

Iranian EFL Instructors' Integration of Educational Technology to Teach Argumentative Writing: Types, Perceptions, and Barriers

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Abstract. Argumentative writing is a form of writing which is essential and challenging for university students since they should be able to state their insights in academically appropriate ways. They face challenges in applying these formats. Hence, the present study intends to investigate Iranian EFL instructors' integration of educational technology to teach argumentative writing within the Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Moreover, this study seeks to assess the types of educational technology university instructors engaged in their writing class and explores the problems hindering the application of instructional technology within an EFL context. The use of instructional technology in this study defines an integration of email, the Internet, blog, electronic journal, e PowerPoint, Wiki, adobe connect, web search, and podcasts to perform their writing class activities. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, and the data was collected through

structured interviews. Twenty EFL instructors teaching English both at the department of English in some universities and at advanced levels in some institutes in Shiraz took part in this study. Convenient sampling was utilized in the current study. The researchers used content analysis method for analyzing the qualitative part of the study. The findings revealed that educational technology could be considered a complementary factor to facilitate both teachers' as well as learners' practices in the process of teaching and learning argumentative writing. Moreover, participants reported that they mostly employed internet and web search, email, and podcast in their writing class. Besides, lack of accessibility and training were the most problematic barriers to integrating educational technology to teach argumentative writing.

Keywords: Argumentative writing, educational technology, EFL context, instructor

1. Introduction

Within EFL education, teaching writing has been regarded as one of the most challenging and essential tasks (Ferretti, Andrews-Weckerly & Lewis, 2007; Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008). In other words, writing classes are considered as one of the most difficult skills for language learners since they require to apply several linguistic and cognitive skill prior, during, and following their writing task (Selvaraj & Abdul Aziz, 2019). They also should pay attention to both higher and lower skills. This causes teaching writing a challenging and frightening task. Moreover, EFL writing is one of the most significant aspects of language teaching. As Lee claimed, "it is likely that most business and technical writing in the world is done in a second or foreign language" (2003, p. 112). Therefore, in the field of foreign language teaching, good EFL writing is considered as a crucial and fundamental matter for teachers, researchers, textbook writers, and program designers.

Argumentative writing, which is a form of writing, has been considered the most difficult, complicated model in writing (Ferretti, Andrews-Weckerly & Lewis, 2007; Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008). This writing genre is essential and challenging for university students, since they should be able to build their ideas in academically appropriate patterns and approaches. Therefore, they encounter difficulties in the application of complicated syntactic forms and appropriate elements in

generating argumentative writing. To compose effective argumentative writing, learners require to learn argumentation skills. Appropriate and reasonable argumentation includes producing arguments, comprehending, assessing, weighing, as well as combining arguments and counter-arguments from various sources and viewpoints for supporting a final result (Nippold & Ward-Lonergan, 2010). Therefore, learners should be trained to promote the cognitive skills to support justification and give rational and justifiable ideas to overcome particular problems.

Nowadays, over the last few decades, a gradual but noticeable shift has occurred, resulting in less focus on traditional ways of teaching and greater emphasis on new ways of instruction through the application of educational technology. During the coronavirus pandemic, a world invaded by technological tools, causes the program designer, researchers, and teachers to replace the traditional methods of teaching with online instruction (Patil, 2020). Educational technology is supposed to improve the teaching-learning conditions or even cause some ground to promote educational practices (Pope & Golub, 2002; Seels, 2011). Moreover, technological tools such as computer-mediated communication (CMC) enhance the process of learning English as well as student engagement (Adnan et al., 2019). Instructional technology also empowers teachers and learners to collaborate, overcome problems, and make decisions. Besides, the integration of online technologies into classroom activities can increase learners' involvement in writing skills and also enhance better writing, promote students' writing quality, and produce more peer as well as teacher feedback on students' writing assignments (Huisman et al., 2018).

Consequently, teaching writing for both teachers as well as EFL learners seems to be an essential as well as crucial requirement. In addition, the applications of educational technology seem to be an efficient way to teach writing. Although educational technology is so important, teachers should know how to integrate technology into their writing instruction. Therefore, teachers should be able to evaluate and choose appropriate technological tools which are in line with the learning needs of the students, lesson plans, methods of teaching, allowing them to change their teaching strategies, techniques, which in turn, leads to pro-

moting the efficacy of teaching practices in writing classes as wells as improving their writing instruction and enhancing their students' writing skill. As a step taken toward developing students' knowledge, this study attempted to investigate the instructional practices concerning teaching and learning argumentative writing in an Iranian EFL context.

