

## Online Communication for Improving EFL Learners' Spelling

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**Abstract:** *Within a sociocultural and interactionist theoretical framework, this study set out to determine the effectiveness of collaborative dialogues and form-focused, corrective feedback in online communication in improving 27 EFL female learners' spelling. According to a questionnaire results, those students preferred using the WhatsApp to engage in collaborative interaction outside the classroom. The present study adopted the quasi-experimental design in terms of using five experimental groups and one control group. For the direct impact of the improvement in spelling on writing, there was a need to find out the long-term effect of the programme on the writing of the study sample, which was assessed in their final achievement course test. It was concluded that collaborative dialogues and form-focused, corrective feedback in online communication was effective in improving EFL learners' spelling.*

**Keywords:** Cooperation; collaboration; focus on form; corrective feedback; online communication; spelling; WhatsApp

### 1. Introduction

For years, the researcher had the common pedagogical belief that cooperative learning is synonymous with collaborative learning. However, extensive research revealed that they are completely different. For Oxford (1997), cooperative learning is more structured and directive to learners about how to work together in groups. On the other hand, Naughton (2006) clarifies that collaborative learning focuses on social relationship in a community of learners. In other words, it is a disciplined reflective enquiry promoted by a community of learners – ideas have social origins; they are constructed through communication with others.

Throughout the human history, the interactive role has been played principally by speech; whereas, the permanence of written texts has made them powerful vehicles for reflection. Yet, the intersection between interaction and reflection is of critical importance in education. Using text-based, online communication, *the historical* divide between speech and writing can be overcome with the interactional and reflective aspects of language merged in a single medium. That is, for the first time in history, human communication takes place in a text-based form which is easily transmitted, stored, archived, reevaluated, edited, and rewritten. The opportunities to freeze a chat-dialogue box and focus attention on it are greatly expanded (Warschauer, 1997; Smith, 2005; Kawase, 2006; Thorne, 2007; Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009).

Therefore, the present study encourages learners to collaborate with each other to improve their spelling through online communication. The written mode of online communication allows them

to reflect upon the form of words while interacting in a manner approaching face-to-face (F2F), verbal communication. They can receive corrective feedback on their spelling of words and modify them, thus potentially focusing their attention on problematic words. They are not only correcting each other, but they can go back to their typed speech and correct it as well.

### 2. Review of literature

Contact between peers is closely tied to the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Nevertheless, the problem of time-limitedness for practice, due to large numbers of learners, is a great challenge to generate collaborative dialogues in the target language (TL) while being in classroom. In these dialogues, the divide between language learning and language use is overcome with the two occurring in the same activity (Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009; Mesh, 2010). Online communication brings about the benefits believed to accrue from text-based interaction, in particular, promotion of conscious attention to language forms in the course of meaningful communication which is highly authentic since each learner should in principle be interested in one another as an individual and not just as a source of language input. It also facilitates an autonomous mode of learning. That is, learners alone determine what they want to learn and when, and they can only expect from their partners the support that they have defined and asked for (O'Rourke, 2005; Sykes, 2005; Mesh, 2010). Besides, it produces a digital record that has been described as "persistent conversation" which can be searched, browsed, replayed, annotated, revisualised, and restructured (Thorne, 2006).

The demands of electronic chatting force learners to produce the TL (pushed output) and to take on the role of more competent ones. It also seems to afford them more processing time. This extra time leads to accurate production of words and help facilitate a higher quality language than would occur in a non-electronic environment. This can help them take a more active role in discourse management than in the classrooms, which increases their satisfaction at being able to manage themselves as leaders and contributors in the TL (Smith, 2005; Sykes, 2005; Sotillo, 2006; Mesh, 2010).

In audio-lingual method, errors were seen as something that should be avoided. Therefore, teachers spent a great deal of time correcting learners' errors. In the 1970s, communicative language teaching necessitated exposure to comprehensible input as part of the acquisition process. However, extensive research has shown that a mere focus on meaning and exposure to the TL is not enough for learners to reach proficiency in the TL. In other words, meaning-centered instruction led to low levels of linguistic accuracy and overlooking of form (Mayo, 2011; Al-Shamsi, 2013).

