

Integrating Microsoft Word in an EFL Pre-Service Setting to Enhance Students' Academic Writing: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating technology into the process of writing in an English as a Foreign Language setting can aid educators to create an engaging learning environment and learners to explore various strategies of developing their writing skills. This study was set up to investigate the experiences of 28 pre-service language teachers in a Microsoft (MS) Word integrated writing course at Farhangian University. Participants were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews administered upon completing the course, and triangulated via focused group discussions moderated by an expert in academic writing. Content analysis of the interviews revealed that students expressed favoring an MS Word integrated approach with regard to writing skills improvement (through features such as spell check, grammar suggestions, thesaurus tools) as well as utilizing feedback mechanisms in the Review menu (via track changes feature and editing facilities, proofing, and comments), and the References menu (via Manage sources and Insert citation features). Participants also expressed preferring the on-screen editing activities performed in the classroom compared with their previously held conventional writing sessions. Implications regarding how MS Word can be incorporated into teacher education curricula to improve both their academic writing skills and teaching writing through technology-based instruction are discussed.

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1. Introduction

From the advent of the computer, the utilization of the word-processor has become an integral part of student writing, profiting specialized teaching programs at colleges around the globe. This is where writing specialists admit that learning to write is both enjoyable and demanding for learners, and educators have always been looking for ways to provide support for novice and professional writers in this regard. Today, many documents are reported using word processors, and computerized writing has become commonplace in all spheres of knowledge. Language education has not been an exception and language teachers have thrived to incorporate this facility into their classrooms. In fact, the integration of technological advancements such as the Microsoft

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word has become a driving force which has transformed and reshaped the ways skills are taught and mastered in second and foreign language environments. More specifically, English as a Second/ Foreign Language has been one of the fields in which the synergy between this technology and language skills instruction is explored. Microsoft Word is now introduced as a powerful aid in ESL/EFL classes providing a reliable platform that goes far beyond a word processing tool. This multifaceted program can be fruitfully utilized in both educating various aspects of writing skills and providing feedback to the learners.

As this article navigates the intricate area of English as a second/foreign language writing enhancement, it illuminates the ways in which MS Word transcends its conventional utility, emerging as a dynamic companion in the journey of language acquisition. The aim of this study, thus, is to investigate the experiences of EFL pre-service teachers of an MS Word integrated approach in an Academic Writing class. More specifically, to gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences, participants were inquired whether and in what areas they perceived enhancement in their writing skills as a result of being exposed to and engaged in an MS Word integrated writing class. The present study, therefore, addressed the following question: What are pre-service English teachers' perceptions of an integration of Microsoft Word into a writing skills classroom?

2. Review of Literature

Studies designed to investigate the effects of Microsoft Word (MS Word) on student writing skills have mostly reported positively, implying there are meaningful relationships between the use of the technology and students' scores in composition (Bernhardt et al., 1988; Godsey, 2000; Kurniawan, 2017; Nomass, 2013; Owston et al., 1992). These studies have focused on different aspects in which the use of MS Word can benefit students writing skills such as revision (Daiute, 1986; Owston et al., 1992), peer review (Dickenson, 1986; MacArthur, 1988, as cited in Owston, 1991), and self-correction (Kurniawan, 2017). Kurniawan(2017) found that students' errors in subject-verb agreement, revision of words, and misused vocabulary dropped considerably when the students were asked to perform the writing assignments through Microsoft Word processing tools. They were even able to self- correct their own papers easily compared with those who had completed the tasks by hand (traditional paper- and- pencil method).

Likewise, Dickenson (1986) reported that the word-processing environment was of great help to the students in terms of elements such as the screen display which could facilitate peer review and editing. The students were able to share their assignments with classmates and use the atmosphere provided by the screen display. Owston et al. (1991) endorse the idea that "students' ability to produce reports, newsletters, and 'books' with a polished look for a real audience may promote a perception of writing as a meaningful and personally valuable form of communication" (p.250). Moreover, the ability to create neat copies of revised text can be regarded a psychological relief for those who may be reluctant to showcase their somehow poor writing skills to others, including but not limited to the instructor of the classroom. This quality can be regarded a transformative force which has the potential to redesign the ways students engage themselves into the process of writing in English as a second or foreign language. In other words, MS Word may own potentials to be discovered of how it can enhance English as a Second/Foreign Language writing skills and strategies and features that

learners can use in their quest for linguistic accuracy, fluency, and expressive clarity, connection, and conciseness.

