

## The Effects of Using Interactive Task-based Activities in Online English Writing Classes

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**Abstract:** This quantitative and qualitative study aims to scrutinize the effectiveness of utilizing interactive task-based activities to teach English writing in Bethlehem Secondary School for Girls. The experiment was conducted at the second semester of the academic year 2016/2017. Two scientific sections from the 11th grade participated in the study; section B was the control group and section C was the experimental one. The former group practiced writing traditionally. The students in the latter group were enrolled in two online platforms, "Facebook" and "PBworks", to practice the target skill electronically. A questionnaire, pre/posttests, online platforms, a text content analyzer tool and self-reports were administered to investigate the participants' achievement and attitudes. With regard to the writing skill, the results indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control one. Also, the former manifested more positive attitudes towards e-learning than the other one.

**Keywords:** Online classes, task-based activities, writing skill.

### فاعلية استخدام الأنشطة التواصلية القائمة على المهام من خلال تدريس مهارة كتابة اللغة الإنجليزية عبر الإنترنت

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**مستخلص:** هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى قياس مدى فاعلية استخدام الصفوف الافتراضية والمهام ذات الطابع التواصلية لتعليم الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية في مدرسة بنات بيت لحم الثانوية، تم إجراء الدراسة خلال الفصل الدراسي الثاني من العام الدراسي ٢٠١٧/٢٠١٦. وتكونت عينة الدراسة من شعبتين دراستين من الصف الحادي عشر العلمي. لقد تدرت المجموعة التجريبية على الكتابة عن طريق الإنترنت، بينما تم عرض هذه المهارة للمجموعة الضابطة بطريقة تقليدية، وتم استخدام استبانة، واختبار قبلي وبعدي، ومنصات إلكترونية، وتقارير ذاتية من أجل تحقيق أهداف الدراسة. لقد أشارت نتائج الاستبانة البعدية إلى أن المجموعة التجريبية قد طورت اتجاهات أكثر إيجابية نحو التعلم الإلكتروني مقارنة مع المجموعة الضابطة، وكانت نتيجة الوسطين الحسابيين للإمتحان القبلي متقاربة، بينما أشارت نتائج الإمتحان البعدي أن المجموعة التجريبية قد تفوقت على المجموعة الضابطة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، دلت إحصائيات تحليل المنشورات على أن التكنولوجيا ساعدت الطالبات على استخدام تراكيب لغوية مفهومة وأكثر وضوحاً، وفي النهاية أشارت نتائج التقارير الذاتية إلى أن التعلم الإلكتروني قد طور مهارات الكتابة وقلل من التوتر.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الدراسة عبر الإنترنت، الأنشطة القائمة على المهام، التعليم الإلكتروني، مهارة الكتابة.

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Recently, the current technological innovations have become prominent in innumerable educational systems around the world. This prominence has been adopted because there is a conspicuous chasm between the students' aspirations and the affordances of the traditional educational systems. In the era of the technological superfluities, the dominance of many traditional teaching methodologies is not adequate anymore to fulfill the needs of the new generations because all walks of life have been interconnected by computers. For instance, many policymakers and teachers have attempted to rejuvenate the educational process in a manner that conforms to the current technological era.

The integration of the technological "surges" into the Palestinian educational system is a sophisticated process that requires profound and principled investigations due to four reasons. First, the Palestinian Authority took the responsibility of education after the Oslo accords in 1993 (Gumpel & Awartani, 2003), so it's a relatively embryonic system that needs years of rejuvenations to construct a pillared infrastructure that underpins technology. Second, the Palestinian educational system is managed by three parts; the Ministry of Education, private NGO's and the UNRWA (Gumpel & Awartani, 2003). Each part has diverse technological infrastructures, so not all students get even technology-based educational opportunities in Palestine. Third, the Ministry of Education is suffering financially, so not all of the public schools receive a lot of support that includes technology. Fourth, the Palestinian context is full of political and military turbulences between Palestine and Israel, so many schools are closed on daily basis. These abovementioned points indicate that the Palestinian educational system exists in an unstable context in which adopting technology-based instruction would be highly necessary to improve the chances

of facilitating lifelong education (Shraima & Khlaif, 2010).

Furthermore, the range of research about e-learning is still hazy and developing in Palestine due to four major reasons listed as follows:

1. Due to the lack of financial support, many teachers don't get enough training to develop their teaching methodologies in a manner that conforms with the latest technological innovations.
2. Some schools lack the basic infrastructure that supports e-learning. For example, it's hard to conduct research about technology in labs that contain twenty computers (some of them may be broken) for forty students.
3. In the Palestinian educational context, English is considered a prestigious language that is needed in all walks of life. However, the bulk of research is completely individual; there are no principled procedures that support teaching English in the public institutions. Most of the research papers were written and published by teachers for personal developments.