On the other hand, form-focused, corrective feedback is one of the major tools used for enhancing English language teaching and learning by providing learners with feedback to correct their errors. It can be beneficial in facilitating the acquisition of words' spelling which may be difficult to learn through input alone, including forms that are rare, or that lack a clear pronunciation-form relationship. It is possible to facilitate the occurrence of noticing by drawing the learner's attention (Elashri, 2013; Malaggay, 2013; AbuSeileek & Abualsha'r, 2014).

The focus-on-form perspective dismisses the traditional focus on forms, in which learners' attention is drawn to form by the teaching of discrete units of the language syntactically and morphologically. It also disaccords with an exclusive focus on meaning, in which no special effort is made to deal with form. Focus-on-form perspective, as an alternative to both, overtly draws learners' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning (Yilmaz, 2011).

Despite the emphasis on learners as a source of corrective feedback, teacher's response continues to play a central role. For Hyland and Hyland (2006), feedback is generally encouraged by teachers employing scaffolded learning techniques. Teachers write substantial comments to provide a reader's reaction to learners' efforts, to help them improve as writers and to justify the grade they have been given (Seliem, & Ahmed, 2006; Lee & Schallert, 2008).

The ability to spell words involves learning how to map speech sounds onto letters, learning how to apply the orthographic and grammatical rules of a written language, and learning the exceptions to these rules. Effective communication skills – from writing a memo, to searching for information in a directory, or sending an e-mail message – rely on appropriate spelling (Senechal, Basque & Leclaire, 2006; Vedora & Stromer, 2007; Willson & Given, 2010). According to Viel-Ruma, Fredrick, and Houchins (2007), spelling difficulties have a negative impact on overall writing quality in several ways. First, learner compositions that contain spelling errors receive lower teacher ratings. Second, poor spelling can hamper learner ability to plan, organize, and generate meaningful written texts. In addition, the compositions of poor spellers often lack the more sophisticated, multi-syllabic vocabulary used by their more spelling-proficient peers who get high scores in their achievement tests. For these reasons, improving spelling may have a positive impact on learners' scores in written exams.

Therefore, spelling should be an area of concern for the fact that many English words are irregular and unpredictable in their spellings. Teaching spelling in isolation contradicts its main purpose, which links it to writing (Johnson & Marlow, 1996). Here, the emphasis in this study appears as the learners' general focus is always on the link of any exerted effort with its effect on their performance in the final exam. That is, there was a great importance to show learners how their focus on spelling increased their scores in the final achievement test.

Consequently, the present study integrates form-focused, corrective feedback with collaborative dialogues in online communication for improving EFL learners' spelling. Pedagogically speaking, online communication is used as a medium for facilitating the emergence of a learner-centered, discourse community where learners can benefit from interaction since the written nature of the discussion allows greater opportunity to attend to and to reflect on the form of words.

With the continuous development of online communication technologies, more powerful tools become available (i.e., smart phones operated by Android system with different chat applications). These applications (apps) and their use are straightforward and practical to implement, especially in distance learning or hybridized courses where F2F contact is limited (Sykes, 2005). They opened a new approach called Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Although most of them (e.g., WhatsApp, Tango, Viber, ChatON, LINE, FreePP, ... etc.) have video conversation feature, people usually prefer "texting". Indeed, written chat provides an environment in which EFL learners can

individually practice what they learn and process TL forms just being acquired. Additionally, learners can practice using the TL outside the normal class time.

To sum up, text-based, online communication enables learners to have real-time conversational exchanges via text. It has beneficial features which make it a useful medium for creating an effective learning environment where learners collaboratively learn language, learn about language, and learn through language. Yang (2010) refers to it as "cognitive conflict" where "peers' suggestions and corrections serve as the stimulus of cognitive conflicts for student writers to revise their texts" p. 202. That is, it can be a useful means of corrective feedback for learners' spelling of words.

