Investigation in the Application of Email in Thesis Supervision in Libya

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Abstract

The role of technology is becoming more and more important in the different aspects of our life, and its role in ELT is no exception. An example of the application of technology in ELT is email, which is considered one of the most effective tools of communication nowadays. The paper investigates the application of email in thesis supervision in Libya taking the Department of English at the University of Zawia and its counterpart in the School of Languages at the Libyan Academy as examples. The aim is to shed light on the situation and determine to what extent Libyan supervisors and supervisees benefit from email as one of the modern technological tools in facilitating their work. Another aim is to try to specify the problems they face in this respect in order to find better ways that may help in dealing with them. To fulfill these aims, two questionnaires were designed; one for supervisors and the other for supervisees. These questionnaires sought answers to the main research question: To what extent do supervisors and supervisees use email in their communication with each other and for what purpose. The results show that half of the participating supervisors do not use email in their supervision. Similarly, half of the supervisees investigated were found not to be using email to communicate with their supervisors mainly because their supervisors were not willing to use it. One of the possible reasons for not using email by supervisors is that they are technophobes because they lack knowledge and experience in using technology and thus they are not aware of its importance and usefulness amongst other reasons.

Introduction

As Pritchard (2007, 19) puts it "the internet and its possibilities for email, ... have opened up many possibilities for long distance rapid communication, which can be used to good educational advantage." With the continuous development of information and communication technology (ICT), the use of computer and internet in English Language Teaching (ELT) is becoming more and more important. Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) has been widely used all over the world especially in developed countries. For example, nowadays "students can use the new technology to their advantage, such as manipulating the network to contact teachers, and receiving answers by email." (Shyamlee, 2012, 153). However, in Libya, the role of computer and internet in ELT is still restricted to certain places and for limited purposes. For instance, e-mail, which is one of the most widely used means of communication in the world, is rarely used by teachers and their students in Libyan universities.

This paper will try to investigate the effectiveness of using email as a communication tool between thesis supervisors and their supervisees. Problems related to using email by both supervisors and supervisees will be discussed. The ultimate aim is to make supervisors aware of the importance and usefulness of using email in an effective manner. Due to some limitations, the study will be limited to the English Department in the School of Languages at the Libyan academy and its counterpart in the University of Zawia. However, the researcher believes that the findings of this study may be generalized to Libyan universities because of the relative similarity in circumstances between these universities due to several factors; political, economical, social, etc.

Rationale for using email

Graddol (1997, 16) argues that, "technology lies at the heart of the globalization process; affecting education work and culture." Email is one of the technology tools and it has some advantages that make it very useful when applied in thesis supervision as a means of communication between supervisors and their supervisees. Email enhances the interaction between teachers and students and creates a solid ground for exchange between supervisors and supervisees. Email can make the work of supervisors and

supervisees easier and quicker and, thus, more interesting. According to Dudeney (2000, 10), "email is, for many reasons, the most used tool on the Internet: It's easy to use, it's cheap, fast and reliable" (2000, 10). The advantages of using email in thesis supervision can be summarized in the following points:

1. Email makes the relationship between supervisors and supervisees very flexible and convenient. Email provides a good tool of interaction between supervisors and supervisees since the chance to face-to-face communication is not always possible, and because of the negative effect of inadequate communication between supervisors and supervisees. When email is used, there will be no need for making appointments and waiting for these appointments except when absolutely necessary. In this way both effort and time will be saved. When faced with any problem or when they want to ask their supervisors any questions, supervisees can send their queries via email easily and quickly without the need to make an appointment or wait for the suitable time to meet the supervisor. The supervisor in turn can answer his supervisee's questions and solve their problems from, for instance, his/her office at work or at home by sending them emails which will also save time and effort. Finally, supervisors and supervisees can keep in touch with each other during their holidays (Dudeney & Hockly, 64)

2. Email is a convenient and easy way to send big amounts of information. It will, therefore, enable students to send their materials and assigned work to their supervisors as files attached to emails, and receive feedback in time. Supervisors, on the other hand, can use email to send references in a form of, for example, PDF files to their students. It can also be used to send and receive other types such as picture files, and sound files (Dudeney (2000, 15). This will partially save the problem of the lack of references in university libraries about which most supervisees complain. Supervisors and their supervisees can easily and quickly exchange large amounts of information electronically which will also save the amount of wasted paper and help in avoiding the mess that paper makes in offices both at work and at home.