In short, the researchers conducted the study to scrutinize the effects of utilizing interactive task-based activities in online English writing classes.

### Research Hypotheses

The study will address the following research hypotheses:

1. **There are no statistically significant differences in the students' attitudes towards e-learning between the experimental and the control groups.**
2. **There are no statistically significant differences in the students' writing achievement between the experimental and the control groups.**

### Significance of the study

The following points summarize the significance of this study:

1. This study attempts to present writing through technology as a way of "modern communication" rather than a requirement for academic success.
2. Using online classes in the Palestinian educational context is still immature, so this study helps administrators, teachers and students to get initial perceptions about e-learning.
3. This study diminishes the prototypical images of the conventional classes in which many students, entrenched in rows, receive information passively.
4. To the researchers' best knowledge, there isn't much research about the use of technology to teach English writing in the Palestinian educational context. Therefore, this study will hopefully give other researchers the chance to open the door for other future investigations.
5. This study necessitates the empathetic and the social dimensions of learning writing. Both are usually marginalized in many conventional classes.
6. This study will hopefully enhance the recent technological reformulations that the Palestinian Ministry of Education is conducting in the public sector.

### Limitations of the study

There are four major factors that will possibly affect the study:

1. The participants may encounter technical problems like online disconnections. In the targeted school, the net connection is usually weak and distorted.

2. The accumulated school assignments might distract the participants and lessen their interest.
3. Some of the participants might not be able to use the e-learning modules because they don't have convenient computer skills.
4. Time limitations can hinder this study. All of the sessions, particularly the synchronous ones, are limited to thirty minutes only.

### Literature Review

By exploring the historical evolvments of the pedagogical implications that e-learning underpins, it is apparent that many "technological inducements" started as supplementary tools to boost traditional teaching. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, e-learning took a drastic destination towards more didactic functions (Moore, 2015). Individuals were able to join online classes and deal with the teaching-learning processes interactively although their ability to use technology was fragile. The following two points depict e-learning and summarize the congruencies among the majority of the researchers as follows:

1. E-learning is a continuum of teaching that requires a harmonious mixture of technological, interactive and academic skills.
2. E-learning, in its full extent, can be perceived as a complementary teaching tool that gives many students the opportunity to retrieve what has been mentioned in class at any time. Also, teachers may use online modules to post announcements, assignments and remedial materials.

### E-learning in Palestine

Al-Sayyed and Abdalhaq (2016) declare that ICT (information and communication technology) has lately caught attention in the Palestinian context because it

contributes to the development of the economic situation, so technology has appeared in all walks of life—including education. In addition, Shraim and Khlaif (2010) point out that the Palestinians noticeably started to use the net in the 1990s, so new trends in education appeared in this decade.

Correspondently, Affouneh and Raba (2017) point out that An-Najah National University has participated in the development of e-pedagogies in Palestine. For example, the university published hundreds of lectures online in order to enhance and expand the students' learning abilities. Additionally, an e-learning center was established in 2012 as an endeavor to lift higher education to notable levels. From a different perspective, Sabbah (2010) indicates that Al-Quds Open University started to apply e-learning in the academic year 2008/2009. The author declares that the university initially made a good progress in e-learning; however, many hurdles stood in the way later on.

#### **Theoretical pillars of online classes**

Constructivism plays an important role in identifying the essence of using e-learning in teaching languages. Huang (2002) derives four didactic principles that are stemmed from constructivism and closely reflected in e-learning. They are summarized as follows:

**The promotion of communicative and collaborative learning:** Dewey (as cited in Huang, 2002) believes that learners cannot develop knowledge alone without interaction.

**Sheltered learning:** Constructivists believe that teachers should create a secure learning environment in which students feel that it is acceptable to make mistakes (Huang, 2002).

**Authentic input:** Constructivists believe that learning should occur in situations that echo real life (Huang, 2002). Online

classrooms are enriching sources of authenticity.

**Learner's autonomy:** Constructivists believe that learning is developed through social interactions rather than purely cognitive processes.

The researchers adopted the abovementioned principles to conduct the study. In other words, the workplaces were designed in a manner that promoted communication and collaboration. The students were asked to interact with audio-visual materials and respond by writing. Additionally, the participants were given the chance to receive feedback and correct their mistakes. All of the materials reflected authentic themes like school life. With regard to the teachers' role, it reflected "facilitation" rather than "authoritativeness". The researchers gave initial instructions and "watched the students' interaction from a distance" to examine the smoothness of the learning process. Intervention only occurred when serious deviations took place.