### 2.1. A theoretical framework

Mesh (2010) argues that constructivism is probably the dominant theory in online communication. Learners construct their own knowledge, so the emphasis centers on their dialogues, rather than on the teacher who steps out of the central position. Learning is based on creating meaning through dialogue, reflection, and experience. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), an important constructivist notion, means "collaborative construction of opportunities for individuals to develop their abilities" (Lantolf, 2000 as quoted by Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009, p. 435).

Ignoring the socially-construct nature of interaction among peers, the traditional interactionist approach of Krashen's Comprehensible Input (1985) and Swain's Comprehensible Output (1985) perceive knowledge as an exclusively individual cognitive construct to be transmitted from one person to another. To broaden her original Comprehensible Output hypothesis, Swain (2000) used "collaborative dialogue" viewing output within the sociocultural perspective in which learners mutually scaffold each other to find how best to express their intended meaning by giving and receiving assistance (i.e., corrective feedback) as they interact with each other. Learners' mutual attention to form does not necessarily result from non-comprehension, as is the case in traditional interactionist literature; rather, it is a collaborative endeavor to achieve better performance. Thus, collaborative dialogue is both a cognitive, social tool that mediates language learning (Thorne, 2000; Thorne 2006; Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009).

Central to the interactionist perspective is the role of interactional modifications in promoting attention to and noticing of linguistic forms. Such noticing is an essential first step in the eventual integration of target-like forms into one's own language. The text-based, online communication can amplify learners' attention to linguistic forms (i.e., words' spelling), offering them sufficient

opportunity to notice the features of the linguistic input. Indeed, written communication likely affords more opportunity for attention to form than spoken language. Reformulated spelling from the learners gives some reason to believe that the mismatch between their spelling and the target spelling has been noticed. This may further change or expand learners' abilities to acquire new lexical items (Smith, 2005; Yang, 2010).

### 2.2. Previous studies

Several studies (Johnson & Marlow, 1996; Senechal, Basque & Leclaire, 2006; Chliounaki & Bryant, 2007; Kemper, Verhoeven & Bosman, 2012; Eroglu & Okurb, 2014) aimed at improving learners' spelling for its own importance, some other studies (Vedora & Stromer, 2007; Cornoldi, Del Prete, Gallani, Sella, & Re, 2010) improved spelling for improving other language skills (e.g., reading and writing), while the other studies (Willson & Given, 2010) investigated the importance of spelling in achieving some important, instructional objectives. Yet, some studies (Jones, 1010; Lyddy, Farina, Hanney, Frrell & O'Neill, 2013) focused on the extent to which online communication can encourage learners to use nonstandard spelling or even misspelling.

Some researchers tried different online communication tools for achieving several instructional objectives. For example, García-Sánchez and Rojas-Lizana (2012) used a bilingual blog to fill in the language and cultural gaps of foreign language learners. They focused on the participation, interaction, motivation, language acquisition, feedback and cultural input of learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language in Australia and learners of English as a Foreign Language in Spain. They demonstrated how this learner-directed, instructional context allowed intercultural and language exchanges, firstly between participants, as a peer revision exercise and secondly, as a collaborative work and a discussion platform in the blog.

Extensive literature of recent research focused on the role of teacher written and oral feedback in writing (Lee & Schallert, 2008; Barjesteh & Vaseghi, 2012; Saeidi, Chehreh, & Akbarzadeh, 2012; Al Shamsi, 2013; Elashri, 2013), some studied the effectiveness of collaborative peer feedback (Yilmaz, 2011; Malaggay, 2013), and the others searched the modalities of computer-mediated feedback (Seliem & Ahmed, 2006; Yang, 2010; AbuSeileek & Abualsha'r, 2014). However, this literature has not been unequivocally positive about the role of feedback in writing development, and teachers often have a sense that they are not making use of its full potential.

Using computer-mediated corrective feedback for developing spelling, Heift and Rimrott (2008) investigated learner responses to three

distinct types of corrective feedback for misspellings produced by English learners of German. Twenty-eight beginner and intermediate learners used an online parser-based system for German that recorded learner interaction with the software over 15 weeks. The study considered a corpus of 1268 misspellings and, for the two more explicit feedback types, the system provided correction suggestions for the misspellings. Study results indicated that, while the number of correct responses was significantly higher when the system provided a correction list, there was also significantly less learner uptake for the feedback type that did not provide any correction suggestions. Moreover, learners were far more successful in submitting the target word if it appeared in the suggestion list.

