

Foreign language use outside the classroom and CMC: Investigating the role of the context in Moroccan EFL learners' written Performances

Hind Brigui

Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra
Corresponding Author: Hind Brigui

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the impact of both informal and formal contexts of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner's written messages. The study, which adopts an exploratory approach, examines the written exchanges of learners in both contexts and see (a) to what extent spelling and grammatical mistakes are present in each conversation, (b) if the same learner can show different writing protocols based on which one is formal or informal, and finally (c) if there are factors that can help deploy CMC as an efficient tool to reinforce what was learned in the writing classroom. Fifteen students from semester One in the English department at Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra participated in the study via Facebook messenger as an CMC tool. The text messages of the participants in both contexts were quantitatively analyzed in a way to detect both spelling and grammar mistakes. Data are, then, analyzed through frequency distribution counts as well as through t-tests. Findings show the existence of a relationship between the frequency of language spelling and grammar mistakes used and the online CMC context, despite the existence of the variable of the teacher in both contexts. All the group members are found to differ statistically in the number of mistakes exhibited in each context, as the same students show a more mistake free language when they communicate in a formal context. This implies that all the subjects exhibit a good control of their linguistic competence when they have to react to their professor in a formal manner. Still, in the informal context, their written language is affected by the informal decontracted context, and mistakes resulting from actual use of online 'chat language' are dominant. It may be, therefore, recommended that CMC should be utilized positively in language learning classrooms, especially as a way to practise writing. It should be encouraged as a support in the writing classroom for language improvement. When a formal context is established, CMC can become a fast, easy and accessible means to help students practice writing beyond the traditional pen and paper in-class context.

Keywords: Computer mediated communication (CMC), formal and informal online settings, written messages, spelling and grammar, online chat language, writing instruction.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex activity that requires from students the ability to convey ideas and information in a clear manner (Alber-Morgan, Hessler, & Konrad, 2007). It is difficult to teach writing without using direct instruction (Walker, Shippen, Alberto, Houchins, & Cihak, 2005). Moreover, even with direct instruction, writing requires that students draw on many skills at the same time. The student must write, think and compose, all the while using proper grammar and spelling (Kieft, Rijlaarsdam, Galbraith, & van den Bergh, 2007). Consequently, some students become successful writers, while others fail to gain the necessary proficiency (Penrod, 2007).

With the development of the internet, and with the new generation of cell phones in the late 2000's, students have access to resources through new communications tools like social network sites and apps for smart phones which have achieved an increasing dominance in societies (Fogg, 2010). This online access is a phenomenon that is expected to grow at a significant rate Johnson & Aragon, 2003, Allen & Seaman, 2004). Online discussion forums, or Computer Mediated Discussions, are popular with educators who aim at using IT (information technology) to enhance the quality of student learning.

II. COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC)

CMC, according to Levy (1997), is concerned with communication between two or more participants via a computer. CMC has also been described as “the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunication systems that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages” (December, 1996). CMC can be divided into synchronous and asynchronous modes. In synchronous communication all participants are online at the same time, while asynchronous communication occurs with time constraints such as email. CMC can occur in different forms which include e-mail, chat (video, audio, text), bulletin boards, blogs, and so on. These forms can be categorized under two main types: oral and written. Another framework includes the distinctions between open and closed CMC. Hrastinski (2010) pointed out that in open CMC all members of a group participate while closed CMC implies that only some individuals are allowed to participate. Interaction via CMC can be classified into three types according to the users of CMC. CMC is widely used in the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), as well as in some other related terms such as “online communication”, and network-based language teaching (NBLT). MCM can be according to Moore (1993) of three types: learner-content interaction, learner-to instructor interaction, and learner-to-learner interaction. NBLT refers to the pedagogical use of computers connected in either local or global networks, allowing one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication” (Kern, Ware & Warschauer, 2008).

The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as emails, blogs, and social networks has influenced the ways languages are taught and learnt. Language learners can use CMC environments to increase their language skills. These environments also help teachers to add new tasks that learners can do to learn a language. Regarding the context in which CMC is used, two ways can be distinguished (i.e. formal and informal). The former means that planned CMC activities are used along with traditional classes for learning purposes; a context that is very rare if not impossible in the Moroccan university context. The latter means that language learners themselves use CMC environments to improve their language skills according to their convenience. These activities are neither planned nor used for evaluation purposes. Formal use of CMC takes place in formal settings such as classrooms, seminars and language labs, whereas informal CMC can take place anywhere, and at any time. Unlike other ways of teaching and learning a language, CMC can support out of classroom communication between students and their teachers, and among the students themselves.

