Computer as a Tool for Writing Instruction

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The computer is a new medium with its own characteristic features and offers great promise and potential for improvements in writing instruction. Due to its increasing demand and committed use in the field of education, it has become mandatory for both the teachers and learners to have command over it. A writing teacher should be aware of the fact that integrating computer technology by itself will not help in improving writing skills. Before using computers to teach writing, teachers themselves must be familiar with the know-how of the technology because it is the teacher's responsibility to teach students how to use computers for writing. One of the best sources to improve the learners' writing skills is word processor.

A word processor can be a great help and highly resourceful as it has tremendous facilities for the writers to offer. A writer can use word processors for manipulating data from a given text or he can be asked to write a text. After writing the text can be examined and discussed by teachers along with the other learners. Many other options for editing an existing text are available in the word processor of today. The editing facilities of word-processing eliminate the need for complete rewriting. At all times the writer can see an instantly updated, tidy picture of what he has written. The first and the final draft are not two different or separate versions. They can be different manifestations of the same matter. Peter McWilliams sees word processors as "Tools that serve the word processing that goes on in the ultimate word processor, the human mind."[1]

In conventional writing lessons, as soon as the learner finishes his writing, he considers it to be over. It is product-oriented. It is given to the teacher to be marked and following that, the hard copy is often forgotten. The writer may not make the effort to make the corrections and rewrite the piece. It is here that the word processor comes to play a very important role. Let us assume that a learner has been writing a short story on the computer. When he has finished, he runs the text through the spell check. Then finally he makes a hard copy of his

work on paper to hand it over to the teachers for marking. But at the same time also makes a soft copy of his documents on the disk. The teacher may mark the composition in the traditional way by marking on the learner's printout. He may himself use the word processor to insert comments in the file itself. Whichever method is used, the marking by the teacher does not constitute the last stage of the activity. The learner's final task is to rewrite the story. This can be easily done using the word processor. He simply loads up the file and edits it where necessary. But this time he has the teacher's comments right in his file to guide him. The facility of track changes helps in comparing the old text with the new one. These markings or comments are no longer regarded as criticism of his work, but as the helpful guidance. The end result is a new printout, a clean, tidy and correct piece of writing in which the learner can take pride. It is much better than the one dotted in red highlighting only errors.

The most common use of the computer as a tool for learning writing is word processing. Both for L1 and L2 writers, the process of writing represent the culmination of many other skills. For a student attempting a writing task, the load is immense as writing means conveying a message to the readers. The writer has to observe the rule of grammar, keep in mind the relevant vocabulary items, their spelling and collocations. He needs to be aware of using punctuation and paragraphing. If he uses pen, inkpad, paper, the quality of handwriting is another factor to be borne in mind. For many language learners writing a continuous text is indeed laborious and the teacher is lucky to receive a 'fair copy' that is free of crossing out and insertions. While writing text into the memory of a computer, rather than onto paper, the writer is freed from the linear constraints of pens and typewriters and can play around with his text until entirely satisfied.

The physical activities involved in composition, that is typing/keying in and handwriting, are considerably, if not totally, different from each other. Handwriting, as it seems, is intrinsically more difficult than typing/keying for all students in general and for students with handwriting problems in particular. Though correct spellings and neat handwriting are desirable, these are not necessary since these abilities do not have any influence over good writing skills. In addition to this, the time, effort and attention dedicated to superficially mechanical and technical aspects of writing can and may affect potentially significant aspects of writing such as, outlining, ordering, organizing, elaborating, illustrating,

referencing, revising etc. This may affect writing in terms of quality, and also in terms of quantity because students with less confidence may write less to avoid risks. The computer not only enables writers to employ the correct mechanics to produce legible text but also facilitates the more complex cognitive processes of planning, writing, and revising. According to J. Aumack, The computer facilitates for educational purposes, as part of communication, as part of the lecture environment and as part of the provision of lecture notes and model answers to assignments and exercises.[2]

At this juncture, it is important to note that the whole occupational class of typists/stenographers which specializes in the purely mechanical aspects of writing is on its way out as most writing today is done by the writer himself on the computer. The computer has assumed responsibility for the mechanical operations which were earlier handled by these skilled personnel. While earlier the cognitive and the mechanical aspects of writing were separate, now the two have got conflated by computer technology.