Contrary to the positive aspects of the integration of MS Word into writing classrooms, there have been other studies arguing for the distractions caused by this technology. They assert this platform can easily divert students' attention when they need to be cognitively alert to focus on the process of thinking and writing simultaneously. Dickenson (1986, as cited in Owston, 1991) points to the "inability of the writer to see the entire composition on the screen at one time and the elimination of recopying, and thus rereading tasks, [which] may discourage deeper level revisions of content and structure" (p.250). The authors believe that novice and lower level writers may be hindered cognitively if they are not competent in handling various aspects of the software. Owston et al. (1991) believe learning may be blocked by the demanding procedures needed for changing, substituting, and revising of the words, sentences, and paragraphs. Added to these are poor typing ability (Dalton, 1988), insufficient computer literacy, and unfamiliarity with editing processes.

In a similar vein, Wedell and Allerheilgen (1991) report that business students who took part in their study, did not perceive considerable progress in writing, having used the Writer's Workbench, a famous computer software which was used as a grammar checker in the 90s. Participants, however, perceived significant improvement in their oral communication skills.

Practically speaking, in an age where effective written communication is indispensable, the role of technology in language education has expanded far beyond mere convenience. At the present time, Microsoft Word emerges as an invaluable aid, offering a rich suite of features that cater to the diverse needs of language learners. From spell check and grammar correction to thesaurus and synonym suggestions, the multifunctional nature of Microsoft Word not only polishes writing mechanics but also amplifies vocabulary acquisition and language refinement. This integration of language support is particularly revolutionary for second language learners, providing real-time feedback and guidance. Moreover, the collaborative and organizational capabilities of Microsoft Word break down traditional barriers, fostering an environment in which students can engage in interactive writing, peer review, and seamless document sharing. These collaborative dimensions not only enrich the learning experience but also emulate real-world language usage and communication, nurturing both linguistic and interpersonal skills crucial for effective written expression.

3. Methods

This qualitative study took place in the context of a semester-wide English as a Foreign Language writing class at Farhangian University (the main route for training English teachers in Iran).

3.1. Context and Participants

According to the curriculum, the students study Basic English Grammar for two subsequent semesters before they are offered Academic Writing courses I and II. Conventionally, in Basic Grammar courses, the students are not assigned writing paragraph tasks, hence they practice expressing ideas only at sentence level. In Academic Writing I and II, longer pieces of writing are assigned and paragraph writing is introduced and worked for the first time, along with lessons which orient the students with mechanics of academic writing. In other words, students learn how to write single

paragraphs of various types (i.e., expository, narrative, descriptive, etc.) in Academic Writing I, and five-paragraph essays in Academic Writing II, where they learn to organize their thoughts in an essay in at least five paragraphs. This study was carried out at the conclusion of Academic Writing II (which lasted for twelve 90-minute sessions), where the instructor had taught the class how to write, edit, and proofread their texts using the word processors available in university's language lab. Using convenient sampling, a total of 28 pre-service EFL teachers (all female), aged between 21 and 26, agreed to participate in the study.

3-2. Data Collection Procedure

For this qualitative study, the data preparation consisted of transcription. All the participants were asked to recall their experiences of the sessions and describe the class and the methodology used by the instructor to utilize the facilities and functions of the MS Word. Two roundtable discussions were held in which students expressed their opinions about the efficacy of the approach, advantages, disadvantages, and whether and in what ways they perceived improvement, if any, in their writing. These discussions lasted 30 and 40 minutes and were audio-recorded after students' consent for the recording was received. They were also inquired about their practice at home or in the dorm of using their own word processors and evaluating their experiences in terms of whether they felt any gains in academic writing. Besides roundtable discussions, to reach at an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences of integrating MS Word into their writing, they were asked to write field notes on the advantages/disadvantages of using word processors for writing classes and whether they recommended peers or other writing instructors to follow the methodology in future and why. They were asked to send their answers to the instructor via email or social media platforms.

