

The Use of Online Dictionaries During Web-Based Collaborative Writing Among EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study is about an investigation of Turkish high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' use of online dictionaries during asynchronous web-based collaborative writing (CW) activity. 26 groups of three EFL learners ($N = 78$, 16 years) were involved in a two-hour CW task in English outside the classroom setting in a Facebook group. Data were gathered from 78 online researcher-participant interviews and 8,700 discussion threads collected from 26 groups. The study's findings revealed that 80% of participants used their mobile phones to undertake the activity, so they preferred online English dictionaries with mobile applications. Participants with high English proficiency mainly used online English dictionaries to search for the collocations of words to vivify their sentences. Also, those participants directed their group members to use the online dictionaries to independently identify their vocabulary mistakes and validate their existing vocabulary knowledge. Participants who had low English proficiency mainly used online bilingual dictionaries (Turkish-English) to look up the unknown words and then got their group partners to verify their use in their collaborative writing pieces. Additionally, Google Translate was utilised by those participants to serve a purpose of an online dictionary. This study provides useful insights for researchers and EFL teachers about how online dictionaries were used during the web-based collaborative writing process.

Keywords: EFL writing, collaboration, online writing, small group learning, foreign language, dictionaries

Introduction

Collaborative writing (CW), which can be defined as “an [instructional] activity where there is a shared and negotiated decision-making process and a shared responsibility for the production of a single text” (Storch, 2013, p. 3), has been extensively researched by the foreign/second language writing

researchers by dint of the constantly evolving technology-enhanced collaborative tools and increasing accessibility of Web 2.0 technologies (Li, 2018; Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016).

A recent review study by Zhang and Zou (2021) has indicated that to date, previous studies have used the following web-based environments such as wiki ($N = 21$ studies), Google Doc ($N = 6$ studies), offline word processor ($N = 3$ studies), Facebook ($N = 2$ studies), chat ($N = 2$ studies) and forum ($N = 2$ studies) when undertaking the CW activities in second/foreign language writing contexts. Additionally, previous studies on web-based CW explored

- 1) patterns of peer interaction and learners' co-constructed texts (e.g., Abrams, 2019; Li & Zhu, 2017),
- 2) peer affective factors (e.g., Selcuk & Jones, 2022; Selcuk, 2017), individual writing versus CW (e.g., Alsubaie & Ashuraidah, 2017), and the influence of peer leadership during the CW process (e.g., Selcuk, Jones & Vonkova, 2019a).

Nevertheless, few studies (e.g., Selcuk, Jones & Vonkova, 2019b) investigated the Information Communications Technology (ICT) tools used by the learners during the CW processes. Therefore, to fill a gap in the literature, this current study examines the use of online dictionaries during web-based CW among 26 groups of three in a total of 78 learners of EFL.

In their study, Selcuk et al. (2019b) explored for what purposes Google Translate (GT) as an ICT tool was used among Turkish high school EFL learners ($N = 6$) during seven weeks of web-based CW. The findings showed that participants who reported that they were not confident with their English knowledge and were feeling anxious writing in English used GT in the pre-writing stages of writing. Also, the study found that participants with lower grades in English used GT more frequently than participants with higher grades in English. Another emerging finding was that a group member who mainly led the group writing process encouraged them to use GT to start with their writing, which enabled some group members to gain self-confidence in writing in English.

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical bases of the web-based CW in connection with teaching and learning EFL writing in this study are social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), the process-oriented approach (Hyland), and the sustainable smart pedagogy framework proposed by Daniela (2019) (also Lytras et al., 2018).

