

Using Pixton for writing instruction in foreign language higher education: A case of Ecuadorian pre-service teachers

PAOLA CABRERA SOLANO, PAÚL GONZALEZ TORRES, CÉSAR OCHOA CUEVA, LUZ CASTILLO CUESTA, ANA QUIÑONEZ BELTRÁN

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of Pixton to support the teaching of writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Ecuador. The participants were 63 pre-service English teachers who were trained for five months. At the beginning of this period, a diagnostic test was applied; at the end, a final exam and a questionnaire about perceptions were administered. As a result of this action-research study, students had a positive perception about the use of Pixton; they improved their writing skills due to the effective use of this technological tool.

KEYWORDS: Comic Strips; Learning; English; Perceptions; ICTs.

ARTICLE HISTORY: Received: 14-december-2018 | Accepted: 14-january-2019.

English as a Foreign Language writing is an important skill that allows learners to have a good level of linguistic performance. In this respect, writing could be considered a central element of academic success since it is fundamental for instructional practices in an academic environment (Khan and Bontha 2015). Certainly, writing helps learners to convey their ideas in written form.

One way to assist learners in their EFL writing instruction is the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly employing digital comics. Previous research on the use of digital comics for improving EFL writing indicate positive results as to students' learning. For example, Yunus, Salehi, Tarmizi, Syed, and Balaraman (2011) aimed to find out about teacher trainees' perceptions on using digital comics in teaching English writing to low achiever learners. The results indicate that most of the teacher trainees had a positive opinion of digital comics because they increased students' motivation when writing in an English as a second language context. Another study is the one by Kılıçkaya and Krajka (2012) who integrated comic strip creation software into EFL classes. The purpose was to facilitate grammar activities and sentence writing in the classroom. By using the online comic strip creation site (<http://www.makebeliefscomix.com>), the students created comic strips related to the grammar topics studied. These activities had positive effects on students' motivation when writing English sentences.

Paola Cabrera (✉)
Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Ecuador
pacabrera@utpl.edu.ec



Based on the aforementioned points, EFL writing has been included as an element to be examined in our study. Our proposal presents the case of A1+ level pre-service teachers at Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, who usually experience many difficulties in their written output. One of these difficulties is that the errors they make in their written production persist throughout the study of the English program.

Considering the students' problems in EFL writing, we established a training period that consisted in incorporating ICTs through the use of Pixton, which is an appealing software for making online comic strips. This platform allows teachers to create visual materials that involve students in the learning process by means of producing dialogues about the contents studied, taking into account the students' learning styles and preferences (Cabrera, Castillo, González, Quiñónez, and Ochoa 2018). In addition, using comics can also stimulate imagination, help students overcome linguistic barriers, and lead them to the development of their literacy (Cimermanová 2015).

The opportunity of using ICTs to help pre-service teachers overcome their difficulties in EFL writing, led us to investigate the use of Pixton to support the teaching of this skill. This process involved improving teaching practice; thus, the design used was action research. In this case, 63 students (male and female, aged 19–23 years old), who were taking an English Language: Integrated Skills course (second level), participated in this study along with 5 English teachers. The students had an A1+ proficiency level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The pre-service teachers attended 9 hours of English instruction per week for a period of five months. At the beginning, students took a diagnostic test, which was useful to assess their level of writing skills. Then, each student was guided through the process of creating 10 comic strips that were presented and explained to the teacher, who, in turn, provided feedback focused on vocabulary and grammar. After finishing the academic term, students took a final exam in order to demonstrate how their writing skills had improved. Additionally, they were asked to respond a questionnaire about their perceptions on the use of Pixton as a resource for learning writing.

The findings show that, before the training period, most of the students (83%) had used technological tools to learn English. The most popular tool used by teachers in their writing lessons were PowerPoint presentations (74%). As for writing performance, 63% of students rated themselves as good; however, just a few of them mentioned that they needed their teachers' support to improve this skill. In the diagnostic test, the results indicate a score of 5.2 out of 10 points, which means that they had a poor writing proficiency level.

Once the training process was carried out, students were given a final exam and a post-training questionnaire. The results of the final exam indicated a score of 7.8 out of 10 points, which means that the use of Pixton was a successful factor that allowed students to write well-structured texts. As for the students' post-training questionnaire, there is general satisfaction regarding the use of Pixton as a tool to enhance their writing skills. In this context, students were totally motivated by the use of this tool because it allowed them to write texts coherently and practice grammar and vocabulary. In the same regard, learners indicated that Pixton got them more involved in the activities of the subject because they claimed that they were more attentive and dynamic. Furthermore, students' interest and motivation increased due to the use of this tool.

The conclusions of this study revealed that pre-service teachers have had prior experience with the use of technological tools, especially with basic resources such as PowerPoint presentations, which means that other more dynamic tools were not really common in their previous instruction. On the other hand, the students' level of writing skills was not very good, as indicated by the results of the diagnostic test. In this respect, the training process including Pixton generated a notable improvement in their writing skills, according to their EFL proficiency level.

Students believed that the use of Pixton as part of their writing instruction helped them improve EFL writing skills because it allowed them to practice the organization of ideas as well as other elements of writing such as grammar and vocabulary. This tool also engaged students in dynamic and interesting activities. For this reason, their motivation in the writing lessons increased.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors take this opportunity to acknowledge the Research Department at Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja for promoting and supporting research projects through the EFL Learning, Teaching and Technology Research Group.

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PAOLA CABRERA SOLANO
 Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Ecuador
 (✉) pacabrera@utpl.edu.ec
 iD <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3298-6671>

PAÚL GONZÁLEZ TORRES
 Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Ecuador
 (✉) pfgonzalez@utpl.edu.ec
 iD <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1964-2671>


CÉSAR OCHOA CUEVA
 Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Ecuador
 (✉) caochoa@utpl.edu.ec
 iD <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9047-3180>

LUZ CASTILLO CUESTA
 Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Ecuador
 (✉) lmcastillox@utpl.edu.ec
 iD <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4755-8242>

ANA QUINONEZ BELTRAN

Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Ecuador

(✉) alquinones@utpl.edu.ec

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5722-1096>