2. Related Literature

In the area of EFL instruction, teaching writing has long been considered a problematic and debatable matter. This complexity in EFL argumentative writing originates from the fact that writing involves searching for a thesis, developing reasons for the claim, composing, changing, editing and finally these steps lead to having an effect, error-free writing production. Moreover, EFL argumentative writing is one of the most significant genres of language teaching. Coffin asserted that students' academic writing continues to be at the center of learning and teaching in higher education, but it is frequently an invisible dimension of the program; that is, the conventions or rules governing what counts as an academic writing are often assumed to be part of 'common sense' knowledge students have, and are thus not explicitly taught within the disciplinary course (2004, p.3).

Therefore, the fundamental responsibility of teachers, researchers as well as program designers is to enhance the efficiency of EFL argumentative writing instruction (Coffin, 2004).

Educational technology has proved an important element in the educational context during these decades. Tomei (2002) described technology as "the application of behavioral and physical sciences concepts and other knowledge to the solution of problems" (p. 6). The utilization of Pedagogical technology enables instructors to have enough time for the arrangement, and planning of instruction and so meet the needs of the learners. Besides, internet-based tools enable learners to collaborate and receive peer and teacher feedback on their writing assignments, increase their engagement and critical thinking ability, which in turn, causes them to improve the quality of their writing (Chen & Tsai, 2009).

Since writing has been considered as one of the most challenging language skills to teach and acquire, the multidimensional characteristics

of online technological tools can give instructional occasions to language educators. In this regard, some studies focused on the utilization of educational technology in the writing learners' performance.

In one study, Tandiana, Abdullah and Komara (2016) sought to investigate the utilization of the Talk-Write Technique to improve the students' argumentative writing ability, especially in the interpretation of Discussion essays. The results indicated that the utilization of the Talk-Write technique empowered the students to learn in a more efficient and energetic situation, which increases the argumentative writing skills of learners.

In a similar vein, Maria and Palpanathan (2017) aimed to assess the efficiency of computer-based writing compared to pen and paper writing. 114 Senior One Chinese high school students in West Malaysia took part in the study. Participants were involved in the in-class writing task through pen and paper and in the computer-assisted writing task via Google Docs. At first, a pre-writing questionnaire was administered to know how students perceive the application of Google Docs in writing tasks. Then, by giving a post-writing questionnaire, researchers investigated whether Google Docs motivates students to write more. The findings demonstrated that most of the learners have optimistic viewpoints toward the utilizing of Google Docs in learning and improving writing skills.

In another study, Sarvari and Ezzati (2019) sought to explore the application of Telegram social network on the writing ability of adult EFL learners at an intermediate level. To achieve this purpose, 46 Iranian EFL learners at Zaban-e No language institute participated in the study. Participants were divided into control and experimental groups. The control group was taught writing through traditional instruction, whereas the experimental group was taught via the application of Telegram. The results indicated that the experimental group significantly improved in their writing performance than the control group.

Luna, Villaln, Mateos and Martn (2020) designed and sought to assess the effect of virtual training on writing integrative and well-structured arguments in an online learning university. The study's findings showed that after virtual instruction, the participants' written as-

signments enhanced in terms of their grammatical structure. Moreover, the results revealed how online teaching of argumentative writing could be utilized in higher education which leads to positive results.

In another study, Rashtchi and Porkar (2020) sought to explore if the incorporation of technology and brainstorming could influence the argumentative writing of Iranian EFL learners. The findings demonstrated the integration of word clouds as a cognitive activity in enhancing the argumentative essay writing of Iranian EFL students.

In the same vein, Karim et al. (2021) aimed to investigate the effects of the Mobile-assisted Mind Mapping Technique (MAMMAT) on ESL university students in Malaysia. The findings illustrated that MAMMAT could improve the argumentative writing skills and performance of ESL university learners.

Teaching argumentative writing is considered a significant, challenging, and difficult task within the EFL context. Having recognized the vital role of teaching writing in general and argumentative writing, in particular, are often ignored in the Iranian EFL context. The first shortcoming of the previous studies is that there has been little research on these issues in the Iranian context.

