

THE IMPACT OF IMPLEMENTING iEARN PROJECTS IN STUDENTS' WRITING ABILITY

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of implementing iEARN projects in Omani students' writing ability. Also students' perceptions toward participating in iEARN projects have been examined. Fifty students participated in this study and data were collected through 3 tools: students' documents, questionnaire and interview. The findings indicated that students' ability to write in English has improved in terms of quality and quantity because of their participation in iEARN projects. Students took time to revise their drafts with their teacher or their partners so their writing became more accurate and organized.

Keywords: iEARN, technology, online collaborative projects, writing ability

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a crucial skill for students in schools and universities. It is also a challenging activity since it requires high levels of thinking such as brainstorming, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, among others. To simplify, in order to write, students need to combine their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to create a meaningful paragraph or essay. As a result, for most students writing is scary and intimidating (Bettger, 2008).

Educators and researchers have tried to find ways for effective writing instructions by using technology which has become a big part of today's society. Therefore, many research talked about the advantages of using different applications on the internet in the language learning (Sullivan & Sharp, 2000; Eastment, 2005; Dizhange, 2009; Simsek, 2009). The internet contains many valuable resources such as websites and connections to other teachers and students. This can lead to a great improvement on students' writing. The goal of this paper is to highlight the impact of using one website of an organization called iEARN on students' ability to write in English.

What is iEARN?

According to the Wikipedia, "iEARN (International Education and Resource Network) is a non-profit organization made up of over 30,000 schools and youth organizations in more than 125 countries. iEARN supports teachers and young learners people to work together online using the internet and other new communications technologies. Over 2,000,000 students each day are engaged in collaborative projects worldwide.)

What are iEARN projects in Oman?

All iEARN projects are designed by teachers and students who tried to enhance technology in their teaching and learning. Also, all iEARN projects involve a final product or exhibition of the learning that has taken place as part of collaboration. These have included magazines, creative writing anthologies, websites, reports, and more examples of students taking action as part of what they are learning in the classroom.

Recently, Ministry of Education in Oman has started to implement some iEARN projects in some elementary and secondary schools. In these iEARN projects, students are supposed to work collaboratively with some other students inside and outside Oman in one topic every semester or every month.

In the academic year 2009-2010, students in various schools in Oman (Sharqiya North) have worked in many projects. Table1 shows the examples of these projects in which students participated.

Table 1: iEARN projects in Oman

Name of the project	Aims	Number of the school
One day in the life	Students document one important day in their life by taking photos and writing about them. Every month one theme.	7 schools
My country	Students write about their countries to introduce to other students. Every month writes about one theme.	6 schools
Good deeds	Students write about the good deeds that they do and share with others.	5 schools
Friends book	Students write letters to their friends about different topic and they create a book.	1 school

The effects of online collaborative projects on Students' writing

There are many ways the online collaborative projects can directly impact the writing process in the classroom. A significant aspect of writing process is constant feedback, conferencing and sharing writing with others. Students are able to conference with other students or the teacher to guide their thinking as they revise and edit their writing (Karchmer, 2001). Through participating in iEARN projects, students have a great opportunity to get feedback about what they have written from students and teachers who participate in the same projects. What interesting about iEARN that each project has a facilitator and forum, so students can post their inquiries, comments, writing and get constructive feedback form the facilitator, teachers and students who are involved in the project.

In Addition, online collaborative projects allow students view and respond to each others' writings (Strangman, 2001). In this way, writing becomes purposeful. Ensio, Tobi and Boxeth (2000) stated that when students begin writing in their schools, they are taught that the main and only reader of their writing is their teachers. However, publishing students writing has very positive impact on students' motivation to write because they will realize that their writing will be read by others not only their teachers. Ward (2004) stated that when students write only for their teachers" they may not only have difficulty adjusting their writing to fit the reader but may have trouble getting started because, aside from the final grade, what they write does not mean anything to them because it does not need to mean anything to anyone else." Participating in iEARN projects, students' writings are read by many students who are participating in the same projects. Students become highly motivated when they can see what other students have written and discuss their writing ideas together. They also become interested because they can correspond back and forth within seconds or minutes (Leu &Leu, 1999). This provides the quick feedback and acknowledgment wanted by students.