#### **Challenges of teaching English writing in EFL contexts**

Al-Khasawneh (2010) lists several reasons explaining why writing, in EFL contexts, is considered a complex skill that many teachers and students suffer from. They are summarized as follows:

1. Some teachers have a low proficiency in English, so they transfer their weaknesses to students.
2. Due to the fact that some classes are overcrowded, teachers tend to provide holistic feedback.
3. Literal translations from Arabic lead to ambiguousness. Some students tend to use the exact Arabic words and translate them into English.

#### **Task-based activities**

Adopting the notion of "task-based" activities in education has become pop-

ular recently. Nunan (2004) explains that "goals" are the "general intentions behind any learning task" (p. 41). Likewise, Swan (2005) proposes several characteristics of task-based activities such as the naturalistic settings and real-life situations. Moreover, both of them should enhance the students' roles in constructing meaningful learning processes and communicative activities.

With regard to the experiment, the researchers presented authentic materials, asked the students to express their own ideas and create a personal understanding of the tasks. All types of communicative exchanges were encouraged. Therefore, "interaction", "communication" and "tasks" were major dimensions that the study underpinned.

#### **Studies related to teaching writing in online platforms**

Despite the fact that the literature review about CALL studies is relatively developing worldwide (Mehanna, 2004), there are various congruencies that can be found among such studies to shape the initial cornerstones of teaching English writing and e-learning.

In a study conducted by Ghafoori, Dastgoshadeh, Aminpanah and Ziaei (2016), the impact of CALL on the grammar of writing was investigated at Azad University of Marivan Branch in Iran. Fifty homogeneous students, who were EFL intermediates, participated in the study. The experimental group outperformed the others who used the regular textbooks. The four researchers concluded that employing CALL to improve the grammar of writing was worthy of consideration since it motivated both the involved teachers and the learners.

Additionally, Aydın and Yıldız (2014) conducted a study to scrutinize the efficacy of utilizing WIKIS to promote collaborative writing. The students' pages were analyzed to investigate the effectiveness of task-based roles in peer-corrections, decision-making and accu-

racy. The results revealed that the utilization of wiki-based activities led to a major percentage of accuracy (94%) in the students' writings.

Similarly, Davoudi, Gorjian and Pazhakh (2013) scrutinized the effects of post-task activities on fifty-five M. A. students at Khouzestan Islamic Azad University. The writing competence was the focus of the study. The students were divided into control and experimental groups randomly. The former group was taught writing conventionally; however, the latter practiced this skill through email correspondences. The results revealed that CALL had a significant influence on the students' writing accuracy.

Farrah and Tushyeh (2010) conducted a study at Hebron University to investigate the efficacy of utilizing CALL in teaching reading and writing as integral skills. The participants were 104 English majors who manifested motivation, improvements and different attitudes after the experiment. Regarding the results of the posttest, the experimental group outperformed the other. Both researchers concluded that CALL positively affected the students' achievement and attitudes simultaneously.

Correspondingly, Al-Menei (2008) investigated the efficacy of computer-based instruction on a large number of EFL learners at the university level at King Saud University in KSA. The results of the study showed that e-learning motivated the participants, increased their quantity of writing and encouraged them to use more complex expressions.

#### **Methodology**

The researchers adopted a mixed approach, both qualitative and quantitative, in order to congruently target the complexity of achievement and attitudes. Five elicitation techniques (pre/posttests, a questionnaire, online platforms, self-reports and a text content analyzer tool) were administered in

order to get a more rounded picture about the students' writing skills and attitudes towards e-learning.

### Study sample

The sample of the study consisted of 65 students from the 11<sup>th</sup> grade—the scientific stream in Bethlehem Secondary School for Girls. They were randomly chosen from a total number of four scientific sections in the school. Section B (32 students) represented the control group and section C (33 students) represented the experimental one. Both groups were homogeneous; they belonged to a similar working socio-economic class. In other words, both groups came from refugees camps, villages and outskirts in Bethlehem. The majority of the students in both groups had received their education in the Palestinian public schools. However, the minority (15 students) had pursued their previous education in private schools that introduced English, French and Dutch as academic requirements.

### Instrumentation

In the study, the questionnaire, the pre/posttests, the online platforms, the text content analyzer tool and the self-reports played complementary roles in forming a rounded image about the issue of teaching writing in EFL online classes. The following points demonstrate the developments of the above-mentioned elicitation techniques:

**The questionnaire:** It initially contained two sections. The first one was entitled "the demographic data". It included general information; the net access, computer availability, hours spend online and anxiousness during e-learning. The second section contained three domains that included the general beliefs about e-learning, writing online and the online integration of language skills. After revision, the last version of the questionnaire contained demographic data, general beliefs about e-learning and online writing. The reli-

bility of the questionnaire was calculated by using "Cronbach Alpha Coefficient". The total alpha value of the adopted questionnaire was (0.87).

