

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING ONLINE  
FORUMS AND BLOGS FOR PROMOTING  
WRITING PERFORMANCE  
OF OMANI LEARNERS**

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**2016**



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by

**JAYARON JOSE**

**Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**June 2016**



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

First of all, I am grateful to my God, Lord and Savior Jesus Christ whose abundant grace has kept me in good health and thoughts that have been necessary to complete the study and writing this thesis. He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). All glory to Him!

I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to my first supervisor Dr. Mohammed Jafre Zainol Abidin for providing me with all the necessary advice and guidance for the research. He has been a tremendous mentor for me allowing me to grow as a researcher. I am also thankful to my second supervisor Dr. Azidah Abu Ziden for her prompt and precious feedback on my work, and continuous encouragement. I also want to place on record my sincere thanks to Dr. Aziah Ismail for her valuable advice in helping me conceptualize my study in its initial phase. I am grateful to the Dean and members of the board of evaluators for their expertise, valuable feedback and encouragement during my proposal defense, pre-viva and viva. Their pithy comments and suggestions gave me much insight, and shaped my research.

I express my sincere thanks to Dr. Azlina Mohammed Sadik and the language lecturers at School of Language and Literacies and Translation for helping me complete Bahasa Malayu Course successfully with A grade. Their contribution to my successful completion of LKM100, Bahasa Malaysia is profound.

I am grateful to the Faculty members of School of Educational studies, the staff at IPS and Visa Section and the administration in general for their regular support and guidance enabling me to continue my studies fulfilling all the legal and formal requirements to stay in the country as a research scholar.



I acknowledge with thanks the permission granted by Mr. Younus Al Zaabi, Head of English Language Center at Al Musanna College of Technology, Oman to use computer labs and college facilities to carry out the studies. I am also grateful to the technicians at the center for the technical assistance extended to me during the experimental sessions.

My hearty thanks to my friend Mr. Aloysius Britto Ithayaraj for his selfless and constant support and guidelines. He wholeheartedly helped me throughout the period of my study. I cannot remember him saying 'no' to any of my requests. I lack words to express my gratitude to him. My thanks are due to Mr. Joy Arualappan, Lecturer, for proof reading my thesis despite his busy schedule.

My special thanks to my beloved wife, Blessy and my daughter, Joysh and son, Joshua who unceasingly supported me in every means possible throughout this venture. The sacrifices that they have made for me in the process of my studies are beyond words to express. I also acknowledge my parents, family members and church members for their prayers and support which sustained me thus far.

I place on record my sense of gratitude to everyone who directly and indirectly contributed to my studies through their prayers, words of encouragement and presence in this auspicious occasion of the thesis submission.



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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>EFTs</b>	Error-free T-units
<b>EFC</b>	Error-free Clauses
<b>ELL</b>	English Language Learners
<b>ELC</b>	English Language Centre
<b>FtF</b>	Face-to-face
<b>GCC</b>	Gulf Cooperation Council
<b>ITA</b>	Information Technology Authority
<b>ITU</b>	International Telecom Union
<b>LCRP</b>	Language Centre Research Publication
<b>LMS</b>	Learning Management System
<b>MOODLE</b>	Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment



**KEBERKESANAN MENGGUNAKAN FORUM DAN BLOG DALAM  
MENINGKATKAN PRESTASI PENULISAN  
PELAJAR-PELAJAR DI OMAN**

**ABSTRAK**

Kajian ke atas keberkesanan dalam menggunakan forum dan blog untuk meningkatkan prestasi penulisan pelajar-pelajar EFL di Oman telah dirancang dan dilaksanakan disebabkan oleh peningkatan penggunaan Teknologi Komunikasi Maklumat (ICT) oleh pelajar, terutamanya dalam memenuhi keperluan akademik dan sosial mereka. Pengkaji merasakan perlu pentingnya mengkaji kesan-kesan alat ICT dalam membantu pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris melalui penggunaan kaedah perbincangan forum atas talian (forum) dan penulisan blog sebagai hasil sorotannya terhadap literatur yang dikira relevan dengan kajian. Dua soalan kajian utama telah dibentuk untuk menjalankan kajian secara eksperimen ini dengan 28 orang peserta terlibat dalam kaedah forum atas talian dan 28 orang lagi dalam menggunakan kaedah blog sebelum pasca-ujian dijalankan. Soalan-soalan kajian ialah: 1) Adakah terdapat sebarang perbezaan yang ketara dalam dan di antara bahasa penulisan yang dihasilkan oleh kumpulan forum, dan bahasa penulisan yang dihasilkan oleh kumpulan blog dari aspek kuantiti linguistik, ketepatan, kesukaran dan kepaduannya? dan 2) apakah persepsi para peserta terhadap kaedah-kaedah penulisan melalui blog dan forum? Soalan kedua melihat kepada koleksi data kualitatif, analisis dan interpretasinya. Analisis untuk data pasca-ujian forum dan blog (di antara kumpulan berkenaan) mendapati bahawa terdapat perbezaan ketara di antara beberapa pembolehubah forum dan pembolehubah blog seperti bilangan klausa, ketepatan, kata hubung kata penerang, kata hubung subordinat dan alat kohesif; sebaliknya,