Collaborative work undertaken with peers or in small groups in an EFL writing context is mainly supported by a social constructivist framework in which there are affordances for interactive learning and knowledge-sharing (Storch, 2019). Furthermore, the process-oriented approach to teaching EFL

writing (Hyland, 2009) was considered the most suitable for the present study for the following reasons. This approach is a non-linear and recursive approach to writing that comprises planning, drafting and revision, and editing activities. As argued by Steele (1992) and Hyland (2003), this approach would involve peer collaboration during the writing process, involving learners in brainstorming, group discussion, peer feedback and CW. The web-based CW activity was designed based on the sustainable smart pedagogy framework by Daniela (2019) (see Table 2) because, as argued by Selcuk and Jones (2022), the activity is to be undertaken synchronously anywhere and anytime; students opting in were considered ‘intellectually smart’, social, and motivated when doing the activity and the learning environment was technologically enhanced with the use of up-to-date laptops and smartphones. The ‘smart pedagogy’ aligned with the writing process and group members’ roles as fluid and dynamic, enabling students to develop meta-cognitively during the writing process and to be developers of technology used in this context.

Table 1. Smart pedagogy framework

| | |
|----------|---|
| S | smart (in the sense of intellectual smartness), social |
| M | meta-cognitively developed and motivated |
| A | anywhere, anytime (in the sense of a learning process that is flowing across the temporal and spatial borders) |
| R | rapidly changing |
| T | technology enhanced, which takes into account the peculiarities of human development, the taxonomy of the educational process where the next generations are using the benefits of technology, and Smart Pedagogy bringing the students of the next generations in front of progress to serve as developers for new levels of innovation. |

Source. (Daniela, 2019, p.16)

Aims and Research Questions

This study aimed to investigate how and which online dictionaries were used among 26 groups of three ($N = 78$) Turkish high school EFL learners during a two-hour web-based CW activity. Considering the aim of the study, we formulated the following research questions:

1. How do EFL learners make use of online dictionaries as an ICT tool during the web-based CW?
2. Which online dictionaries do EFL learners benefit from as an ICT tool during the web-based CW?

Methodology

Participants

Seventy-eight EFL learners who were 10th graders (57.7% females and 42.3%, males, 16 years old) in a public high school in Izmir, Turkey, volunteered to participate in the study. These seventy-six participants were asked to form a group of three ($N = 26$ groups) and undertake a CW task of writing a short story in English synchronously in a Facebook (FB) group outside school hours. The CW task lasted around two hours. Before the study's commencement, official consents were obtained from the Provincial Directorate of National Education, the school's principal, and all participants' parents.

Before group participants started their collaborative short story writing task, they were asked to self-assess their English proficiency on a scale of five (elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced). Moreover, the participants' teacher of English was asked to evaluate all participants' English proficiency on the same scale of five.

Table 2 displays participants' self-assessed English language proficiency and their teacher's evaluation of participants' English proficiency.

Table 2. Participants' self-assessed English language proficiency and their teacher's evaluation of participants' proficiency in English

| Teacher's evaluation | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|------------|------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------|
| Self-assessed English level | | Elementary | Pre-Intermediate | Intermediate | Upper Intermediate | Total |
| Starter | F | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| | % | 21.7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6.4% |
| Elementary | F | 9 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 17 |
| | % | 39.1 | 21.9 | 5.3 | 0.0 | 21.8% |
| Pre-Intermediate | F | 8 | 19 | 3 | 1 | 31 |
| | % | 34.8 | 59.4 | 15.8 | 25.0 | 39.7% |
| Intermediate | F | 1 | 6 | 12 | 1 | 20 |
| | % | 4.3 | 18.8 | 63.2 | 25.0 | 25.6% |
| Upper Intermediate | F | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| | % | 0 | 0 | 15.8 | 50.0 | 6.4% |
| Total | F | 23 | 32 | 19 | 4 | 78 |
| | % | 29.48% | 41.3% | 24.36% | 5.13% | 100,0% |

According to the Turkish Ministry of National Education (2011), 10th-grade students' English level is expected to be pre-intermediate or A2, according to the Council of Europe (2001). A2 level language users are categorised as 'basic users' by the Council of Europe (2011, p. 25), and their capabilities are described as follows:

They can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). They can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. They can describe aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

Concerning the skill of writing, the Council of Europe (2001) highlights that A2 level language users should be able to write simple short notes and messages in areas of immediate need. They need to be able to write an elementary personal letter, for example, thanking someone for something.