The study of Norouzian and Farahani (2012) sought to take learners' and teachers' written feedback perceptions into account. The results indicated four areas of misfits between learners' and teachers' perception of (1) their manners of error marking (comprehensive vs. selective), (2) manners of feedback provision (direct vs. indirect), (3) use of error codes, and (4) amount of errors selected and their actual feedback performance were found.

As a matter of fact the above-mentioned studies paved the way for the present study to use online communication for improving EFL learners' spelling.

2.3. *Need for the study*

Supported by computers and smart phones requiring internet connection, online communication tools (i.e., chat applications in the present study) are very popular among young people. The most important common point of online communication is that it requires "texting". Although it provides its users with video and audio options, they usually prefer texting. For this reason,

it can be pedagogically attractive for learners to improve their spelling.

Nevertheless, there are some studies which investigated the bad effect of online communication on spelling (e.g., Jones, 1010; Lyddy, Farina, Hanney, Frrell & O'Neill, 2013). Yet, there is a need to find out if the same effect exists when using chat apps as well as to search – as Hyland and Hyland (2006) questioned – if there is a long-term effect of feedback on learners' writing, how online communication can facilitate peer and teacher corrective feedback, and how corrective feedback can encourage EFL learners to reflect on their misspelling of words. Indeed, some researchers (e.g., Heift & Rimrott, 2008) studied the effect of computer-mediated feedback on spelling. Comparatively, little research has studied the effect of peer and teacher corrective feedback on spelling.

In addition, there is a need to make use of the study of Abadikhah and Ashoori (2012) in the sense of providing learners with an opportunity of interaction after receiving feedback to trigger their noticing of the gap between their misspelling and the target spelling. According to the study of Lee and Schallert (2008), there is an emphasis on the context and the relationship between teacher and learner that might influence how feedback is produced and interpreted by the learners.

According to the researcher's observation, the majority of learners enrolled in the English department at the ... – are unable to produce a piece of writing that is free of spelling mistakes. Using a spelling test (see Appendix A), the researcher conducted a pilot study on a random sample of 106 learners from all the levels at the end of the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014. Results of the pilot study are shown in Table (1). Learners' scores showed that their level in spelling is average. Actually, the total score of the test was 55. The highest score was 50.

Table (1)

Results of the Pilot Study

N	Minimum score	Maximum score	Mean	Std Deviation	Percentage
106	0	50	28.03	8.58	50.96%

Shortage in previous research in addition to the results of the pilot study represented a challenge for the present study to be implemented. As it was argued by Evans et al. (2010), the weaknesses in instructional methodologies can be an important reason for this problem.

3. **Statement of the Problem**

Based upon the results of the pilot study, EFL female Saudi learners enrolled in the English department at ... – are poor spellers, which impedes their on-the-job success as prospective EFL teachers. Previous research suggests that

online communication can be helpful in attracting learners to participate in collaborative dialogues with form-focused, corrective feedback provided for solving different instructional problems. Consequently, experimenting with online communication might ultimately lead to better, more developed level of spelling. Therefore, the present study attempted to answer the following main question:

- **What is the effectiveness of online communication in improving EFL learners' spelling?**

For achieving this, it attempted to answer the following sub-questions:

1. To what extent do EFL learners prefer participating in online communication for improving their spelling?
2. How can EFL learners collaborate to reflect on the spelling of words to provide each other with corrective feedback in online communication?
3. What is the effectiveness of online communication in improving EFL learners' spelling?
4. What is the effectiveness of online communication in improving EFL learners' achievement?

#### 4. Method

##### 4.1. Design

At the Humanities and Administration College, 38 female learners, who were enrolled in a course of applied linguistics, had a two-hour lecture a week throughout the second semester of the academic year 2013/2014. For this, they studied Cook's book (2007) *Applied linguistics*. Only 33 learners attended both the pre- and post-tests. Being asked to be divided into collaborative groups to participate in the experiment, only 27 learners formed five groups. The remaining 6 learners did not participate in any group. So, the present study adopted the quasi-experimental design in terms of using five experimental groups and one control group, which included those 6 learners.