3-3. Data Analysis

As the data preparation process used for this study was mainly transcription, a data pool was constructed using the transcripts of the roundtable discussions and the field notes received from the participants. All the content was reviewed for accuracy and to ensure that the audio-recordings and field notes were typed verbatim. Data analysis was carried out using conventional content analysis techniques in which the researcher immersed herself into the textual content to identify patterns and codes related to the utility of the MS Word in a writing class. To determine meaning units, the content was analyzed using coding and recoding (Creswell, 2009) in which the transcripts were organized and reduced into themes and subthemes. After reviewing, revising, and combining the initial codes, major themes and subthemes were identified and were cross checked to make sure that themes truly reflect what the respondents had expressed. MAXQDA (version 2020) software was utilized to content analyze the data and a manual searching procedure was applied as a control for the computerized analyses.

The next step was determining the trustworthiness of the findings for which two experts were asked to review and check the obtained themes and subthemes. Inter-coder agreement (Creswell, 2009) was obtained suggesting that the obtained themes and propositions were accurately reflecting the participants' conceptions, feelings, and experiences. In addition to raters' agreement, to ensure the authenticity of the interpretations and validity of the findings, a member check procedure (Creswell, 2009) was carried out to make sure that the information received was accurate. To this end, the

themes and propositions extracted from the texts were returned to the students to check the accuracy of the interpretations, and to add, revise, or endorse their intended meanings.

4. Results

Results of the content analysis of the textual data from the roundtable discussions and field notes revealed major advantage areas perceived by the students. Generally, all the participants expressed positive feelings toward the experience endorsing the idea that working with MS Word had an influence on their perception of what a piece of academic writing (in this case, an essay) would look like or how writers can manage to perform well if they learn to utilize the functions provided in the system. The experience was new to all the participants, even those who had already mastered typing in their own word processors. One participant (No 6) stated, "I have been using my laptop since I was a kid, but I did not know these facilities are present in the Word files to help us write better." Another student (No19) regretted if she knew these facilities were installed in her system, she could have acquired a better writing skill.

Three major themes and propositions were identified in the data, reflecting various aspects of the students' perceptions of the value of an MS Word integrated approach in a writing class: improving writing skills, which was facilitated through some of the MS Word features such as spell check, grammar suggestions, thesaurus tools, etc.; enhancing individual and peer feedback mechanisms provided by the buttons in the Review menu such as track changes feature and editing facilities, proofing, and comments; and mastering skills in citation, an integral part of academic writing which was practiced via the References menu functions such as Manage sources and Insert citation features.

Table1

Major advantage areas in the MS Word integrated writing classroom

Main themes	subthemes	Quotations from the textual data
Writing skills	Improvement of spelling power, Enhancement of vocabulary (synonyms/antonyms, thesaurus) Development of mechanics of writing (punctuation, capitalization, etc.)	My dictation has always been defective making me reluctant to write or showcase my writing to others. Here I felt more power in writing because I could use the spell check which spared me more time to think.(S 21)
Effective feedback mechanisms	Individual feedback Peer feedback Public feedback Self- correct opportunity	Self-correction was easier when using the software. I felt more confidence in my writing because using the red/blue lines which appeared under the words, I was able to check it before everybody else could see it.(S 4)
Citation skills	In-text citation instruction	Compiling the references in the references sections seems to be a challenge. Complying

Parenthetical citation strategies Referencing and managing sources	with the APA standards seem to be a more demanding job. But I used the Manage Sources function in the References tool and it was OK. (Ss 18, 5, & 20)
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4.1. Writing skills improvement

As is shown in Table 1, students expressed gaining confidence in their ability to write as a result of applying the software in their writing tasks. One of the areas mentioned in the textual data was the spelling accuracy or the ability to form words with correct letters using the correct orders. Many participants mentioned that the software has helped them improve this skill. "My dictation has always been defective making me reluctant to write or showcase my writing to others. Here I felt more power in writing because I could use the spell check which spared me more time to think." (S 21)

The type of psychological relief seems to free them from the obstacles inherent in traditional writing sittings in which pen and paper are used. This relief would seem to spare them sufficient time to focus on more important aspects of writing including but not limited to critical thinking. Student 3 believed she felt more freedom when using her word processor now that she could spell check and grammar check her text knowing that her first draft would be commented by the software. Another participant stated,