tidak ada sebarang perbezaan ketara di antara pembolehubah seperti bilangan perkataan, bilangan unit bahasa, kesukaran sintaks, kepelbagaian leksikal, kepadatan leksikal dan jumlah penuh kata hubung kordinat-subordinat. Analisis data menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua kaedah mempunyai kesan statistik yang ketara ke atas output penulisan Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) pelajar-pelajar Oman dari sudut semua pembolehubah kajian dengan kebarangkalian  $p = .05$ . Himpunan data kualitatif melalui temu ramah dan analisisnya mendapati 5 kriteria utama (kod) seperti penulisan EFL dan pembetulan ralat, penerimaan forum dan blog sebagai alat tulisan baru, pembelajaran secara kolaborasi dan berautonomi, penulisan elektronik berlawanan dengan penulisan pensil-dan-kertas dan cabaran dan kesukaran. Pendak kata, dapatan data temu ramah forum dan blog adalah sama. Walau bagaimanapun, kaedah forum berjaya menunjukkan output penulisan EFL yang lebih baik berbanding dengan penulisan blog. Sebagai kesimpulan, kajian mendapati bahawa forum dan blog adalah dua alat ICT penting yang boleh digabungkan dengan amalan pengajaran dan pembelajaran EFL, terutama yang berkaitan dengan aspek penulisan. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa pengajaran dan pembelajaran EFL boleh memudahkan melalui alat-alat ICT, dan terdapat keperluan untuk pihak-pihak yang berkepentingan untuk mencipta dan melaksanakan dasar yang berkaitan, melalui berkesan ICT infrastruktur, penyenggaraan, latihan dan kajian.



**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING FORUMS AND BLOGS  
FOR PROMOTING WRITING PERFORMANCE  
OF OMANI LEARNERS**

**ABSTRACT**

The study on the effectiveness in using forums and blogs for promoting the writing performance of Omani EFL learners was planned and executed because of the learners' increased use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) especially for their academic and social needs. The researcher, therefore, felt the need to examine the effects of ICT tools in facilitating English language learning through the use of online forum discussions and blogs as a result of reviewing relevant literatures. Two main research questions were formed to carry out the experimental study with 28 participants in the forum treatment and another 28 participants in the blog treatment before the post-test was administered. The research questions are: 1) Are there any significant differences within and between the written language produced by the forum group and the written language produced by the blog group in terms of linguistic quantity, accuracy, complexity and cohesiveness? and 2) what are the perceptions of the participants toward methods of writing through blogs and forums? The second question is for the qualitative data collection, analysis and interpretation. The analysis of post-test data for the forum and the blog (between the groups design) found that there is statistically significant difference between some of the forum variables and the blog variables such as number of clauses, accuracy, conjunctive adverbs, subordinate conjunctions and cohesive devices; on the other hand, there is no statistically significant difference



between the variables such as the number of words, number of language units, syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, lexical density and the total number of coordinate-subordinate conjunctions. The data analysis found that both the treatments had a statistically significant effect on the EFL writing output of Omani learners in terms of all variables of the study with the probability of  $p = .05$ . The qualitative data collection through interviews and their analysis found five leading criteria such as EFL writing and error correction, acceptance of forums and blogs as new writing tools, collaborative and autonomous learning, electronic vs. paper-and-pencil writing, and challenges and difficulties. In short, findings of the forum and the blog interview data are similar. However, the forum treatment has shown better EFL written output than the blog treatment. To conclude, the research found that the forum and the blog are two important ICT tools that can be integrated into EFL learners' teaching and learning practices especially in relation to writing. The study implies that EFL teaching and learning can be facilitated through ICT tools, and there is a need for the stakeholders to create and implement policies about it through effective ICT infrastructure, maintenance, training and research.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background of the Research**

The significance of English language in the globalized world is remarkable for the cross-cultural communication and awareness (Johnson, 2008), and the technology has contributed much to the increased use of English language worldwide. As a result of technological advancement and the adaptation and application of different technological tools, English Language Teaching (ELT) and learning has been freed from the constraints of time and place (Burston, 2013). The integration of technology in English language teaching, therefore, can facilitate the language learning and teaching processes in the context of ever increasing use of technology in communication. Language learning has become one of the challenging social activities in education with the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) resulting in a new concept of learning using different technological devices and tools (Guerza, 2011). Therefore, the concept of language learning through ICT can be summarized as learning language through the use of any computer assisted networked communication devices or applications (Rouse, 2011).

The English language teaching and learning and its need for technological integration in the Middle East are very much emphasized due to the current economic, political, social and technological developments in the Middle East. According to UNESCO (2013), the social movements that took place in 2011 in the Arab States have demonstrated the potential of ICT to play a catalytic role.