Another pitfall is that previous studies on argumentative writing lacked the application of educational technology to improve argumentative writing ability. Moreover, most studies have geared to focus on the application of educational technology to increase just learning argumentative writing. In addition, there is little empirical evidence that emphasizes the instructors' views regarding the integration of educational technology to teach argumentative writing, how such techniques enhance the process of both teaching and learning argumentative writing, and problems concerning the incorporation of educational technology in teaching argumentative writing.

To partially void the gap in the existing literature, there is a requirement for conducting more research in this area in Iran to assist teachers' better understanding of how to integrate educational technology to enhance the productiveness of instructional practices concerning teaching argumentative writing and to understand the perceived problems which cause to implementing of educational technology in their writing classes.

3. Research Questions

To achieve the study's objectives, the following research questions are addressed in the current study.

1. What types of educational technology do Iranian EFL instructors prefer to use in their writing classes to teach argumentative writing?
2. How does instructors' view of the integration of educational technology enhance teaching and learning argumentative writing?
3. What are the obstacles to using educational technology to teach argumentative writing in the targeted contexts?

4. Method

4.1. Research design

This qualitative survey research was aimed to explore a descriptive account of EFL instructors' attitudes toward the integration of educational technology in their writing instruction in Shiraz in the academic year of 2021. A qualitative study was employed to provide detailed and meticulous as well as comprehensive information about instructional' teachers' descriptions of their experience with incorporating technology into their writing classes as well as to examine how technology-based actives can enhance both teaching and learning argumentative essay writing.

4.2. Participants

A total of 20 male and female EFL instructors teaching English both at the department of English in some universities in Shiraz and teaching English at advanced levels in some Language Institutes in Shiraz participated in this study. All of the participants had M.A or Ph.D. degree in TEFL. This survey utilized convenient sampling to meet the requirements of the study such as teaching experience in teaching writing for over four years and being volunteered to participate in answering questions via interview.

4.3. Instruments

In order to answer the questions posed in the current study, 12 open-ended questions were administered to the participants. The researcher

designed interview questions. Questions were made based on the comments as well as recommendations and views of some EFL experts with writing as well as technological skills. They verified both the content and face validity of the instrument, suggesting minor modifications to the wording of the instrument.

The first part of the questions was related to their teaching experience especially concerning their writing instruction and the second one centered upon the attitudes towards the application of technological tools and the obstacles which hamper the advantages of employing these educational tools in writing classes.

To achieve insight regarding the integration of technology in writing instruction, a structured interview with instructors was held via WhatsApp. In this case, recorded voice messages were transcribed in the written format. At first, the researcher described the interview aims for the instructors, then 20 teachers were interviewed. The interview questions were designed to explore their views about the application of educational technology to teach argumentative writing and how such technologies can enhance their writing instruction as well as the argumentative writing performance of their learners and also to capture the types and extent of technology use in their writing class. Furthermore, the questions in the interview allocated to the problems in employing such assets. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes.

4.4. Data collection

The participants included 20 Iranian EFL instructors chosen through convenient sampling from both University and Institute contexts in Shiraz, Iran. The current study was conducted during the academic year 2021 within three months. The required data were collected through semi-structured interviews, aligned with the research questions.

The interview was employed for descriptive and detailed elaboration of the subject under the study. Accordingly, a group of 20 English language instructors was interviewed. The instructors teach at both the department of English at some universities and advanced level in some institutes in Shiraz. Participation was voluntary, and no remuneration was needed. The questions in the teacher interviews were aligned with the research questions to generate meaningful interpretations.

5. Results

The first research question was sought to determine the types of educational technology applied by Iranian EFL university instructors and institute teachers to teach argumentative writing. Respondents reported that they mostly utilize internet and web search, email, and podcast.

They believed that this technological tool could boost their writing instruction particularly better than other types of instructional tools.

As one respondent, who has taught writing courses for over five years, said:

“Well, I apply the internet and web search since it is a suitable search tool for academic research and assist me in for searching new information; I also recommended my students use it because it can improve the process of brainstorming, activating background information, critical thinking which are so crucial for writing skills. I also use email to interact and also provide online feedback with students in the process of writing an argumentative essay.”

Another respondent, who has been teaching writing courses for about seven years, said:

“I use the internet and web search regularly to prepare my lessons and tests, and to find online resources for my writing class.”

