

Written Production in EFL through blogging and cooperative learning at A-level

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Abstract: Our main objective is to verify whether learners improved their level of EFL written production through blogging from the perspective of the Cooperative Learning approach. The learners participating in this experiment were in their 1st academic year of A-levels within the Spanish education system. Their level of English was B1 according to the CEFR. Having identified the learners' level related to EFL written production, one research question was established to confirm whether learners improved their level of written production through blogging. From this research question, the following starting hypothesis was created: 1. Blogging helps learners increase their EFL written production within the Cooperative Learning approach. The chosen method was action-research implying, thus, that quantitative outcomes were analyzed. The results were quite satisfactory implying, in consequence, that this current paper is worth and interesting since not much research has been published at non-university education and, in particular, in A-level studies.

Keywords: EFL; Written Production; Blogging; Cooperative Learning; A-level.

Introduction

This research emerged due to the need to improve the quality and competence of EFL written production by Spanish learners in their 1st academic year of A-levels from the perspective of the Cooperative Learning approach. This current paper is, therefore, framed within the use of ICT as a tool in order to learn EFL within emergent educational methodologies, such as the cooperative learning approach. Moreover, this research is a response to the lack of publications related to the use of blogs when teaching EFL from the inclusion of active and emergent educational methodologies within the Spanish education system at non-university setting.

1. Aims

This current research aims to verify whether learners improved their competence in written production in EFL from the perspective of the cooperative learning approach through blogging with the use of the digital platform Word Press (<http://wordpress.com>). When this experiment was finished, it was expected that learners might have improved their EFL written production through blogging (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Murray & Hourigan, 2008), so that we could confirm the hypothesis previously established, and thus offer an answer to the research questions initially established.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Blogging

In education, two types of blogs should be considered: microblogging and edublogs. Twitter and, particularly, the educational social network Twiducate, are the best examples of microblogging. According to Herring *et al.* (2005), educational blogs are mainly characterized by making use of multimedia elements, being updated very often, the posting of comments permits users' asymmetric exchange, as well as the ease of interaction among users causing. All these elements promote communication and a strong relationship between author and readers.

With regard to publications on the use of blogging in EFL, two significant periods should be considered. The first period relates to the first decade of the 21st century and, to be more precise, these publications date between the years 2003 and 2010, while the second period is dated from the year 2016 up to the present day. The following academics are recognized worldwide and belong to the first period of publications on blogs in EFL: Campbell, 2003; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Ward, 2004; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Jons & Nuhfer-Halten, 2006; Dudeney & Hockly, 2007; and Carney, 2009. It is also worth mentioning other key academics, such as Arani, 2005;

Pinkman, 2005; Wu, 2005; Murray & Hourigan, 2008; and Martín-Monje, 2010, who focus on blogging in Languages for Specific Purposes and, particularly, in ESP.

The second period commences almost at the end of the second decade of the 21st century with the paper by Montaner (2016), who explores the use of blogging in technical English by analyzing quantitative outcomes. Montaner (2017) focuses on the use of blogs in technical English with the perspective of qualitative methods. Thirdly, Montaner (2019) analyzes the rank of outcomes of written production in technical English through blogging. These papers were thus framed within the use of the ICT when teaching ESP in vocational training in Spain. Next, Montaner (2018a) covers the use of blogs through task-based learning in compulsory secondary education and this same author (*in press a*) deals with blogging in secondary education from the perspective of the cooperative learning approach. Both papers were thus framed within the use of technology, combined with innovative educational methodologies. Lastly, Montaner (2018b) analyses blogging from the perspective of interaction in EFL compulsory secondary education. This period differs from the first one because the experiments took place in non-university settings, whereas findings from the first period were obtained in university contexts.

2.2. Cooperative Learning approach

The use of blogging in teaching EFL, in this current experiment, is done through the cooperative learning approach, an educational methodology which is a key element of this paper. Relevant literature on the cooperative learning approach insists on its practical application in the classroom (Kagan *et al.*, 1995, 1997; Kagan, 2009; Pujolàs, 2017). The cooperative learning approach aims to organize the diverse tasks within the classroom in order to transform them into a social experience. Learning depends on information exchange among learners, who are motivated not only to successfully achieve their own learning goals, but also to increase their colleagues' achievements.