Arguably, the Arab Spring ranks among the most significant informal ICT (Information and Communication Technology)-assisted “learning” phenomena in 2011, whereby thousands of youth used social media as a space for self-identification, self-assertion, contestation and mobilization around democracy, human rights and civil liberties. In this context, geographically and economically, the Sultanate of Oman, an Arab country in the region, occupies a strategic location connecting Asia, Europe and Africa (Ministry of National Economy, 2010). The country is fast advancing due to its social and economic growth, and it possesses relatively high potential to support English language learning through ICT tools using both computers and the Internet, given that about 80% or more of computers in the country is connected to the World Wide Web (UNESCO, 2013). In addition to these geographical, social and technological situations in the country, it is necessary to understand the development of English language in Oman and the government’s policies for English language teaching to assess the significance and scope for promoting EFL (English as a Foreign Language) as it can contribute much to the background knowledge about the present study.

### **1.1.1 Development of English Language in Oman**

According to Al-Busaidi (1995), Oman was never a British colony and “... had no foundations for English ... there were no English- medium schools in Oman ... there was no British inspired education” (p.90). Nevertheless, since 1970 onwards Oman has accepted English as an officially taught foreign language in its institutions realizing the country’s need to expand its relationship with other non-Arabic speaking countries especially after the discovery of oil in the Gulf States.



Oman has established trade links with non-Arabic speaking countries in Europe, Asia and USA using English as a lingua franca in communication. English language is not just for trading purposes, but is also the means of communication between Omani nationals and expatriates within the country. Increasingly there seems to be a need for a single language to enable people with different linguistic backgrounds to interact in a variety of contexts, especially with the revolution of information and communication technologies. In Oman, as all over the world, English has evolved as the language which is being taught and learned with increasing intensity (Hu, 2005). Non-English-speaking countries are adopting policies that promote the teaching and learning of English and their countless educational institutions now require their students to pass in English as a condition for graduation. In Oman, as in other Arabic-speaking countries, graduate students with an outstanding command of written and spoken English are highly valued and accepted in the private sector, in oil companies in particular, where English is the only means of communication.

English is considered as a foreign language in the Middle East in general and Oman in particular because it is not the local medium of education nor an official language in the region (Nordquist, 2015). So English is studied as a foreign language in Oman. In fact, Arabic learners have linguistic and cultural backgrounds that are completely different from English, which create obstacles in the learning of that language. According to Al Jadidi (2009), unless they are planning to migrate, Arabic speaking learners learn English for practical, rather than cultural purposes, so that the English language teaching context in Oman is quite different from teaching English as a second language to learners in many Commonwealth countries. Omani learners, therefore, learn English not necessarily to become part of an English-



speaking community or for English to become a language of social identity (Al Jadidi, 2009). In summary, English is considered as a foreign language in Oman, and the teaching of English language has been adopted as a major policy imperative. As a result, English Language Teaching is developing rapidly in schools, colleges and universities along with technological advancements in the country.

### **1.1.2 English Teaching as a Strategic Policy**

EFL teaching in Oman, as in many parts of the world, receives political, economic and legislative support from the government. English is considered as “a resource for national development and as the means for wider communication within the international community” as mentioned in the NELP (National English Language Policy) (Nunan, Tyacke & Walton, 1987, p.2). The Omani government recognizes the importance of English language as the language of modernization in the world today. The Reform and Development of General Education (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. A5 -1) states that:

The government recognizes that facility in English is important in the new global economy. English is the most common language for international sectors such as banking and aviation. The global language of science and technology is also English as are the rapidly expanding international computerized databases and telecommunications networks, which are becoming an increasingly important part of academic and business life (p. A5-1).

Apparently, the government is aware of the interrelationship of the global economy with its national economy. In this context, the Ministry of Education documented the policy outlines for the future development of English Language



Teaching (ELT) in Oman titled *Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum* (Nunan et al., 1987). The policy philosophy and guidelines were written by three authors led by David Nunan, a leading Australian scholar in second language teaching and learning.

The Oman Ministry of Education, therefore, recognized the importance of promoting English language teaching for Omani learners, and it produced the philosophy and guidelines for the Omani English language school curriculum in 1987. The government affirmed English as Oman's only foreign language to be used officially in the country, and it would contribute to nation building especially in the field of science and technology. The government thus considers English as a bridge toward national development and a medium that narrows the technological gap between the developing world and the developed world. It is widely used in sectors such as banking, tourism, healthcare, automobile and insurance (Al-Jadidi, 2009).

### **1.1.3 Scope of ICT for EFL Learning in Oman**

ICT with its powerful tools has become an inevitable element in all spheres of life in the modern world especially in Oman. Along with the explosion of ICT, its integration into teaching practices in all academic fields in general and ELT in particular is seriously being studied through the process of implementing different ICT tools in the teaching and learning process and examining their effectiveness in multiple aspects across the world. Oman with eight universities, seven Colleges of Technology, six Colleges of Applied Sciences and 19 private colleges under different government bodies are offering courses in English language to Omani students (Al Balushi, 2012) in a well-equipped technological environment. According ICT



statistics survey (ITA, 2012), 98% of higher educational institutions provides a Local Area Network (LAN) to their staff and students with the Internet, Wi-Fi and intranet.