One respondent, who has been teaching writing for over 15 years, said:

“I think I have depended on my laptop, and our classes are very dependent on online activities both for conversational activities and writing activities, because of the pandemic situation in different courses both teachers and learners have had to use online resources. So, the internet is an integral part of their writing instruction. I also use my own weblog to write some teaching materials for my students, some parts of their lessons, and sometimes some extra fun materials; I believe that blogs are some sort of communication tools. Web search also is an indispensable part of my writing class. I use podcasts' email in my writing class as well.”

Another EFL instructor who has been teaching writing for about six years said:

“For me, internet and web search are considered as the most powerful tool for my writing class since they help us to know up-to-date information. Oh, podcast and blog are too time-consuming to create.”

One EFL instructor who has been teaching writing for about ten years said:

“Well, I use the internet, email, web search in my classes, through internet and web search both me and my students can familiarize with new information and help us to expand our knowledge which is important in brainstorming activities. I use email to communicate with my students and for giving them effective feedback. Well, I also use podcasts in my writing class.”

One EFL instructor who has been teaching writing for about eight years said:

“I use the internet, especially YouTube to find some educational videos, podcasts, and these days due to covid 19 and I do use some video conferencing apps like zoom, or adobe connect, to have some of my writing classes online.”

Another EFL instructor who has been teaching writing for about five years said:

“To be honest, before the pandemic, I didn’t use technology a lot, but now the classes are online; I have to use technology. When I wanna talk about my writing classes, most of the time I try to use the internet and, you know, try to get some information from the internet and sometimes I even use blog to find some extra information. Well regarding other educational tools, I don’t use adobe connect for my teaching; to be honest, I use zoom as an application to connect to my students and I really enjoy using it”.

As for the first research question with regard to the types of educational technologies that Iranian EFL instructors prefer to use in their writing classes to teach argumentative writing, the following pie chart demonstrates a clearer image of the teachers’ preferences. Accordingly, searching the Internet is the most used and preferred type for instruction; email, podcast and blog are presented afterward, respectively.

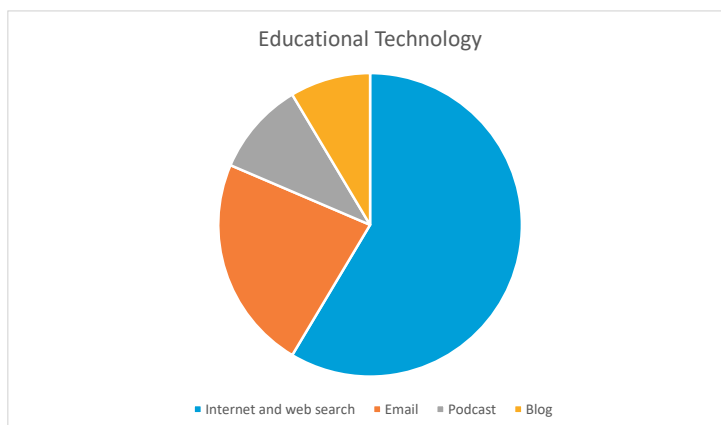


Figure 1. Educational Technology

The second objective of the present study sought to understand Iranian EFL instructors' views on the integration of online educational technology in enhancing teaching as well as learning writing. Most of the respondents believe that technological tools can improve the way of teaching argumentative writing, and they also cause to enhance their students' ability to write an argumentative essay. This insight is exemplified in some direct quotations, as follows:

As one EFL instructor, who has lots of teaching experience in writing classes, said:

“Of course, nowadays teaching without some technology is impossible. Since writing, classes are sometimes the most difficult classes for students who want to take the IELTS exam and in this module, one of the most important parts is to find new ideas. I always recommend my students to go, and find ideas and to use the internet in order to help them in the brainstorming process of writing, therefore web search is an inseparable part of my writing classes. So, we have to do brainstorming for a great part of the class, and nowadays using the internet, I can easily find ideas, students can find ideas, we can share screens and find ideas it has made learning much faster and much more efficient. Compared with the time before my online classes, I see that students skipped the classes less and stuck to the program much more seriously. Of course, it is cleaner, Compared to writing on the board with a marker, I'm just

typing the word on the screen and students can see it, and it also helps students in saving the material because they can save the video of the classes.”

Another EFL instructor said:

“Concerning teaching writing, I can correct my students writing through Foxit reader and Google Doc. Both of which have made it easier to leave some useful comments on students writing by being able to use color-coding.”