The most influential feature among many other potential ones of the word processor is its unique flexible nature that allows writers to make infinitely frequent revisions, reorganization, reformulation, and surface level editing without tedious recopying. Revision is a significant aspect of the composing process that distinguishes more skilled writers from less skilled writers. In other words, anything (tool) which eases frequent revision leads to a better composition. Obviously, the computer has more potential to make revision easier and faster than any other conventional tool. As a result of this unique facility, writers are more likely to make more revisions, which as writing researches suggest, is desirable and even necessary. Consequently, the freedom from the tedium involved in recopying which demands not only physical effort but also extremely high motivation, may encourage students to pay more attention to fluency and content.

One of the important things a teacher should teach novice students is how to save back-up files of a written document. If students constantly write in a single saved document, the earlier draft may be lost and cannot be retrieved if required later. It is necessary to save subsequent drafts of the matter labeling them systematically.

It is found from various studies that familiarity with computer writing leads to more effective use of computers in writing. Therefore, basic computer literacy should be the prerequisite for writing instruction. The ability to use computers for writing comes from

experiencing, exploring and experimenting with it. It is difficult to learn to use computers for writing only by listening to the teacher. Students should be given enough practice supported by teacher and peer help. If learners are put through the experience of discovery and exploration, it will transform learning from passive listening of instructions to active interactions. This process of interaction helps students discover more than what has been imparted through instruction leading them to greater autonomy.

The studies indicate that the computers are mostly used for academic and email writing. As has been revealed in many studies, students 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 online discussion or debate. In these situations there is a real audience or readership. This promotes confidence in writing which is then likely to get transferred to academic writing.

It has been observed that L1 users of a language move from speaking to writing. Many of the problems of L2 users arise from the lack of the ability to speak. Hence, much of their writing tends to be very stilted. They either work others' words from memory or struggle to write originally. Communication through email, chat etc. helps build oral fluency which is a prerequisite for natural writing.

One of the objectives of effective writing instruction is promoting spontaneity and fluency. It is difficult to maintain fluency at a uniform pace because generating thoughts and ideas are not confined to or governed by any approach or fashion but an attentive and sincere attempt at putting down related and relevant ideas randomly is considerably important especially at the planning and brainstorming stage. This issue is equally crucial for recollecting experiences, information acquired from reading or from any other sources since this recollection process is like choosing and selecting raw materials from a highly dense storehouse (memory). The aim of this stage is to look for potential raw information to generate content and not to focus on form.

One of the weaknesses of inefficient writers is that they tend to make corrections at the word level and tend to write linearly. Novice writers are afraid of putting down their thoughts on the screen because they treat screen writing as paper writing. However, they move towards making complex changes as they gain experience. These complex changes include organizational changes such as moving a whole chunk of text and allocating them in a place

where it fits best, deleting unnecessary paragraphs and sentences or inserting new materials, paragraphs, rearranging the whole document etc. They need to know that at the stage where thoughts are verbalized, editing should be kept to a minimum, so that ideas can take precedence over other considerations.

It is also found in most of the studies that grammar and spell check are greatly used by writers. Undoubtedly, grammar and spell check have beneficial effects on students' writing. However, students may have mistaken assumptions about writing and editing with the help of a grammar and spell check. Teachers must help students clearing false assumptions that grammar and spell check can correct all errors. Since grammar and spell check cannot rectify all errors in students' texts and may offer changes to items that do not require changes, teachers must inform students about the limitations of a grammar and spell check.

Teachers should not forget the point that the use of computers in writing, as one of the many computer assisted language-learning activities, should be optional, but not a compulsory task for all students including those who are not comfortable using computers. Students comfortable with pen and paper may turn out to be inefficient with computers at least at the initial stage of writing on the computer. But while keying in it can transcribe thoughts instantaneously is highly doubtful. Planning and translating are highly controlled operations that usually proceed at a slow pace.