According to Motteram (2013), it is difficult to think of a foreign or second language (L2) program that does not make use of ICT in one or the other form. For example, Anderson and Miyazoe (2010) in their study found about students' positive perception of the use of ICT tools, and their progress in identifying different writing styles through the use of forums, blogs and wikis. Similarly, studies by Jun and Lee (2012) and Gillam and Wooden (2013) underpin the importance of online writing tools for promoting EFL skills.

Considering the significance of English language learning in education through technological means, the exploitation of different generic technologies or ICT tools has attracted attention of researchers. They range from email (Evans, 2012; Liu, 2011), chat, forums, blogs, wikis (Alwi, Adams & Newton, 2012; Alshumeimeri, 2011; Chen, 2012; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012), podcasting (Rahmi & Katal, 2012) to mobile phones to tablets - iPad<sup>TM</sup>/iPod<sup>TM</sup> (Hsu, Hwang, & Chang, 2013; Martin & Ertzberger, 2013) for mobile learning. Social media such as YouTube<sup>TM</sup> and Facebook<sup>TM</sup> are also used in EFL teaching (Alias, Manan, Yusof & Pandian, 2012; Ghasemi, 2011; Lairea, Casteleyn & Mottart, 2012). Researchers (Klimova, 2011; Klimova & Semrodava, 2012; Rusanganwa, 2013; Yusof, Manan & Alias, 2012) have facilitated language learning and instructions through various ICT tools and found many benefits of technology integrated language learning; for example, stress free learning environment, better language output and sense of self-improvement in the learning process (Blin, 2013; Nowrozi, 2011). Hence, the present study closely following the latest studies, aims to investigate the



effectiveness of using online forums and blogs in facilitating writing for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in the context of Omani tertiary level education in the Middle East.

This research is concerned with EFL students' writing performance in English by using ICT writing tools such as forums and blogs, and their impact on the learners' writing performance as measured by the written language output, linguistic complexity, accuracy, cohesiveness and the learners' perspectives about them. The study is carried out in the context of Omani learners at Al Musanna College of Technology (ACT). Similar studies on the use of ICT tools in writing showed that ICT can reduce writing apprehension and improve fluency, and grammatical accuracy of Arabic EFL learners (Alshumaimeri, 2011; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011). Researchers do agree that since ICT tools have interactive networked communication in written form, it has more scope for facilitating writing proficiency along with other skills (Klimova, 2011). The current study, therefore, specifically investigates the effectiveness of using online forums and blogs in promoting writing performance of Omani EFL learners in terms of their written language out-put. In addition, the participants' perception towards the use of forums and blogs is also studied within the research context.

In the background of the significance of ICT in teaching learning, the Ministry of Manpower in Oman introduced Moodle, an e-learning platform, in Omani Colleges of Technologies as a Learning Management System (LMS), and the study used online discussion forums and blogs on the Moodle platform as writing tools to assess their effectiveness in terms of the writing measures. Costa, Alvelos and Teixeira (2012) write:



The Moodle represents one of the most widely used open-source e-learning platforms that enable the creation of a course website ensuring their access only to enrolled students. This platform allows the exchange of information among users geographically dispersed, through mechanisms of synchronous (chats) ... (p.337).

## **1.2 Statement of Problem**

EFL writing is understood as the most difficult linguistic skill for learners in the Middle East. Many studies (Al Buainain, 2009; Fender, 2008; Jahin and Idrees, 2012) point out that writing in English is the first difficulty in learning English for EFL Arab learners in terms of vocabulary, accuracy, complexity and cohesiveness. The common writing problems for the Arabic EFL students are errors in relative clauses, articles, fragments, noun modifiers, prepositions and coherence (Al – Buainani, 2006; Boudersa, 2013). Some studies on EFL learners' vocabulary and grammar have found that the learners considered both vocabulary and grammar are difficult writing problems (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Al-Saadi & Samuel, 2013; Mojica, 2010). As ELT in Oman is relatively new 'enterprise' (Al-Issa & Al-Balushi, 2012), stakeholders and teachers need to find out methods to facilitate the learners overcome the difficulties.

In addition, understanding some of the EFL writing challenges of Arab Omani learners in the present context of increased ICT use in education is essential for better elaborating the problem. For instance, Warner (2013) points out that both students and teachers view language teaching and learning are more effective through the use of ICT tools. Likewise, Stepanek and Hradilova (2013) in their study using ICT tools indicated that the ICT enhanced tools such as online discussion



forums helped both the learners and teachers in the process of academic writing, and they recommended for further research on the benefits of ICT tools in meeting the learners' challenges in academic writing.

Among numerous EFL learning challenges faced by Arab learners, Ferah (2010) in her study found that lack of learner-motivation, teacher-centered methods and inadequate teaching techniques as hindrances to Arab EFL learners' writing performance. The study also finds that some teachers think that writing is 'unteachable'; and the learners do well in examinations due to memorization and rote learning, but they lack creativity, critical thinking or problem solving; and the study recommends for more students' exposure to English, real-life learning objectives, creating learning situations that are conducive to realistic language use through innovative teaching methods. In this context, the integration of ICT can be one of the best ways to meet some of the challenges faced by the Arab learners especially at the tertiary level of their studies. Mozaheb, Seifoori and Beigi (2013) in their study reveal that the best EFL teachers are of the opinion that they should find innovative techniques for engaging students in EFL writing by incorporating newest technology (ICT) considering the significant role of it in the personal lives of the learners. Such incorporation of EFL writing with ICT can address many challenges faced by the Arab learners especially in writing.

