

The New Technological Tools in EFL Writing

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Introduction

The technological explosion of the last fifty years affected all domains of our daily life. Education makes no exception to the rule; it has not remained inflexible towards the profound changes taking place in other areas of knowledge. The impact of those changes on the educational areas is increasing and broadening. The first question that might be stand when considering whether to introduce computers into the writing classroom: do computers improve the writing of students? The answer, surprisingly, is that we are not sure, but it is worth trying.



Using Computer to Teach Writing

In spite of the contradictory or inclusive research on the qualitative changes affected in writing any word-processing system, the computer does improve students' writing at certain more specific levels. Following are some of the advantages of using computers in writing instructions.

- a- Students produce neat texts and take pride in the neatness of texts.
- b- They produce, to a certain extent, more error free texts.
- c- They take more initiative, spend, more time on assignments and more time on task, thus they are more involved with assignments.
- d- They are eager to experiment and take risks.
- e- They are more empowered and see themselves as individuals who are "in print".
- f- They show more enthusiasm and more positive attitudes.
- g- They display more engagement with text; they are also more aware of the recurrence and the writing process.
- h- They are more able and willing to revise and read one author's writing or engage in peer review, collaborate and interact, then forge a unified class identity.
- i- They develop of computer skills
- j- They better communicate cross-culturally
- k- They are aware of global issues & concerns

It is easier for the teacher to intervene due to the neat orderly presentation of text on a monitor. It is also much easier to reshuffle, add, modify or delete words and/or sentences without crossing out or erasing, leaving then with "neat text". Also, they remember where that paper is; instead, all they need access to that text, which is waiting in the computer.

Citing the above benefits of using computers to teach writing does not mean that computers are the panacea for all pedagogical difficulties, but a new tool that is gaining ground in our daily life. It is like the use of the calculator in education nowadays. In addition, it can be used to avoid monotonous classical writing lessons and cut down routine and some of the students' boredom in class. The writing laboratory may give more interest and motivation to learners. Yet, teachers can combine pen and paper and computers in the different writing phases (pre, while and post).

The aim of using new technologies in writing instruction is to provide a variety of perspective writing research and to facilitate the discovery and critical analysis of the possibilities of teaching language skills. Many teachers still lack computer expertise, which is now a major problem. Distance education is gaining the ground and in a couple of years teachers might be asked to prepare online courses. Tomorrow's events have to be planed today; we have always been reluctant in making decisions and sometimes resisting to any change. The acceptance of

Internet as a new communicative tool has taken more time in Algeria than some of our neighbouring countries. Then, we have spent more time and efforts to make up the delay. There is no doubt that the country is losing ground in e-learning and distance education either because policy makers and educational institutions do not dare enough or because they are not quite ready to incorporate such pedagogical tools due to their costs or other unknown concerns.

Nevertheless, applying such technological tools requires the availability of both computers and Internet connection. This implies a serious financial problem as well as the spatial limit for the computer laboratory. Another requirement is the capability of teachers to handle new technologies. Some if not many language teachers are not computer specialists and so it is reasonable to demand too advanced computing knowledge and skills from them, for computer facilities could benefit language learning. Like teachers, students need to have reasonable computer knowledge.

The Internet for Writing

Nowadays, many researchers advocate a multimedia approach for writing. They contend that these applications add a context and purpose for writing, which are both motivational and meaningful. The Internet is another innovative way of using the computer as a communication tool in educational settings. It is a worldwide network that connects many smaller networks with a common set of procedures for sending and receiving information. **Morrison, et al (1999)** identified three educational uses for the Internet. It serves as a source of information, a place for collaboration, and a place to publish. Many schools are linked to the Internet so those students are able to access information and communicate with people in their communities and around the world.

