The Role of E-mail Activities in EFL Writing Classes

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Abstract

Technological advances have greatly affected teaching and learning at different levels and consequently CALL is a research area that has received great interest recently. The present study aims at providing an overview of the role of e-mail activities in EFL writing classes. An assumption that is sometimes made by composition instructors is that the incorporation of e-mail writing exercises in curricula will necessarily have beneficial effects on students' academic composition abilities. However, if e-mail creates features of both written and spoken language, it is questionable that the e-mail writing will necessarily improve their academic writing abilities. In order to address this question, this study investigates whether student-produced writing in e-mail and traditional pen-and-paper mood is similar or different with respect to factors like the length of text produced in each medium, and the type of structures used. Forty students majoring in English as foreign language in an advanced writing class were the subjects of the study. They were first given a five-point Likert scale questionnaire asking them about their feelings and attitudes toward using computer and also their abilities and what they can do with it. The same questionnaire was given to their teachers to compare the results. The students then were randomly divided into two groups of twenty. Over the course of the semester one group and the teacher corresponded several times in the form of e-mail assignments. The other group did their assignments using traditional writing tools and submitted their papers to the teacher for correction and feedback. The findings suggested that although e-mail was proved to be an authentic communicative writing activity (Weasenforth & Biesenbach-Lucas 1998), and that texts produced by the writers using computer and exchanging writing tasks via e-mail as a supplement to traditional writing instruction provided little or no benefits in improving students’ overall academic writing skills. However, the research concluded that it could be at least as good as traditional instruction.

Keywords: CALL, E-mail, EFL writing, traditional writing

Introduction

The unlimited access to information which can now be viewed and digested at a student’s own rate of learning and in accordance with a student’s own level of interest, significantly changes the dynamics of the learning environment (Reed, Helen, 2010). Growing demand among learners for improved accessibility and convenience has greatly affected the educational settings.
The result is a dynamic competitive environment among those universities that adapt learning processes and administrative procedures in which students attend classrooms where a full-time faculty teaches and those that are adapting technologies to better serve their clients although many of which have not yet committed whole-heartedly to using technology systematically. Our educational system, however, still places the teacher as expert in front of the classroom and students are forced to learn within a rigid system that does not match with the world in which they function or the interest and interaction that they encounter outside the walls of the classroom. We are now in a position to exercise options that were beyond our comprehension a mere decade ago. How we educate a generation that can comprehend, cope with and direct these technologies is a challenge that schools must respond to. Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) is an approach to teaching and learning in which the computer and computer-based resources such as the Internet are used to present, reinforce and access material to be learned. Although few of the tools were originally designed for pedagogical purposes, many have been successfully used to enable teaching and learning over the Internet. CALL has also been known by several other terms such as technology-enhanced language learning, computer-assisted language instruction (Davis) and computer-aided language learning. One important form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), computer applications that facilitate communication, for students to interact is the use of E-mail. Research shows that e-mail is a very useful vehicle for teaching English (Lee, 1998; Warschauer, 1995). Communication via computer and Internet can be in two main forms; synchronous communication and asynchronous communication. Asynchronous communication is carried out most frequently via E-mail. Rapid advances in information technology and easy access to internet are reshaping educational institutions by providing new learning environments and new ways to teach. E-mail and other forms of asynchronous computer-mediated communication have been used for a variety of purposes in second language classes. E-mail is concerned with the clear and unambiguous transmission of messages, and stresses a two-way communication channel. In EFL writing classes e-mail is a very useful and powerful vehicle for teaching. It enables the teacher to monitor the process of the students’ writings to save class time for the teacher's assignments and comments (Belisle, 1996). In 1997 Warchauer looked at the use of e-mail between a teacher and her students in a graduate ESL writing class. He found that e-mail was a powerful medium for apprenticeship learning, with the teacher able to provide students with detailed and rapid feedback on the immediate problems and questions that they had. This benefit, though, seemed largely due to the teacher’s willingness to put a lot of time and effort into reading and responding to the students’ e-mail messages, a luxury that many teachers might not have.