3. Email can improve the computer skills of both the supervisor and supervisee. The development in technology is continuous and never stops. Every day we are faced with new inventions and updates, and emails are no exception. The

frequent use of email will help these supervisors and supervisees keep up-to-date with the latest developments in using email and how to benefit from it most. Another point is that using email will improve the typing skills of its users. The more frequent use of email the better typing will become. Some people are technophobes and encouraging them to use email will help them gradually overcome such problems until they are familiar with it.

4. Email can also improve the writing ability of the supervisees. Most emails are now provided with spelling checkers which will help students correct their spelling mistakes and also grammatical mistakes. From my experience as a supervisor, I have noticed that a lot of students are not familiar with the etiquette of writing emails and the differences between formal and informal letters and emails. Some students, for example, never write the subject of their emails nor the opening or closing greetings. Some are even worse in that they only attach their files without even bothering to write anything in their emails. However, with some advice and guidance, students have learned things and their writing of emails has improved.

5. Another skill that will improve by the use of email though indirectly is the ability to read. In a traditional supervision, it is not easy for the supervisor to give his supervisee as many reading material as possible which passively affects the ability of the students to obtain sufficient material necessary for their theses. Email certainly solves this problem to some extent because the supervisor can send electronic material such as PDF files and even electronic copies of some books and journals that the supervisees need to use as references. The material sent by supervisors to their supervisees and their insistence on reading and using them as references will no doubt encourage students to read and broaden their knowledge. However, supervisors should be aware not to send materials that are protected by copyrights in order for them to remain within the law.

6. Email can provide access to professional forums to have the opportunity to contact experts and exchange ideas and information. By joining discussion groups and lists and specialized forums, both supervisors and supervisees can discuss some issues related to their work with their counterparts via mailing lists and discussion groups such as Teachers of English as a Second Language Discussion List (TESL-L) which focuses on issues related to TESL/TEFL and

Second Language Acquisition Research and Teaching List (SLART-L). By joining these lists through email, supervisors and supervisees can participate in their activities and ask any related questions and obtain answers from members all over the world (Wang, 2010, 130).

7. Email can help in solving the problem of lack of supervisors. By email, limitations of distance can be overcome. It might be possible, for example, for a student in the university of Sebha to be supervised by a supervisor from the University of Benghazi chosen in terms of suitability or specialization. By email supervision, students will not have to choose only the topics which are suitable to available and willing supervisors. In this way, email can be an effective means provided that communication between the supervisor and supervisee is adequate in terms of frequency and supplemented with other possible ways (Dick & Davies, 1995, 1).

8. Email indirectly provides a convenient and flexible way of giving assignments, correcting mistakes and giving feedback to the students (Sharndama, 2013, 38). Programs Like Microsoft Word are equipped with features that enable the supervisor and the supervisee to deal with the corrections in a flexible and dynamic way. features like copy, paste, delete, and select make the writing process easier and quicker. With a feature like TrackChanges, for example, the supervisor can make corrections and add comments easily and quickly without worrying about availability of space or the quality of handwriting. Students, on the other hand, can accepts (or reject) the changes the supervisor has made by one click if they want. (Dudeney, G. & Hockly, N., 19-20)

In spite of the paramount importance of these advantages, email may result in lack of direct communication between supervisors and their supervisees since students will have a fewer chances to meet with and speak directly to their supervisors. Therefore, email cannot completely replace the need for face-to-face communication between the students and their supervisors. It is sometimes necessary for the two to arrange for direct meetings to keep the favorable atmosphere by the mutual communication between supervisors and students.

