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Graphic organizers as writing tools in online english language learning: A critical review of studies

Los organizadores gráficos como una herramienta de escritura en el aprendizaje de inglés en línea: Revisión crítica de estudios

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Abstract

The present article examines the efficacy of Graphic Organizers (GOs) as beneficial tools to facilitate and enhance writing acquisition within the online English language learning context. Technological advancements involve innovations in language education, which include adapting strategies and tools to teach the language in virtual contexts. This work intends to discover how graphic organizers can effectively enhance students' writing skills when they are used as educational tools in online *English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) education. Based on a qualitative analysis of twenty-seven international journal articles, this study examines the significance of writing skills in EFL education and the pivotal role of GOs in developing writing proficiency. It highlights students' challenges in acquiring writing skills and explores the way in which GOs can facilitate the students' acquisition through organization, creativity, and overall writing improvement. Additionally, by assessing the impact of GOs on students' cognitive

load, skill acquisition, and writing achievements in online learning environments, the study elucidates the transformative potential of integrating these visual tools to strengthen students' writing abilities. Through a systematic literature review, the article reveals important contribution to the effectiveness of GOs in enhancing EFL writing skills, demonstrating that these teaching tools maintain relevance in language instruction because of their proven effectiveness. On the other hand, most of these studies connect to EFL writing instruction in traditional settings and emphasize the need for further research into virtual or online teaching contexts and the practical implications for educators in order to improve students' writing competencies in the digital age.

Keywords: Graphic organizers, English as a foreign language, online education, visual aids, writing acquisition.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la eficacia de los *organizadores gráficos* (OG) como herramientas beneficiosas para la adquisición y mejora de la escritura en el aprendizaje de inglés en línea.

Explora cómo los Organizadores gráficos (GOs) contribuyen al desarrollo de la escritura de los estudiantes en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), basándose en una revisión de veintisiete artículos de revistas especializadas. El estudio destaca la importancia de las habilidades de escritura y los retos a los que se enfrentan los estudiantes, demostrando que los organizadores gráficos facilitan la organización, la creatividad y la mejora de la escritura en general. Además, analiza el impacto de los GOs en la carga cognitiva, la adquisición de habilidades y el avance en la escritura, resaltando su potencial para fortalecer las capacidades de escritura de los estudiantes en entornos virtuales. A través de una revisión sistemática de la literatura, el artículo revela valiosos aportes a la eficacia de los GOs para mejorar las habilidades de escritura en EFL, demostrando que estas herramientas didácticas continúan siendo relevantes en la enseñanza de idiomas debido a su eficacia probada. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los estudios se refieren a la enseñanza de la escritura en EFL en contextos tradicionales, evidenciando la necesidad de mayor investigación en contextos de enseñanza en línea, así como las implicaciones prácticas para los educadores deseosos de mejorar las competencias de escritura de los estudiantes en la era digital.

Palabras clave: Organizadores gráficos, inglés como lengua extranjera, educación en línea, adquisición de la escritura, recursos visuales

Introduction

English is the global language, and the ability to understand and communicate in it has become essential across various human development contexts. Today, having a proficient level of English can open doors in different fields of human development, as it is regarded as "the main voice of globalizing trends and developments in business, technology, communication, and various cultural domains (e.g., music and film)" (Onysko & Siemund, 2022, p. 1). The author's experience as a language teacher is that to communicate effectively in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), learners must progressively develop the four key skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Aznan & Saad (2023) stated that writing organization is not just about ordering content; it is a process that "involves the strategic sequencing of information to establish a pattern of presentation" and "extends beyond linguistic expressions, incorporating symbols or visual elements" to structure and organize content before setting writing goals (p.117). Similarly, Suvin (2020) considered writing as a highly challenging, complex skill that requires motivation, so students change their writing perspective.

This paper explores the effectiveness of graphic organizers in supporting language learning when used as writing tools in the online EFL context. It analyses the implementation and application of these visual aids to improve EFL writing proficiency, as it must be developed gradually in order to communicate ideas and thoughts in the process of learning a foreign language. "Unlike spoken language that tends to be more spontaneous, writing is more complex, requiring more concise planning" (Yavani, 2018, p. 77).

Language teachers understand that effective writing requires previous knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and content comprehension, and in this way, they play a critical role in guiding students through these different stages. In order to do this, they use different strategies and tools to improve writing skills, considering that it is generally the last developed by EFL learners, since they require a proficient language command.