##### 4.2. Subjects

33 EFL ... learners from ... were enrolled in an EFL-credit programme at the Humanities and Administration College. As they varied greatly in terms of age, and linguistic and educational background, they went through two preparatory levels (i.e., 001 & 002). In their fourth academic level, the instructor – the researcher – taught them a course in applied linguistics. As for the majority of learners (proved by the pilot study) at this college, these subjects are poor spellers.

##### 4.3. Setting

At the very beginning of the second term of the academic year 2013/2014, 33 learners were pre-tested on February 19<sup>th</sup> on their spelling (see Appendix B). The subjects were post-tested on May 14<sup>th</sup> (see Appendix C). They were asked to be divided into collaborative groups randomly. They preferred to be divided into groups according to their friendship. The researcher agreed, as they must have interest to go on online communication at their own convenience. They formed five groups of 7, 4, 7, 5, 4 learners. They were punctual in chatting as the researcher was a member in each

group. 6 learners did not participate in any group. On May 25<sup>th</sup>, the achievement test (see Appendix F) was administered.

#### 4.4. Instruments

A file of the study instruments was introduced to some jurors to check their validity. They are as follows:

- a. *Spelling Test*: Two equivalent versions of 50 words to be dictated to learners to be used as pre- & post-tests:
  - *Version I* consists of 50 randomly chosen English words of intermediate level (Appendix B).
  - *Version II* consists of 50 words which were randomly chosen from the first five covered chapters of the course book, ten words from each chapter (Appendix C).
- b. *Learner Questionnaire*: 15 questions for gathering information about learners' preferences and commitment to the whole process of participating in online communication for improving their spelling using chat applications (Appendix D).
- c. *Achievement Test*: It is the final exam of the course. It is a paper-and-pencil one. It consists of 6 different types of questions to measure learners' achievement in applied linguistics (Appendix F).

#### 5. Results and Discussion

The results of investigating the problem of the present study can be shown in the following way:

##### 5.1. The first question:

*To what extent do EFL learners prefer participating in online communication for improving their spelling?*

On February 26<sup>th</sup> – the second week of the experiment – the study sample was given a questionnaire in the form of a series 15 questions. They were asked to answer these questions through choosing either 'never', 'rarely', 'every once in a while', 'sometimes', or 'almost always'. For the percentages of their responses to the questionnaire, (see Appendix D). Because it was difficult to administer the questionnaire twice or use another rater, its intrareliability was measured using the coefficient of Cronbach Alpha for internal consistency. It was 0.977 indicating a high level of internal consistency with this specific sample.

For the sake of clarity, their responses were categorized into *preferences* (sometimes &

almost always), *non-preferences* (never & rarely) or *neutral* (every once in a while). Agreeing that WhatsApp was their most popular chat application, the questionnaire results revealed that learners had experience in using text-based, online communication in their native language, and were familiar and comfortable with the keyboard layout and chat applications. They had fairly easy access to the internet using their mobile phones. On the other hand, learners did not prefer using English while chatting and consequently they did not care about their spelling or even referring to a dictionary. They did not try using chat applications for improving their spelling although they thought that correct spelling is important, they did not consider poor spelling is a problem. This did not bother themselves to see it as a problem even though they are poor spellers.

5.2. *The second question*

*How can EFL learners collaborate to reflect on the spelling of words to provide each other with corrective feedback in online communication?*

On February 26<sup>th</sup>, the subjects of the study were given a guided training session – the researcher referred to: Fitzgerald (no date), Weaver, Gillmeister-Krause, and Vento-Zogby (1996), Oxford (1997), Roger and Johnson (1997), Writing and spelling strategies: Assisting students who have additional learning support needs (2007) – providing them with some spelling rules (see Appendix E).