III. ONLINE LANGUAGE

With great advancements in technology, and with the invention of mobile phones and internet, people lives, jobs, communication, education and speech styles have changed dramatically. Online language, also known as texting language is a latest language variety that comes into sight with the arrival of technologies like mobile phones, internet and digital media. Texting is one of the most recent forms that people use to communicate (Javed and Mahmood, 2016). Much like other new technologies, texting has generated its own style of language including abbreviations and graphics. It differs from other forms of written communication to a great extent. This language has developed a unique variety of English, which separates it from the daily written language. This language is very familiar among mobile users, internet users, chatters and bloggers, who are in most cases the teenage students. These activities resulted in creation of a new body of “discourse, identity, authorship, and language” (Kern, p.183). People use several different terms to describe this new language variety like texting language, internet language, SMS language or digital language.

Texters are always been criticized for their use of texting language, as people hold a common belief that it is damaging students writing skills. It makes the young ones unable to distinguish between the formal and informal writing. However, opposed to this popular belief, texting is actually not posing any serious threat to the English language. As David Crystal (2015) stated that “All the popular beliefs about texting are wrong or at least debatable” (p.7).

With the arrival of texting, a new language makes its appearance by the name of text language. It is more like decoding or translating a message; they require a different and special understanding of the language. There is a different usage of symbols and punctuations that the traditional language does not use, and it is a whole new way of thinking about language that has never been used (Javed and Mahmood, 2016). According to Crystal text language is different from the conventional language with 12 distinctive features as follows:

1. Abbreviations: An abbreviation is a shortened or contracted form of a word, used to represent the whole word as Dr for Doctor, Msg for Message.
2. Initialisms: A kind of abbreviation consisting of only the first letters that are pronounced separately such as CPU for Central Processing Unit and OMG for Oh my God.
3. Acronyms: Acronym is an abbreviation formed from the initial letters of other words and pronounced as a whole word for example, LOL for Laugh Out Loud, YOLO for You only live once.
4. Shortenings: Shortenings are words with missing end letters (Thurlow & Brown, 2003). Days and months are commonly shortened in SMS and IM, for example, "sun/Sunday", and "Feb/February".

5. Contractions: Contractions are words with omitted middle letters, usually vowels (Crystal, 2008). It is like contracting or combining two words to make it as a single word. E.g., using "don't" instead of "do not", I've for I have. Text language also use contractions like gonna for going to.
 6. Clippings: In clipping a word is reduced or shortened without changing the meaning of the word. Examples of clipping are goin for going, ad for advertisement, photo for photograph.
 7. Single Letter/Number Homophones: Also termed logograms, phonetic reductions, or letter/number homophones use a letter or-number to represent a word or part (Thurlow & Poff, in press). Examples are c for see, u for you, 2 for to, l8r for later.
 8. Emoticons: Emoticons are symbols or combinations of symbols used to convey an emotion with the use of punctuation marks or other objects like :-) happy, :-(sad.
 9. Typographic Symbols: Typographic symbols are single or multiple characters which represent whole words (Bieswanger, 2008). A popular example is one or several "x" used to symbolize a kiss, or "zzzz's" to suggest sleep, tiredness or boredom, @ for at and <3 for heart.
 10. Accent stylization: Replacing the alphabets with others for obtaining stylized look like yew for you, dat for that, xmart for smart etc.
 11. Excessive use of punctuation: The excessive and useless use of punctuation or capitalization for expressing emphasis or intensity of emotion such as 'what!!!! For 'what!' NEVER for never.
 12. Repetitions: Repeating some letters to mirror lengthening sometimes for emphasis such as soooo for so, grrreeeeennn for green, Yesssss for just yes.
- In text language, the standard spelling conventions and grammar rules are overlooked and the use of "textisms" or "text slang" is widespread. As stated by Nenagh Kemp (2011), these orthographically unconventional language forms are used for a number of reasons: to reduce writing time for a quick response, to achieve the shortness and economy required, A small screen and an alphanumeric keypad contain both numbers and letters on the same keys. It makes difficult for the texter to type, so text language can help reducing texter's difficulty.