I have always been dependent on my dictionary or Google to find synonyms or antonyms or English words for what I had in mind. This would make writing a daunting job, discouraging me from even entering an essay writing task. I now learn that I can do all of these by a simple right click and use the synonym given by the software. (S 15)

Aside from the options provided by the MS Word in terms of synonyms, translate, and thesaurus tools, the software has been helpful in aiding students to reduce their grammatical mistakes. One participant expressed satisfaction with the type of help she received in this regard. She wrote, "I felt more power in looking up and revising pronouns and avoiding unnecessary repetitions, and escaping grammatical mistakes." (S 14) In a similar vein, student 12 believed that she was not afraid of writing like before as she felt support from the system. She wrote, "I used to hate writing even in my native language, Farsi. But using the software gave me fun and courage to start something. The facilities are really helpful."

4.2. Effective feedback mechanisms

The next major theme extracted from the content analysis of the textual data pertained to the students' perception of how MS Word facilitated feedback mechanisms in their writing sessions. They were able to receive not only individual feedback from the word processor but also peer feedback provided by their classmates. This advantage came through as a result of the instructor's way of presenting students' essays on a projector so that others could see, comment, and engage in revisions. Student 15 stated, "when the essays were shown on the projector, everybody was engaged and we had fun because it was kind of collaborative writing. We were all working on the same project and I really loved that." (S 19)

Several students expressed positive attitudes towards the feasibility of self-correction in the classroom. Students seemed to benefit the red and blue lines under problematic words provided by the MS Word. Familiarity with the function of each color was a helpful guide for self-correction both while writing and after the act of writing was over.

“Grammar suggestions, red and blue lines under certain words, etc. worked as a warning for me and made me stop to think more carefully about what I was trying to write,” commented student 12.

Finally, participants in general showed great enthusiasm towards the facilities provided by the Track Changes buttons in the Review Menu of Microsoft Word. They could easily revise their text by clicking the Accept or Reject buttons without having to rewrite the whole text again, something they would normally do in writing with pen and paper. Student 1 perceived this facility “the most interesting aspect of the software”.

4.3. Citation skills development

The last major theme extracted from the data related with the students’ ability to see how citation works and how writers use content from other sources giving credit to others’ work. Although the participants were somehow familiar with in-text and parenthetical citation techniques from their previous classes or the types of reading assignments they had already completed, it was the first time they were required to include citations in their essays. Students’ expressions reflected that this newly-required technique could be easily handled when they used the functions in the References menu tool. One student asserted, “monitoring the organization of the essay I was writing was easier and I could easily insert references and citations using the buttons in the system. Doing it manually could have been almost impossible for me.” (8) Other participants believed handling sources in an APA format could have taken days for them without the software, as they would have needed hard work to learn the standards of citation in essay and article writing.

Regarding the requirements of citation standards, many students perceived the assignments challenging. Participant 14 believed she had not learned the technique in her native language. She wrote, “this is the first time I see myself writing something serious so I need to be careful about all the authors I have used in my text, all the publication dates, spaces, periods, parentheses, ... they all need thought and attention. It’s exhausting! I do not think I can ever do it without the software.”

Overall, not all students’ perceptions had a positive perception of implementing MS Word in writing classes. Content analyses of the textual data reflected some issues with using such a tool in a writing class. First, students complained that the system had not been able to guide them through academic writing standards. They believed they needed help to distinguish between formal and informal or academic and nonacademic prose, a facility not offered by the MS Word system. One participant reported she had difficulty checking the options provided by the software in the “synonym” function as she did not know the appropriateness of the choices. She believed academic writing was new to her and she needed both help in finding suitable words and support in using the words appropriately. Participant 20 stated “In spite of the software being equipped with grammar checking and mostly usage facilities, it failed to aid us with use recommendations, something we, beginner writers need more urgently.”

The second issue that emerged from the textual data was that students with various writing abilities expressed varying levels of enjoyment. In other words, students with a lower writing ability had not presumably been able to utilize the facilities provided by the software. More specifically, better writers had used the capabilities more effectively and held more positive attitudes towards integrating MS Word into writing classes. In other words, more competent writers enjoyed the practice more than other less competent writers.