Review of Related Literature

During the 1980s, the microcomputer became an important tool for many educational purposes. The most common use of computer as tool, and probably the most common use overall of the computer for language learning, is word processing. High quality programs like Microsoft Word can be useful for certain academic or business settings (Healey & Johnson, 1955a). Some programs, such as IdeaFisher from IdeaFisher Systems and Inspiration from Inspiration Software, help students in the pre-writing stage to generate and outline ideas. Most word-processors now also come with spelling checkers, giving weak spellers some help in finding their errors and recognizing the correct spelling from a list of option. Studies by Neu and Scarcella (1991) and Phinney (1991) show that students have positive attitudes toward writing with computers. In a study published in the “Journal of Research on Computing in Education” (Langone and Levine
1996), the use of computer-based word-processing was found to have a positive effect on the writing of students with disabilities by making them more independent. Other students’ writing showed little improvement, except that they were more likely to edit, spend more time on their writing and express a more positive attitude toward writing. A meta-analysis of studies from 1990-1995 (Coley 1997) indicated that using technology for writing instruction was valuable in improving writing because of the ease of editing. Thus the quality of writing was improved. Indeed, many of the studies in the literature reviews report positive student attitudes as defined by lower anxiety levels, higher interest, and greater student participation (Gray & Stockwell, 1998; Liu et al., 2002; Singhal, 1998.). Writing now includes research on e-mail correspondence as a way of improving motivation and writing skills.

First, by using e-mail in the writing class students become familiar with a communication tool that is vital to their survival in the 21st century. Second, shy students have a chance to express themselves and ask questions. Students who do not like to express themselves in a group tend to do better with writing. Expressing ideas via e-mail gives students self-confidence and eventually improves their writing ability. Third, teacher can interact with a student or group of students working at a project at times that are more convenient to the student, group, and the teacher. Electronic mail gives students the convenience of responding at their own convenience thereby giving them the time to contemplate their responses. Moreover, writing assignments received can be organized electronically. Another advantage of using e-mail for writing purposes is that in terms of increased facility of writing, EFL students do not have to worry about handwriting since they type on the computers, and the words they write have more possibility to be revised when writing on a computer, as it is easier to use the backspace button than an eraser. E-mail is also a convenient and discrete way for the instructor to contact students who need extra attention. The types of comments that instructors make also vary. Tarvers and Buswell (2000) identify two types of comments made by email tutors: overview comments and intertextual comments (p. 7). Overview comments are those that comment on the organization and overall impression of the paper. Intertextual comments are those that are related to specific areas of the paper. Additionally, Jackson (2000) discusses the concept of writer-centered metacognition in which the tutor structures the tutoring environment so that the tutee reflects upon his or her learning and writing process. A combination of different types of responses will help the instructor maintain an ongoing dialogue with his or her students.

One problem associated with the asynchronous nature of email tutoring, as identified by Weedon (2000), is that, "The opportunity for discussing the comments with the tutor in a face-to-face interaction is in many cases not available" (p.186). Therefore, several researchers caution of the possibility of misinterpretation of the tutor's comments (Barker, 2002; Weedon, 2000). As a result, the teacher should elicit feedback from the student as to his or her understanding of the comments and suggestions made. After sending feedback, the teacher may consider following up with the student a day or two after sending his or her feedback. Weedon (2000) emphasized the importance of developing a method of receiving feedback from students about the comments they received. She contends that it is important to get feedback about whether comments are helpful to the students. She also suggests exploring whether the student interpreted comments the way that the teacher intended.

