ESL INSTRUCTORS AND LEARNERS’ VIEWS ON THE USE OF DROPBOX AS A SHARING TOOL IN WRITING LESSONS

Misrah Mohamed & Aireen Aina Bahari

1 Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL, Coventry, UK
2 Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, EX1 2LU, Exeter, UK

*Corresponding author: aabb201@exeter.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Many researchers have been investigating ways to improve learners’ writing competency through various strategies. However, there are very few, if any, that look into ESL learners’ participation in an online discussion using Dropbox during writing lessons. How learners and instructors perceive the use of Dropbox for writing activities has also not been well informed. Therefore, this article aims to present a study that investigated the online interactions among 54 learners and two instructors from a local university in Malaysia who used Dropbox as a complementary tool in their English writing lessons. The study was a qualitative research which involved interviews and focus groups. The data collected was analysed using a qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti version 7. The findings revealed that instructors and learners had positive views towards the use of Dropbox in a writing lesson. It was also found that instructors and learners agreed Dropbox was an effective sharing tool for collaborative writing. The findings, however, pointed to the need for future studies on various ways Dropbox can be used to keep learners’ motivation high.

Keywords: Dropbox, ESL learners, online interactions, sharing tools, writing skills

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is defined as the exchange of information among people through computer networks (Rovai, 2004) comprised of synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (delayed time) communication. Instant messaging, chats, and video conferencing are considered synchronous CMC because individuals are required to actively participate simultaneously in real time. On the other hand, asynchronous CMC deals with delayed written communication which does not require immediate user participation in real time (Romiszowski & Mason, 2003).

In the context of Malaysian universities, asynchronous CMC is considered to be more convenient as it enables learners to interact with instructors or classmates whenever and wherever they are. Even so, synchronous CMC is still used as part of the learning activities, especially in encouraging learners’ participation in impromptu tasks. The use of CMC either synchronously or asynchronously is now widely preferred due to the mobility of devices used by students such as netbooks or laptops. In addition, the fact that most faculties and residential colleges usually provide Wi-Fi zones, CMC is no longer alien. In whatever way CMC is utilised, teaching and learning to write seems to be at an advantage because instructors and
learners implement CMC through writing most of the time. Consequently, various changes
have been made in teaching and learning processes especially the ones which involve writing.

Whilst a number of studies involving learners’ asynchronous interactions have utilised
learning management system (LMS) (e.g. Berhannudin & Wan Fara Adlina, 2009; Dawson,
2006; Ranjit & Mohamed, 2010) and emails (Mansor, 2007), this study has selected Dropbox
as the main platform for learners’ interaction. While it is accessible on multiple devices such
as laptops, tablets and smartphones, Dropbox is mainly selected because it is considered to be
a handy tool for its users. Besides, Dropbox has features that are simpler compared to other
applications, including one similar, Google Drive (Gaikar, 2012). In comparison with LMS,
previous studies (e.g. Hunsinger & Corley, 2012; Lorenz et al., 2012) also have shown that
Dropbox may produce better results in three aspects: attitude toward using, perceived ease of
use and perceived usefulness.

1.1 Problem statement
Malaysia is one of the many Asian countries with very few opportunities for authentic English
communicative experiences (Ellis, 2003). Since learning English as a second language (ESL)
has become a rudimentary requirement in most Malaysian universities, it is therefore necessary
for language learners in an ESL environment to be provided with realistic opportunities to
practice the target language authentically (Jeon, 2005). Consequently, efforts have been taken
in designing a more communicative curriculum and it is believed that online interactions
can function as a useful device in creating opportunities for authentic communicative experiences
among learners. Yet, learners with low competency and limited ESL ability usually have
trouble articulating their views and opinions either orally or in a written form.

In order to engage learners with low proficiency in a more communicative environment,
collaborative learning seems to be a promising way to increase their competency. However,
face-to-face collaborative learning is no longer on top of the list because learners nowadays are
more interested in online interactions. Thus, it is worth finding out how online interactions can
help them to be more collaborative, further develop their thoughts and put them into real life
practice.