Routman (2000) asserted that students put more effort into writing, revision and editing process if their writing is published to the audience. Students become more determined to write very well because they want their writing to be good in front of the audience because they realize that their writing reflects their personalities and identities. Strangman (2001) said, "there is nothing like looking at a kid's eyes when they first see their work come up on a computer. It's like magic!" Through participating in iEARN collaborative projects students become more motivated to write and keen to know about others around the world. Because students' writing are read by others in the forums and seen by other students and teachers, students tend to write more text (Trupe, 2002).

With all these potential benefits, iEARN collaborative projects having been experienced by an increasing number of teachers and it has been very necessary to measure the effectiveness of these projects in language learning, in general, and in writing, in particular.

METHODOGY

Research questions.

This study seeks to answer the following questions. First question is “Is there any difference between the writing performance of students before they participated in iEARN collaborative projects and after their participation?”

Second question is “What are the perceptions of students towards applying iEARN projects?”

Participants

Fifty female students participated in this study. The students were in grade 10 and they have spent 10 years studying English in the governmental schools. Because of the curriculum and administrative limitations of the schools where this study conducted, it was difficult to choose random sampling. Consequently, convenient sampling procedures which “involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondent” (Cohen & Manion, 1994) were utilized in selecting sample for this study.

Instruments

To gather needed data, writing test, document analysis, questionnaires and interview were used. In the following section, these instruments are further described.

First instrument in this research is writing test which aims to answer the first question. The test was designed to examine the existing ability of the participants in writing. At the beginning of the academic year, 5 students were asked to do a writing test as a pre-test. The students were giving to choose from 5 topics related to the themes in iEARN projects. The students had to write only about one topic. At the end of the semester, the same test was repeated as a post test. Two teachers were selected to evaluate the participants’ writings by using a rubric designed by Assessment department in the Ministry of Education.

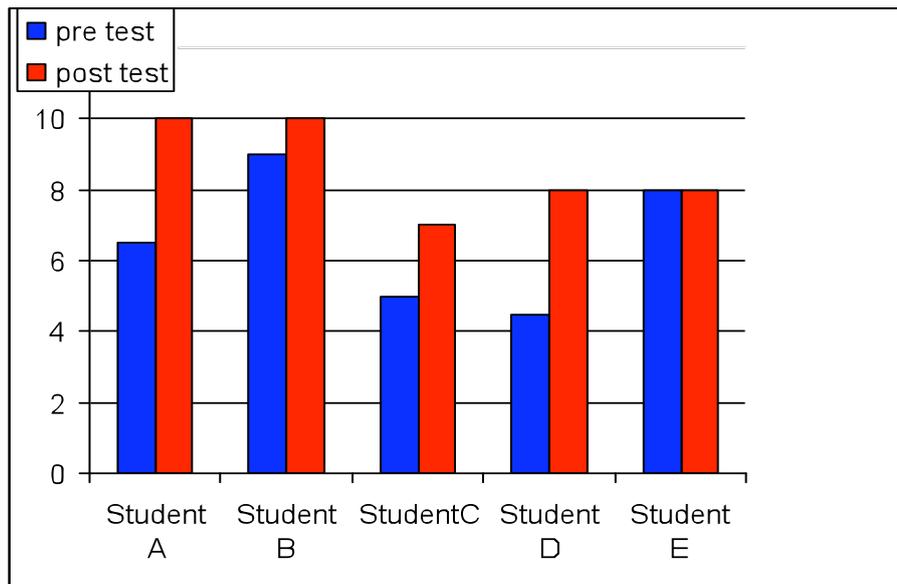
In order to get a deeper answer for the first question, 4 writing documents belonging to another 2 students have been analyzed in terms of quantity and quality. These documents were also analyzed by two teachers.

To answer the second research question, “What are the perceptions of students towards applying iEARN projects?” a questionnaire contained 15 statements was used. These statements targeted students’ perceptions of iEARN projects in terms of (1) effect on writing performance (2) motivation and (3) technology use.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The aims of this study are to investigate the impact of the applying iEARN projects on students’ writing. To answer the first question “Is any difference between the writing performance of students before they participated in iEARN collaborative projects and after their participation?” data was gathered from the writing test that was given to 5 students. Fig 1 summarizes the results of the students in the pre and post tests.