Therefore, learners collaborated together in small groups to help each other learn the words

in order to take the spelling test individually. They were informed that their scores in the final achievement test would be increased by adding assignments scores according to their participation in the chatting groups. In that situation, each learner was concerned with how well she spelled and how well the others in her group spelled. This collaborative umbrella was extended over the entire class if bonus scores were awarded to each learner when the class participated more.

Learners were asked to be divided into groups and assign a leader for each group. This leader had to set times for the group to start chatting each day and to tell the instructor about the group members' punctuality. As the instructor was a member in each group, she had an access to all of the groups. It was also necessary to specify the basic behaviors that were expected to see in the groups so that learners had an "operational" definition of what collaboration was.

5.3. *The third question*

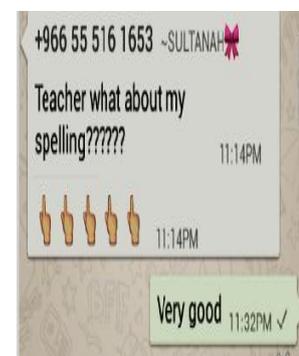
*What is the effectiveness of online communication in improving EFL learners' spelling?*

To prove the equivalence in spelling among the study groups, the pre-test was administered to the subjects of the study. Since the number of them was >30, Kruskal–Wallis one-way analysis of variance by mean ranks was used as a non-parametric method for testing whether groups originated from the same distribution. Table (2) shows that ( $Chi^2 = .904$ ) not significant. That is, the equivalence among the study groups has been determined

**Table (2)**  
Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test of the Spelling Pre-Test

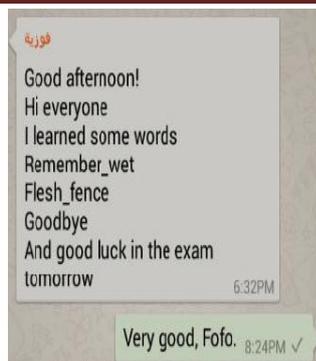
Groups	N	Mean Rank	Chi <sup>2</sup>	Degree of Freedom	Significance
Group 1	7	18.86	.904	5	not sig.
Group 2	4	18.00			
Group 3	7	16.57			
Group 4	5	16.60			
Group 5	4	18.00			
Group 6	6	14.33			
Total	33				

Administering the experimental treatment, close attention was paid to the question of group dynamics. The researcher was responsible for monitoring groups of students, explaining spelling rules, and providing corrective feedback, and support to them, Screenshot (1). Collaborative interaction fostered cognitive engagement, as well as, reflection on spelling of words among learners.



**Screenshot (1):**

For improving their spelling, learners integrated four forms of spelling knowledge: *phonological, visual, morphemic, and etymological*. The instructor's role was to organize the examination of words in such a way that learners understood how particular spelling features and patterns operate (see Appendix E). They chose some words from the course book they had not learned to spell correctly. Each time they chatted, peers could test each other on the words they each had practiced during their study as in Screenshot (2). Individualized dictionaries were helpful as learners were trying to get a grasp on the spellings of words. Screenshot (3) shows examples of these dictionaries.



Screenshot (2):



Screenshot (3): An

Learners benefited from guidance in developing a spelling conscience: a concern for spelling, and a sense of when something may not be spelled correctly. Therefore, teaching learners strategies for correcting spelling was far more important than giving them the correct spelling of any particular word. Such strategies included: writing the word two or three different ways and deciding which one "looks right"; locating the correct spelling in their course book; asking someone; consulting a dictionary; or using a spelling checker on their computer or a hand-held electronic speller. Then, they had to tell the other members which words they learned their spelling.

Administering the post-test to the subjects of the study, ( $\chi^2 = 13.123$ ) was significant ( $p > .05$ ). Rejecting the null hypothesis, there were statistically significant differences among the mean ranks of the experimental groups and that of the control group on the post-test favoring the experimental groups in spelling. So as a measure of effect size in Kruskal-Wallis test,  $\eta^2$  is analogous to  $R^2$  in multiple linear regression. Since ( $\eta^2 = .383 > .26$ ), then the effect size of the experimental treatment on spelling is large.