Before Kagan's work (1995; 1997; 2009), it is worth mentioning the work by Dewey and Small (1897), who were the precursors of the cooperative learning approach. Kagan (1995; 2009) conceived the cooperative learning approach as a teaching methodology which is characterized by forming groups in a heterogeneous way and building an identity group. Positive interdependency occurs, which enhances the communication within the group and allows group members to comprehend that the main purpose is to carry out various tasks in a collaborative way. Individual responsibility is also important. The various tasks should be equally distributed among learners and, lastly, simultaneous interaction implies opinion exchange and decision making, which is agreed by students when solving the dialogue task.

The practical application of the cooperative learning approach as well as its own assessment (Johnson & Johnson, 2016) acquires special relevance here. In this line, the cooperative learning approach cannot be conceived without technology, since materials and information sources must be diverse, and sources must break space and time barriers. Blogging, thus, allows students make a wide variety of online tasks which result from products derived from the cooperative learning approach, easing thus collaborative learning, team learning and more online interaction by learners (Sevillano & Vázquez, 2011; Domingo-Coscolla *et al.*, 2014).

Lastly, but not least, it is important to highlight that there is scarcely empiric research focused on the study of the Cooperative Learning approach to enhance EFL written competence through technology and, in particular, with the use of blogging. In this line, it is worth mentioning Montaner (*in press a*) who explores blogging in an EFL course from the perspective of the Cooperative Learning approach at Secondary Education, and Montaner (*in press b*) deals with the blogs in an ESP course at Vocational Training taking into consideration the Cooperative Learning approach. This current research is, thus, worthwhile and interesting since it covers new research on the use of educational technology and active methodologies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context and Sample

This experiment took place throughout the whole academic year 2017-2018 with the participants being learners from the first year of A-levels at a compulsory secondary school in Valencian Region, where secondary education, A-level and Vocational Training are offered and, thus, we are referring to a non-university context. This school covers different educational programmes, such as the inclusion of the CLIL approach, task-based teaching, cooperative learning approach, European programmes (Erasmus, KA1), among others.

As for the sample, there was a group of 29 learners, who, at the time of the experiment, were doing the first year of A-levels and, thus, were in post compulsory secondary education. All 29 learners were selected in a random manner from the four groups which the 1st year A-level were composed, and they participated in the experiment in the treatment manner, and were aged approximately between 16 and 17. Their level of EFL was B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (henceforth, CEFR).

3.2. Treatment

We considered interesting the idea that learners, who participated in the experiment, made their corresponding tasks in order to enhance EFL written competence within the Cooperative Learning approach at the treatment manner with the main aim of verifying whether, at the end of the experiment, there was improvement. These learners completed their writing tasks through blogging originating, thus, online interaction among the participants since interaction is key within learning through educational technology.

The whole experiment consisted of writing opinion essays in the format of blogging in the cooperative way, in other words, we aimed, at this research, to encourage learners from 1st year A-level to write their

own online opinion essays in groups of 4-5 learners. At the first term, learners were asked to commence their opinion essays in the form of drafts. Next, they were required to interact through blogging at the section “comment” of the corresponding blogs. At the second term, the same pattern was followed and, after the second interactive task through blogging, learners had to write their final version of their opinion essays at the third term. Learners were free to choose the theme of their opinion essays while blogging.

3.3. Research Tools

To collect the quantitative outcomes of this research, we utilized three different writing tasks and two interaction writing tasks through blogging being, therefore, a total of five tasks. Every writing task took place at different moments, coinciding with the corresponding terms throughout the whole academic year 2017-2018, so that the first digital written task was completed during the first term. Next, the second online written task was done at the second term and, finally, the third digital task happened at the third term. Related to the interaction tasks through blogging, the first task was done after having the first written task being completed and, later, the second interaction task was completed once the second writing task was done.

The quantitative outcomes of this research were obtained from the various written tasks while blogging within the environment of the Cooperative Learning approach, which learners made during the academic year 2017-2018, with the main purpose of verifying whether learners improved significantly their EFL writing skills during the whole experiment.