One EFL instructor said:

“Well, help my students to be autonomous, help them to feel free about writing without limitation, help them to find their way of writing through encountering different sources from different types of applications, websites, and podcasts. Considering their reactions, it indicated that it was convenient and enjoyable. Therefore, they had more eager to do these kinds of activities via the use of technology.”

The other participant said:

“By sending video via online video conferencing apps such as Zoom or Adobe connect on how to write a good piece of writing, the time of the class can be saved. Moreover, technologies such as Google Doc have made it easier to leave comments on students writing as they are writing.”

One respondent said:

“When I’m using the internet, when I’m using technology, I can use my laptop, I have written the writing before, and I have even highlighted the part that I wanna mention and I wanna talk more about, so the students can understand with more colorful vivid, you know it becomes tangible for them, also they emailed their writings for me, and whenever I wanna correct them because I comment on their writing, it has a better effect on their learning, you know when I write it with a red pen it has a bad influence on their mind, and they say wow I have ten mistakes, but whenever it is in the form of comments via email; first they open their email, they can see just some tiny points near their mistakes, they can see more help and description about their problems, so I think it really

helps them and it is really effective for them”

Another EFL instructor said:

“As far as I remember the one I read before, “technology is a gift of God,” it was so interesting to me, and thought about it a lot. The importance of technology in school cannot be ignored especially when you want to teach a new language to your students. You need to be up to date. If you want to be a good writer, you need to be a good listener. I think a good listener can be a good writer so I recommend all my students listen to many things; so I recommended all my students to use audio and video podcasts. They can be helpful.”

The last research question delves into the obstacles in employing educational technology to teach argumentative writing in the Iranian EFL context. Respondents reported that regarding the utilization of technology, the most problematic ones were lack of accessibility and training.

One EFL instructor said:

“So, we have some barriers sometimes most of the students don't have any internet access or maybe the information is not reliable.”

Another respondent said:

“Lack of accessibility can cause some barriers. For example, YouTube is instrumental. In Iran, it is filtered, and we cannot use it in the class context.”

Another participant said:

“Sometimes lack of accessibility due to filtering and slow internet connection speed. Oh. Lack of training, since you know, all types of online materials are not trustworthy and the writing applications do not suit the purpose of a specific kind of writing, so having some guidelines on how to use technology effectively can be beneficial to all teachers.”

One EFL instructor said:

“Lack of training and lack of accessibility of technological tools are the most crucial problems that prevent an effective application of technology.”

Another participant said:

“All the alternatives, and also poor knowledge towards using technology.”

Another EFL instructor said:

“In our country, the most important obstacle that both the students and teachers encounter is the slow speed of internet, we do not have an internet connection, it is a common problem in most of the online classes, to have disconnected communication or sometimes when you want to share video and sounds together you have logged in the class, so the communication is somehow disrupted, so the most important barrier is lack of accessibility due to bad connections and slow internet in my country. If I want to add another problem in my country, students are not very good at typing, so most of them complain, and they ask me to do their assignments by hand, but I ask them to send a word file, so lack of training to use technology is another barrier.”

Accordingly, the obstacles met by several participants were summarized in lack of training and accessibility due to a variety of concepts such as lack of information and reluctance in staying up-to-date with the modern educational technology as well as filtering and poor internet connection. A more comprehensive description can be seen in the following figure.

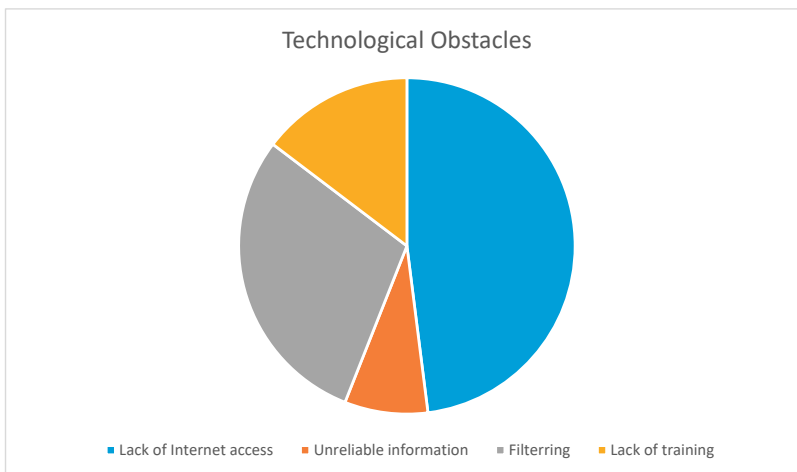


Figure 2. Technological Obstacles

6. Discussion

The current research aimed at expanding our understanding regarding the utilization and efficiency of educational technology to teach argumentative writing. In other words, the present study addressed how the Iranian EFL instructors view the integration of educational technology tools in enhancing the writing instruction and writing ability of students.