Problem

Working as a head of the English Department in the school of languages in the Libyan Academy and then as a dean of the same school for the last couple of years in addition to his experience as a supervisor, the researcher has noticed that a number of students complain about not being able to frequently meet their supervisors. They say that they wait for a long time to see their supervisors to hand-in their work or to obtain feedback for a previously handed-in work. Also, some students were obliged to choose topics merely because these topics are the only ones for which supervisors are available in their educational instituuons. Some students also say that they are sometimes not able to figure out the handwritten feedback given to them by their supervisors on hard copies of their work. These observations and others motivated the researcher to investigate this issue in order to know why some supervisors (and supervisees) do not use emails to overcome these difficulties, and to raise their awareness of the importance, effectiveness and usefulness of using email in thesis supervision.

Participants

participants consist of supervisors and supervisees in the University of Zawia and the Libyan Academy in Tripoli. Due to the small number of supervisors and students under supervision, the sample was not randomly selected. It included any of those whom the researcher could reach, and fortunately all of them were willing to participate.

Data collection

to collect data from participants, two questionnaires were designed; one for supervisors and the other for supervisees. The questions included in the two questionnaires were similar since the data sought from both groups is almost the same. Each questionnaire consisted of one main question and two dependant questions from which the participants answer one depending on their answer to the main question. The first question asked participants whether they use email to communicate with their supervisors/supervisees and, if the answer, is 'Yes', participants have to answer a further question which asked them to state the advantages of using email in supervision and whether they exploit these advantages themselves and in what way. They were also asked to mention any particular software they use to correct material sent/received by

email. However, If the answer to the first question was 'No', participants are, then, asked to mention the reasons for not using email to communicate with their supervisors/supervisees.

Data analysis

Data obtained from the two questionnaires was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative approaches. It was thought that both types of analysis are needed in order to obtain accurate and reliable information. For example, the quantitative analysis will help in finding the proportion of those who use email and those who do not, which will give an overall picture of the situation. On the other hand, qualitative analysis will be helpful in going deeper into the details of the responses of the participants and their interpretations.

Analysis of the supervisors' questionnaire

The researcher was able to obtain 10 completed copies of the supervisors' questionnaire. Their work experience, gender and age are shown in the following chart.

Supervisors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Work experience (years)	37	35	27	20	40	36	40	20	42	-
Gender	M	F	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Age	63	-	50	60	62	55	67	60	69	-
Use of email in supervision	√	√	√	√	√	Χ	Χ	Χ	Χ	Χ

It is obvious from the chart above that their work experience ranged from 20 to 40 years while their age ranged from 50 to 69 years excluding the only female participant who refused to give her age, and participant 10 who did not give his age and work experience. It is also clear that 50% of the participants use email in supervision while the other 50% do not use it. The reasons given for not using email by the participants can be summarized in the following points:

1. The service is not always available. (2 supervisors)
2. The university does not supply supervisors with internet services. (1 supervisor)
3. The internet services sometimes do not reach the students' residential areas. (1 supervisor)

4. The service does not always work systematically. (1 supervisor)

5. Power failure. (1 supervisor)

6. "It is unnecessary to communicate with students via email as I had the opportunity of seeing my supervisees very often." (1 supervisor)

7. The addressed person might not have Internet service. (1 supervisor)

8. "Internet communication was not easy when I supervised my students." (1 supervisor)

9. "I would rather meet my supervisees personally because very often I need to discuss things with them in details and probably show them samples of what I want them to do." (1 supervisor)

10. "I do not have personal access to the net."

As for those who use email service to communicate with their supervisees, they mentioned the following advantages for using email in supervision:

1. It is an easy way to get in touch with supervisees. (2 supervisors)

2. One can send and receive materials with no delay. (2 supervisors)

3. No appointments are needed to meet face-to-face. (1 supervisor)

4. Saves time and effort. (2 supervisors)

5. Train students to be punctual and cooperative. (1 supervisor)

6. It is a way of documentation and record. (1 supervisor)

7. It is a fast way for communication; it saves time. (1 supervisor)

8. "Using email is cheaper for supervisees, i.e. no need for printing over and over of corrected materials in case of using hard copies." (1 supervisor)

9. "It enables the supervisor to find out whether the student uses the resources in an academic way."

The overall results of this research show that half of the supervisors do not use email in their communication with their supervisees.