Furthermore, to consider some of the specific aspects of EFL writing, Saigh and Schmitt (2012) found that Arabic EFL learners have difficulty in the spelling of English vowels – short and long because of the L1 influence. Arabic learners in the Middle East are often influenced by their L1 habits such as the tendency to omit vowels - 'vowel blindness'- while writing in English, and such 'vowel blindness' is a



temporary problem that can be remedied (Khan, 2013). Also, Arabic EFL learners require support in advancing their comprehension especially of the relation between different language skills and knowledge-construction in an academic framework which can meet the learners' needs of the present time (Al-Zubaidi, 2012). As an example, Ezza (2010) in her study across three Arab Universities found that the writing problems of Arabic EFL learners were because of the un-updated methodology and resources. The study revealed that the English Departments across the three universities used "approaches and materials characteristics of the 1940 and 1950s" (p.1) mainly of product based writing approach, and less or least focus on process oriented or genre oriented writing approach. Likewise, Al-Hazmi and Schofield (2007), Fitze and Glasgow (2009) and Khuweleh and Shoumali (2000) consider the Arab EFL writing problems are due to the learners' lack of mastery of rhetorical structure of L2 text, L1 discourse transfer and linguistic incompetence. Other factors such as tutor-student ratio, classroom strength (number of students in a class), the number of writing courses, the writing materials and teaching methodology are also considered as some of the causes of the writing difficulty of Arabic EFL learners (Ezza, 2010).

Moreover, Arab Omani EFL learners' writing problem extends to their lack of independent writing proficiency, and Arab learners are more teacher-centered (Al-Issa, 2007; Al-Jadidi, 2009; Al-Mohanna, 2010; Fareh, 2010; Luik & Kukemelk, 2008; Krips, 2013). Students often feel that they are ill-equipped to make the move toward autonomy and frequently feel unable to adjust to a different system of education where they are expected to take more responsibility for their own learning and apply higher-level cognitive processing and problem-solving skill in terms of



their writing. The students in Oman and Arab region believe that classrooms are the only place where learning takes place (Al Handhali, 2009) while they have immense learning opportunities through technology integration outside classrooms. Researchers suggest that Omani EFL learners may not respond positively to student-centered, autonomous and facilitative teaching methods (Al-Saadi, 2011; Vrazalic, MacGregor, Behl & Fitzgerald, 2009) in EFL writing. Moreover, Omani students try to avoid self-study (Al-Saadi, 2011) that hampers their independent writing performance along with other language skills. This lack of independence in writing poses a problem to Omani learners.

Finally, only a few studies were conducted to find the effectiveness of ICT in language learning with a focus on writing in Oman (Al-Aufi & Al-Azri, 2013). The lack of relevant studies on promoting EFL writing through ICT media may disallow its language instructors to understand possible causes or areas that may influence their students' writing performance. It has also resulted in the absence of the literature about the use of ICT tools such as forums and blogs in improving writing proficiency of the Omani EFL learners.

The problem, therefore, can be summarized as learners' limited opportunity for EFL writing in a conventional teaching and learning situation, which results in EFL students' poor writing performance. Nevertheless, the learners are very much exposed to technology in their learning environment which has the potential to facilitate their EFL writing supplementing the conventional learning situations. Similarly, like any other Arab and non-Arab EFL learners, Omani learners seldom get opportunities outside schools or colleges to interact with other English speakers through writing (Fareh, 2010). Arab learners use Arabic which is their first language



for informal and formal communication in and outside classrooms, and they face the problem of less exposure to the target language as used by its native speakers (Jdetawy, 2013). For example, in one of the surveys, 54% of under-graduate respondents from Saudi Arabia were reported using English rarely or never outside the classroom (Malcolm, 2004). Other similar EFL surveys (Puengpipattrakul, 2007; Pawapatcharaudom, 2007) yielded the same result emphasizing the fact that EFL learners such as Omani learners need more exposure to using English language outside their classrooms.

Omani EFL learners' writing problem, therefore, has led the researcher to draw on the idea of designing this study to examine the effectiveness of online forum writing and blog writing in promoting the writing performance of Omani learners. Particularly, this study, therefore, explores the effectiveness of using online forums and blogs for promoting the writing performance of English language learners who are at the post-foundation level of EFL learning in Al Musanna College of Technology (ACT) in Oman.

### **1. 3 Research Objectives**

The aim of the present study is to determine the effectiveness of using forums and blogs in promoting writing performance of Semester 1 (2013 – 2014) students at ELC, post-foundation English writing program in Al Musanna College of Technology in Oman in terms of their written language output, linguistic complexity, linguistic accuracy and lexical cohesiveness followed by the students' perception towards writing through the use of ICT tools such as forums and blogs.