The most obvious assistance it provides is the unlimited academic learning time. Academic learning time is the amount of time a student spends with relevant academic tasks. Whatever the subject area, academic success is likely to be more strongly related to academic learning time than any other variables. It seems fairly obvious that the more time we spend on a task, the more we learn. But simply spending more time to vocabulary, grammar, conversation, or any other area will not automatically improve the students' writing. Academic learning time can be increased not only by lengthening the duration of the course, but also by enabling the teacher to manage a classroom more efficiently and by enabling students to study more efficiently and at a higher rate of success. The computer cannot lengthen the course duration but it can help students and teachers perform their tasks more efficiently and at a higher rate of success. When the computer enhances learning, it is through an increase in effective academic learning time. Computers can enhance learning time in the following ways:

i. By permitting learners to access and acquire specific information any time they want to practice specific skills with less time and more accuracy.

ii. By helping students develop the basic tools of writing, which they can apply in a wide variety of settings.

iii. By providing immediate feedback.

With the availability of the internet, the teacher is no longer the supreme authority in possessing information or knowledge. It has been found in the study (p.39) that many writers use internet for academic writing. Using the World Wide Web, students can search through millions of files around the world within minutes to locate and access authentic materials. They can also use the web to publish their texts or multimedia materials to share with class partners or with general public.

The networking features of the computer provide the writer an authentic and diverse audience to communicate with which is usually absent in typical academic settings. Further, a teacher, working with a group of students, can send assignments and tasks electronically. If the teacher has to remind the students of assignments due or of a certain procedure he can send one message to the entire group. The return receipt capabilities of email enables to find out if each student has read the message. This enables the teacher to monitor students outside the classroom. Chat groups can be formed for a particular group of students and information exchanged outside class. Online discussions are also possible.

Internet offers a very convenient channel to deliver course materials to students. Instructors can create their course homepages and upload their handouts, exercises and reading materials anywhere, and at anytime. In addition to text files, image files and sound files can also be uploaded in web sites. One can find a good number of websites which will provide tips to improve one's own writing skill. Some websites of this kind are:

Business English Exercises http://www.better-english.com/exerciselist.html

English Forum http://www.englishforum.com/00/teachers/

English Teacher Blog http://www.enotes.com/blogs/english-teacher-blog/

English Teachers Everywhere http://www.etseverywhere.com/

English to Go http://www.english-to-go.com/

I Love that Teaching Idea http://www.ilovethatteachingidea.com/ideas/subj_writing.htm

Journal of Teaching Writing http://www.iupui.edu/~jtw/home.html

Kairos http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/

Kim's Korner http://www.kimskorner4teachertalk.com/writing/menu.html

Lit Plans http://litplans.com/

National Council of Teaching English http://www.ncte.org/

National Writers Project http://www.nwp.org/

Poet's Craft http://www.poetscraft.com/

Proteacher: Writing Prompts http://www.proteacher.org/c/193_Writing_Prompts.html

Riggs Institute http://www.riggsinst.org/

Scholastic http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/teachwriting/

Suite 101 http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/teaching_creative_writing

Teachers & Writers http://www.twc.org/

Teachers Desk http://www.teachersdesk.org/writing_plans.html

Teaching that Makes Sense http://www.ttms.org/

Teaching Writing Article http://ezinearticles.com/?Teaching-Writing&id=1591510

TeAchology http://www.teach-nology.com/themes/lang_arts/creative/

The English Teacher http://teacher2b.com/creative/createwr.htm

Time 4 Learning http://www.time4learning.com/teaching-writing.shtml

University of Minn http://writing.umn.edu/tww/index.html

Web English Teacher http://www.webenglishteacher.com/writing.html

Writing A-Z http://www.writinga-z.com/razwritingweb/home.do

Writing http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/ela20/teach4.html

Writing Instructor http://www.writinginstructor.com/

Writing World http://www.writing-world.com/freelance/teaching.shtml

These websites may be of immense help in improving one's writing skills. Once learners improve their writing, there are plenty of opportunities to publish their writing on the free space available on the net. They may send their writings to number of online journals available in the web. They may also create a blog and post their writings on the web pages. The following are the 40 websites which are useful for writing help, peer review, and grammar tips.

Writing Communities and Courses

- https://www.youngwriterssociety.com/ - Dedicated to scribes between the ages of 13 and 25, the Young Writer's Society is the world's largest website for young writers. The members-only community encourages submissions and offers tips that will help anyone become a better writer.

- http://ywp.nanowrimo.org/ - NaNoWriMo is short for National Novel Writing Month. Every November, the young writers' section of the site challenges people who are 12 and under to write a 50,000 word novel.