"Developing writing skills is a long-term investment. Far from merely transcribing language into written form, writing is a thinking process that demands a conscious intellectual effort over a considerable time" (Dragomir & Niculescu, 2020, p. 206).

Mantra et al. (2021) emphasized the pivotal role of writing skills in effective communication in the digital education scenario, promoting traditional techniques like mind maps to involve students and improve the organization of the ideas. Both teachers and learners in EFL contexts use various tools, including advanced AI like ChatGPT, to enhance writing skills (Han et al., 2023). However, while these modern tools make language interaction easier, traditional tools like graphic organizers are indispensable for the effectiveness in developing specific language skills.

Graphic organizers are visual aids that help learners arrange and structure data comprehensively and efficiently. There are varied types of GOs that can be used to develop writing creativity according to the topic or purpose of the activity, such as flow charts, bubble maps, circle maps, onion rings, tree maps, and multi-flow charts, among many more. Pratama et al. (2017) described graphic organizers as effective tools for learning, identifying and connecting ideas, and encouraging critical thinking. Following the same idea, Styati & Irawati (2020) found out that using graphic organizers aids idea organization, fosters critical thinking, and improves both content and vocabulary in writing tasks.

Additionally, Pratama et al. (2017) affirmed that graphic organizers are precious learning tools that improve in a significant way students' descriptive writing skills and at the same time, help them recognize and determine key concepts, make connections, and develop critical thinking.

On this view, the effectiveness of these traditional educational tools is crucial to improve productive skills such as writing. Zainudin et al. (2023) asserted that when compared to traditional

methods, graphic organizers can help ESL students produce more explicit, sophisticated, and higher-quality writing.

Based on teaching experience, the authors of this study observed that once language students get to master grammar and vocabulary and are quite proficient in listening, speaking, and reading, they still deal with frustration and difficulties when it comes to writing. Nevertheless, the use of graphic organizers has shown effectiveness in concept retention of the foreign language. As a matter of fact, they help the development of new vocabulary, grammatical structures perception, and ease complex information and comprehension (Kalmamatova et al., 2020).

Varied studies have investigated different aspects of EFL writing and the obstacles students find during this process. [Maharani \(2018\)](#) focused on the difficulties students encounter at the time of writing recount paragraphs, for example on the generation of ideas, organization of content, use of correct grammar, sentence structure, development of topics, support of details, and sentences conclusion. The author points out that the use of graphic organizers can lead to positive results. In fact, these tools improve gratification, lessen difficulties, and meliorate the overall writing performance. Students usually run out of ideas soon, not necessarily due to a lack of imagination or interest, but because of factors such as a lack of confidence and unfamiliarity with useful and valid strategies.

[Yavani \(2018\)](#) claimed that the integration of visual tools, such as graphic organizers, during the writing process improves thought organization, engagement and students' content creation abilities. Through the application of these tools in writing persuasive articles, students can significantly improve their writing skills, develop their ideas and organize thoughts clearly, and at the same time, focus on grammar and vocabulary.

English-major sophomore students have been found with some difficulties in writing, especially in argumentative essays, where they have difficulties with language use, background knowledge, organization, argument developing and critical thinking abilities. [Boykin et al. \(2019\)](#) studied the use of a computer-based graphic organizer (CBGO) combined with self-regulated learning (SRL) showing the improvement of argumentative writing strategies and the role of GOs in supporting and guiding students in improving their English writing skills.

The study conducted by [Dang et al. \(2020\)](#) analyzed the linguistic difficulties that students find during the process of writing argumentative essays, showing the lack of organization and critical thinking skills. Therefore, providing students with suitable methods, techniques, and tools is fundamental for the organization of ideas and the improvement of their writing abilities.

Similarly, but in a different educational context, [Uamsiri \(2021\)](#) evaluated argumentative writing skills of EFL students by combining a genre-based approach with graphic organizers. Although difficulties related to language proficiency, vocabulary, and technological obstacles during online instruction were identified, the results demonstrate a considerable improvement in writing proficiency.

The effectiveness of graphic organizers has also been studied to improve narrative writing. Referring to this, [Kurnia et al. \(2018\)](#) observed the effectiveness of GOs didn't limit to the

organization and structure of the ideas, but also helped students grab the narrative main components, and improve their overall writing ability.