IV. RESEARCH ON THE FIELD

Many studies (e.g. Beauvois, 1996; Chun, 1994; Pellettieri, 2000; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Warschauer, 1996; Warschauer, 1997) presented a number of potential benefits of CMC. Some of these benefits are of that CMC provides more participation of students, enables students to have meaningful and authentic conversations with others in the target language, encourages a collaborative spirit among students, enhances motivation and reduces anxiety. It also improves the quality of language output, and offers an effective environment for learner autonomy and empowerment. In addition, it provides an opportunity for learners to monitor their own language production and learn from each other. Moreover, one of the major advantages of CMC is to bring together geographically dispersed students, and in doing so, adds immediacy and increases motivation (Romiszowski & Mason, 1996).

Swaffar (1998) summarized the benefits derived from CMC as compared to oral exchanges in the L2 classroom. He pointed out that networked exchanges seem to help all individuals in language classes engage more frequently, with greater confidence, and with greater enthusiasm in the communicative process than is characteristic for similar students in oral classrooms. Some studies comparing oral classroom discussion with computer-assisted classroom discussion draw attention to significant differences between the two. Simpson (2002) pointed out that the levels of learner participation and of turn-taking initiation is greater in the computer mode. It is more difficult for anyone, including the teacher, to dominate a computer-based discussion. The formal use of CMC has been examined to find out its benefits in language learning (e.g., Chun, 1994; Pellettieri, 2000; Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009). However, the comparison between the formal and informal uses of CMC, to the best of author's knowledge, has received little attention in the literature.

V. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

As the researcher is a university professor at a Moroccan university, she noticed that more and more undergraduate students are using smart phones and online chat applications in their communication with each other. The researcher felt that there was a need for a study on the effects of CMC on students' writing achievement to find out if it would improve the writing skills of undergraduate students in Morocco. In this research, the researcher examined how EFL undergraduate Moroccan university students' use of CMC technical applications in English can affect their writing, investigating the impact of formal and informal contexts. Reasons for this study emanates from the assumption that many EFL university students at the English department don't practice writing when they are asked by their professor to bring written material, while they tend to be very active when it comes to online writing. It would be a good idea if it could be possible to make them practice writing for academic purposes via electronic media. Computer based composing could be beneficial to practice writing for academic purposes, as it could be a good training for any possible future needs. Recently, many international tests such as TOEFL ask students to write using computers, so it would be a kind

of practice for such contexts. Therefore, this study aims to explore the positive side of online writing, and tries to look at the language of texting from an optimistic point of view by means of exploring the Moroccan context and seeing to what extent other studies' findings can match with this research outcome.

Educators have started to notice the new technologies and explore their effects on student behavior and performance. There is supporting evidence to suggest that these technologies have a large influence on the academic development of students (Fogg, 2010).

VI. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study will be geared towards the following objectives:

- 1- To explore to what extent spelling and grammatical mistakes are present in each of the students' conversation,
- 2- To examine the effect of proficiency level on the types and numbers of mistakes made by students;
- 3- To examine the effect of the online context on the type and number of mistakes made by students;
- 4- To examine if the same learner can show different writing protocols based on which one is formal or informal, and finally
- 5- To find out if there are factors that can help deploy CMC as an efficient tool to reinforce what was learned in the writing classroom.

To achieve these objectives, the following research questions have been formulated to give direction to the investigation:

VII. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1- What are the types and the frequency of mistakes present in Moroccan EFL university students' online written conversations?
- 2- What is the relationship between the online CMC context and the number/type of mistakes that EFL students made in their written interactions?
- 3- Does the students' proficiency level have an effect on the students' online written mistakes?
- 4- Are students' writing protocols more affected by the students' proficiency level or the online CMC context?

VIII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.1. Subjects

Subjects of this study are 30 students from two different levels: 15 Semester one and 15 semester 5 students; all are university students studying English at the faculty of letters and humanities in Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra, Morocco. Neither age nor gender was a criterion for subjects' selection. In this study the variable of class level stands for proficiency level.