The Present Study

This study will examine using e-mail for purposes of EFL writing instruction and learning. Much of the technology research has been based on the investigation of the computer use that facilitates or promotes those things that we believe aid language acquisition as
interaction, target language input, and motivation rather than on the measurement of the outcomes. In this study attempt is to find out whether using e-mail exchanges as a technique to teach and learn writing English can really help in practice or not. A total of forty students in an advanced writing class were the subjects of the study. They were first given a five-point Likert scale questionnaire asking them about their feelings and attitudes toward using computer and also their abilities and what they can do with it. The survey questions were worded so they would be understandable to university students at intermediate level and above. Nevertheless students were also told they could consult a dictionary or ask their teacher if there were any unclear points. The same questionnaire was given to their teachers to be completed in order to compare the obtained results. The mean responses to all questions were calculated for each student separately. Then, they were randomly divided into two groups, A & B, each containing 20 members. Students in both groups were given the same writing tasks. Students in group A engaged in learning with the system. They were asked to send their assignments via e-mail to the teacher. They were also told that they can be in touch with the teacher any time during the day to ask any question, receive feedback and correction, etc. via e-mail so that they could choose their learning path, time, etc. according to their learning abilities.

At first it seemed to be very challenging for the participants in group A to interact with teacher via e-mail believing that they are the members of a superior group. Although students were expected to be the same level of proficiency, their responses and feedbacks revealed that they had different backgrounds and abilities in relation to the use of system in learning the language. Group B did their assignments using traditional writing tools, pen and paper, and submitted their papers to the teacher for correction and feedback. The performances of the students in the two groups were carefully studied and compared in both structure and content. The teacher’s responses to the five-point Likert scale questionnaire were also studied to see whether or not the teacher’s ability/interest in using computer influences the outcome of the study. Although technology was present in classroom, it was not necessarily used correctly or efficiently and both the teacher and the students were frustrated with the problems associated with the new implementation, yet welcoming its potential success.

Results

Results indicate that almost all students have access to computer, mostly at home. Fifty percent of participants claimed that they had a good knowledge of computers and typing ability. For the rest this knowledge and ability was claimed to be fair. However, more than 60% said that writing by hand saved time compared to by computer. More than 60% of them said they used computer to surf the net. They specially used it for issues related to their course mainly for searching the latest news and information. In case of exchanging e-mail, 45% used a computer a lot to send e-mails, 25% a little and it seemed interesting that about 30% of the students claimed they never used a computer for e-mail purposes. 90% claimed using computer gives them more chances to practice English, and 72% said using computer gives them more chances to read and use authentic English. 56% said that although they enjoyed the challenge of using computer, computers made them dependant. They mostly agreed that they enjoyed using computer to communicate with their teacher, but when they had a question or comment they preferred to contact the teacher in person rather than by e-mail. Many variables affect children’s experiences with computer. Factors that seem important in this study are easy access to computer, ability to work with computer, and experience using e-mail. These factors were determined based on students’ self-rating, and this cannot be totally relied upon. This leaves us with a “chicken or
egg” question. Does a more positive attitude cause one to gain more knowledge and experience, or does more knowledge and experience cause a more positive attitude? This would emphasize the importance of teachers providing time and training so that students learn as much as possible about the functions of the computer, and also creating opportunities for students to have positive experiences with e-mail communications (Warschauer, et al., 1994). Students who preferred to use pen and pencil had no or little experience working with computer and sending e-mails and so they were afraid of getting involved in the job. Students tended to like using computers, even when they might not make much progress and that computers did not necessarily improve their language learning which is in line with Stenson et al., (1992) and Schcolnik et al., (1996). Some e-mail texts resembled oral communication, sharing the characteristics of spoken language. That was in line with Tella’s 1992. Phrase structures were more common in the students’ e-mail messages than in the in-class essays and hand writings.