Others as **Cummins and Saywers (1995)**, **Gable (1997)** **Yost (1998)** **Mills (1995)** and **Donovan (1998)** maintained that it is through this medium that there can be widespread educational renewal in our schools. In using the network system of the Internet, educators can promote academic development across the content, including literacy development, critical thinking, and problem solving. They identified the computer as being motivational, a means of reinforcing learning, and a tool for the future. **Lacombe (1997)** concluded that good writing is a taught skill and a computer facilitates the execution of that skill. She emphasized the use of the computer as a tool for writing and not a solution to the problems that face students in their writing. She cautioned that as a tool the computer can ease the writing process that is exacerbated by the difficulty of making revisions with pencil and paper; however, it cannot rectify writing problems that are not understood by the student.

The fast evolution and the availability of new technologies: multimedia, electronic network and the new methods of transmission and information are

changing the way the educational system works slowly but steadily. The data show is replacing the chalkboard and the flash disk the paper lesson plan documents. In other words they are broadening the array of possibilities for the limited traditional teaching-learning process. It is not said that the machines are to replace teachers, but to support, facilitate and complete the educational objectives. A computer can not take the place /role of a teacher, i.e. a human being with a heart and mind. The effective dimension is of a great importance in the process of teaching/learning. Hence, teachers are not asked to abandon those traditional methods absolutely but to update them according to the new educational expectations. Teaching how to use computers has become a must for any learner whatever his/her special field is, for there are countless reasons to justify the implementation of such technological projects.

It is wisely impossible to predict exactly what effects the Internet, for instance, will have and bring to education, but it is becoming evident that it is here to stay and it is ready to influence society. Though we do not have a lot of experiences so far, yet it might be reasonable that it would acquire great significance. It is becoming imperative, then, that learning to work with computers and understanding new technologies is assimilated into the curriculum and into the teaching methods.

It is almost impossible to ignore the Internet; it is an invaluable source of information, which can be useful in education. Learning to work with the information highway is a prerequisite today. People speak about information and Communication Technology illiteracy (ICT), (who is ICT literate and who is not) particularly in job opportunities. It is among the responsibilities of educational institutions to help learners develop values, such as tolerance and respect for other cultures. The Internet, however, may be used to deepen our cultural understanding and lessen or eradicate stereotypes and interpretations of caricatures.

The Internet has tremendous potential as a tool for teaching EFL learners. How can we best utilize this new phenomenon, so as to enable our students to be part of the global village? How can we carry on real correspondence with other EFL learners and native speakers of English throughout the world? Experiencing the virtual classroom can make the Internet in a meaningful context. To enhance EFL students' creative writing ability, it is recommended that time has to be spent on interactive writing rather than independent and solitary writing. Online courses may be used to motivate learners and provide them with rich learning opportunities in language creative writing.

Many recent researchers reported that online courses had made writing an enjoyable task. It provided a non-threatening environment for trying out new ways for students of expressing themselves in English. Studies also showed that they were encouraged to trust their own linguistic ability. It nurtured their creativity in

every way possible. The students dived into the writing task because it was exciting, challenging and fun. They felt comfortable and unthreatened, and a positive relationship with their classmates and teachers was fostered. Friendliness as a sense of humour and playfulness prevailed in the online course. When asking students to communicate with people in higher institutions they can have access to some clear, formal native English, which is invaluable to them as EFL learners, who have few opportunities to communicate with educated English speakers by means of e-mails.

E-mail in writing lessons

Among the new technologies "e-mail" is one of the most popular applications used on the Internet. It can be anything from an informal one-liner to a formal letter but using acceptable correct grammar and vocabulary. This can take many forms, of which teacher- students' interaction, students-students interaction and whole-class interaction are the most obvious. Teachers, nowadays, in many places of the world seem to be increasingly inclined to publicize their e-mail addresses as their preferred mode of contact with students outside of class. This would allow students to have more contact with their teachers who wish to discuss about daily or weekly assignments, ask questions, and get clarifications on assignments easily and even sent copies as e-mail attachments. On the other hand, this may create additional work for the teacher. In this case it is advisable to caution students and set time limits of online availability particularly with overcrowded classes. Using Internet to teach EFL students may be a treasure of authentic materials for teachers and students and the information used is up-to-date. Furthermore, students are more visually oriented, they are not very excited by mere textbooks, no matter how colourful they have become.