Table (3)

Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test of the Spelling Post-Test

According to Kruskal-Wallis test, then at least one group dominated at least another group. To identify where this dominance occurred, post-hoc tests helped analyze the specific group pairs for dominance. As a post-

Groups	N	Mean Rank	Chi <sup>2</sup>	Degree of Freedom	Significance	$\eta^2$ (Effect Size)
Group 1	7	26.64	13.123	5	.050	0.383
Group 2	4	13.63				
Group 3	7	15.14				
Group 4	5	10.60				
Group 5	4	22.38				
Group 6	6	11.92				
Total	33					

hoc analysis, Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) of multiple comparisons was used. It is basically a set of individual t-tests, differentiated only in the calculation of the standard deviation. Table (4) shows the results of the multiple comparisons among pairs of the study groups.

Table (4)

Results of LSD Test for the Spelling Post-Test

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Group 1	9.2857	.951	7	————	3.036*	2.429*	3.686*	.786	3.286*
Group 2	6.2500	2.75	4		————	-.607	.650	-2.250	.250
Group 3	6.8571	2.035	7			————	1.257	-1.643	.857
Group 4	5.6000	2.302	5				————	-2.900*	-.400
Group 5	8.5000	1.291	4					————	2.500
Group 6	4.0000	2.097	6						————

\*There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the post-test at the level (.05) favoring the group having a higher mean score

Particular attention was given to the influence of metalinguistic data containing information about the form of learners' spelling of words; this information had the potential of building learners' knowledge about the TL. Whereas positive feedback generally confirmed learners' accurate hypotheses about the TL, negative feedback involved information showing their hypotheses to be incorrect, incomplete, or somehow non-target-like, Screenshot (4). Once learners had controlled a set of correct vocabulary and spelling rules (i.e., a rudimentary knowledge base), they improved spelling. Successful language learning occurred due to learners' noticing, a process that entailed awareness with attention to the discrepancies between their spelling and target-like spelling.



**Screenshot (4):**

12. The fourth question

*What is the effectiveness of online communication in improving EFL learners' achievement?*

This question aimed to find out – depending upon Hyland and Hyland's question (2006) – if there is a long-term effect of form-focused, corrective feedback on learners' writing. Corrective feedback oriented them to attend to form in general, and this benefited not just accuracy in spelling but in structures of sentences as well and made possible "noticing the gap". It should be noted that, however, that a durable effect would have been evident had learners continued to receive practice with corrective feedback.

Administering the achievement test (see Appendix F), ( $\chi^2 = 14.006$ ) was significant ( $p > .05$ ). Rejecting the null hypothesis, there were statistically significant differences among the mean ranks of the experimental groups and that of the control group on the achievement test favoring the experimental groups. Since  $\eta^2 = .509 > .26$ , then the effect size of the experimental treatment on achievement is large.

**Table (5)**  
Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test for the Achievement Test

Groups	N	Mean Rank	Chi <sup>2</sup>	Degree of Freedom	Significance	$\eta^2$ (Effect Size)
Group 1	7	23.79	14.006	5	.050	0.509
Group 2	4	13.63				
Group 3	7	19.57				
Group 4	5	21.30				
Group 5	4	15.88				
Group 6	6	5.50				
Total	33					

Table (6) shows the results of the multiple comparisons among pairs of the study groups in the achievement test.

**Table (6)**  
Results of LSD Test for the Achievement Test

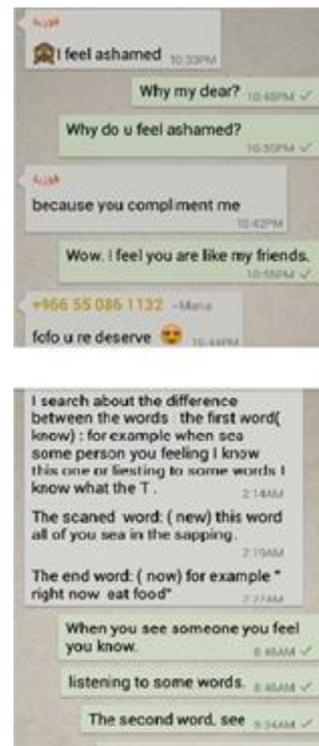
Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Group 1	84.1429	10.447	7	————	15.893	5.143	2.943	10.643	33.143*
Group 2	68.2500	11.147	4		————	-10.750	-12.950	-5.250	17.250*
Group 3	79.0000	13.341	7			————	-2.200	5.500	28.000*
Group 4	81.2000	13.773	5				————	7.7	30.200*
Group 5	73.5000	12.476	4					————	22.500*
Group 6	51.0000	13.928	6						————