1.2. Instrument

As a research instrument, online computer mediated conversation scripts are used. Facebook messenger was chosen to be the CMC tool because all participants are familiar with this social media messaging device. These conversations were designed to answer two writing tasks under two different contexts: formal and informal.

1- Online formal CMC task: This has nothing to do with the same term used in the writing literature. This task is called formal because students know that they are addressing their professor by means of engaging in dyadic online conversations. The professor asks each student a series of questions that they have to answer via the written medium on the spot. Each conversation lasts for about 15 minutes for each student. Following are examples of the task's questions:

- 1- *Who is the kindest person you know? Why do you think so? Give an example of this person's kindness.*
- 2- *In your experience, are grownups happy or unhappy about their jobs?*
- 3- *What do you consider a good job? What are the duties? The salary? The working hours?*
- 4- *Some jobs are high stress. Name one high stress job and explain why you think it is high stress?*
- 5- *You are on a desert island and you can have your choice of two books. What two books are you going to choose and why?*
- 6- *You are still on the desert island and you can choose 10 articles of clothing to go with you. What do you choose and why?*
- 7- *What is the nicest thing that someone has ever done for you at school?*
- 8- *What is the most miserable day that you ever had in school? What made it so Miserable?*
- 9- *Describe the best teacher that you have ever had? What made him/her so good at his/her job?*
- 10- *Is a lie always bad? Can you think of a time when a lie would be permissible?*
- 11- *What was the toughest decision that you have ever had to make? Why?*

- 12- If you could change one thing about you or your life, what would you change? Why?
 13- .What was the best dream that you ever had? Why?
 14- .If you could travel to anywhere, where would you go and why?
 15- You are allowed to make the classroom rules. What is your first rule? Why?

2- Online informal CMC task: It is designed to be a collective group conversational task where students and their professor are gathered in a conversation group, and all have to share their opinions and react to each other in a relaxed context. Discussed ideas and topics are neither planned nor used for evaluative purposes, and students are aware of this fact. The whole task lasts 30 minutes. Students from both proficiency groups participated in the same task.

All conversation scripts were collected and analyzed. Each student’s interactions were taken for analysis separately in both tasks. After the primary analysis of the data which dealt with the language mistakes identification and categorization under two broad categories namely; spelling and grammar mistakes, numerous statistical analyses were, then, applied to the elicited mistakes, investigating every single aspect stated in the research questions. These analyses were very useful in gathering, organizing, analyzing and interpreting the numerical data yielded. In addition to the frequency distribution of mistakes, t-tests were also run; each one targeted a questionable aspect in the questions of research.

IX. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are discussed by addressing each of the four research questions:

1- What are the types and the frequency of mistakes present in Moroccan EFL university students’ online written conversations?

After counting the number of mistakes committed by students in their conversational interactions in both contexts, mistakes were categorized under two basic types ‘spelling’ and ‘grammar’ as reported in the following table (Table 1).

	Mistakes		Total (N)
	Grammar	Spelling	
Formal Context	203	308	511
Informal Context	434	630	1064
Total (N)/ (%)	637/ 40,4%	938/ 59,6%	1575

Table 1: Total number of all students’ mistakes in both writing tasks/contexts

The analyzed data consists of 60 writing protocol (in both tasks). The total number of mistakes is 1575 which seems to be a large number seeing that it represents a mean of 52,5 mistakes per students in both conversations, regardless of their proficiency level or their online context. This makes it clear that a large number of students can’t manage their written language when writing under computer based conditions. As for the types of mistakes made by students, all language mistakes were divided into two general types. Grammar mistakes comprise all mistakes in verb forms, tenses, articles and prepositions as in the following examples taken from actual data:

- Ex 1- If I *will to go* on a desert island.....
 Ex2- I always *lying* to get from trouble.
 Ex3- The nice thing *person* did *at* me is *help* me.