Two different but similar online applications which are synonymous with collaborative
learning and growing in popularity are Dropbox and Google Drive. These tools allow users to
sync any type of file in any size (depending on ones own storage size) between multiple devices
such as computers, tablets and smartphones. Both Dropbox and Google Drive provide free
storage of 2GB and 5GB respectively. If users require more space, they can always upgrade
their accounts to the premium options. To sum it up, Dropbox provides less space and its
pricing is more expensive compared to Google Drive. Even so, Dropbox is still preferred by
many users because of its simplicity (Gaikar, 2012). For example, Dropbox users can always
use their existing email, including Gmail to log on. This is different from Google Drive where
users have to create a new Google email if they do not have one. Besides, if users have a large
video file to share with someone from a different place, all they need to do is to upload the file
in their Dropbox folder and the person who has the link to the folder will be able to open the
video once it is ready to go on his/her end. With Google Drive, however, this simplicity no
longer exists. Users need to explicitly choose the shared recipient and the person on the
receiving end has to right click on the Google Drive icon and click on the “view items shared
with me” button to be able to see the video.

Nevertheless, Dropbox is seen to be very limited in use especially for teaching and learning
purposes. Studies that have been carried out which looked into its usefulness are also rather
limited. In addition, there is also very few, if any research that has looked into ESL learners’ participation in online discussion via Dropbox to develop their writing skills. For this reason, to what extent instructors and learners perceive the use of Dropbox as a learning tool also remains unknown. Thus, the main aims of this study are to find out how Dropbox has been used as a teaching and learning tool and how instructors and learners view the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool in teaching and learning writing. This article, however, will only present findings of the latter.

Following the introduction is the literature review of the current study which is related to Dropbox and its advantageous as a sharing tool especially in a writing lesson. The methods used in this study will be described in section three. Section four will give details of the data collection and analysis. Finally, results and discussion will be elaborated on in section five, followed by a brief conclusion of the whole study, which will give an insight into learners’ participation in a writing task, as well its implications to language teaching and learning.

This study aims to explore instructors and learners’ views on the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool in writing lessons. To help meet this aim, three research questions have been addressed:

1. How do ESL instructors view Dropbox as a sharing tool in their teaching of writing?
2. How do ESL learners view Dropbox as a sharing tool in learning writing skills?
3. How do ESL instructors and learners perceive the use of Dropbox in a writing lesson?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Social networks can be defined as group interactions within a range of virtual applications which increase in shared spaces for collaboration, social connections, and collective information exchanges (Rovai, 2004; Curtis et al., 2000). In this age of modern technology, learners are widely exposed to online social networks no matter where they are. Thus, it is seen that online social networking can offer a huge opportunity for schools, universities and other educational organisations to reach out and connect with learners and prospective learners. This has captured the attention of educationists and policy-makers to create an alternative tool for language teaching and learning using online networks. However, instructors need to be cautious of the outcomes of each tool they use so that they can gain better achievements among students, instead of the opposite. In order to do this, instructors need to familiarise themselves with social networks and get a clear direction of how they can be fully utilised before considering them as tools for effective teaching and learning. Owing to that, this study explores one of the many social media tools that is found to be relevant, connected, and meaningful to instructors and learners for language teaching and learning, known as Dropbox.

2.1 Dropbox as a sharing tool

Dropbox is an online virtual storage utility that permits its users to make their work accessible from almost anywhere, provided they have an internet connection and a mobile device. It is designed to be an alternative for those who have been e-mailing files to themselves (their own email address) and carrying around flash drives wherever they go. In other words, Dropbox transforms the way people store and share their work effortlessly.

Dropbox gives a lot of benefits to its users. For example, Dropbox can work across platforms because it can sync up a to-do list on a Windows machine with the one on a Blackberry, Mac, Linux, iPhone, or Android device. This turns modification work into
something more convenient for many users. Dropbox is eminently known as a sharing tool because it has a public folder which is accessible by audiences who have the links to open the folder. In other words, Dropbox has the ability to make items public to the online world.

Besides having the folder shared with others, Dropbox can also provide a file sharing folder in which multiple users can easily save their work from their own device and have the work seen by others from different devices at the same time. This is very useful especially in encouraging collaborative work among users. The most likable part about this is that users can send large attachments right to the folder without worrying about the file size. Thus sharing attachments via email is no longer necessary. All they have to do is simply upload the file to Dropbox and use the built-in link tool to send a link to the recipient. The recipient can then download the file at their convenience.

Dropbox also has a back-up system which helps to copy essential files automatically. Therefore, everything that is saved in a Dropbox folder will be automatically copied, not only to ‘the cloud’ but also to other devices connected to the same account. Not only that, Dropbox also has a system which can help users retrieve items that have been deleted. However, this retrieval only works for thirty days after the deletion. Even so, the fact that it does provide a retrieval system leaves users with nothing to worry about.