Web-based Collaborative Writing Activity Design

Participants in groups were asked to write a short story not less than 150 words and no more than 300 words in English with their group members collaboratively in a FB group created only for the study. Participants were asked to undertake this writing activity outside of school hours online. During the writing activity, 80% of participants reported using their smartphones to engage and interact with the discussion sessions in a FB group. Participants in groups were told to complete their short stories within two hours. Five volunteer teachers of English served as a facilitator of this writing activity. The facilitator's role was only to provide participants with writing instructions at the beginning of the writing task.

Participants reported that they had not previously undertaken a collaboratively regulated learning activity outside the classroom. Their writing experience in secondary school classrooms was limited to perfunctory textbook exercises with little collaboration. As argued by Aydin and Özdemir (2019), EFL learners in Turkish secondary schools generally have insufficient writing practice in English lessons due to factors such as time constraints, inadequate writing instruction, exam-oriented classrooms, grammar/reading-based textbooks, and teachers' attitudes toward EFL writing, all of which serve to reduce opportunities for students to develop their writing skills. Against this backdrop, it was decided to use the FB group as the technological setting of the study.

Data Collection Methods

This study mainly gathered data from 78 online researcher-participant interviews and 8,700 written discussion threads collected from 26 groups. The researchers interviewed each seventy-eight participants using Facebook Live Chat. Each participant interview was recorded and lasted around 10–15 minutes. To gain a deeper understanding from the interviews, we also collected all 26 groups' written discussion threads ($N = 8,700$) from the FB group. Before

the CW activity, all participants were asked to discuss in their FB groups in a written manner. The rationale behind that decision was to collect information from participants’ interactions during the CW process.

Data Analysis Procedure

The group interviews, along with the online written facilitator-participant chats and the FB discussion boards enabled us to gather different types of qualitative data sets. We analysed each data source using an open coding analytical approach (Saldana, 2009). We used open coding because there is no existing parallel research therefore no previously existing analytical framework available in the Turkish public high school context.

Findings

Based on the overall evaluation comprised of participants’ self-assessed English language proficiency and their teacher’s evaluation of participants’ proficiency in English in Table 2, participants’ (N = 78) achievements in English subject were grouped into four categories (1. low Achievers, 2. Average Achievers, 3. High Achievers, and 4. Very High Achievers). Additionally, based on the analysed data from researcher-participant interviews and participants’ written discussion threads, Figure 1 was created to illustrate the relationship between participants’ English language achievements and their online dictionary preference during the CW process.

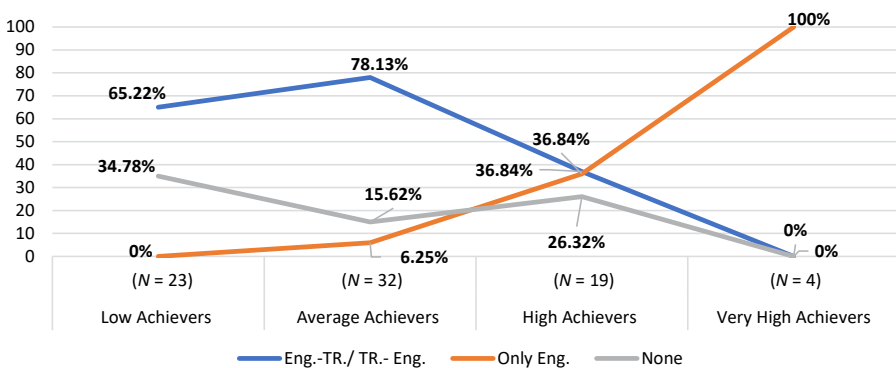


Figure 1. Relationship between participants’ English Language achievements and their online dictionary preference during the CW process

