Computer technology in the ESL/EFL writing classroom: Impacts on teachers

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Abstract

This paper gives a brief review of the status of ESL/EFL writing instruction, with an emphasis on the writing teachers’ role in an environment where computer technology is available, and examines the changes that this technology has brought to writing teachers with respect to their relationship with students, syllabus design, their choice of instructional approaches, and teaching strategies.

Keywords

Computer technology, ESL writing, classroom, teachers’ role, CALL.

Introduction

With the use of computer technology in many language classrooms, ESL/EFL writing teachers are once more challenged. The literature reveals that students have benefited from computer technology (Silver 1990; Allen 1995), but few studies have focused on the teacher’s new role.

ESL writing instruction started in the 1960s, due to an increasing enrolment of non-English speakers in American higher education (Leki 1992). The four instructional approaches, Controlled/Guided Composition, Current-traditional Rhetoric, Process, and English for Academic Purposes, have taken turns in dominating the writing class but they have also co-existed (Silva 1990). In a Controlled Composition class, a teacher prepares and designs activities, guiding students to practise bits of language in sentence patterns and focusing on grammatical perfection. Students apply their sentence-level practice to paragraphs and then to full essays. In the mid-sixties, some ESL teachers adopted the Current-traditional Rhetoric Approach to meet students’ needs to write extended discourse. The application of this approach was aided by the birth of the study of contrastive rhetoric, which surmised that each culture has a manner of presenting ideas particular to itself, just as each language has syntax particular to itself (Kaplan 1966). The teachers would determine the paragraph patterns typical of English for the students to imitate. They focused on the overt features of an English discourse – word, sentence and paragraph structures, discourse genres, syntax and language use. In the early 1980s, L2 writing teachers embraced the Process Approach (Leki 1992), helping students work throughout their composing process – getting started, drafting, revising and editing (Kroll 1990). The teacher functioned as an idea generator, encourager, coach, and collaborator. At the same time, writing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) was being taught with the growing interest in English for special academic purposes courses. In this approach, the teacher helps students write in English for their class assignments such as essays and lab reports, and for their academic fields. The teacher functions as a real reader, judge, and evaluator. These roles are, according to Cowan (1977), the three different personae of the writing teacher. A writing teacher could do a good job by giving assignments, marking papers, and providing readings (Raimes 1983), and by recognising the complexity of
composing (Raimes 1991). But when computers are available in a writing class, how do they impact on teachers and the way they teach?

**Pedagogical applications of computer technology – Impacts on teachers**

Since the 1960s, computers have been used to assist instruction and language learning. Three stages of CALL correspond to ESL writing instruction approaches. Behaviourist CALL, which appeared in 1960s and 1970s, matches the Controlled Composition Approach. Communicative CALL, from the 1970s and 1980s, focused more on using forms rather than on the forms themselves, and corresponds to Cognitive theories and the Process Approach. In Integrative CALL, teachers have moved away from a Cognitive view of communicative language teaching to a Socio-cognitive view that emphasises real language use in meaningful and authentic contexts (Warschauer & Healey 1998; Cozens, this volume; Warschauer, this volume), and thus matches with EAP in ESL writing instruction.

Computer applications have brought changes to the writing class in three aspects. Firstly, computers change the teacher–student relationship positively (Kenning & Kenning 1990). The teacher exchanges e-mails with his/her students, leaves electronic assignments, provides a communicative outlet for the students, extends authentic input and corrective feedback (González-Bueno 1998), and takes part in the drafting process. Secondly, the teacher has to make special efforts to integrate computer technology into the syllabus by taking into consideration factors such as students’ computer literacy and their attitude towards technology. The teacher even has to lobby administrators to install or upgrade computers and other facilities in the classroom. Thirdly, the teacher consciously or unconsciously changes his/her teaching approaches and strategies. In a seemingly less ‘structured’ teaching environment, a new pattern of interaction emerges which further contributes to developing students’ writing skills (Kamisli 1992). Unlike in a traditional teacher-centred classroom, different activities and teaching strategies are used in computer-assisted L2 writing (Allen 1995; Wang 1996) where the teacher functions more as a facilitator of, and guide to, learning rather than merely an imparter of information to the students. With the availability of the Internet, the teacher is no longer the supreme authority in possessing information or knowledge. Consequently, the teacher can best help the students by guiding them to participate actively and critically in the learning process.

Advantages to using word processing (Kamisli 1992; Lam & Pennington 1993; Mehdi 1994; Sullivan & Pratt 1996) and e-mail (Tella 1992; Liaw 1996) have been noted, including writing, exchanging ideas, and bringing social skills into focus. Meanwhile, potential problems are also acknowledged, for example, computers are not a panacea for all aspects of language teaching (Kenning & Kenning 1990); and student–teacher e-mail interaction might overload the teacher (Warschauer et al. 2000). Nevertheless, supportive views prevail.

**Conclusion**

What implications do computer applications and the changes they bring have for writing teachers? Firstly, teachers need to upgrade their knowledge of modern technology. With the availability of the Internet, students have extensive resources, so writing teachers might fall behind their students in knowledge learning. Secondly, teachers are responsible for classroom management in ensuring that students’ time is not wasted in class. Students used to rely on their teacher in their learning, but now various related training and materials are available online. Teachers have to plan wired lessons carefully in advance, taking into consideration the content of Web sites, downloading time, and language appropriateness. Thirdly, teachers need to set realistic goals and express these clearly
in the syllabus, together with the course purpose and description, and the requirements of the students. Fourthly, teachers are challenged in their personal and interpersonal functions. The tone and atmosphere that they set in the classroom determine whether the students’ non-linguistic emotional needs are met.

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Acknowledgement

This overview is part of a study completed with the sponsorship of Grant for Humanities and Social Science Research at Jilin University.