Aznan & Saad (2023) focused on the crucial importance of teacher expertise in using GOs. They found out that the TAZ Burger GO considerably improved ESL learners' writing abilities by providing them with valuable support for essay planning, organization, and creativity, at the same time helping them overcome linguistic difficulties.

Methodology

The methodology used for this research follows the approach and structure established by P.R.I.S.M.A. (2020). This qualitative study applies a descriptive-interpretative analysis of twenty-seven articles, mainly from international journals, which were selected after consulting the following descriptors: graphic organizers, online, writing strategies, and EFL learning. This research consists of a systematic review of former studies on the use of graphic organizers for EFL teaching in different countries, in order to outline how these tools can improve students' writing skills in an effective way when used as educational implements in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) online context.

The inclusive criteria considered studies made in the English language, from 2014 to 2023, on aspects like EFL online teaching, writing skills, and the use of GOs as writing teaching tools, whereas studies conducted in languages other than English, teaching English writing in traditional contexts, the use of GOs for teaching other language skills or for teaching other subjects were excluded.

Results and discussion

The systematic review of relevant literature conducted during this study, has highlighted that the use of graphic organizers impact positively EFL students' writing skills, above all in the online context. At the same time, the difficulties students encounter in the process can offer new ways for promoting continuous growth and improvement.

The authors highlighted multifaceted challenges in writing argumentative essays and the need for targeted interventions to enhance students' writing skills and academic performance. The findings underscore the importance of providing support and guidance to help students overcome writing obstacles and improve English writing abilities.

Referring the writing strategy, **Sabarun et al. (2023)** stated among their findings that there is an interaction between writing strategy and learning styles. On his part, Hafidz (2021), said that the graphic organizer strategy can considerably motivate and boost argumentative writing. This strategy makes it easier to outline main ideas and detail, and structure arguments by improving writing organization, coherence and clarity. Last but not less important, graphic organizers motivate engagement during the writing process.

The previously expressed was also supported by **Yavani (2018)**, who implemented graphic organizers in the process of writing persuasive articles in two academic cycles. After implementing

GOs, in the first cycle, there was already evidence of improvements. However, the second cycle modifications were made in the lesson plan and graphic organizer design to address students' challenges in organizing ideas and editing processes. Overall, the implementation of GOs positively impacted students' writing skills and perceptions, leading to enhanced writing abilities, engagement in the writing process, and overall learning performance.

According to [Wei et al. \(2019\)](#), the intervention of graphic organizers can benefit the student's persuasive writing ability and their performance in narrative and expository texts. The results of the study stated that the intervention of Quality Talk graphic organizer (QT GO) benefited the students' ability for writing more and better essays as well as their ability to construct persuasive arguments in different text genres. A study on the use of graphic organizers for writing modeling and scaffolding was done by [Rahmat \(2020\)](#). The findings suggested that integrating modelling and scaffolding in EFL writing, along with graphic organizers, can enhance perception and concentration during text creation.

In today's digital world, made of hybrid and online classes, teachers and students should be able to use different tools and, more specifically, graphic organizers as they have been proven effective visual aids to facilitate the development of language skills through the use effective organization of thoughts and ideas in the different learning contexts, including the virtual environment. With the technological advancements, the use of computerized graphic organizers as inspiration by enhancing ideas organization and writing skills in general, has led to better language performance results. [Puentes et al. \(2022\)](#) analyzed the implementation of graphic organizers as a reading strategy to research the learning process development and the students' perception on the effectiveness of these tools using the computer. The study findings suggest a positive impact of the combination of technology and Graphic Organizers especially in terms of attitude towards language learning and creativity development as they demonstrated to help students organize and understand ideas better while allowing them to use previous knowledge and save time.

In the previously mentioned study, the results indicated that the recontextualization of learning through implementing technology and using Computer Graphic Organizers positively impacted the English learning process. The implementation helped organize and understand ideas, save time, enable creativity, improve attitude and confidence in language learning, and utilize prior knowledge.