**The online platforms:** The online platform "PBworks" was divided into four major workplaces that contained mini sessions. Each workplace tackled one common theme like bullying. "Facebook" was utilized for chatting and instructions.

The online platform "PBworks" ([www.pbworks.com](http://www.pbworks.com)) was utilized to conduct the experiment. It's a semi-free website that anyone can access by simply signing up. Also, it is a convenient site because it allows different students to check the assigned tasks, move to YouTube and browse other websites through hyperlinks to post comments directly. This platform doesn't provide an "editing" icon in posts; students will have to post their comments for several times if they want to edit something. Regarding spelling, the website automatically highlights mistakes by red lines, so many students will be triggered to check their writings autonomously. The consultation of other web materials was completely accepted to give the participants enough exposure to language.

Moreover, it doesn't provide a chat panel, thus a group on Facebook was launched to give the participants the chance to chat with each other, receive extra instructions and ask for feedback. The sessions, held in both platforms, were synchronous and asynchronous. In other words, the teachers and the students gathered online at the same time to do certain tasks. Sometimes, they posted comments at different times without having a simultaneous online gathering with the others.

The tasks were presented in four interactive forums entitled "workplaces". Each workplace represented a certain theme and multiple sessions. The targeted students were exposed to audio-

visual materials to respond to by writing. In short, Facebook and "PBworks" were interchangeably used to investigate the efficacy of interactive task-based activities and online classes on the students' propensity to develop their writing skills. The former platform was used for chatting and instructions; however, the latter was utilized to post different tasks and comments.

**Pre/posttests:** They were designed to gradually cover the controlled, guided and free writing items. In the first item, the students were asked to study a table that tackled the percentages of the labor force in Palestine. In the second item, the students were asked to imitate the paragraph in the first question. The final item was free. The students were asked to express their own ideas about the participation of women in the labor force. Two teachers graded the test for both groups; also, the mean scores between the grades were calculated in order to avoid bias.

**The text content analyzer tool:** It is a semi-free website that was utilized to get statistical features about the students writings. The participants' productions were copied and pasted in a box to get information about word count, number of sentences, syntactic length, paragraphs, lexical density and fog index.

### Results

This section presents the results of the elicitation techniques, tackles the research hypothesis and sheds light on the significance of the study outcomes.

**Results related to the first hypothesis:** "There are no statistically significant differences in the students' attitudes towards e-learning between the experimental and the control groups"

In relation to the first hypothesis, the questionnaire was designed to tackle general attitudes towards e-learning and the linguistic dimension of using online classes to develop the writing

skills. The students' responses were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Table 1 and Table 2 show the significance of the results:

**Table 1**  
**The results of the independent t-test (the students' general attitudes towards e-learning)**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	d.f.	Sig.
Control	32	3.32	0.48	2.894	63	0.005
Experimental	33	3.71	0.59			

The results of the t-test indicated that there were significant differences regarding the students' general attitudes towards e-learning between the experimental and the control groups  $p = 0.005 < 0.05$ . The differences were in favor of the experimental group because they manifested more positive attitudes towards e-learning ( $M = 3.71, SD = 0.59$ ) compared to ( $M = 3.32, SD = 0.48$ ) for the control group.

**Table 2**  
**The results of the independent t-test (the students' attitudes towards the linguistic realms of using e-learning)**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	d.f.	Sig.
Control	32	3.29	0.51	2.886	63	0.005
Experimental	33	3.65	0.51			

As Table 2 reveals, the results of the t-test indicated that there were significant attitudinal differences between the experimental and the control groups  $p = 0.005 < 0.05$ . Such differences were in favor of the experimental group as they expressed more positive attitudes towards learning English writing online  $M = 3.65, SD = 0.51$  compared to 3.29 for the control group.

In short, the results of Tables 1 and 2 indicated that the first hypothesis was rejected. In other words, the mean and the probability values showed that there were statistically significant differences in the students' attitudes towards e-learning between both groups.

**Results related to the second hypothesis:** "There are no statistically signifi-

### cant differences in the students' writing achievement between the experimental and the control groups.

**Results of the Pretest:** In order to make sure that the control and experimental groups are equivalent concerning their writing ability, the mean averages for the questions in the control and experimental groups were calculated. Table 3 shows the means for each question in the pretest and the total mean values for the final grade. It's significant to note that question one was graded out of 10, however, the second and the third were graded out of 5.