\*There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the achievement test at the level (.05) favoring the group having a higher mean score

Online communication was implemented for collaborative dialogues, which extended the time for interaction and conversation that began in the classroom. The subjects of the study receiving corrective feedback made more detailed revisions on their spelling. Online communication resulted in more complex language use than in classroom discussion, more equal participation, and an increase in “willingness to communicate”. Learners used a wide variety of discourse structures and took a more active role in discourse management than in the classroom, Screenshot (5).

Online individual log files (see Appendix G) could be discovered, revised and easily remembered in the context of the course. They could be used to provide reflection on the learning process. They were also a useful monitoring tool, in which the instructor could provide timely feedback as well as encouraging peer comments and review.

Online communication promoted peer interaction in a reciprocally supportive climate for brainstorming ideas, expressing opinions, requesting and offering help, and learning within a group through peer feedback and support in L2 practice and performance. Collaborative learning was useful in such a way which helped learners feel supported by each other, which in turn produced the conditions for taking risks in the learning process when trying out more complex linguistic structures without losing face. In addition, the socio-cultural aspects of collaborative language learning facilitated increased progress and encouraged the development of autonomous learning habits. They shared ideas and commented on peer's work in an environment of trust, empathy, and enjoyment. Consequently, learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a positive self-image and a low level of anxiety were well-prepared for success in language learning.



Screenshot 5: Use

## 6. Conclusion

Spelling should be an area of concern for the fact that many English words are irregular and unpredictable in their spellings. Teaching it in isolation contradicts its main purpose, which links spelling to writing. Therefore, online communication was effective in helping EFL learners improve their spelling using the WhatsApp – the most popular chat application among them. They were encouraged to participate in collaborative groups of online communication outside the classroom. The instructor – being a

member in each group of learners – sent the chat of each group to her e-mail for analysis. Learners were not afraid from corrective feedback; they were not face-threatened. As the learners' general focus was on the link between their exerted effort and their results in the final exam, it was important to show them how their focus on spelling increased their scores in the final achievement test. Hence, it was concluded that online communication is highly effective in improving their spelling and writing as proved by their high marks in their final exam.

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## Appendix A

Read this table of 55 words\*, then correct mistaken ones:

cuontry	realy	agian	between	every
night	between	appear	allmost	enogh
becuase	imporant	somtimes	being	light
thought	family	idea	second	without
vioce	sevrал	peice	dosen't	usualy
hunderd	always	rember	example	beatiful
carfully	question	specail	money	probabaly
friends	however	machine	ground	notice
intrest	genral	allready	morning	hopeing
milion	finally	insted	minute	your'e
writen	early	themselves	suprise	stopping

\*Source: adapted from <http://www.spelling-words-well.com>

### Appendix B

Write the words you hear:

offer	neighbour	friend	said	morning
pair	listen	eight	telephone	please
twelve	twice	often	Saudi	different
sound	hotter	writing	paragraph	cake
pretty	house	mother	brother	breakfast
thousand	noisy	exam	journey	family
careless	wonderful	private	swimming	possible
friend	however	machine	ground	notice
afternoon	restaurant	building	street	woman
match	finally	clock	college	answer

### Appendix C

Write the words you hear:

scope	educational	standard	linguistics	applied
lexicography	performance	proficiency	society	testing
restricted	dialect	concern	criteria	prescription
successful	standard	linguist	description	flexible
attitude	property	common	contemporary	language
geopolitical	loyalty	population	pedagogy	growth
theory	foreign	acquisition	teaching	language
vocabulary	natural	grammar	pronunciation	translation
biological	explicit	competence	purposes	communicative
completion	activities	monster	debate	investigating