Fig 1 The pre and post tests' results



There were obvious differences in the performance of students A, D and C. However, there was a slight difference in student B difference. Student E's scored the same in both tests.

Such improvement cannot be only due to participations in iEARN projects. Many other factors can influence students' improvement such as writing instructions, self-directory and efforts made, among others.

Getting close look during the interview, student D and C stated that participating in iEARN projects motivated them to deeply think about their writing because it would be seen by other students in iEARN forums. Student D said, "I want my writing to be perfect, so other people will say, WOW her English is really good though she is an Arabic native speaker". This shows that students cared a lot of what their audience would think about her writing. She also added, "I spent a lot of time revising my paragraphs with my elder sister, friends and my teacher who explained to me how I can improve my writing by adding some words and using many adjectives." Student C mention when she was interviewed that iEARN projects encouraged her to use dictionary to look for synonyms, so her writing would appear nice and correct. She also asserted that she went to her English teacher during the break to explain for her how she could develop her paragraphs by giving her tips. When student A was asked about the factor behind her improvement, she said, "I was not really interested in writing because I felt it was difficult though I am good in other skills, especially speaking. But when the teacher told us about iEARN projects at the beginning of the year, I liked the idea of sharing things with others and I was so enthusiastic in seeing my name and my school's name in the computer. So I tried my best to be a better writer, so I can communicate with other American students because in this project we co-operated with American students and we told them about our life and they told us about their life." It has been noticed in other studies that students do make a lot of efforts in writing, revision and editing process if their writing is published to the audience (Routman ,2000)

From the interview, it was clear that participating in iEARN projects has a positive impact on students' writing by having a purpose to write and audience who read their writing. It also encourages them to revise their writing, asking their teachers and using dictionary in order for their writings to be better.

The pre-test and the post test were corrected using a rubric which focuses on the content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and punctuations. Table 2 presents the results of the students in each criterion.

Table.2: The results of studentst according to the rubric used

Students	Pre-Test					total	Post-test					Total
	content	organization	vocabulary	grammar	punctuation		content	organization	vocabulary	grammar	punctuation	
S A	1.5	1.5	2	1	.5	6.5	2	2.5	2	2	1	10
S B	2.5	2.5	2	2	.5	9	2.5	2.5	2	2	1	10
S C	1	1	1.5	1	.5	5	2	2	1.5	1	.5	7
S D	1	1	1.5	1	0	4.5	2	2.5	1.5	1	1	8
S E	2	2	1.5	1.5	1	8	2	2	1.5	1.5	1	8

From the above table, it was observable that the students made an obvious improvement in the organization of their writing more than other criteria. This can be due to the fact that the students were trying to make themselves as clear as they could because their writing would be read by other students. Students also in the post test obviously divided their writings in three main categories: introduction, body and conclusion. In addition, they frequently used transitions such as *however*, *moreover*, *in conclusion*, etc. When student C was interviewed, she stated that after participating in iEARN projects, she became aware of the organizations of English writing because she had a chance to see other students' writing and try to imitate them. She stated, "one day I saw one student in iEARN forum used the word nonetheless. I went to my dictionary and looked for the meaning of this word. I liked it and now I am using it in my writing."

The usage of punctuations such capitalizations of letters, spelling and using full stops have improved. One possible explanation of this improvement can relate to that fact that all iEARN forums have spelling and style checkers which students can use before they post their writing. Also iEARN forums have a preview characteristic where student can preview their writing before they post it.

As seen from the above table, students scored better in the post test in terms of content. Such improvement might be because of the audience. This is to say that students were aware that other students would read their writing and this motivated them to write more and better. Very slight differences can be seen between the pre-test and post test scores regarding vocabulary and grammar.

To get a deep answer for the first question about the effects of implementing iEARN projects on students' writing, 2 documents belong to 2 students were analyzed. Two documents were related to normal classroom assignments where teacher was the only reader. The other two documents were assignments to be posted in iEARN forums. The two students were participating in a project called my country and every month students talked about one them to introduce their country. These documents were collected during the second semester. The rubric used for evaluating the test was also utilized to analyze the quality of students' documents. Table 3 and 4 show the detailed analysis for Student F and G documents.