5. Discussion

This paper was an attempt to uncover the English as a Foreign Language pre-service teachers' perception of the advantages and/or disadvantages of integrating the Microsoft Word into their writing skills classroom. The overall perceptions of the majority of the participants were influenced by the features of the software. In other words, MS Word did help the students via features like spell check, grammar suggestions, thesaurus tools, synonym, antonym, translate, and smart look up functions. Students in this study had apparently gained a kind of autonomy and self-governance over their writing assignments. This finding is in line with Kurniawan's (2017) who reported that students' errors in subject-verb agreement, revision of words, and misused vocabulary had dropped considerably when they were asked to perform the writing assignments through Microsoft Word processing tools. Moreover, the perceived usefulness of the software was triggered by a type of psychological relief created by the kind of support the participants received from the software.

Celce-Murcia (2001) states that "the goal of every course should be individual student progress in writing proficiency, and the goal of the total curriculum should be that student writers learn to become informed and independent readers of their own texts with the ability to create, revise, and reshape papers to meet the needs of whatever writing tasks they are assigned." (p.215). Elsewhere, she points out that if a writing goal is set, spelling tests will be regarded important. The findings of this study are in line with this statement and the type of pleasure the students expressed in their notes reveals that they have been able to experience individual progress in their writing while at the same time being able to practice creativity and independence in writing. This finding is in line with the idea of self-correction put forward by Kurniawan (2017). Practically speaking, an area in which students could self-correct has been the spelling power which not only is facilitated by the software but also as Berkel (2004) notes can itself expedite communication and other aspects of the writing process.

Other studies have also shown that spelling power enhancement is linked with improved communicative and writing abilities (*e.g.*, Blazquez-Carretero and Woore, 2021; Russak, 2022). This ideal can be easily attained by helping learners improve a spelling power in the foreign language while at the same time heading for more important communicative abilities to convey ideas in written form. In other words, the students can do most of the corrections by a click of the mouse and spare time to more thinking on what they are trying to express, knowing that what they have put on the paper is being monitored by the machine and checked and edited at the same time, before everybody else can find time to comment on it or find fault with it.

In her book, *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, Celce-Murcia (2001) comments:

A [nother] challenge for learners is the fact that most vowels can be spelled in many different ways. Learners who are used to a strict sound spelling correspondence in their L1 will often be misled by English spelling. For EFL learners, who often depend more on the written text than on what they hear, this can cause many pronunciation errors. (p. 123)

The question worth asking here is whether the integration of the MS Word into a writing curriculum as such has been able to help learners become informed users and independent and creative writers. The answer seems to be positive! The findings of this qualitative study revealed that participants' perceptions were influenced by the type of

engagement with the software and the amount of gain and support they received before, during, and after the writing process.

Computer -Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has always been regarded a merit in educational settings. According to Naidoo (2020), the usage of digital communication technologies and machine applications, as well as teacher and student characteristics, expectations, and obstacles, have modified and shaped the global learning environments of the twenty-first century. Kocaman (2022) reported, while computer-assisted writing benefits EFL learners, incompetent software use adversely affects the results. According to Dalton (1988), some of the factors which may hinder the usefulness of word processing in students' writing are linked with simultaneous attention to writing and word processing, inadequate computer literacy, and software weaknesses.

6. Conclusions

This qualitative study was an investigation into the perceptions of prospective teachers of English as a Foreign Language. Data received from roundtable face to face discussions along with written field notes showed that all the participants had favored the integration of the MS Word into their writing class. However, in line with the limited literature in the area, the findings of the present study revealed that the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language needs to integrate the facilities provided by the word processors in its curricula. Teacher education programs can devise strategies to develop MS Word integrated writing classes for novice as well as experienced teachers. To this end, student teachers need to become cognizant with such facilities not only to improve their own writing skills but also to help future learners explore such capacities in their lifelong learning. This finding shows that the implementation of such techniques can work effectively in similar contexts.

To sum up, the present study contributes to the small but increasing body of literature suggesting that technological advancements like word processors, online platforms, social media systems, even AI generating tools can be fruitfully integrated into teacher education and K-12 programs to enhance both native and foreign language learners' abilities. For the current study, due to the prearranged classes at Farhangian University, the researcher was able to include only female students, as the program is of a segregated type. However, to draw more comprehensive conclusions about the type and amount of engagement with MS Word, a larger scale study, with both genders will be warranted.

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