The dependent variables consisted of the grading of the diverse written digital tasks, while the independent variables are classified into: 1) Composition process and 2) Final product. At this research the emphasis was on the final product. Since this paper is focused on the written competence, within the final product (Shehadeh, 2011) these

variables are distinguished: 1) Content of the text; 2) Organization and structure of the text; 3) Grammar; 4) Vocabulary usage and 5) Spelling.

These variables were assessed through the Spanish traditional grading system at both Primary and Secondary Education. Like wisely, the mark of excellent is between 9 and 10. Next, the mark of very good is between 7 and 8. The mark of good is 6, later, the mark of pass is equal to 5 and, finally, any mark under 5 implies that learners have failed either in the various school subjects or in the case of the corresponding variables that were marked at this research.

3.4. Procedure

This experiment took place during the academic year 2017-2018, commencing at mid-September 2017 and finishing almost at the end of May 2018. Throughout the whole academic year, learners from the Treatment group (henceforth, T-group) utilized 4 sessions each term being, thus, a total of 12 sessions for the whole academic year. Each session lasted 55 minutes. Taking into consideration that a rather high percentage of teenagers have to deal not only with the English language but also with other school subjects, we considered that learners could work on this experiment at the computer room of the school facilitating, therefore, their participation.

At table 3.4, below, the procedures related to the experiment as well as their description can be observed.

Table 1
Procedures

Procedures	Group	Description
Introducing the experiment	T-group	Teacher presents project, explains aims, methodology and time. Tasks are distributed
Experiment commences	T-group	2 sessions are given at computer room in order to explain learners how to utilize Word press. Teacher e-mails to learners a dossier on how to use Word press, in case they need to consult

Experiment develops	T-group	The experiment takes place at computer room, with the presence of the teacher, who can communicate with learners either through the chat of the platform or in person
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Source: own elaboration

3.5. Data Analysis

At this research, the outcomes of the different written production tasks, which learners made during the experiment at the academic year 2017-2018, were analyzed. For this, the quantitative outcomes from the T-group were analyzed with the final aim of determining whether learners improved their EFL written skills through blogging within the Cooperative Learning approach.

For obtaining these quantitative outcomes, the different writing tasks were marked through numeric grading. These marks, according to the Spanish educational system, correspond to mark 1 up to mark 10 so that, on the one hand, the marks from 1 to 4 imply failure whereas, on the other, the marks from 5 up to imply that learners pass at different degrees. The different variables, which the final product of the written texts are composed of, that is, content of the text, organization and structure, grammar, vocabulary and spelling, were marked.

These numerical marks were introduced in the software Excel from Microsoft Office bearing in mind, through a basic descriptive statistics analysis, to calculate the different media of the results related to the different variables mentioned above. Next, after being selected in Excel the different media of the corresponding variables as well as the total media of each written production task, these media were inserted in the form of graphics with the aim of analyzing and, later, justify the diverse quantitative outcomes which were obtained during the experiment.

3.6. Research questions

The scientific emphasis of this paper is, on the one hand, the correctness and competence of the written English of A-level learners and, on the other hand, a corroboration or refutation that using blogging will have a positive impact on students' competence of written production in EFL. The following research question is established: 1. Might the use of blogs help learners improve written production in the English language within the cooperative approach?

4. Outcomes

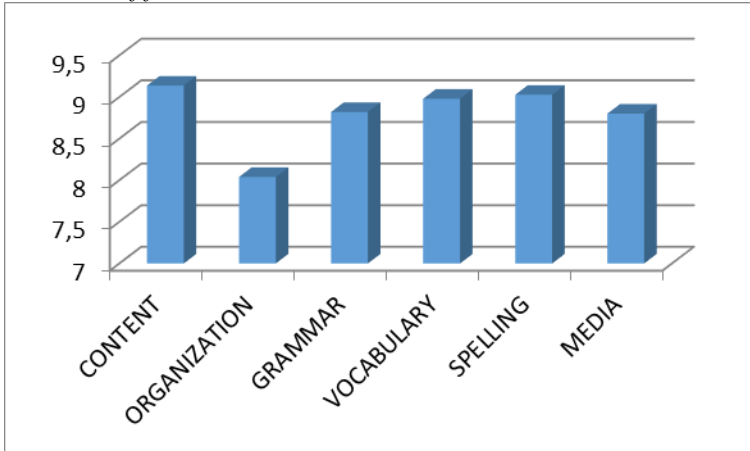
4.1. Quantitative data

The analysis of written production is based on basic descriptive statistics and, particularly, only the media of the different variables were analyzed, with the aim of verifying whether or not learners improved their quality and level of EFL written production within the Cooperative Learning approach at the end of the experiment through the various suggested tasks on the online platform, Word Press. It is important to note that this experiment took place only in the treatment group. Therefore, the quantitative outcomes were only analyzed from the perspective of the treatment group. The users in the treatment group also interacted while blogging and, thus, this interaction was also analyzed for the purpose of this research.

