Fostering EFL learners' writing skills using word processing within a computer-assisted process-writing framework

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Abstract

Word processing is a computer application that allows text to be entered and stored in a computer file as well as to be changed and formatted in a variety of ways, thus, facilitating the writing process. The purpose of this paper is to discuss why WP can be exploited as a beneficial writing tool for creating and manipulating texts for EFL purposes. It also focuses on how WP can enhance EFL learners' motivation, open the way for collaborative writing activities and offer a supportive learning environment through group work by stimulating conversation among learners and affecting positively their attitude towards both the process and product of writing.

Key-words: word-processing, collaboration, motivation, process-writing, flexibility

1. Introduction

By the early 1990s, educational technology has become a well established part of the international field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Taylor et al. (1996-97) state that technology is not only a helpful but also a transformative tool in the language classroom as it can offer a great flexibility and variety in terms of scheduling classes, pacing of individual learners, selection of activities and selection of content. Technology can enhance English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning when teachers focus on the learning objectives and then choose the type of technology and the tasks that best suit the objectives (Chun & Brandl, 1992). The most common computer-based technologies currently in use are the word processor, CDs, authoring software and the internet (web, e-mail, discussion lists, blogs, etc).

In particular, the fact that the development of the writing skill remains one of the most difficult areas which the majority of EFL learners seem to regard as the least enjoyable of the four skills as well as the way that it has been neglected or treated poorly up till now in the school courseware necessitate a more systematic development of learners' writing skills through technology. To 'fill this gap', word processing (WP) can be integrated into the EFL classroom in order to increase learners' motivation while conducting the whole writing process - planning, drafting, composing, editing and proof-reading- not merely as a typewriter for copying out a final neat version.

2. Fostering EFL writing skills through WP

2.1. Theoretical review

The positive contribution of WP to the development of learners' writing skills is stated by Piper (1987) who pinpoints that it includes two aspects: the first aspect concerns the features and functions of the word-processor itself and their effects on teacher's preparation and class management, on the range of possible learning activities and on the final product. The second aspect concerns the apparent impact the WP has on EFL learners, in terms of what it enables them to do and how it motivates them to write. According to Piper (1987), after investigating the learners' attitudes towards WP, learners feel more enthusiastic about EFL writing. In other words, composing in a foreign language tends to be an interesting, even pleasurable, process. In this sense, Piper suggests that WP seems to exert some kind of fascination over learners mainly due to its ability to make the writing activity easier.

Apart from motivation which is claimed to be a major advantage, another positive impact of WP is stressed by Pennington (1996:125) who makes reference to a 'natural computer based writing approach' which is facilitated by a development process consisting of the four following stages: writing easier, writing more, writing differently, writing better. Pennington's model of a Natural Writing Process can be described as 'a linked chain of intensive writing episodes in which content is generated and then reworked over time towards a final product' (1996:127). All the above effects, according to Pennington (1996:126) can create a learning/teaching context where a 'highly natural process' facilitated by the computer turns to be a 'highly effective writing process' which consistently leads to good written products. In other words, word-processed writing smoothly moves from quantity towards quality through a series of stages which facilitate the production of high-quality written texts following a process-writing framework.

Other researchers (Bialo and Sivin, 1990; Bright, 1990; Novak,1996) state that the use of WP leads to better writing outcomes than the use of paper-and-pencil tasks or conventional typewriters. Specific positive outcomes associated with the exploitation of WP in writing include: longer written samples, greater variety of word usage, more variety of sentence structures, more accurate mechanics and spelling, more substantial revision, greater responsiveness to teacher and peer feedback, better understanding of the writing process, better attitudes toward writing and freedom from the problem of illegible handwriting (Batey, 1986; Bialo and Sivin, 1990; Collins, 1984; Dickinson, 1986).

Qualitative writing is enhanced through the use of word processors since, as Piper (1987:123-124) argues, 'the word processor seems to inspire a desire for perfection which is manifested in the constant refinement of the text… and also to inspire concentration on the writing process'. Another contribution of word processors to the whole writing process is that corrections can be carried out several times before the final writing product while drafting and redrafting can be carried out without the need to work exhaustively and/or feeling puzzled due to a mass of corrections. Furthermore, while using WP errors take on an entirely new status as the word processor error is ephemeral, with none of the permanence of a mistake written on a piece of paper and this facilitates the process of moving from a first draft through self- and peer-evaluation and redrafting to a final draft.

2.2. Why using WP

The growing use of WP as a 'real world activity' (Hardisty & Windeatt, 1989) has already established it as an 'authentic tool' for writing. Formatting features, icons that enable learners to cut, copy and paste a piece of writing, drop down menus such as the spell- and grammar-checker or the thesaurus, the ease of entering a picture or sound segment in the document offer the flexibility for text generation, modification and development and are inextricably linked to the process writing approach which views text evolution as 'dynamic' and ever-changing (Daiute, 1985). The possibility of moving from a first draft through a process of evaluation and redrafting to a final draft which would have been cumbersome on paper is now not only feasible but also spontaneous. Therefore, error takes an entirely new ephemeral status permitting learners to take risks (Piper, 1987).

Piper (1987) states that a word processor offers an environment which is highly motivating and learners who use the word processor concentrate more than those who use pen and paper. At the same time, on-screen writing helps learners regard their work more objectively as readers. They read their work as an audience member, one step removed from themselves and from the written output. WP enhances learners' motivation, opens the way for collaborative writing activities and offers a supportive learning environment fostering small-group work and stimulating conversation among learners (Piper, 1987). WP has a motivational impact especially on basic/elementary writers and, as studies suggest, there is close relationship between motivational factors and writing quality (Bangert-Drowns, 1993). All the above-mentioned properties are supplemented with a model of computer writing skills (Bangert-Drowns, 1993; Pennington, 1996) which represents the evolution of natural writing based on WP and affects learners' attitude towards it as well as the process and the product of writing.