- http://www.writing.com/ - Boasting resources for everyone from novice writers to scribes with master's degrees in writing, this online writing community is a great place to store and display your work online. Free memberships are available to all.

- http://www.youngwritersonline.net/ - This community for young writers offers one forum for submitting your work for critique and one forum for general conversation about the craft.

- www.writersdigest.com - Although this website isn't specifically designed for young writers, it is a fantastic resource for anyone who wants to learn how to write better. Site features include blogs, community forums, writing tips, creative writing prompts and guidelines to getting published.

- www.pomegranatewords.com - This site features free lessons in poetry and fiction, critiquing services and a magazine for teen authors.

- http://www.copyright.gov/ - This site is a must-see for writers of all ages. It will teach you everything you need to know about copyright and includes a section where you can register your work.

Grammar and Reference Websites

- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/ - Purdue University's Online Writing Lab is a wonderful place to learn all of the various rules of grammar and usage.

- http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl - Mignon Fogarty, a.k.a. Grammar Girl, offers up a wealth of quick and dirty grammar tips for better writing. The tips are available in a blog and a free podcast, and readers can submit their own burning grammar questions.

- http://www.merriam-webster.com/ - Merriam-Webster's online dictionary and thesaurus is easy to use and guaranteed accurate. Other site features include a Word of the Day, podcasts, word games and free downloads.

- http://www.chompchomp.com/ - This website provides 'grammar instruction with attitude.' The site's 'grammar bytes' include grammar rules, handouts, interactive exercises, videos and definitions to common grammar terms.

- http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/ - The Writers' Workshop (run by the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) offers a free grammar handbook that explains basic grammatical rules. The handbook is easy to read, complete and accurate.

- http://www.dailygrammar.com/archive.html - Nearly 500 grammar lessons and quizzes can be accessed for free on the Daily Grammar site. Other resources include workbooks and a glossary.

- http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/writing/ - Jack Lynch's Guide to Grammar and Style is an indispensable resource for young writers. The guide explains grammar rules in detail and provides valuable usage suggestions.

- http://www.bartleby.com/ - This Internet publisher has a number of free books online that will help users master the rules of grammar. One book in particular worth checking out is The American Heritage Book of English Usage

- http://www.syntaxis.com/ - Syntaxis allows you to test your knowledge of grammar with this ten-question quiz. The questions change every time you take the quiz so users are sure to be challenged each time around.

- https://www.autocrit.com/ - The AutoCrit Editing Wizard can check writing for grammar errors, clichés and other no-no's. AutoCrit also provides a number of other writing resources as well.

Creativity Boosters

- http://thestorystarter.com/ - Creativity abounds at Story Starter! Their automatic generator plays host to over one trillion (no joke!) creative ideas for writers.

- http://www.creativewritingprompts.com/ - When you need inspiration, this site is the place to go. It features more than 300 detailed creative writing prompts, as well as journal ideas.

- http://indulgy.com/post/H3rFLDPJV1/ink-provoking-creative-writing-prompts-update - This site provides creative writing prompts of all kinds. New prompts are added every Sunday.

- http://bonnieneubauer.com/storyspinner.shtml - The Online Story Spinner from writing instructor Bonnie Neubauer offers millions of ideas to get people writing. When users click on the Story Spinner, they get a starting phrase, a setting and four words that must be included in the story.

- http://www.brucevanpatter.com/storykitchen.html - This site starts a story for you using the elements you choose and then asks you to finish it. With a focus on youth-friendly protagonists like superheroes and genius kids, Bruce Van Patter's Story Kitchen is excellent practice for young writers.

- http://languageisavirus.com/writing_prompts.html#.VasUzqRViko - The automatic prompt generator on this site can provide writers with an endless number of creative writing prompts. Other resources include writing exercises and information on dozens of different authors.

- http://www.thedabblingmum.com/ - The Dabbling Mum is an interesting site that offers 30 days of prompts for fiction writers, nonfiction writers and pro writers. Writers are encouraged to pen a 500 to 1,000 word piece with each prompt.

- http://teacher.scholastic.com/ - If you are looking for a site that inspires and covers the basics of writing, Scholastic is the place to be. The site is great for kids and teachers.