Firstly, outcomes from the three writing tasks are analyzed. In the graph below, the average of the results of the first digital task can be seen.

Figure 1

Average outcomes of first written task



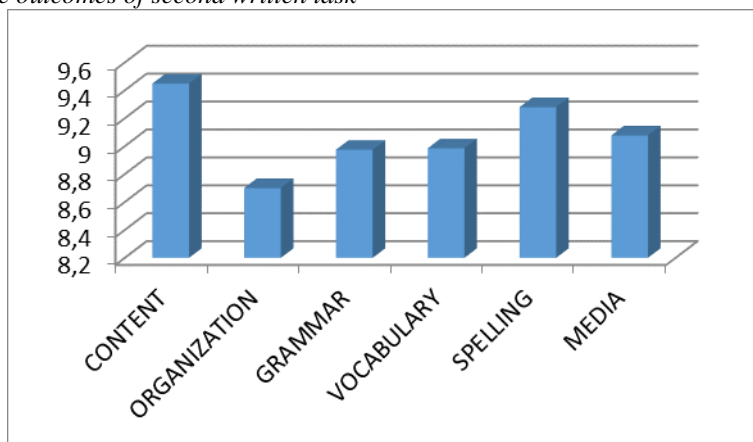
Source: own elaboration

In first place is content, with 9.13. The next component is spelling with a mark of 9.02. In third place, vocabulary has a mark of 8.98. Next, there is grammar, with a mark of 8.82. The last component is organization, with a mark of 8.03. The total media of this first digital writing task is 8.8.

In the second digital writing task, students had to write a second draft of their online opinion essays from the first term, taking into consideration the suggestions previously offered by colleagues during the interactive blogging tasks. The results of this second digital writing task can be observed in the figure below.

Figure 2

Average outcomes of second written task



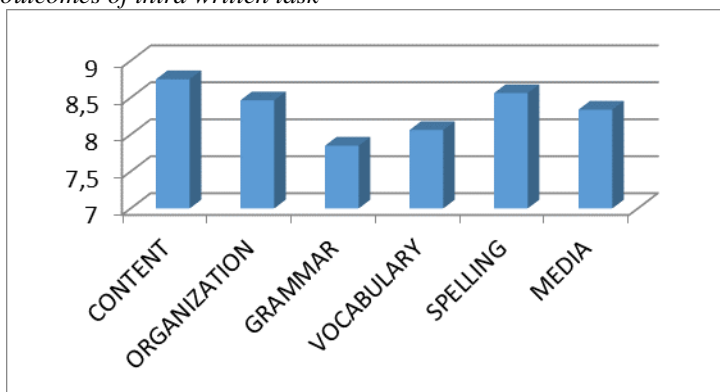
Source: own elaboration

The component content has the highest mark of 9.4. The next is spelling with a mark of 9.2. After that, the vocabulary component has 8.98, followed by grammar with a mark of 8.97. In fifth place, organization has 8.7. The total media of this second online writing task is 9.07. If we compare the outcomes of both tasks, regarding content, there are no significant differences related to the media. Concerning the organization component, there is no significant difference since the media in the second task is slightly higher than the first. As for the grammar component, the mark is slightly higher in the second writing task. In relation to the vocabulary component, the media of both tasks do not differ significantly. As for the spelling component, the mark is slightly higher in the second writing task. Regarding the total media of both tasks, the second one (9.07) is higher than the first one (8.8).

In the third digital writing task, students wrote their final versions, having received feedback from colleagues on the interactive task on the blogs. The outcomes of this third digital writing task can be seen in the figure below.