Teaching writing is regarded as a significant and challenging issue in the teaching context in both university and institute contexts. Argumentative writing is one of the most crucial, complicated, and datable genres of writing. Therefore, how to teach it is of great importance both for instructors as well as the students. Educational technology can also significantly influence writing instruction. Moreover, such a tool can increase teachers' practice inside the writing classroom. Based on the results of the present study, on one hand, teaching argumentative writing is as an important and challenging task and assists teachers to increase their efficiency of writing techniques and practices; on the other hand, instructional technology also enhances the efficiency of such practices. Moreover, employing instructional instructors can increase the effectiveness of their teaching argumentative writing, which in turn, leads to the improvement of their students in writing argumentative essays.

Yang and Huang's (2008) study reported that English teachers in Taiwan used technology most often in activities of listening and speaking, while technology was least used in teaching grammar. However, the findings cast doubts on the proposition that technology is basically used to impact English literacy learning, i.e., reading, writing, grammar, spelling, and punctuation (e.g., Burn & Leach, 2004). Further, the results showed that EFL teachers have a general tendency to use technology despite the mentioned difficulties surrounding Internet access, filtering, and students' lack of knowledge. This highlights both the teaching and the learning communities' inclination toward keeping pace with the modern world and staying up to date. As the content of the existing EFL curriculum in Iran has not been revised for at least two decades (Ketabi & Talebinejad, 2009), instructors' teaching has apparently developed based on the existing pedagogical and learning envi-

ronment and the changes technology use demands. This point can be addressed from two different perspectives, one may arise from the different obstacles that Iran's educational system is involved with which in itself postpones advancement. Nevertheless, as it was stated by one of the instructors, the spread of COVID 19 led them to integrate the use of technology in-class activities in a more serious manner, which seemed to have sparking impacts, especially on students' writing with respect to different methods, such as having more comprehensive feedbacks compared to the time when they had face to face classes. This progression due to demands addressed the other perspective of the problem which in itself emphasizes the tendency toward enhancement of the quality of the educational context.

The present research produced findings that showed university teachers considered technology regarded technology as a tool for teaching ESL composition courses. The instructors reported the usability of technology both for teachers and learners and the instructors' self-evaluation regarding technology (Stefano, 2013).

The results of the study are also in line with those previous studies which show that technological tools such as email and the course management system can provide online feedback, which leads to improved learning process and outcomes of writing, and increases student motivation and satisfaction during the process of learning EFL/ESL argumentative writing (Stefano, 2013; Maria & Palpanathan., 2017).

Furthermore, the findings also accord with previous studies which showed that CALL and other technological tools such as Telegram could be considered as a practical instructional tool which helps the learner to reduce their writing anxiety in second or foreign learning and assist them to write clearly and effectively, which cause to improve writing ability of the learner (Maria & Palpanathan, 2017; Sarvari & Ezzati, 2019).

Broadly speaking, since the educational context moves increasingly toward the efficacy of teaching practices, the application of educational technology was a crucial need in the context of teaching in general and teaching writing in particular. Iranian EFL instructors appreciate the value of technology and other aspects of teaching; therefore, this new

method of teaching is developed progressively in teaching all of the skills within the EFL context.

7. Conclusion

The present study aimed to capture Iranian EFL instructors regarding the utilization of educational technology to teach argumentative writing. The interview results showed that Iranian EFL instructors considered educational technology as a viable and effective tool in their writing class. It is self-evident that educational technology has an essential role in teaching and learning argumentative writing. The utilization of educational technology assists the teacher to increase the productiveness of writing practices through providing online feedback, interaction, and collaboration with their students, provide online authentic video or audio writing materials in the process of writing instruction, which in turn, leads to decreased anxiety, increase brainstorming, critical thinking, autonomy, and motivation of the learner which are crucial in the for learning argumentative essay. Therefore, teachers can enhance the efficiency of writing practices through the application of educational technology which enhances the quality of argumentative writing.

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