1. To determine the differences between the written language produced through the use of online forums and the written language produced through the use of online blogs in terms of language output, linguistic complexity, linguistic accuracy and textual cohesiveness.
2. To determine the participants' perception towards the methods of writing through forums and blogs.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

Based on the above research objectives, the following research questions are framed for investigation.

**Question 1.** Is there a significant difference within and between the written language produced by the forum group and the written language produced by the online blog group in terms of written language output, linguistic complexity, linguistic accuracy and lexical cohesiveness?

To answer Question 1, the following sub-questions are framed. Questions 1a, 1b and 1c are to determine the quantity of written language output, questions 1d, 1e and 1f are to determine the linguistic complexity of the written language, question 1g is to determine the linguistic accuracy and questions 1h, 1i, 1j and 1k are to determine the lexical cohesiveness of the written language outputs.

**Question 1a.** Is there a significant difference in the number of words within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 1b.** Is there a significant difference in the number of T-units within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?



**Question 1c.** Is there a significant difference in the number of clauses within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 1d.** Is there a significant difference in the lexical diversity within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 1e.** Is there a significant difference in lexical density within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 1f.** Is there a significant difference in syntactic complexity within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 1g.** Is there a significant difference in the percentage of error-free clauses (EFCs) in terms of accuracy within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 1h.** Is there a significant difference in the number of cohesive devices within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 1i.** Is there a significant difference in the number of subordinate conjunctions within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 1j.** Is there a difference in the number of conjunctive adverbs within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?



**Question 1k.** Is there a difference in the number of coordinate and subordinate conjunctions within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group?

**Question 2.** What are the participants' perceptions toward methods of writing through forums and blogs?

### **1.5 Hypotheses of the Study**

The following null hypotheses are formed to statistically test the quantitative data to determine whether there are enough evidences to infer the effectiveness of the forum and the blog treatments is true for the entire population.

**Hypothesis 1.** There is no significant difference within and between the written language produced by the online forum group and the written language produced by the online blog group in terms of linguistic quantity, accuracy, complexity and cohesiveness. To test hypothesis 1, the following sub-hypotheses are formed.

**Hypothesis 1a.** There is no significant difference in the number of words within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1b.** There is no significant difference in the number of T-units within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1c.** There is no significant difference in the number of clauses within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.



**Hypothesis 1d.** There is no significant difference in the lexical diversity within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1e.** There is no significant difference in lexical density within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1f.** There is no significant difference in syntactic complexity within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1g.** There is no significant difference in the percentage of error-free clauses (EFCs) in terms of accuracy within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1h.** There is no significant difference in the number of cohesive devices within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1i.** There is no significant difference in the number of subordinate conjunction within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1j.** There is no significant difference in the number of conjunctive adverbs within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.

**Hypothesis 1i.** There is no significant difference in the number of coordinate and subordinate conjunctions within and between the written output by the online forum group and the written output by the online blog group.



## **1.6 Rationale of the Study**

More proactive initiatives are required to include and implement ICT in the Middle East in general and Oman in particular across individual courses. A survey conducted by Dubai School Inspection Bureau in 2012 found that though the teachers and students use ICT at homes and schools, many students do not have regular access to ICT to support their education across different subjects (“Economic Update”, 2012). It is undoubtedly true of Omani educational system as well, despite the increased ICT penetration in the society. Even studies on the use of ICT for EFL teaching and learning in South East Asian countries (which are comparatively better fared than the Middle East in terms of ICT in education) show that the region is in the developing stage in relation to the use of ICT (Kabilan, Too & Widodo, 2012). The studies such as this, therefore, are important to find out the effectiveness of different ICT tools in EFL teaching and learning in the background of ICT incorporated Omani educational system which is at its developing stage, and which has not been systematically studied to find the effectiveness of ICT initiatives by the stakeholders across different academic courses. Thus, this study aims to strengthen the current practices of ICT in Oman EFL curriculum as Blackstone and Harwood (2012) in their study emphasize the need for further study to measure the effectiveness of ICT tools in implementing individual courses.

Moreover, the use of forums and blogs in Moodle in testing the Omani learners’ writing proficiency is justified because Omani Technological Colleges are equipped with modern computer labs with Moodle software by the ICT Department at the Ministry of Manpower for effectively incorporating ICT in teaching and learning. The respective college administration in the Sultanate does encourage the



teachers and students to make the best use of the Moodle tools by providing them with regular training, and recognizing their use of ICT. The Ministry and the college administration offer the teachers and students round-the-clock access to wireless Internet and daytime access to computer labs in the campus. Omani EFL teachers and learners, therefore, ought to make the best use of the ICT infrastructure available in promoting Omani learners' writing performance.

In addition, unlike face-to-face (FtF) writing instruction in traditional classrooms, writing through forums and blogs generally lessens the high pressure of immediate demand for writing production, and learners can take their time formulating their thoughts much like they might do in written composition; and both the forums and blogs are student-centered. Since writing and discussion through forums and blogs do not have FtF communication, the feeling of risk or embarrassment of making mistakes is absent. Learners highly rate the use ICT in language teaching because it increases their exposure to the target language and impart in them a sense of self-improvement and autonomy (Cheon, 2003; Lengluan, 2008). A study of this sort would surely give insights into Omani learners' attitude towards ICT in language learning in terms of writing performance.