Table 3: Detailed análisis for students F.

Student F	February				March			
	Document 1 <i>iEARN assignment</i> "food in my country"		Document 2 <i>Normal assignment</i> "Healthy food you should eat"		Document 3 "interesting places in my country"		Document 4 <i>Normal assignment</i> "Tourisms in Oman"	
	Quantity	Quality	quantity	Quality	quantity	Quality	quantity	Quality
	180 words	8/10	130 words	8/10	211 words	9/10	170 words	7/10

Table 4: Detailed análisis for students G.

Student G	February				March			
	Document 1 <i>iEARN assignment</i> "food in my country"		Document 2 <i>Normal assignment</i> "Healthy food you should eat"		Document 3 "interesting places in my country"		Document 4 <i>Normal assignment</i> "Tourisms in Oman"	
	Quantity	Quality	quantity	Quality	quantity	Quality	quantity	Quality
	120 words	7/10	100 words	5.5/10	186 words	8/10	130 words	6/10

From the above tables, it can be observed that there were differences between students' writings in the 4 documents in terms of quantity. Although every 2 assignments talked about the same topic, both students tended to write more in the assignments that would be posted in iEARN forums. This might be because students wrote for other students who participated in the same projects. Thus, a conclusion could be made that having audience encourages students to write more. Participating in online collaborative project improves students' attitudes towards writing and practicing the target language (Kupelia, 2001) and encourages students produce more text (Trupe, 2002).

Regarding the quality of students' writings, student F got the same scores in in February assignments but she scored better in iEARN assignments in March. Student G scored better in iEARN assignments than in normal classroom assignments. Both students tended to use transitions and better organization in iEARN assignments. In the assignments that talked about he "interesting places in my country" students concluded their paragraphs by inviting the other students to visit these places. When students realize that they are going to put their work on the internet for readers in the real world, they are motivated to write in an interesting way (Leibwitz, 1999). They also tended to revise their writing (Kupelia, 2001) and student F and G stated that they rechecked their writing with their teacher and with their parents who were good at English writing. Analyzing these 4 documents gave more evidence that iEARN projects affected students' writing in terms of quality and quantity.

To answer the second research question, "What are the perceptions of students towards applying iEARN projects?" a questionnaire was distributed to 50 students who participate in iEARN projects. It was noticeable that the students had a favorable perception of participating in iEARN projects and they thought iEARN positively affected their writing performance and almost no student commented on the negative impacts of iEARN projects. Having audience from different parts of the world was among the advantages mostly uttered by the respondents. They felt that they are real authors who could provide others with new information. When students were asked about their feelings when they participate in iEARN projects with other students from different countries in the world, a majority said that it was scary at the beginning but once they got through it they felt proud of themselves. When talking with individual students about their attitude toward writing after participating in iEARN projects, many of them said that writing was fun when they had a chance to share with other students. Also, many students said that their ability to type in English has increased because of participating in iEARN and they have learned how to register in website, browse it and post discussions in its forum. Thus, iEARN projects help them improve their skills in using technology.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to find answer to the question related to the impact of implementing iEARN projects on the students' writing performance, the analysis of pre-test and post test scores showed that some students have improved their scores after participating in iEARN projects. Also, a deeper analysis of students' results in pre and post test indicated that students did develop the content and the organization of their writing. However, students' usages of language and vocabulary have not improved a lot. There was a noticeable increase on students' writing in terms of quantity and quality when they wrote for iEARN projects than when they wrote for normal classroom assignments even though the topics were the same. Students were more motivated to use and practice the target language if their writing is published through the internet (Kupelia, 2001). Students had very positive attitudes towards participating in iEARN projects and they believed that iEARN projects encouraged them to write fluently and accurately and to share their ideas with other students from different parts of the world. Based on the interview, I have observed that students have been taking writing more seriously. It is no longer difficult as it used to be because they feel as though they are writers who can create and share their writing with others. Throughout the implementations of this study, I have learned that people, including students in my country, need to be challenged to work outside their comfort zone in order to grow and become more comfortable and confident with the idea of sharing their writing with different students in the world. (Bettger, 2007).

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