**Table 3**  
The averages of the pretest

Group	Average of question 1	Average of question 2	Average of question 3	Total (20)
Control	8.68	3.46	2.70	14.85
Experimental	9.27	3.13	2.34	14.77

As Table 3 reveals, both groups manifested an "average" writing competency. For example, the averages of the first question were 8.68 for the control group and 9.27 for the experimental one. Regarding the second question, both averages showed that the students had a "fragile" ability to imitate other texts. Finally, the values of the final question showed that the students' ability to write freely was relatively limited.

### Results of the Posttest

In order to find the effects of using the online class on the achievement of the students in their writing ability, the researchers calculated the mean averages for the questions in the control and experimental groups, as shown in Table 4.

Regarding the posttest, the distribution of marks was slightly different from the pretest; the first question got 12 marks. However, the second got 3 and the third

was graded out of 5. The first question took the highest mark because it underpinned "controlled writing", so there was no chance for bias. The following table shows the total mean values of the posttest:

**Table 4**  
The averages of the posttest

Group	Average of question 1	Average of question 2	Average of question 3	Total
Control	10.65	1.48	2.09	14.25
Experimental	11	2.12	2.59	15.66

Regarding question one, the control group got an average that's equal to 10.65; however, the experimental one got 11. In question two, it's apparent that the experimental group 2.12 outperformed the other one 1.48. Also, the control group got an average that is equal to 2.09 and the other got 2.59 in the third question. The total averages of the grades indicated that online classes had positive effects on the students' writing competence. To conclude, the results of the t-test showed that there were significant differences in the results of the posttest between the experimental and the control groups  $p = 0.02 < 0.05$ .

### Results of the "PBworks"

Regarding "PBworks" and the text content analyzer tool, all the textual statistics of the sessions indicated that the students' writing competency developed gradually and systematically. The development was seen on semantic, syntactic, discourse and stylistic levels.

#### A. The introductory session

The introductory session was held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, 2016. The students were asked to explore instructional

**Table 5**  
The textual statistics for the introductory session

Word Count	Number of Sentences	Average Sentence Length	Number of Paragraphs	Lexical Density	Fog Index
46	4	11.5	0	71.74	7.21

pictures about PBworks to sign up and participate correctly. In addition, they were asked to post anything to make sure that they could access the platform efficaciously.

Table 5 details the students' textual features in this session: Twenty students out of thirty-three participated in this workplace. As shown in table 5, the total word count for all the responses was 46, the total number of the sentences in each post was 4 and the average sentence length was 11.5. Many students responded by posting greeting words like "hi" and "marhaba" only.

Moreover, the value of the lexical density showed that most of the used words were content ones (71.74%). The complete absence of any well-tailored paragraphs and the high reliance on content words were ordinary because the researchers didn't provide a lot of instructions about the requirements of this phase. Checking the participants' ability to access the platform was the ultimate aim of this session.

**B. The identity session**

This session was divided into three workplaces. In the first one, the students were asked to punctuate a text about biodiversity. Then, they were asked to watch a video about identity and fill out a given text. Afterwards, they were asked to write about hypocrisy in the final one. Only the students' personal productions in the final workplace were analyzed.

As shown in Table 6, the students showed more sophisticated writing productions in comparison to the pre-test and the first session. The total word count was 1679, the number of the sentences was 49 and the average of the sentence length was 17.8. The lexical density was relatively low; this indicated that the students used more functional words to connect sentences together and construct structural relations among texts. Also, the value of the fog index was higher than the one in the

first session; this indicated that the complexity of the input types provided triggered the target students to develop.

**Table 6**  
**The textual statistics for the second session**

Word Count	Number of Sentences	Average Sentence Length	Lexical Density	Fog Index
1679	94	17.8	32.33	10.29

**C. The picnic session**

This session was divided into three workplaces. In the first one, the target students were asked to watch a video about picnics and respond to certain questions. In the second, they were asked to describe a photo about the same topic. Finally, the students were asked to study the "hamburger paragraph" and write about a school trip. Table 7 shows the textual statistics for all of them:

**Table 7**  
**The textual statistics for the third session**

Aspect	Space one	Space two	Space three
Total Word Count	1456	1607	1801
Number of Sentences	76	84	90
Number of responses	27	27	22
Average Sentence Length	17.3	19.1	20.9
Lexical Density	36.47	28.69	27.96
Fog Index	10.39	13.15	16.71

As shown in Table 7, the complexity and the flow of the students' writings augmented gradually. Both the used words and the posted sentences increased progressively in comparison to the first session. Furthermore, the average sentence length became higher even when the number of the responses was smaller. This indicated that using technology had indubitable effects on the students' propensity to write intelligibly.