Note. Eng. TR./ TR.-Eng. (Bilingual), Only Eng. (Monolingual)

Low Achievers

23 participants (29.48%) among seventy-eight were considered 'low achievers' in the light of the overall evaluation of participants' self-assessed English language proficiency and their teacher's assessments of their proficiency in English. Based on the analysed data on web-based researcher-participants interviews and online written discussion threads, it is found that low achievers avoided using monolingual online English dictionaries due to their low language proficiency in English. Most low achievers used bilingual dictionaries, Turkish-English or vice versa during the CW process. Other than that, some low achievers (34.78%) stated that they used neither online nor printed dictionaries during the CW process.

Most low achievers reported using Google Translate (GT) as an online dictionary when working with their group partners during the CW process. As 80% of the participants reported undertaking the CW activity using their mobile phones, most participants said they used GT's mobile app during the task. Moreover, their primary purposes of using online dictionaries were listed as (1) looking up unknown words and (2) getting their group partners to verify their use in their CW pieces. For example, one participant expressed,

I rarely write in English, and it was a stressful activity for me to produce sentences in English for this activity. However, Google Translate (GT) helps me a lot when choosing the most appropriate English word for me ... I first produce my sentence in Turkish and then get it translated using GT, and I do not need to spend hours searching for the right English word for my sentence (Participant 23).

Another participant highlighted,

GT translated 'Sally iyi Fransızca konuşur' [Sally speaking French well] as Sally speaking English good. However, my group partner corrected the sentence and told me I should use 'well' instead of 'good'. After that, I felt more comfortable writing in English as I knew that my [group partner] would correct my written mistakes (Participant 72).

Average Achievers

Of 78 participants, 32 (41.3%) were considered 'average achievers' in connection with the overall evaluation of both participants' self-assessments and their teacher's assessments of students' proficiency in English. Based on the analysed data on web-based researcher-participants interviews and online written discussion threads, it was discovered that most participants used bilingual dictionaries (Tr.-Eng.; Eng.-Tr.). Even though most used Google Translate as an online dictionary, the participants also used the mobile apps of Tureng and Sesli Sözlük online dictionaries. As reported by the participants, the primary purposes of using online dictionaries during the activity were

- 1) to search for the unfamiliar words that their group partner(s) used in the co-constructed text and
- 2) to diversify the words used in the Google Translated text.

Some average achievers (15.62%) said they did not use a dictionary (neither online nor printed) when doing the CW writing task. Few average achievers (6.25%) professed that they also used online monolingual dictionaries to verify the meanings and usages of the words they had already looked up in online bilingual dictionaries. For instance, one participant explained,

I did not know that advice is an uncountable word. In Turkish, you can make it countable. I checked 'advice' in the online Cambridge Dictionary from my phone to find out if it says anything about the plural form of the word and found that 'a piece of advice' could be used for the plural use of the word (Participant, 45).

High Achievers

19 (24.36%) participants among seventy-eight were considered 'high achievers' in the overall evaluation of both participants' self-assessments and their teachers' assessments of students' proficiency in English. Based on the analysed data on online researcher-participants interviews and written discussion threads, it is found that among high achievers, the number of participants who used online bilingual (36.84%) and monolingual (34.84%) dictionaries was even. Additionally, some high achievers (26.32%) reported that they did not use any dictionary during the CW activity. Interestingly, among high achievers, none of the participants indicated that they used Google Translate as an online dictionary. Some said they used Tureng and Sesli Sözlük. Concerning the monolingual dictionaries, Online Cambridge Dictionary, Online Oxford Dictionary, The Free Dictionary and Online Collins Dictionary were the most frequently used online dictionaries among high achievers. The primary purposes of online dictionaries for the high achievers were to search the synonyms of words they already know and verify the correctness of the selected word they use in the co-constructed text. Most high achievers who used the online dictionaries when undertaking the CW activity felt responsible for leading their group. For example, one participant explained,

I attached too much importance to the correctness and appropriateness of my word choices as the other two group partners were seeking help from my vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and I felt that I had become the teacher of the group. Therefore, I checked Cambridge Dictionaries several times during the activity to be sure I was using the right word (Participant, 29).