Spelling mistakes, on the other hand, encompass both aspects of forming words, and some common features that are related to chat language such as:

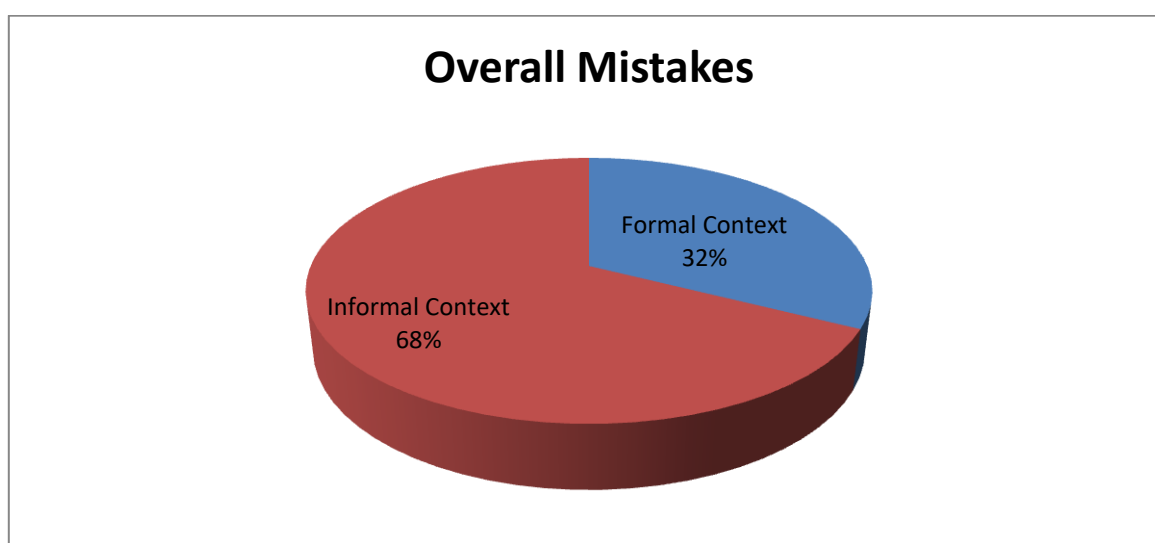
- 1. Abbreviations or shortenings:** Ex1- I sent you a *msg*/ I saw you at the *deptmnt*/ let’s meet *tmrow* in *uni*
- 2. Initialisms:** Ex- OMG you are so nice!/ IDK what you mean by this/ You are funny! LOL
- 3. Clipping:** Ex If am *gonna* on an island./ You’re *doin* a good job.
- 4. Single Letter/Number Homophones:** Also termed **logograms**: Ex- I will *c u* later/ How *r u* today?/ I bring it *2 U*.
- 5. Emoticons:** Ex ☺ happy/ ☹ Sad
- 6. Excessive use of punctuation or capitalization:** Ex- I will *NEVER* lie again/ Who told you so????????/ I was shocked!!!!!!!
- 7. Repetitions:** Ex- This job is soooooooooo good for me./ He gave him a biiiiiiig chance/ hhhhhhhhhh laughing.

Results reported in the table show that subjects made more Spelling than Grammar mistakes with percentages of 59,6% and 40,4% respectively. This is quite evidence that the language of students is rather impacted by the online context which characterizes their written language with a reliance on characteristics only present in online language. This discrepancy, though, is not very large to be conclusive; therefore, further analyses are definitely recommended.

All in all, it can be seen from a general scope and regardless of the students' level of study or the CMC online context that students, when they compose online, make a considerable amount of mistake of two major types with varying proportions, yet with a special dominance of spelling inaccuracies.

2- What is the relationship between the online CMC context and the number/types of mistakes that EFL students made in their written interaction?

The two variables at work here are that of CMC context (formal or informal), and the other of the number of mistakes. The following graph shows that almost two thirds of the overall number of mistakes were located in the students' interactions that they had in the informal context with an overall percentage of 68%.