Writing involves brain storming, taking notes, preparing outlines, first drafts, and revising, editing, and final drafts. Not even the best students get it right the first time. When it was asked, some students in group “A” claimed that they first did the task on paper, checked and then typed and sent it via e-mail to the teacher. Reid (1986) believes that students who use computer based feedback system to write improve their editing and writing skills significantly more than those who do not. Also Chen (1997) in her study on the use of grammar checker points out that students who got computerized error feedback did more editing and improved their writing. However, relying on the checking programs on computer in “word” program (like style checkers, spell checkers, and Grammatik/ correct grammar) which check and correct grammatical, spelling or even punctuation errors when committed by the writer, it was found that students in group B were not worried about making errors and did not try to learn the correct form as they knew when they encountered the similar case computer would volunteer to help! Knowing why something is wrong is more valuable than just having it corrected once. It was also found that when students communicated with each other or the teacher using e-mail, they tended to focus on the message itself and much less on the form, grammar, spelling, mechanics, etc. However, some participants in the computer group expressed that the grammar check ability of their computers helped them a lot in saving time and improving their spelling. For some teachers, the problem was that they had little experience in exchanging e-mails and rarely used computers for typing purposes. Some others said that they had to invest a lot of time checking and answering the students’ messages and their e-mail boxes became flooded with messages from previously-reticent students. They claimed that discussing important points and commenting on the students’ writings in class had proved to be more helpful. They also said that having face to face interaction puts students in a condition that they took the job more serious. Hence, I believe that the problem is related to the fact that some teachers I know are uncomfortable with computers and even more uncomfortable with the notion that students sometimes know more than they do. Nevertheless, we may claim that some of the students in the computer group improved their knowledge of computers, which gave them a feeling of personal empowerment.

Discussion

One of the key components of being an effective teacher is keeping one’s skills up to date. This includes technical skills and pedagogical knowledge. As computers become more widely used in language instruction, their effectiveness as educational responders becomes increasingly critical. Although we can see the effectiveness of computer in our environment, and despite the advantages and widespread use of CALL, it has its own limitations. It is not practical for students
who are not good enough at using it. First, it is necessary to have access to a computer. Second, whatever results may be achieved over the long term, there are definite startup expenses related to implementing new technology in education. For college language learning programs, such expenses usually entail hardware, staffing, and training. Increased demand on time which is partly due to the difficulty of using new online multimedia technology is the next. In addition many students have limited word processing skills. And in this process the level of the students’ proficiency should also be considered as being important. Another negative point is that nowadays students everywhere are downloading term papers written by others and submitting them as their own, and sometimes they don’t even read the material. It is also important to note that computer is a machine not a method. When two different writing media are involved, as in media and traditional pen and paper writing, “the packaging of information in sentences and in texts” (Biber, 1992, p.215) is likely to differ. The mode of transmission of information to the addressee(s) may influence the discourse output. Gonzalez-Bueno (1998) suggests that language produced electronically results in “discourse somewhat different from both written and oral communication” (p.58).

However, the effectiveness of technology partly depends on the teacher’s readiness to adopt new attitudes and approaches toward language teaching. It also depends on the teacher’s ability, and how it is integrated into the curriculum and individualized for each student because poor application of any software can at best cancel out any potential advantage it might offer. Teachers are advised to consider what the computer industry offers for their classrooms, and should, consequently, seek the necessary training to use them efficiently. Beyond having to learn the use of new technological tools, Internet implementation also comes with other types of responsibilities such as possible supervision issues, the creation of new projects that incorporate the network into the curriculum, and the introduction of new evaluative methods. While it must be recognized that the Internet cannot replace the language classroom or the interaction between the language teacher and student, it lends itself to communication possibilities that can greatly enhance the language learning experience. All these take energy and time to develop and get used to. The teacher should establish clear guidelines before, during and after each session. Teachers become guides as they construct the activities students are to do and help them as students complete the assigned tasks. As facilitators, teachers must be aware of a variety of material available for improving students’ language skill. They also need to know how to teach learners to use the material effectively and be able to respond to the students’ needs, not just what has been set up ahead based on a curriculum developer’s idea of who will be in the classroom. Teacher training is a key element to success in this more flexible language classroom, so that teachers can use multimedia and other resources effectively. However, teachers and institutions are expected to invest large amounts of time and money without any guarantee of achieving particular results. So the natural tendency is to use new technologies in ways consistent with previous methods of organization and practice. This can often result in inefficient or even de-motivating uses of computers.