[Liou and Li \(2014\)](#) also investigated the use of online and interactive graphic organizers, but did not only use them in online EFL teaching. The two previously mentioned studies claimed that the use of computer-based GOs positively influence students' creativity and the learning process, improving the attitudes towards learning English and helping organize and comprehend ideas more clearly, saving time, and encouraging creativity. When used together, graphic organizers and traditional instruction, showed important progress in students' reading and writing by helping on the development of abilities to summarize and understand content, the source texts, and the organization of ideas. Both studies recognized the value of integrating technology, such as computerized graphic organizers, to benefit language learning improvements and academic performance in English literacy skills.

Estacio et al. (2023) stated that, among the positive effects the use of graphic organizers can bring to students, it is essential to consider the cognitive benefits, resulting in improved information processing and higher-order thinking. Yundayani et al. (2019) went further in the description of graphic organizers and propose using the online tool Canva to create interactive presentations with graphic organizers, showing that this digital tool improved creativity and writing proficiency in Indonesian students.

Regarding the use of graphic organizers as media tools, the research study conducted by Anggraeni & Penturi (2019), underlined the importance of using creative approaches, such as graphic organizers, to make learning engaging and meaningful. The study showed that when students used GOs as media tools, they were able to express their ideas more effectively and think critically, improving their overall writing performance. Similarly, Wang et al. (2019) found that graphic organizers improved language learners' writing performance by helping them to order ideas and develop their writing skills.

Table 1. Main Contributions to the Study

Author/s	Research Country	Publishing Year	Design	Main Contribution	Participants
Anggraeni & Penturi	Indonesia	2018	Descriptive Action Research	The effectiveness of GOs as a media tool to enhance writing skills,	Sixty five Third-semester English Education Department students
Estacio et al.	Philippines	2023	One Group Pretest-Posttest Using a Self-rating Scale	The Influence of GOs on cognitive load and knowledge acquisition and the impact on online education.	Thirty five first-year Bachelor of Science in Accountancy (BSA) college students from
Hafidz, M.	Indonesia	2021	Quasi-Experimental Study	The use of GOs as argumentative writing aids to define and support main ideas.	One hundred and twenty three students
Liou & Li	Taiwan	2014	Experimental Research	The enhancement of the writing skill through the integration of a computer organized	fifteen English-major junior or senior students
Puentes et al.	Colombia	2022	Qualitative Research	The use of computer GOs in the EFL Class.	Twenty seven EFL A1 level students ranging from sixteen to forty five years old.
Rahmat, N. H.	Malaysia	2020	Qualitative study	The use of GOs to improve learning, their impact on academic performance and the writing process.	One hundred and three undergraduate ESL learners
Sabarun et al.	Indonesia	2023	Quasi-Experimental Research using 2X3X2 variance analysis.	The study of variables like gender, learning styles and writing strategies like GOs can interact and influence EFL writing performance and accuracy in higher education.	Seventy male and female EFL college students.
Wang et al.	The United States of America	2021	Quasi-Experimental Design	The effectiveness of GOs to boost motivation and performance, aiming at generating learning on online learning environments.	Experiment 1. Sixty middle school students. Experiment 2. Two hundred and thirty middle school students.
Wei et al.	The United States of America	2019	Experimental Research with	Explores how Quality Talk GOs ameliorate the written argumentation skill and the improvement of argumentative essays.	One hundred and fifty fourth-grade students.
Yavani	Indonesia	2018	Experimental Research with a pretest-posttest design.	How the implementation of GOs in writing persuasive articles can improve the student's writing skills on structure, coherence, and overall quality.	Sixty EFL University students
Yundayani et al.	Indonesia	2019	Experimental research design with a pretest-posttest, experimental and control group, design.	The benefits of using visual media like Canva GOs design platform to support students-centered learning and the improvement of the writing skill.	Seventy college students, studying an English program.

Conclusions

The results could have better aligned with the expectations, considering that graphic organizers are not a new approach. However, they suggest that although graphic organizers are widely discussed in the cross-curricular educational field and in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) area, current research mainly concentrates on in-person classes, leaving a gap in understanding their effectiveness in online or virtual environments.

Despite the advances in educational technology over time, more evidence is needed regarding the use of graphic organizers to teach language, especially for enhancing writing in online EFL teaching.

Furthermore, graphic organizers offer a structured approach for online assignments and projects, assisting students in planning and organizing their work effectively.

The investigations indicate that graphic organizers are effective instructional tools for EFL writing, enhancing language proficiency and skill development. Consequently, the authors recommend further research to adapt these tools for online EFL teaching contexts.

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