Piper (1987) makes reference to certain characteristics and functions of word processors which contribute to learners' writing production and perfection. For instance, learners can use the formatting function in order to exercise and vary paragraph structure, use deletion and insertion keys in order to experiment with sentence linking or insert lines to divide the text into paragraphs, mark a part of a text and move it somewhere else. Word processors contain a wide variety of tools that help with layout, construction and reconstruction of texts. In using them, writers can look at the text they have just written, and rewrite, reorganise, and redraft it. Redrafting is viewed as a valuable way to clarify the writer's developing purpose and understanding (Connor et al, 1994). That is to mean that with a word processor we are 'thinking on the screen', 'making decisions on the screen' and 'writing on the screen' in partnership with technology.

2.3. How using WP

The best way to integrate WP into the writing curriculum is to focus on the learners and the curriculum, not on the word processor (Robinson, 1991). WP can be used for conducting the whole writing process - planning, drafting, composing, editing and proof-reading- not merely as a typewriter for copying out a final neat version. WP is a computer application that allows text to be entered and stored in a computer file as well as to be changed and formatted in a variety of ways, thus, facilitating the writing process. Within this context, the teacher attempts to make learners feel comfortable

with technology and familiarises them with the keyboard and the computer applications, starting from easy functions and proceeding with more difficult ones providing a collaborative environment by assigning pair/group work activities which facilitate and encourage interaction. WP in computer labs encourages learners' interaction and offers excellent opportunities for joint composition (Hyland, 1993).

In other words, to make effective use of WP, learners need some basic WP skills (Hunter et al, 1989). During the initial class periods in the computer lab, the teacher should provide an orientation that introduces learners to WP, covering basic functions such as opening a WP application, moving around in a document, simple editing, formatting documents, saving a document and printing (Kahn & Freyd, 1990).

Last but not least, learners tend to be more motivated to write for real reasons - communicating with a friend about a mutual interest, writing to a magazine or for a magazine, preparing information for a bulletin board, taking part in an on-line discussion or debate. In these situations there is a real audience, or readership, and the learner-writer will take care to address this readership appropriately, attractively or persuasively as the need is perceived, depending on the specific context.

2.4. Towards a process-writing framework

Researchers (Hansen, 1987; Harste et al, 1988) investigating the way writing is taught have found that most teachers are concerned with the final product of writing, but do not focus on the process that writers use in creating that product. However, the process approach offers opportunities for practice, collaboration and revision and learner autonomy. To this end, the word processor, as already mentioned above, can be used as a tool which can simultaneously facilitate the writing process and contribute to the production of good quality written output. Researchers concerned with writing outcomes have determined that writing performance is ameliorated when the teaching approach emphasizes 'writing-as-a-process', rather than focusing only on the final written product-the finished composition because the writing-as–a-process approach encourages learners to engage in sub-processes such as prewriting activities, followed by drafting, revising, editing and final publication, with each step receiving often feedback from teachers and peer editors promoting learners' writing performance.

In particular, Bangert-Drowns (1993:83) remarks that there is a strong relationship or 'correlation' between writing quantity and quality. In addition to this 'correlational relationship', as Pennington (1996:135) claims, learners-writers have more opportunities to reflect on and develop their ideas, spend more time on revising and polishing their written work easily and efficiently, stay with ideas and language longer and rework them collaboratively. In this way, a piece of writing is developed over many episodes of recursive content generation and revision achieving a refined final written product.

Moreover, Bangert-Drowns (1993) focuses on the benefits of WP regarding the whole composing procedure stating that the production of a written text with the use of a word processor helps learners to consider that writing a text is a procedure during which the re-writing of the same text, as well as reviewing and writing the final draft are easily carried out. Learners can store their drafts and improve their texts by elaborating their structure by moving, cutting, copying and pasting paragraphs or sentences easily. This continuous elaboration of drafts promotes feedback processes towards achieving a final draft which is more probable to be error-free.

Hyland (1993:25) adds that since the word processor facilitates the production and rearrangement of a text, it allows the use of tasks which both develop language skills and help familiarize learners with WP features.

2.5. Teacher's role

The teacher is a key actor in the whole writing process trying to create a supportive and more effective learning environment by encouraging learners to feel safe taking risks in order to develop a community of writers who support each other and share with each other (writing as social construction - Hyland, 2009). There is a minimum of interference and intervention on the part of the teacher with emphasis on computer guidance, peer-and self-evaluation (O' Brien, 2004) while the evaluation points contribute to the successful textuality (coherence and cohesion- Carrell, 1982). Moreover, the teacher needs to have the technical competence required to manage the use of WP for a writing course as effectively as possible.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, WP proves to be a valuable tool which supports, enhances and extends the school curriculum by assisting learners and minimizing their difficulties in tackling writing increasing at the same time their motivation and involvement (Lo & Hyland, 2007). Hence, it seems that WP can make a positive contribution to the development of learners' writing skills. As Pennington (1996:139) characteristically mentions, a computer and, in particular, a word processor functions as a partner assisting the learner-writer to develop a skilled writing process by creating an environment for generating, formatting and managing the text which evolves to a writing process that focuses on developing and refining content exploiting WP operations constantly and effectively.

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