Regardless the number of the technical problems like the current cut down, disconnection and some difficulties to have access to one's e-mail account, e-mailing may be motivational for shy students to express their views more openly without fear; this may give them self-confidence and eventually improve their writing ability. According to studies done twelve years ago in some western countries, students showed positive attitudes towards e-mail as teaching-learning tool. They were highly motivated because they perceived the e-mail as a very stimulating and dynamic means to communication. Students, nowadays, feel acquainted and more familiar with a communication tool that is vital to their survival in the twenty-first century.

Research shows that e-mail is a very useful vehicle for teaching English **Lee (1998)**. In addition to the cultural, social and academic information, students may feel contributing to the learning process of others while correcting and responding to others' e-mails; that what makes them feel collaborating, helping and enriching themselves and others' learning processes. With the LMD system educational

institutions often claim for the students' autonomy. The use of Internet is more convenient for such objectives and the vital interaction and feedback may give them a sense of responsibility towards their own learning as well as a sense of particular freedom. Besides, e-mail can furnish teacher-student, student-teacher communications, exchange of dialogue journals and writing conferencing **Belisle, (1996).**

It is not easy for students to consult a teacher because of shyness or lack of time. Just give the students the teacher's e-mail address and let them know that questions and comments are welcome. Students can tell ask the teacher more freely what they want without interrupting the teacher when he/she is busy. For EFL writing classes e-mail may be used to enable the teacher to monitor the process of students' writings to save class time for comments and conferencing. E-mail provides students with an excellent opportunity for real and natural communication; it can put EFL students with native speakers or other students of English around the world. Besides the writing skill, the students are supplied with a wide range of skills: how to use a personal computer, how to navigate through the immense source of the cyberspace and how to become familiar with special register of e-mail communication. Is the twenty-first literate the being who could use a computer and speak English? As language learning is a process that involves two main concepts: language and communication, most teachers usually admit how difficult it is for students to use the target language (T.L) in classroom in a meaningful way. Introducing the computers in the writing courses may pave the way to internet use in the writing laboratory trying to create the most realistic situations to motivate students to use language effectively. No strategy or tool has been yet proved to be the one to bring the cure to all our pedagogical problems.

Teachers have to feel convinced of the benefits of such a use for language learning. First of all, teachers have to find a group of teachers sharing the teaching objectives and experimenting the same teaching tools and reflecting on ways of using them in EFL writing classroom. The group of teachers have to know what their learners will be exposed to beforehand to face the different problems they may encounter and to help them prepare more promptly and appropriately with technical problems. Another thing to regard is to select among the platforms offered "The world of education" enabling private conferences to avoid the danger of undesirable interferences. The different activities will contribute to a certain extent to learning process: autonomy and responsibility, team work, collaboration, awareness of the real world and the cultural diversity.

Teachers can first discuss with colleagues worldwide from different countries, discuss and suggest topics of common interest (personal, social, cultural or academic in nature). The teacher's role is of a paramount importance to introduce

remedial strategies to encourage students to continue participating. While dividing the students into groups the teacher has to mix the students' abilities, in other words, the more fluent or computer literate peers can help and coach the weaker students. After all, it is advisable to have computing knowledge. In addition to number of advantages of using Internet as a learning tool, it allows for a better and more comprehensive awareness of the external world and generates richer language learning experiences and environment.

Conclusion

It is believed that it is high time to think of introducing computers for teaching writing and taking profit of the new technological tools and include them in education to help prepare future citizens to survive in the information and communication era. Yet, the integration of e-learning at university level, at least the introduction of new media in EFL needs time and money. We know more or less how to use some communication tools, but do we know really how to build a new learning culture to set its bases and promote its success? Could we avoid the exclusion of those who can not manipulate and manage these rather sophisticated modern tools? The answer is not simple.

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