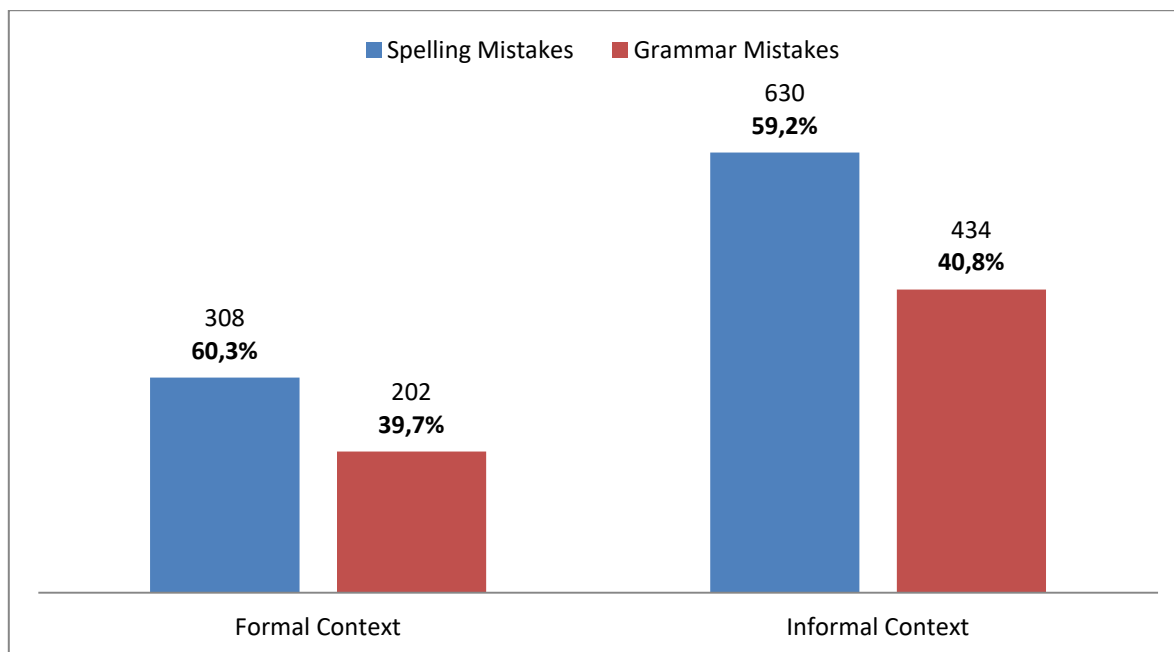
Graph 1 : Mistakes' Distributions per CMC Context

At first glance, it is clear that there exist numerically obvious differences among the two online CMC contexts in terms of the number of mistakes elicited in the subjects' different written performances. The following logical step is, then, to determine more closely the significant differences of these distributions by running inferential statistics. For this reason, a t- test has been inevitably used. The numbers shown in table 1 indicate that participant students made 1064 mistakes while writing in an informal context, and only 511 mistakes when performing in a formal context. A t-test was then performed on the number of mistakes made by every student in both contexts to see if this difference is significant. The results show that there exists a significant difference between the two contexts in the number of mistakes made with a p value of ($t=-10,957$; $df=28$; $p<.05$).

Reasons for this disparity might relate to the active presence of the variable of the professor in the formal context, which makes the students more concerned about their language. They know that they are being addressed individually, and that they are being assessed linguistically, that is why they pay more attention to their written interactions. A general remark is that their sentences, while writing under formal context, are more complete, elaborate, and informative. Such characteristics when taken into account lead to a considerable decrease of mistakes.

On the other hand, when the same students are writing in an informal context, in other words, a context where they feel freer to express their feelings and ideas in a boundary less manner, collaboratively with their mates, and when the presence of the professor is not evaluative, they don't pay attention to their language which results into committing a large number of different mistakes.

As for comparing the types of mistakes in both CMC contexts, spelling mistakes in both contexts are the general mistakes tendency for all students with overall percentages of 60,3% and 59,2% in formal and informal contexts respectively. Likewise, Grammar mistakes, on their own, represent a similar amount in both contexts with percentages of 39,7% and 40,8% in formal and informal context, respectively.



Graph 2: Types of Mistakes in both CMC Contexts

Nonetheless, this suggests a closer look at the results to see whether this apparent similarity has a worthy statistical significance or not. To this end, two t-tests are run. The results show that spelling mistakes have manifested major dissimilarities in their presence across contexts with a statistical significance of $p < .05$ level ($t=5,501; df=58; p=.019$), whereas the number of grammar mistakes across contexts obtained a non significant p value ($t=9,225; df=58; p > .05$).

T-test findings suggest that there exists a relationship between the online context and the number of spelling mistakes made by students. This might be due to the high number of spelling mistakes that a single student made in each context. The average number of spelling mistakes in the informal context is 42 per student, while it is 20,5 per student in the formal context. This high number could be seen as an indication that informal chat language influences the writing of students in a CMC when they are not being evaluated or called upon to perform ‘formally’ to their professor. And this confirms why this high number of spelling mistakes decreases when the same students write in a different formal context.