The lexical density of the students' productions declined in the advanced writing tasks when compared to the initial sessions of the experiment. This showed that the target students used more grammatical, or functional, words alongside the lexical ones. Fries (1952) proposes a helpful distinction between both word categorizations that the re-

searchers adopted to analyze the students' responses on "PBworks". Lexical nouns refer to words that have direct meanings in dictionaries such as, life activities and feelings. However, functional or grammatical nouns refer to words that are hard to find in dictionaries. The function of such noun categorization is to build syntactic relations among sentences.

The declining value of the lexical density showed that the students' sentences were more compound and complex in the advanced writing tasks. In other words, the students had an online session about constructing a well coherent and punctuated paragraph, so they applied it in other tasks. The following examples show some of the students' writings:

- "Since my mom is a great cook, she cooked some Shawerma sandwiches, made a great bowl of salad , set up some cups of juice and cokes and hid some cookies in her bag." (Salma, the picnic session).
- "We slid the big and amazing slide which ends in the pool. After that, we grilled chicken and meat and ate lunch together. Then we sat to hang out together talking, laughing and having fun. Finally, we returned back home with a very happy mood." (Nadia, the picnic session).
- "Teacher, I cannot find neither the video nor your explanation." (Sue, the identity session).

In short, the three examples indicated that the target students moved from simple sentences (S.V.O formation) to more complex ones. Therefore, indulging students in e-learning, for the purpose of practicing writing, had a paramount effect on developing this skill.

#### D. The editing session

Similar to the aforementioned ones, this workplace was divided into three correlated mini sessions to target both writing and editing. In other words, the students were asked to edit their classmates' writings and post letters to some bullied characters appeared in the videos. Only the second and the third workplaces were analyzed as they required free writing productions.

When the students got accustomed to the advanced online tasks, their level of writing became more complex with regard to the words used, the length of the sentences, the lexical density and the fog index. The data provided showed that the students in the last session used more words (1705), more sentences (83), longer sentences (28.2) and a higher fog index.

In short, the results of the posttest and the textual statistics of the sessions indicated that the students' writing competency developed gradually and systematically. Such development was semantic, syntactic, discourse and stylistic. Therefore, the second hypothesis was rejected; there were statistically significant differences in the students' writing achievement between both groups.

#### **Intersection among the results of the questionnaire, the pre/posttests, and the text content analyzer tool.**

This subsection entails the congruencies among the results of all the adopted elicitation techniques. It's significant to note that the researchers tailored the study questions to scrutinize two paradoxical realms—attitudes and achievement. Therefore, the utilization of the questionnaire, the pre/posttests, the platforms, the text content and the text analyzer tool was optimal to maintain the study sustainability.

Based on the results of the aforementioned elicitation techniques, the researchers argue that e-learning, when it's used sagaciously, can definitely be a fruitful method to engage the target

**1. (A human in many faces)**

. . . the hypocrites. In ancient times of the prophet Mohammed, there were many hypocrites; they attacked the Muslims without knowing that this person is against you or with you. Unfortunately, we have like these people in our life. . . (Salwa)

**2. (Be yourself)**

Humans have reached the 21 century, invented magnificent things . . . or accepting the idea that someone's beliefs are different than theirs! . . . But at the end, only the intelligent ones will be themselves. . . (Rinad)

**3. (Picnic in nature)**

One day, I went with . . . food and a few drinks and ate together. Then, we sat down and we played together, where flowers and beautiful fresh air existed. It was the most beautiful day. (Samia)

students in communicative practices to learn how to write. The following points summarize the congruencies among the results of the study:

1. The results of the text content analyzer tool and the posttest indicated that indulging the targeted students in online sessions boosted the development of their writing competence. They used longer sentences, more sophisticated vocabulary items and clearer punctuation marks.
2. The results of the questionnaire indicated that enrolling the target students in e-learning boosted interaction, decreased anxiety, developed competence and enhanced the positive predispositions towards writing.

**Samples of the students' posts**

This sub-section provides various excerpts that show the students' writing strategies and other unique textual features. It's important to note that the researchers chose all the samples randomly to illustrate the students' developmental patterns in writing. Also, all the used names were pseudonyms; the par-

ticipants' privacy was kept under the seal of secrecy.

**A. The complexity of writing**

It is important to mention that the notion of "complexity" has a positive connotation in this interpretation; it refers to the students' developments with regard to the grammatical and the pragmatic realms of writing. The students in the experimental group used more "complex" linguistic structures in comparison to the other students who were taught traditionally. The following excerpts exemplify the students' complex textual features (the targeted linguistic complexities are underlined by the researchers).