- http://fictionwriting.about.com/ - The About.com Guide to Fiction Writing provides all sorts of creativity boosters for young writers. The site also offers advice for those who are new to fiction.

- http://www.book-in-a-week.com/ - The Book-In-A-Week website is for serious young writers who want a challenge. The writing community encourages creativity by asking members to write as much as possible the first week of every month.

Getting Published

- http://www.reacheverychild.com/ - Designed for exceptionally young writers (think 12 and under), Reach Every Child offers a list of publishers that accept stories, poems and works of art. More than 40 markets are listed.

- http://www.teenink.com/ - This national teen website (and magazine) counts on submissions from young writers to fill their pages. Writers must be between the ages of 13 and 19 to be considered, and there are also community forums to which any teenager can submit work for peer review.

- http://www.theclaremontreview.ca/ - This magazine showcases young adult writers and offers resources such as writing tips from famous authors and an annual teen writing contest.

- http://figment.com/ - Ever dream of getting a major publisher to read your work? This site, run by Harper Collins, offers writing tips and advice for young writers, as well as a chance to connect with a Harper Collins editor, if you're lucky.

- http://www.aboutfreelancewriting.com/ - If you are over 18, this site is a great place to find paying freelance writing gigs. New jobs are posted every week, as well as practical tips and advice for freelance writers.

- http://www.writersmarket.com/ - Writers Market is the ultimate guide for young writers who want to learn where to sell what they write. It costs $29.99 for a one-year subscription with a 7-day money back guarantee, but it is money well spent.

- https://www.firstwriter.com/ - Undeniably an indispensable resource, First Writer is a great place for writers to find agents, publishers and writing contests. There is a catch though - you have to pay a small membership fee to access all of the features. A free trial is available.

- http://www.newbiewriters.com/ - This site is a gold mine for new writers in any genre. Newbie-Writers will not only help you learn the craft, the site will also help you get published. Users who sign up for the free newsletter also receive an 85-page e-book.

Both teachers and students, to improve their writings, may also join in free online certificate courses on writing. The following are few websites which offer free certificate courses.

- http://ocw.mit.edu/courses/#writing-and-humanistic-studies - The Massachusetts Institute of Technology offers a number of free college-level writing courses through their Open Courseware program. You can see the full listing of courses at this website.

- https://www.coursera.org/ - It offers free online courses from 115+ universities and educational organizations.

- www.moocs.co – Massive Open Online Course Providers offers some free certificate courses on writing.

The most useful websites for writing teachers are the Online Writing Labs (OWLs). A number of OWLs are hosted by many language centers and universities. Though these sites often focus on academic writing, they also provide information on internet resources, writing tips and task and allow teachers and students to download handouts from their web pages. A number of writing centers are linked to the National Writing Centers Association. The site address is http://www.departments.colgate.edu/diw/NWCAOWLS.html. Other popular OWLs are

http://www.owl.english.purdue.edu

http://www.pilot.msu.edu/user/writing

http://www.web.Missouri.edu/%7Ewritery

http://www.ec.hku.hk/writingmachine

Referencing sources are plentiful in online. They cover grammar, dictionaries, style manuals and many more.

Grammar Handbooks

http://www.webgrammar.com

http://www.tc.cc.va.us/writcent/gh/hotlinol.html

http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors

http://www.yourdictionary.com

http://www.visualthesaurus.com/index.jsp

Dictionaries

http://www.dictionary.net

http://www.dictionary.com

http://www.itools.com/lang

http://www.yourdictionary.com

http://www.humanities.uchicago.edu/forma_unrest/ROGET.html

http://www.visualthesaurus.com/index.jsp

Style Manuals

For APA format

http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DecAPAPrinciples.html

http://www.ithaca.edu/library/course/apa.html

http://www.apastyle.org/elecref.html

http://www.psywww.com/resource/apacrib.html

For MLA format

http://www.webster.commnet.edu/mal.html

http://www.mla.org

http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/cite5.html

http://www.educ.fukushima-u.ac.jp/~ryota/mlastyle.html

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J. Aumack, Computers for Non-Writers, *Principal*, Vol.65, 1990:46. Print.

http://www.everywritersresource.com/teachingwriting.htm

40   of   the   Best   Websites   for   Young   Writers

http://study.com/articles/40_of_the_Best_Websites_for_Young_Writers.html