2.2 Dropbox and writing

The use of social networks amongst the young generation, especially college and university students, is undeniably ubiquitous. The question is, how should educators consider this phenomenon to be of value for educational purposes? With the advent technology of various social networks, instructors do actually have a precious well of resources from which to draw from. Unfortunately, there are many ESL educators out there who are still clueless about how these resources can potentially be effective tools for learning, thus promote learners’ achievements especially in the field of writing. As this research aims to present, Dropbox is one of the many sharing tools that can be utilised in a language learning classroom, particularly in writing lessons.

As described in Buhrmester and Prager’s Model of Self-Disclosure and Individual Development, learners’ self-esteem can be influenced by peer feedback in social networks, both negatively and positively. If a learner receives positive feedback, his/her self-esteem could be boosted, thus helping to further motivate him/her to learn and write. According to Lin et al. (2012), in peer collaboration, students who have better writing skills serve as models for those who are less skilled based on the concept of the zone of proximal development. On the other hand, if the feedback is negative, the learner can be demotivated from writing again for his/her sense of self feedback has been affected (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai, 2002). This can happen simply because common social networks are often open and do not provide privacy for peer review. Dropbox, however, has interactive and easy-feedback features. It helps to avoid learners from feeling demotivated by the impact of public humiliation because peer feedback can be conducted privately and directly to the specific person without anyone else seeing the feedback. This has significantly improved learners’ self-efficacy, motivation and attitudes in general. Thus, Dropbox is a potentially favourable tool for creating and encouraging a conducive environment that aids the writing process for learners.

The use of Dropbox in writing does not only increase learners’ motivation but it also has the potential to improve learners’ writing skills by providing them with an authentic and personalised context in which aids their writing. This makes up for meaningful learning when
the members of the shared folder are able to generate ideas, and build upon the response and feedback given by peers. Learners’ self-efficacy in writing may be heightened when other peers favourably accept their ideas by providing positive feedback. While sharing views and exchanging messages, students certainly develop confidence to write in English as a by-product of their online socialisation. Most importantly, the exposure to the use of Dropbox in writing activities may up skill students to become more experienced at handling the ever-changing tools of technology to produce quality writing (Anderson et al., 2013).

2.3 Dropbox in education
Dropbox has grown in popularity amongst lecturers and students in higher institutions in the education field. This is due to the fact that it allows instructors and learners to socialise and interact with each other in the comfort of their own homes and space. They also seem to feel more secure in revealing private information which they normally would not do in face-to-face interactions. This implies that they are more confident in sharing details about themselves over a shared folder.

As an education tool, Dropbox assists instructors by keeping all their documents in folders. They no longer need to email their documents to their own email address since all of the documents are saved in ‘the cloud’. They can also access the recent changes of all documents in their folders. Since Dropbox is a sharing tool, instructors can make information available to their learners by creating a shared folder. At the same time, learners are also able to turn in their homework or assignments. It is an easy electronic homework drop compared to email and this will save a lot of time. With Dropbox, instructors can visually determine that learners have completed a particular portion of a project or presentation assignment. Best of all, since all presentations are “turned in” to the same virtual place, every learner can access his or her presentation via one log-in. Furthermore, instructors can also share the graded rubrics to individual learner without other learners seeing it.

3.0 METHODOLOGY
This study employed a qualitative research method, which involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A more detailed explanation on the methods will be given in the next few sections. Since the research was a qualitative study, participants were chosen based on a purposive sampling method. A total of 54 learners from two different classes were involved in the focus group interviews. Of all the learners involved, there were only 7 male learners while the rest were all female learners. In terms of their age, they were quite a homogeneous group, ranging from 20 to 21 years old. All of them took an English proficiency course, which was made compulsory before getting into the second year.

Apart from students, two female lecturers were also interviewed in order to gain their views on the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool in writing lessons. As for educational background, both of them graduated from local universities and their major was teaching English as a second language (TESL). In terms of teaching experience, both of them had more than five years of experience and they regularly taught English proficiency courses offered every semester of study.

In conducting the interview with the instructors, the interview questions were formulated beforehand, and each interviewee spent 20-30 minutes with the interviewer to answer the first four questions as listed below:

1. How did you use Dropbox in your writing class?
2. How did Dropbox help you in teaching writing in the ESL classroom?
3. Have you used Dropbox for collaborative writing before?
4. How do you perceive the use of Dropbox in teaching writing?