The following points summarize the grammatical and usage-based complexities that the students manifested all through the study:

**The use of many "relative clauses":** Samia used the relative pronoun "where" in order to add additional information about their place of playing."

**The use of many multisyllabic words:** Most of the students used long adjectives and adverbs like "magnificent", "unfortunately" and "hypocrites" in order to enrich their ideas.

**The use of many punctuation marks:** Salwa used a lot of commas so as to keep a plausible "flow" in her response. Moreover, Rinad used many exclamation marks to indicate rising emotions and excitement.

**B. Creative writing**

Indulging the students in online classes encouraged them to look for more creative ways to post their writings. For instance, the following sample was posted in the picnic session in which the students were asked to look at a photo of a family having a picnic and describe it:

(Fine, awesome, magnificent, intelligent, lucky and young)! If we take the first letter of these words, we will

have the word family that gives us many thing. This word consists of 7 letters but it means many things. It means whole life we must thank God becaus family is a gift from Him and I cannot describe what real family gives to the person. I need years to talk about family five lines are not enough.  
(Suad)

The student in this sample took each letter from the word "family" and wrote an adjective to describe "what a family means" in a sentimental manner. Such empathetic involvement would not take place in traditional classrooms because of the limitations of time, place and stimuli.

### C. The amount of writing

After being exposed to two-month traditional teaching, the control group didn't show a conspicuous development in the level of their writings. They interacted with the free writing items in three manners listed as follows:

1. Some students left the question completely blank. They informed the researchers that they have ideas but they don't know how to express themselves in English.
2. Other students tried to copy sentences from the first and the second questions as an endeavor to write something.
3. Some students didn't write full and intelligible sentences at all. They gathered unrelated linguistic patterns and ordered them randomly.

Significantly, all the students' productions in the control group lacked many necessary linguistic, discourse, textual and stylistic patterns, so their writings were ambiguous and scattered. Such features are summarized as follows:

**a. The absence of many punctuation marks:** some students wrote their paragraphs without using a single punctuation mark.

**b. A highly unparalleled use of some verb tenses:** the students were not aware of the correct uses of the verb tenses.

**c. The absence of capitalization:** the students were inclined to drop the capital letters at the beginning of any sentence.

On the other hand, it's apparent that the students' writings (in the experimental group) were more well-established than the ones produced by the other group.

### Discussion

The results of all the adopted elicitation techniques indicated that enrolling the students in e-learning had positive and incontrovertible roles in developing the writing skill. Such roles are generally mentioned as follows:

**The social role:** engaging students in e-learning helped them to work collaboratively to communicate by writing.

**The linguistic role:** technology gave the students the chance to search other resources to learn new ideas, see language in authentic contexts and acquire new vocabulary items.

**The empathetic role:** the input types that were uploaded on "PBworks" engaged the students in the teaching-learning process. They wrote about their own experiences as an endeavor to emulate what's presented in the sessions.

**The technical roles:** technology gave the students the chance to think about the activities and respond to them aloof from any time and place limitations. This sense of aloofness reduced the anxiety that they felt.

On the other hand, indulging the students in "e-learning" weren't a "magical solution" that smoothly solved all the weaknesses correlated to the writing skill. Both of the researchers and the students expressed the following im-

pediments that stood in the way of learning:

**Social impediments:** Some students pointed out that there was a sense of "hollowness" because they didn't have a vis-à-vis interaction with their teachers and colleagues. Therefore, it is significant to tailor a systematic approach that combines the social, the academic and the technological demands of modern education.

**Technical problems:** Technology cannot be guaranteed. Some students wasn't able to participate because they faced urgent technical problems during the sessions. Thus, building a sufficient technological infrastructure in all the Palestinian schools is a paramount step that should be considered before the adoption of e-learning.

**Anxiety and shyness:** Some students didn't want to reveal their writings online because they were afraid to have many mistakes. As a result, they kept asking the researchers to check their writings before posting.

**Plagiarism:** High-achievers pointed out that other students copied their writings and changed slight things. Therefore, it's vital to focus on the "ethics" of using the net for academic purposes before any online involvements.

#### **Significance of the questionnaire results**

Interestingly, there's an apparent incongruence between the students' attitudes towards e-learning and the traditional methods of education in the first aspect of the questionnaire (the general beliefs).