Figure 3

Average outcomes of third written task



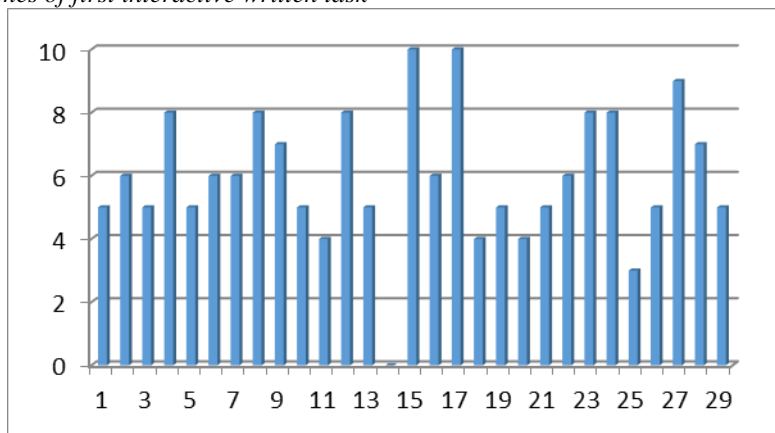
Source: own elaboration

In this third bar chart, the following aspects can be seen: content has the highest mark, which is 8.75. Next, the spelling component has a mark of 8.5. Then, the component organization has 8.4. In fourth place, the vocabulary component has a mark of 8.06 and, last, the grammar component has 7.85. The total media of this third digital writing task is 8.3. If we compare the three tasks, regarding the content, in the third task (8.75), it can be seen that the media decreased significantly in comparison with the first task (9.13) and the second task (9.44). Concerning the organization, the third task (8.4) was slightly lower than the second task (8.7) and slightly higher than the first task (8.03) and, therefore the media of the three tasks do not differ each other notably. As for the grammar component, the third task (7.85) decreased notably in comparison with the second task (8.9) and the first task (8.8). Regarding vocabulary, the third task (8.06) is slightly lower in comparison with both the second and first tasks (8.98). Concerning spelling, the third task (8.5) decreased notably in comparison with the second task (9.2) and the first task (9.2). Lastly, the total media of this third digital writing task (8.3) dropped significantly in comparison with the second task (9.07) and increased slightly in comparison with the first task (8.8).

Secondly, the outcomes of the two interactive tasks while blogging are analyzed. In the graphic below, the results of the first interactive task can be seen.

Figure 4

Outcomes of first interactive written task



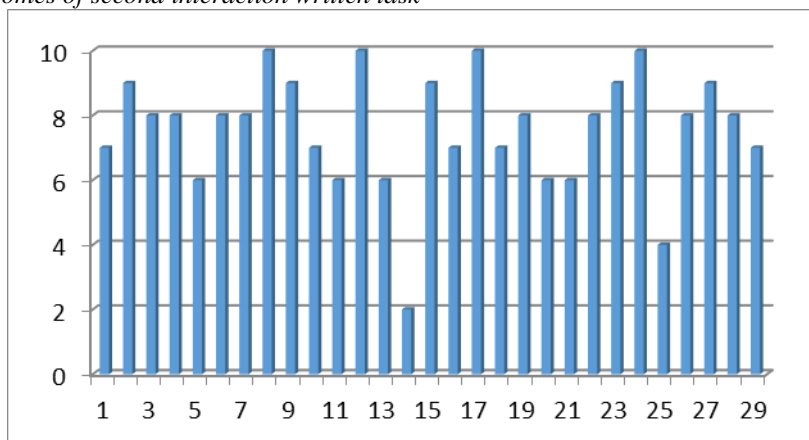
Source: own elaboration

On the one hand, only three learners from a group of 29 students obtained between 9 and 10. A reduced group of 7 learners had between 7 and 8. Only 5 learners obtained a mark of 6. On the other hand, 9 learners had a fair pass with a mark of 5 for this task and, lastly, 4 learners did not pass this task satisfactorily. While 50% of the group did quite well, approximately 48.5% did not do well. There was one learner who did not do this task.

The results of the second interaction task can be seen in the graph below.

Figure 5

Outcomes of second interaction written task



Source: own elaboration

From a group of 29 students, 9 of them achieved a result of between 9 and 10, and 13 learners achieved between 7 and 8. Only a reduced group of 5 learners passed with a fair mark of between 5 and 6 and, lastly, 2 learners did not do well. This implies that, at least, 52% of learners improved their second interactive task, while an approximate 48% of learners did not improve this task. It is thus quite obvious that there is a significant improvement in this second interactive task while blogging.