Furthermore, the use of ICT in writing is relatively new to Omani learners, and its novelty would create a positive feeling in the learners' attitude towards language learning. Applying new methods of language learning through technology would also motivate the learners and attract their attention to the target language components and skills, and increase students' enjoyment of language learning leading to better language acquisition (Jitsupa, Nilsook & Piriya-surawong, 2012; Baniabdelrahman, 2013; Kripps, 2013). Blackstone and Harwood (2012) point out



that ICT tools such as blogs and forums can facilitate EFL learning, and it can surely motivate the learners toward autonomous learning opening new learning opportunities.

The study would also help teachers and students to understand the types of difficulties or advantages the learners encounter while using forums and blogs in the process of their EFL writing. Identifying such areas and being consciously aware of them would help teachers and students find ways of overcoming the challenges in forums and blogs (Al Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011), and providing effective classroom practices. Qteefan (2012) proposes that it is important to have students' access to ICT tools to advance their learning. Also, the use of ICT tools can improve the language proficiency of EFL learners. For example, the study by Bataineh and Hani (2011) among Arab EFL learners found that there were significant differences between the linguistic achievement of students who used ICT tools in language learning and the students who used traditional learning methods only; the result of the study was in favor of those who used the technology.

Finally, there have not been any studies conducted in the Sultanate of Oman regarding the use of forums and blogs as ICT tools in promoting the writing proficiency of Omani EFL learners, and their attitude towards ICT in EFL writing performance. As a result, this study opens new doors in solving writing problems of tertiary level Omani learners through the use of ICT based on its findings and discussions. UNESCO's (2013) ICT information paper on Oman and other Arab countries emphasizes the need for increased integration of ICT in education.



### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

The following are the different areas of the significance of the study, which are anticipated and achieved.

The result of the study provides the Ministry of Manpower in Oman and the stakeholders (who run the seven Colleges of Technology and other higher academic institutions in Oman) with relevant data that would help them take informed decision and form policies on the use of ICT across all seven Colleges of Technology in Oman in line with the policies and e-strategies of National Information Society (NPISO, 2007) under the Information Technology Authority (ITA) by receiving current data about the writing performance of Omani college learners through the use of ICT.

Moreover, the study would help stakeholders at the Ministry of Education, Oman to assess the effectiveness of ICT strategy developed in 2008 and implemented during 2008 – 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2008) in relation to the Sultanate's higher educational institutions. Thus, it offers future direction to the decision makers to incorporate ICT in specific areas of education and learning in line with the ministry's ICT goal of changing Omani students as 'self starters who are adaptable to change and who possess abilities for independent knowledge acquisition and processing strategies' (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Additionally, the study and its findings would help upcoming new universities and colleges in Oman to plan and implement ICT in their respective schools and centres with a special academic emphasize. Rapid economic and social developments in Oman have increased the demand for higher educational



institutions, and their effective running responding to the dynamic changes within the society (Al-Balushi, 2012).

Furthermore, the study and its findings would be an eye-opener for different language committees at the ministerial, university and college levels in Oman providing them with useful recommendations about incorporating ICT tools in ELT which would promote their research and work in developing EFL proficiency of Omani learners across the country. For example, one of the aims of the research committee at the LC (Language Centre), Sultan Qaboos University (the only public University in Oman) is to put continuous effort to assure quality language education by carrying out research in the field of English teaching and learning with the rationale that it is through research that teachers and the institutions can come to better understanding of the various situations or phenomena that could emerge in language teaching contexts, and the factors that shape them (LCRP, SQU, 2011).

Finally, the study contributes to the existing literature, and fills the research gap (Hismanoglu, 2011; Al-Issa & Al-Balushi, 2012) in ELT in the Middle East in general and in the Sultanate of Oman in particular. It would also function as a source of resource for the research community to further investigate factors that may influence writing performance of Omani EFL learners and their attitude in terms of ICT use in writing.

### **1.8 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The study has been carried out with the following limitations and delimitations.

1. The study essentially investigated the quantity, accuracy, complexity and cohesiveness of written language produced through selected ICT tools –



online forums and blogs. Other skills such as listening, speaking and reading are not included in the study though interaction through forums and blogs can also affect these skills.

2. The study included only 56 students of post-foundation English language program from ELC, ACT, Oman. More number of participants across different levels and colleges in Oman may bring about different data and findings.
3. The study covered only the selected aspects of writing performance using online forums and blogs such as quantity, accuracy, complexity and cohesiveness in terms of given writing tasks. It does not particularly regard the learners' general writing proficiency, their exposure to writing English outside classroom and their exposure to technological devices and the Internet outside the college.
4. The participants' perception towards writing through ICT tools such as online forums and blogs alone are focused in this research. Their perception might vary if ICT tools other than forums and blogs are made use of for the study.
5. All participants of the study are native speakers of Arabic Omani nationals. The results of study may differ if Arabic speakers of other countries in the region are included in the study.
6. All participants are EFL Arab learners of English at Al Musanna College of Technology. They are from a semi-urban social background. If participants are selected from other regions – urban or rural – in Oman, the findings of the study may vary.



