by others/ made public. Fifth, immediate feedback was obtained from the lecturer about students' efforts, contributions, ability, preparedness, gaps in knowledge and skills. This increased their level of motivation as well in the writing tasks.

Discussion

The use of Padlet for teaching writing is beneficial for EFL learners in the following ways. It increases their confidence as writers and editors/reviewers and enhances their grammatical accuracy and range of vocabulary as they are able to learn from their more competent peers as indicated by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Their time management, team work and critical thinking skills also improved. Other than that, their quality of writing also showed gradual improvement with real-time feedback from the teacher and peers. This confirms the views of Wei (2018) about the merits of Padlet which include:

1. encourages students to express their ideas on blank wall
2. better quality of writing and grammatical accuracy.
3. allows students to work in groups
4. promote peer learning and self-directed assessment
5. provide crucial information about inter-group dynamics and contributions of individual members

Other than that, their engagement level with the tasks was also higher as confirmed by Wong, Tee, and Shoo (2014) who found out that students were more likely to be in favour of using Padlet compared to other online collaborative tools because of its high interactivity, and colorful background. Moreover, students can post real-time, view other posts instantly, and comment on forums.

These positive feedback are partly due to the user friendly features of Padlet along with its ease of enabling the insertion and export of various types of multimedia

files (Kirch, 2018). However, Padlet can be a more effective tool when used with other online writing tools such as Google docs, Facebook, Edmodo, EtherPad, Wiki, etc.

The success of Padlet for writing classes also depends a great deal on the ability of the teacher to plan the lessons well (pre-, during and post instructions) and students need to be given explicit instructions (step-by-step) about the task. Padlet is also useful for teachers to provide more personalized instruction (Davis, 2017) for students who need further help with tasks assigned. In addition, it is essential for both teachers and students to undergo some training on how to use Padlet and the wifi connectivity in the classroom has to be reliable to prevent interruptions to the lessons. Collaboration/sharing of Padlets with other teachers can also reduce workload for differentiated instruction preparation to enhance student engagement with the lessons.

There were two main drawbacks of Padlet. First, giving detailed feedback on student work can be very time consuming, unlike the use of Google Docs with the comment boxes. Second, students must have completed the tasks assigned for homework, especially the reading of texts as input for writing. Otherwise, the task planned cannot be successfully carried out in the time allocated in the classroom.

Conclusion

Padlet offers many benefits for both teachers and students in EFL writing classes. Students can build their confidence as writers and able to offer peer feedback, manage their time better and work better in teams. It is a valuable tool for teachers to track student progress, offer further help and evaluate their own teaching.

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