The first three questions were asked in order to investigate to what extent the instructors were familiar with the use of Dropbox as a teaching tool. This is to validate their credibility in providing views regarding the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool in writing lessons.

On the other hand, the questions for the focus group interview were formulated after both instructors had been interviewed. This was simply because the researchers needed to know the nature of the writing lessons carried out by the instructors. If this was not carried out earlier, there would be a possibility that learners had to answer irrelevant questions. Below is the list of the first four questions formulated for the focus group:
1. Did you face any difficulty while using Dropbox in your writing class?
2. How did Dropbox help you in learning writing?
3. How did you feel about using Dropbox for collaborative writing?
4. How do you perceive the use of Dropbox in a writing lesson?

Similar with the instructors, the first three questions were created so that the researchers could explore the extent of familiarity the learners had towards the use of Dropbox in their writing lessons. The answer to the final question could not be considered reliable if learners were not familiar with Dropbox and its usage as a learning tool.

4.0 FINDINGS

For this study, the interview sessions were carried out on different days for both of the instructors while the focus group interviews were performed on the same day. As mentioned before, both instructors were interviewed first before performing the focus group interviews with learners. For the focus group, each session was carried out for 40-50 minutes. Every interview session was recorded and after all sessions ended, data collected were transcribed and saved. Then they were thematically analysed using Atlas.ti version 7.

4.1 ESL instructors’ views on the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool in their teaching of writing

In addressing the first research question, both instructors stated that the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool had produced good collaborative writing among learners. Both of the instructors claimed that they were satisfied with Dropbox because they could communicate with their learners through a shared folder. Thus, they suggested that using Dropbox was “highly effective” (I1) and could “create a good collaborative environment among learners especially in the process of writing” (I2).

Since both instructors saw Dropbox as a sharing tool only when they were doing collaborative writing activities, they were asked about their perceptions on the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool for individual writing. The following were their answers:

“Yes, it still is a good sharing tool because they are sharing the folder with us…” (I1)
“It can be considered an effective sharing tool too; otherwise they have to email it to me manually”. (I2)
4.2 ESL learners’ views on the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool in learning writing skills

In addressing the second research question, the data gained from the focus group interviews revealed that Dropbox was a good sharing tool because learners were able to share their folders with the instructors without any difficulty. It was also an effective sharing tool in a way that it could help them to gain more information from their instructors and peers through the shared activity. The following are some of their positive responses:

“…completely a good sharing tool…” (L36)
“We like it! We can share a lot of information” (L38)
“We can gain a lot of information just by opening our shared folder” (L43)

While all of them agreed that Dropbox was an effective sharing tool, especially for information sharing, some of them also mentioned that Dropbox was effective in improving their writing skills. Through Dropbox, they felt that they could understand the process of writing better compared to when they did the writing activity in a face-to-face classroom. One of them stated that, “I think I learned how to write better after using Dropbox” (L12). Meanwhile, another learner claimed that he was able to differentiate the process of writing better because he could see the flow of the process better when Dropbox was used.

“I am not only able to learn its process, but I do learn how to differentiate the processes. Now I know the differences between pre-writing, writing and post writing.” (L18)

Based on the encouraging responses received by the learners, it was clear that learners viewed Dropbox positively as a sharing tool in learning writing skills.

4.3 ESL instructors and learners perceptions on the use of Dropbox in a writing lesson

In addressing the last research question, the data gained from interview sessions with the instructors and learners revealed that both instructors and learners had positive views on the use of Dropbox in their writing lessons. There were a few segments identified that represented similar codes of reasons why these instructors and learners liked the idea of using Dropbox in the writing lessons. For example, both instructors claimed that they preferred to use Dropbox because it saved their time to evaluate the learners’ work. One of the instructors said that Dropbox helped her in teaching writing because she no longer had to go through written assignments manually. Since all assignments were typed and sent in the form of a soft copy, all she needed to do was click on the auto check button and in an instant she could identify the grammar mistakes made by learners. This, indirectly saved a lot of her time in marking:

“All I did was click on the auto check button and in just seconds I was able to see all the red or green lines…it saved my time…” (I1)