The students in the experimental group responded to the items in the questionnaire. The majority of them agreed that e-learning improves their attitudes and upsurges their interests in the writing skill. However, most of them pointed out that e-learning isn't more engaging than the traditional learning methods. Such attitudinal incongruence can be

related to two reasons summarized as follows:

- The Hawthorne effect: Bornmann (2012) points out that this effect means a modification in certain behaviors or attitudes conducted by any participants when they know that they are observed or evaluated. Therefore, it's probable that the students in the experimental group got overwhelmed by the experiment, so they provided certain responses to please the researchers.
- In the Palestinian context, the students' minds are usually "programmed" to perceive the traditional classrooms and the teachers' physical presence in class as the supreme elements of a "good education". Shifting towards online classes is a multifaceted step that takes longer time periods (more than two months) to reformulate clear and steady attitudes.

#### **Significance of the pre/posttests/the text content analyzer tool results**

The researchers adopted "testing" in order to examine the students' writings and gauge achievement. As Fulcher (2010) puts it, language testing always has an objective behind it. Such objective can be academic, social or administrative. In this study, the pre/posttests were designed to fulfill three fundamental objectives listed as follows; 1. To get preliminary perceptions about the students' writing competence; 2. To identify the strengths and the weaknesses that the participants usually manifest; and 3. To identify the effects of online classes on the experimental group.

Similar to the tests, the results of the text content analyzer tool enabled the researchers to get solid numerical and descriptive data about the students' writing developments. The following points

reveal the congruent significances of both elicitation techniques:

- Both techniques showed the meticulous developments in certain linguistic features like the syntactic length.
- They provided numbers that the researchers investigated. These numbers indicated that the relationship between achievement (writing) and attitudes (towards e-learning) was harmonious. In other words, building positive attitudes towards e-learning led to an evitable improvements in the writing skill.

#### Further research trends

This subsection presents several technological trends that have gained popularity in education recently. For example, mobile-learning, micro-learning, app-based methods and video-based learning are all technological trends that have changed the features of e-learning lately.

**First:** El-Hussein and Cronje (2010) point out that many smart portable devices have underpinned a noticeable revolution in all walks of life—including education. Also, the authors explain that “Mobile learning” occurs when students are fully engaged in phone activities to fulfill certain pedagogical requirements. The effectiveness of using mobiles to practice writing would be a catchy issue to investigate.

**Second:** the issue of “micro-learning” has become common in education recently. It focuses on dividing the constituents of e-learning into “small bites” to facilitate and scaffold learning (Aitchanov, Nussipbekov & Zhaparov, 2012). Such a method is a new issue that requires research to understand it better.

**Third:** app-based methods have introduced new perceptions in e-learning. In this approach, learning fully occurs

through mobile and online applications. Students are usually asked to work individually or collaboratively in order to launch e-modes and participate in ready-made apps that target certain pedagogical aims. Asking students to launch their own apps and teaching writing is a catchy combination that triggers research.

**Finally:** the utilization of videos has become prominent in the field of language learning. Pappas, Myllymäki, Hakala, Härmänmaa and Laine (2017) elaborate that VBL (video-based learning) occurs when students are engaged in video-based activities to gain knowledge and exchange ideas. Such a trend and online classes are meticulously correlated, so it would be so fruitful to investigate the efficacy of video-based activities on the students’ ability to transform visual, auditory and acoustic stimuli into written responses.

#### Conclusion

In this study, the researchers systematically explained the congruencies and the paradoxes found in the students’ responses in order to reveal the significance of the attitudes manifested towards e-learning. The concluding outcomes of the questionnaire, the pre/posttests and the text content analyzer tool harmoniously revealed that e-learning developed the students’ attitudes and achievement.

The researchers concluded that using technology to teach writing was pedagogically fruitful for several reasons summarized as follows:

1. Technology establishes authentic learning contexts that boost students to connect learning to personal experiences.
2. It exposes learners to different academic resources.
3. It encourages learners to use language to interact.

4. It provides input multiplicity that encourages students to learn writing as an integrated language skill aloof from decontextualized learning requirements.

### Recommendations

1. Technology and teaching English should be inseparable in the Palestinian governmental schools. Students need several and simultaneous input types in order develop their linguistic apparatuses.
2. Based on the results of the study, the researchers proposed recommendations tackled teaching writing, others targeted technology and task-based activities.
3. The portions of teaching English writing in the governmental schools should be increased because it's a developmental skill that requires time, in-class interactions and preparations.
4. Alternative assessment, like portfolios, should be seriously taken into consideration aloof from complete reliance on conventional testing.
5. All of the writing activities that are included in the series of *English for Palestine* introduce predetermined topics that some students may not like. A free space for students should be determined in the textbooks to encourage them to write about their own experiences.
6. The Palestinian Ministry of Education should hold intensive workshops to train teachers and students to adopt technology as a communicative and pedagogical continuum.
7. The Palestinian Ministry of Education should launch competitions and encourage teachers to conduct research about e-learning and teaching writing.

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