7. The duration of the study was limited to one semester. A longer period of study might bring out a different result.

### **1.9 Conceptual Framework of the Study**

The conceptual framework adapted from Rodriguez, Nussbaum and Dombrvskaia (2012) is used for the study. According to the framework, the process of ICT integration has four attributes such as setting, time, aim and outcomes. The setting refers to where the process operates (classroom, college or school), while time refers to its duration. The aim refers to the effective implementation of ICT tools with proper technical and professional skills; finally the outcomes refer to skills and/or practices to be developed in educational actors (i.e. students and teachers). The context of the study is the ELC at Al Musanna college of Technology in Oman. The computer labs in the college are equipped with computers for about 30 students with broadband connection. Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) is installed and administered in all labs across the college. Hence it has an ICT environment to carry out the study.

Figure 1.1 explains the study conceptually and pedagogically. Step *a*, the teacher (with technical assistance if required) sets up the online forum and blog learning tasks incorporating. The writing topics for each session are uploaded by the teacher or researcher for students' use (step *b*). Later the learners engage in online forum writing and blog writing sessions about the topics given (Step *c*) based on the theory of socio-constructivism, theory of cognitivism, and activity theory and the process-genre writing approach (Chapter 2, p.56 - 72). They interact with each other in English through writing in both the modes of writing. The teacher assigned supervises the sessions, and it enables him or her to monitor the students' writing on



real-time basis (step *d*). Students' work is backed up on the network for feedback and revision (e). The whole process is mediated through forums and blogs. The EFL written outputs through forums and blogs are measured according to the research variables such as the number of words, the number of T-units, the number of clauses, the lexical diversity, the lexical density, the syntactic complexity, the accuracy of word choice and syntax, the number of cohesive devices, the subordinate conjunctions, the number of conjunctive adverbs and the total number of coordinate and subordinate conjunctions in terms of linguistic categories such as language quantity, complexity, accuracy and cohesiveness of the EFL written outputs.

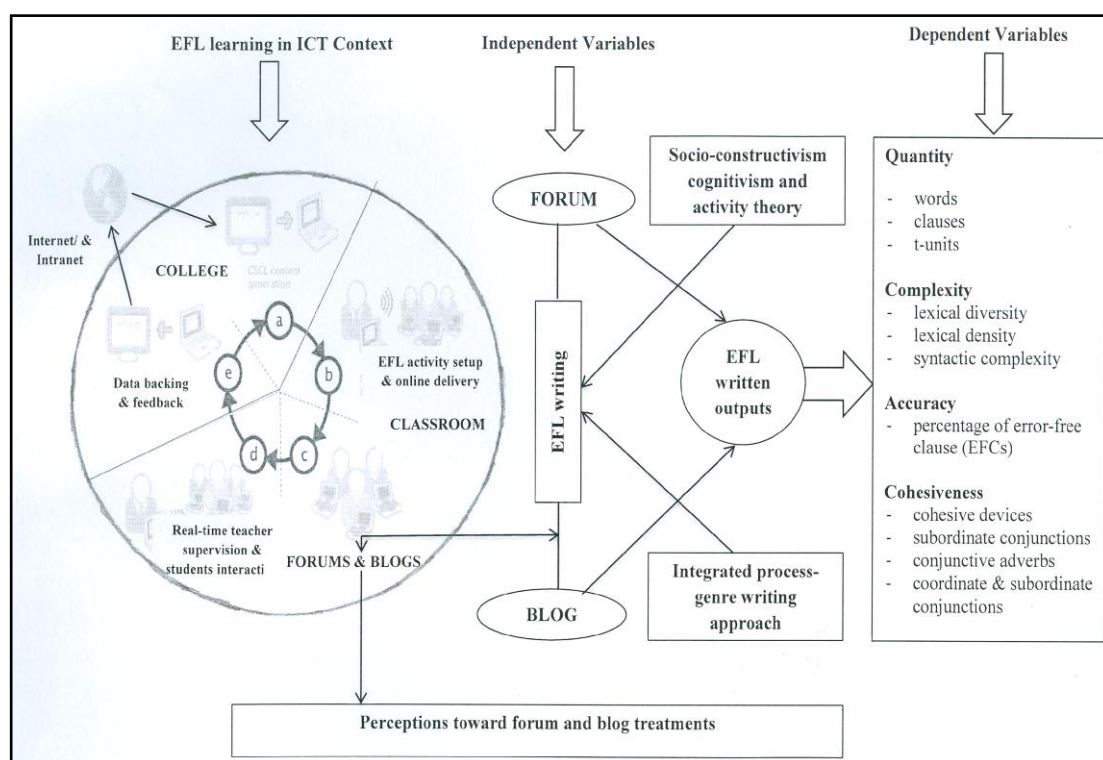


Figure 1.1. Conceptual framework of the study (Rodriguez et al., 2012)