Very High Achievers

4 (5.13%) participants among seventy-eight were considered 'very high achievers' based on the overall evaluation of both participants' self-assessments

and their teachers' assessments of students' proficiency in English. Based on the analysed data on online researcher-participants interviews and written discussion threads, it is found that all very high achievers only used monolingual dictionaries when undertaking the CW activity. The primary purposes of online dictionary use for very high achievers were to search collocation of words, search sample examples with the words they already know, and find synonyms of the already known words to diversify their writing in English. Also, very high achiever participants were instructing their group partners about how monolingual dictionaries will potentially improve their vocabulary knowledge and selecting an appropriate word for their writing. The following episode was taken from one of the group's written discussion threads and illustrating how very high achiever (P24) was correcting his group partners' (P2, low achiever) vocabulary mistake and showing how monolingual dictionary will help him rectify his error.

P2: I would say 'Jack was at home only'.

P24: At home only?

P2: I mean, Jack was at home without other people.

P24: hahaha... [laughter sign] that is funny! Only and alone give the same meaning in Turkish, but you should use 'alone', not 'only'. Only your sentence is used in the adverb form, not the adjective form. If you want to use it only, you can use it this way. 'Jack was the only person at home.'

P2: Okay

P24: Check these out <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-turkish/alone?q=ALONE>, <https://sentence.yourdictionary.com/alone>

P24: There are several sample sentences about 'alone'. For example, 'leave him alone; he is tired.'

P2: Okay, understood, thanks.

Discission and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how and which online dictionaries were used among 26 groups of three ($N = 78$) Turkish high school EFL learners during a two-hour web-based CW activity. The following two research questions were asked considering the aim of the study:

- 1) How do EFL learners make use of online dictionaries as an ICT tool during the web-based CW?, and
- 2) Which online dictionaries do EFL learners benefit from as an ICT tool during the web-based CW?

The findings revealed that participants who were categorised as ‘low achievers’, mainly used bilingual dictionaries when undertaking the web-based CW activity. It is understood that GT facilitated low achievers’ writing process which concurs with the findings of Selcuk, et al. (2019b). Most proficient participants in English mainly used monolingual dictionaries. The corrected feedback received by very high and high achievers after some low or average achiever group members’ initial attempts in producing a piece of writing in English fits well with the fundamental principles of the process-oriented approach. This current study is a small-scale study, conducted with seventy-eight participants in one high school involving only one age range of 16-year-old high school EFL learners and, what is more, they were enthusiastic volunteers. All these matters restrict any generalisation of the findings to other high schools, students, or contexts. However, the insights gained were substantial for this context, and the outcome of such small-scale research we have shown can add nuanced findings to the field about how EFL teaching and learning in Turkey and similar educational contexts could be developed in a more student-centred way with more student autonomy through online-based small group CW activities.

Participants were digitally literate in terms of confidently using smartphones and laptops and, through necessity, making effective use of online dictionaries. That was especially the case with the use of their smartphones as there were no or few laptops and desktop computers in some participants’ homes. All the participants could join in and benefit from the present study because they were all confident and prolific users of their smartphones. The participants in this study indicated the limited availability of laptops was potentially disadvantageous to those students if they could only use those devices, whereas using FB, given the widespread ownership of smartphones, would allow for universal participation in any such exercise. FB can be downloaded as a mobile smartphone application and thus facilitate written discussions.

It would be helpful to replicate or do similar research with students of different age groups and motivation, in different schools, in different locales to gain further insights into the use of online dictionaries to enhance the development of writing skills in EFL and, indeed, of any potential for transfer to other skills.

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