Use every possible opportunity to engage your students in the use of technology at all stages of the writing process. As a teacher you can give your students your e-mail address and let them know that questions and comments are welcome. Students will find that it is one of the easiest ways to access to the teacher and to express their thoughts. They can tell or ask the teacher what they want or what they would like to express more freely and without interrupting the teacher when she/he is busy. The teacher’s role in a technology-in-focused classroom often shifts to that of a facilitator or coach rather than a lecturer (Henriquez, A., & Riconscente, M, 1998).
My final suggestion is to maintain contact with other teachers. Collaboration is important for developing more effective communication methods or discussing issues and concerns.

**Pedagogical implications**

As the Internet is an entity related to literacy and people still interact with it entirely through reading and writing, and that it is a technology that will, without a doubt, have significant implications for both teaching and learning, teachers must become familiar with using the internet and its various functions as e-mail. Showing students the useful aspects of the Internet in course across the curriculum and allowing access to the Internet in all classes gives them an equal opportunity in taking a class that does include Internet use in learning. Teachers have to be trained in the use of the new technological tools and their skills require continuous updating. The more enthusiastic and more knowledgeable language teachers are, the more successfully they can implement Internet in the language classroom. One of the problems seems to be the lack of teacher training programs. When a school decides to introduce the internet in the curriculum, the funds require for teacher training must also be remembered and adequate resources need to be set aside for this purpose. Teachers may need to refine their techniques with CALL over time, and it is hoped students, especially in ESL and EFL classes, will develop new electronic literacy skills as they begin to confront for the first time the challenge of accessing and responding to the immense amount of English-language material available online. However, both teachers and students realize that future professionals needed not only the traditional four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, but also competence in the use of the new communication technologies. Unfortunately our universities are still slow to embrace the integration of necessary changes required for academic departments and faculty to take advantage of new program opportunities. For the Azad universities it is especially necessary to take note of this important more than before because they derive almost all of their operating revenue from the tuition and fees that students pay, and naturally they are expected to return a dividend to investors by providing the best possible service to them. So the costs of educational technology should be built into school budgets as a normal component of recurring costs. To survive, they also have to highly focus on developing and expanding programs that attract large numbers of students.

**Suggestions for further study**

More important than the use of technology per se is the quality of what is done with this medium. Using technology is not enough. In order to promote successful learning, tasks must be meaningful, have a true interactional component, and have a comprehensible purpose for the language student (Chapelle, 1997; Liu et al., 2002; Warschauer & Healey, 1998.). Future CALL research studies should begin with this premise. Reported results included in this brief are from small samples of students in classroom situations with few or no control over other variables, such as methods and strategies, different types of assignments, gender differences, etc. More study is necessary because of the complex nature of the task of writing and the many variables that might be affecting the outcomes. Group size and duration of treatment are also the critical variables that should be controlled in future research to avoid possible impacts on results. Another important issue to be considered in future research is trying to answer the following questions; how do we evaluate “authentic language use in context?” Is it possible to simulate language use with a computer, or have we only learned to use the language in some sort of “authentic computer-human situation?” and “Is it better or worse than today’s language training?”
In order to help EFL learners become more effective writers, we also need to make a crucial distinction between language accuracy and writing skills. That is, a learner may be able to write sentences which are satisfactory for his/her level in terms of grammar, syntax and vocabulary and still be unable to produce an effective text. We need to remember that language input/practice alone cannot result to the development of writing skills. Special 'writing' lessons are necessary, in which learners are guided to become aware of all the elements of good writing, supported with information & examples, provided with opportunities for practice, and given focused feedback on their performance. Of course, we can also plan lessons which integrate work on language with work on writing skills. This can be the focus of attention in future studies by interested researchers.

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