Another issue which arises is that it seems that students are not aware of the degree of informality of chat language. In other words, they don’t know that if they use shortenings, repetitions of letters or of punctuation marks, or even emoticons that they are making spelling mistakes of an informal type. One thing to fix up this problem is by raising the students’ awareness on what is being acceptable in online language and what is not.

3- Does the students’ proficiency level have an effect on the students’ online written mistakes?

Results tabulates below show that there exist a difference between the number of mistakes made by students from each proficiency group, and under each online context.

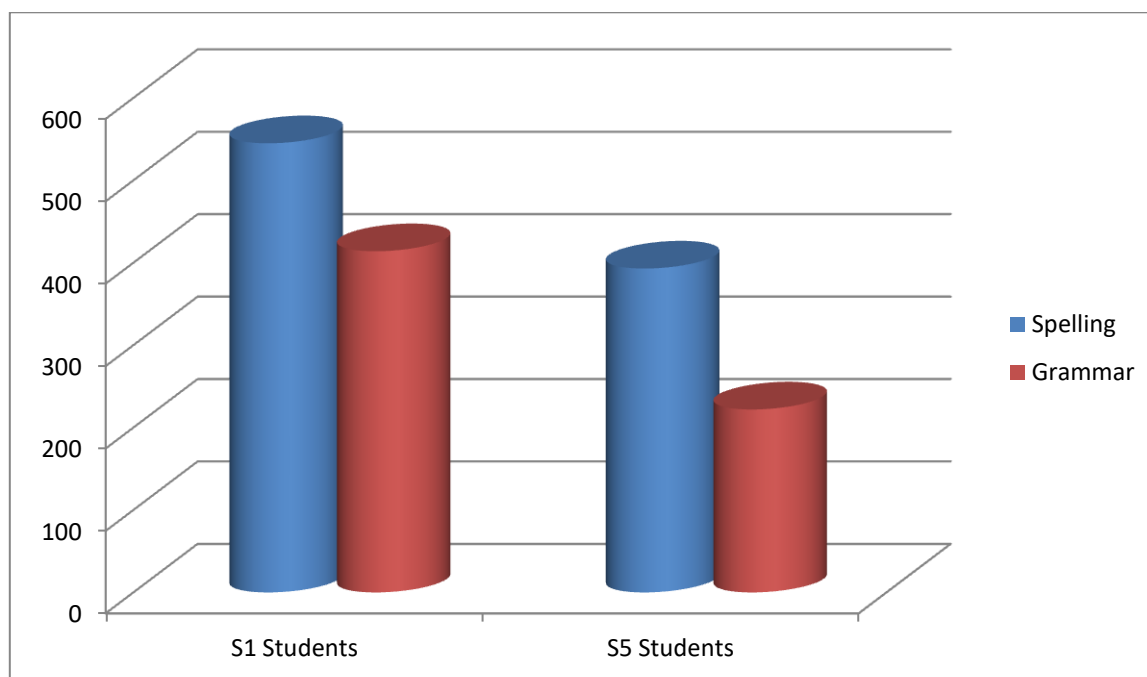
	Formal Context			Informal Context			TOTAL
	Spelling	Grammar	Total	Spelling	Grammar	Total	
S1	185	125	310	360	289	649	959
S5	123	77	200	270	145	415	615

Table 2: Overall Distribution of Mistakes per Type, Number, Proficiency Level and Online Context

As expected, S1 students tend to make more mistakes in both contexts compared to S5 students. While 60,9% of the total number of mistakes in the data are made by S1 students, only 39,1% are committed by S5 students. This might seem self explanatory since normally S5 students are more proficient and have a better command of the linguistic tools in communicating. However, it was necessary to run a t- test on the mean values of the number of mistakes obtained by students of the two groups to see if this difference is statistically significant. The results, unexpectedly, show a result of ($t=2,567; df=28; p > .05$) with no statistical significance.