She also further stated that she liked using Dropbox because she could “comment freely” and “without (did not) have to think of how she or he (learners) might feel” for they could receive the feedback privately. The only thing she needed to do was to limit the contact to whom she meant to share the comment with. By doing so, only the person who was listed as the contact could see the feedback. In the meantime, another instructor was more concerned about plagiarism. She claimed that using Dropbox could help her to identify learners who plagiarised other people’s work. She believed that the soft copy sent via Dropbox saved her time especially in identifying learners who plagiarised in their writing.
“I feel that it is easy now that I can just copy and paste from Dropbox and find out whether they have plagiarised it from somewhere else.” (I2)

In addition, she also said “I don’t think they have problems expressing themselves because it (Dropbox) keeps their privacy”. This was because the learners knew that she was the only person who could see their writing.

While the instructors talked more on how the use of Dropbox could save their time and helped them in evaluating the assignments, learners on the other hand, mentioned that they became more motivated because it was easier for them to type than write. They could “check on the grammar usage first” and more importantly, they could “read the comments alone”. Besides, they were also becoming braver and were “not shy anymore”. They could also “talk about personal problems or experiences” directly with their instructors. All these phrases and statements show quite clearly that learners did have positive views towards the use of Dropbox as a tool in their writing lessons. They also believed that they would be able to gain more knowledge from the personal feedback received from their instructors. They also felt that it was easier to do writing activities via Dropbox because they could check on their grammar mistakes before sending the final edition to their instructors. This, in a way, helped them to learn how to use the written language concurrently. Indirectly, they were also learning how to write using an appropriate writing process.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that instructors and learners have positive perceptions towards the use of Dropbox in a writing lesson. As the data revealed, instructors and learners agreed that using Dropbox gave them a certain level of privacy which might not be available in other online social networks. Due to this situation, it was found that learners’ motivation increased and they did not find any difficulty in expressing themselves confidently. This has given a new insight compared to what Buhrmester and Prager’s (1995) Model of Self-Disclosure and Individual Development suggested. Instead, the privacy that Dropbox provides to its users makes learners work harder when they know that their work will be viewed and judged by their peers whom they share the folder with. In other words, learners are no longer shy to share their products with peers and at the same time, they learn how to give and take the information shared.

Besides providing some level of privacy, Dropbox is also proven to save a lot of its users’ time. This has become another factor why instructors and learners’ view the use of Dropbox in a writing lesson positively. As revealed by the findings, it seems that having learners share their work publicly can actually save instructors’ time. This is because instructors can ask learners to provide formative feedback towards their peers’ work. This peer checking enables the instructors to create a reference of feedback too. At the same time, evaluating learners work publicly can help the instructors to improve their feedback as well as increase learners’ satisfaction because they can see their instructors’ participation. In other words, the use of Dropbox as a sharing tool does not only save time, but it also gives many reasons for instructors to be more detailed in their evaluation.

In collaborative writing, Dropbox has become an effective sharing tool as it connects its users for brainstorming and exchanging ideas. Sharing work publically does not affect learners’ rights towards their own work. Indeed, open sharing can help establish the work as theirs while enriching others through peer feedback. Regardless of their work’s merit, students can also
learn about copyright, plagiarism, and intellectual property. It is a good idea to encourage or require learners to copyright or add a Creative Commons license to their work. This will allow learners to be exposed to not only the collaborative culture of sharing, but also how to cite and credit others' work while protecting their own.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Overall, Dropbox has shown its potential to boost confidence, motivate and foster a positive attitude among instructors and learners especially towards writing in the English language. Even in cases where learners might need some time to increase their self-confidence before performing publicly and being critiqued, having them turn in their work in public sharing spaces like Dropbox has never been difficult. It is also a great environment to post learners’ work and make the work public to the class without exposing the learners to comments outside the virtual classroom.

By simply using Dropbox for work submission, any learner’s assignment becomes a type of performance because the work is presented publicly. Whether a paper, report, or page of written activity, each learner's work is fully visible to others. Thus, when the instructor provides feedback publicly on the assignment, not only do learners learn from the direct assessment of their own work, but they can also reflect on the work of their peers. However, whenever the instructor feels the grade and feedback should remain private, Dropbox is there to provide a different individual shared folder. Dropbox may have it all, but it is the duty of instructors to fully utilise Dropbox and exploit its potential to the maximum so that learners can stay motivated to learn and be able to incorporate technological tools in their writing activities.

REFERENCES