5. Discussion

This section aims to analyze the reasons why learners who participated in the experiment obtained the marks described above. Firstly, there will be a concise discussion and explanation as to why learners achieved these results in the three digital writing tasks. As for the first graph, where the average of the first written digital task is presented, it is important to note that the organization component (8.03) is the lowest; since we have continuously insisted on the relevance of writing both a coherent as well as a cohesive text. Learners in secondary education and those doing A-levels are not accustomed to creating

written texts or following specific criteria such as structuring the text into adequate paragraphs, and so on.

Regarding the second graph, in which the average of the second written online task is presented, the organization component (8.7) is the lowest again. This could be due to the fact that learners tend not to use an adequate number of paragraphs when structuring their essays. Moreover, when learners were required to write various drafts before completing the final text, they showed a resistance to writing paragraphs. This lack of writing coherently by learners at either secondary education or A-level is a general tendency in Spain. In fact, as an EFL teacher with considerable experience of teaching English language in Spain, the author of this paper can testify to there being a lack of coherence in English written production. Therefore, this is clearly a skill that should be given more attention to allow students to improve.

Curiously, in the third graph, the grammar component (7.85) is the lowest mark. When compared with the first graph (8.82) and the second one (8.9), it is clear that the grammar component decreased quite notably in the third task implying, thus, that learners did not manage with grammatical issues as it was initially expected. This is probably because learners did not pay enough attention to grammatical accuracy while blogging. As for the vocabulary component, a slight difference between the outcomes in the three tasks can be seen; the marks in the third graph being the lowest. Even though this slight decrease is rather reduced, it is possible that learners did not pay the required attention to the correct use of specific vocabulary and, for this reason, the mark of the vocabulary component decreased slightly in the third task.

As for the content, there is a noticeable difference when the third graph (8.75) is compared with the first task (9.13) and the second one (9.44). This is probably because a few learners wrote about different themes in the third task (8.75); they mixed at least 2 different stories within their third digital opinion essay, that is, the third digital

production task. This decrease in marks was unexpected as learners had previously written their digital opinion essays in the first and second digital production. However, it is important to note that the total media of the first task (9.13) and the second one (9.44) cannot be 10 because, in the first task, there were two learners who did not do their task and one learner whose marks were very low. In the second task, there was one learner who did not do his task and one learner with very low marks.

Related to the spelling component, learners' marks also decreased in the third task (8.5), compared with the first task (9.02) and the second one (9.2). This means that learners' spelling got slightly worse at the end of the experiment. This possibly occurred because learners made spelling mistakes when dealing with connectors and, occasionally, with some verbs. There are no significant differences among the three digital writing tasks. Lastly, if we compare the total media of the three digital written tasks, we can observe that there is a slight decrease in the third graph (8.33) in contrast with the second graph (9.07) and the first one (8.8). We cannot then confirm that there is a significant improvement by learners at the end of the experiment.

The aim of this section is to explain why learners obtained the outcomes in the two interactive tasks. As can be seen from the basic analysis above (section 4.1), there was a significant improvement in the second interactive tasks while blogging. It is important to mention that this kind of task was new for learners because they were blogging for the first time. This could be the reason why the outcomes of the first interactive task were lower than in the second interactive task. This was, to a certain extent, expected. In this paper, a simple analysis has been done of the outcomes related to the interactive tasks while blogging, thus offering a worthwhile and interesting paper since not much empiric research (Montaner, 2018b) has been published related to the analysis of interactive tasks while blogging.

6. Conclusion

This paper has offered some answers to the research question which was initially created. As for the question on whether blogging can help learners improve their level and quality of EFL written production within the cooperative approach, neither a significant improvement nor a deterioration can be confirmed.

To conclude, since there is not much empirical research on blogging within the cooperative approach either in secondary education (Montaner, *in press a*) or at Vocational Training (Montaner, *in press b*), further research on the use of ICT within innovative educational methodologies is recommended with the ultimate purpose of helping learners improve their EFL written production as well as their digital competence, teamwork learning, and autonomous learning, so that learners can become protagonists of their own learning process.

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