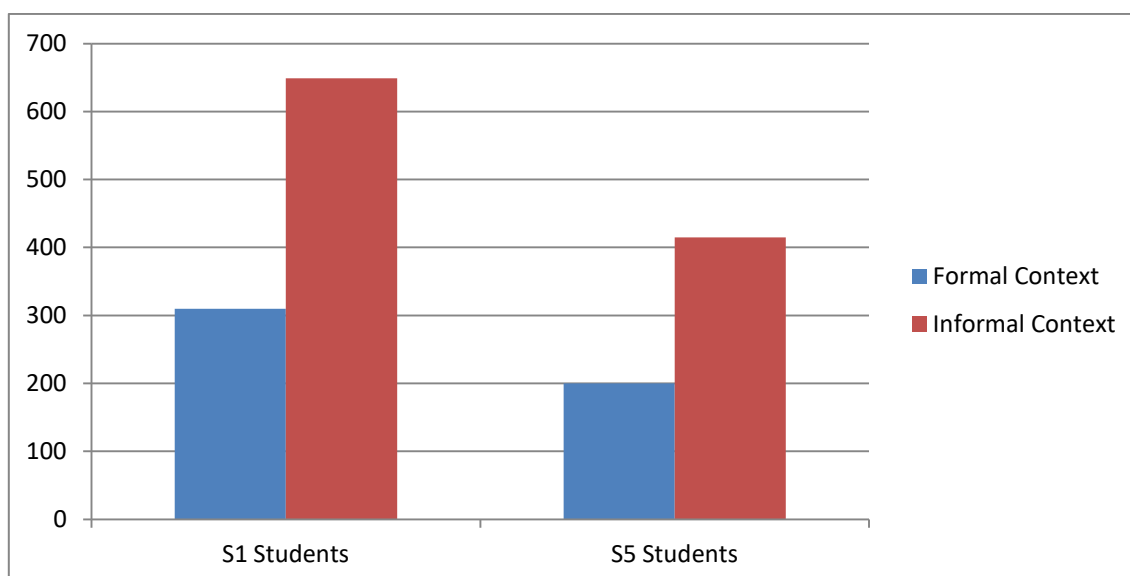
This suggests that the two groups actually do not differ in the number of mistakes made across the data. In more specific terms, all the subjects from the two different proficiency levels tend to show the same number of mistakes when writing in an online CMC context. This means that learning the language and becoming more or less proficient in it is not an indicator that the students acquire the conventions of communicating online via electronic tools. They are always inclined to communicate informally since they perceive online communication as being informal and done only for casual purposes.

Spelling mistakes are the most dominant again in the data regardless of the subjects' proficiency level.



Graph 3: Types of Mistakes for both Students' Proficiency Groups

The last graph shows clearly that students from both proficiency groups made more mistakes when writing in the online CMC informal context.



Graph 4: Distribution of Mistakes for both Students' Proficiency Groups in both contexts

4- Are students' writing protocols more affected by the students' proficiency level or the online CMC context? The answer to this question comes to conclude whatever was said earlier. It is clearly displayed that students' writing protocols which include the number and types of mistakes made by students when writing in an online

computer mediated context are not proved statistically to be affected by the level of proficiency of the subjects. However, it was proved that there exists a significant difference between the two contexts in the number of mistakes, but not for both types of mistakes.

X. FINDINGS

- 1- The variable of online CMC context influences significantly the number of mistakes made by Moroccan EFL university students in their written interactions.
- 2- The online context significantly affects the number of spelling mistakes made by students, but has no influence on the grammar mistake type.
- 3- The students' proficiency level exerts no effect on the number or type of mistakes committed in both contexts.

XI. IMPLICATIONS

These findings advocate that Moroccan EFL university students perform similarly when they write in an online CMC context regardless of their proficiency level.

Using electronic tools and, consequently online form of language is gaining popularity in today's time. We can say that there is a distinguishing line between formal English and online/chat language. This latter cannot cross that line and cannot influence formal English. Learners seem to know that there is a difference between writing in a formal context using formal language, and communicating in informal contexts via a new language variety which is chat language. All educators need is to raise the students' awareness of the dissimilarities between both forms of language, and to give explicit information about the components of each language type. Only then, practicing writing in an online CMC context can serve as a reinforcing tool of what is learned in the writing class. Writing online via electronic media can become a reliable educational tool, which would enjoy a more frequent and spreading use.

Earlier research came to the conclusion that online/chat language should be utilized positively in language learning classroom (Crystal, 2015; Javed and Mahmood, 2016). This research would rather suggest adapting formal correct language to the online CMC context. All that is required is creating out of the online context, a formal attended to instructive environment.

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