Analysis of the supervisees' questionnaire

The researcher was able to obtain 18 completed copies of the supervisees' questionnaire. Their gender, age and use of email are shown in the table below.

Apart from those who did not provide their age and gender, the participants' age ranged from 23 to 36 years, 9 males and 9 females. With regard to the use of email, the results show that 50% of the participants use it while the other 50% do not.

Interestingly, almost all those who use email are females (8 out of 9) and the majority of those who do not are males (7 out of 9).

supervisee	Gender	Age	Use of email
1	F	23	
2	M	32	√
3	F	30	√
4	F	-	√
5	F	30	√
6	F	26	√
7	F	27	√
8	F	25	√
9	-	-	√
10	F	30	Χ
11	M	25	Χ
12	F	26	Χ
13	M	27	Χ
14	M	27	Χ
15	M	36	Χ
16	M	35	Χ
17	M	25	Χ
18	M	31	Χ

The analysis of the data collected from supervisees' questionnaire has shown that there are three main reasons for not using email with their supervisors. The first reason is that their supervisors do not have internet access (5 supervises). The second reason is that these supervisors do not want to use email as a medium of communication (3 supervisees). The third reason according to supervisees is the bad internet service in the country (4 supervisees). The following are some of their comments:

1. "My supervisor does not like to use email although I live in Sebha and he lives in Tripoli... I had to send the material to him and contact him by phone."
2. "The internet service is very bad in our country"
3. "My supervisor does not want to use the internet as a medium of communication."
4. "I would say that my supervisor never tried to engage me in an internet communication."

5. "The internet connection in my hometown is not good enough."
6. "The reason is that the supervisor had no internet access. We insisted to do so in order to make it easy for use but unfortunately not".
7. "....because our supervisor did not prefer using email".

As for those who use email, most of them agreed that email is an advantageous means of communication between the supervisor and the supervisee. According to them, it helps to communicate with the supervisor more easily and quickly and thus it saves effort and time.

Moreover, most of them said that their supervisors use TrackChanges to correct their material and they use the same tool to make the corrections sent to them by email. The following are some of their comments:

1. Email is a "... modern tool [that can be used] instead of using papers and pens to correct the material"
2. Email "... facilitates the process of communicating even if both of them are not at the same country... the learner will not be forced to wait for his/her supervisor to come back."
3. "... I didn't have to come to the Academy in order to contact my professor because of using email at home...It was so amazing and useful."
4. "Since [my supervisor] is always far: in USA, we have to contact [with each other] via email."

Discussion of results and conclusion

The findings of this investigation have shown that half of the participant supervisors do not use email in their supervision. The findings also show that half of the supervisees do not use email either. However, most of these supervisees who do not use email expressed their interest in using it. It was evident from the results that
the main reason for not using email is the fact that supervisors are unwilling to use it, which might be because they are unaware of the importance and usefulness of using it. Another reason is the quality of the internet service about which some supervisors and supervisees complain including weak signal coverage in some areas and the unavailability of the internet service in some other areas of the country with the added fact that technological facilities including computers, internet and mailing services are either limited or unavailable in Libyan universities and academies in general.

Therefore, all have the responsibility to try to improve the situation. Teachers in general and particularly supervisors should catch up with the latest advances in technology by acquiring the latest methods in teaching and especially supervision so that both supervisors and supervisees can benefit as much as possible from the use of email. Supervisees, on the other hand, should make some effort to overcome difficulties in using the different technological tools by improving their computer skills and keeping themselves updated with the latest advances in the field. Moreover, authorities and administrations in educational institutes and universities should make some effort to make the necessary facilities including internet and mailing services available to its members. Furthermore, training courses in the use of computer should be organized for both teachers and students to improve their computer skills. Finally, as an urgent and quick remedial procedure to solve this problem, workshops in the use of some technological tools like email should also be organized by these institutes to increase the awareness of the importance and usefulness of using email among supervisors and supervisees.

To conclude, barring some problems, email can be used effectively in supervision with adequate knowledge on the part of both supervisors and supervisees. Overcoming some obstacles in setting up the infrastructure and helping teachers and students not to be technophopes with some encouragement will no doubt have a positive effect on the situation.

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