

The Human-Computer Interaction in Teaching Writing*

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An individual's motivation and the environment play an important role in language learning. Although there are those who think languages cannot be taught, certainly there are evidences of learning. We have the experience of a child learning its mother tongue on its own without being tutored by the mother. Teacher's role in an ESL class has to be that of a facilitator, counsellor, motivator and manager. The focus of this paper is on developing writing skills for academic purposes. The paper explores the possibilities of using computer to help students write efficiently. The paper also discusses the role of peer evaluation in re-drafting student's writing and the teacher's role as the monitor of activities which lead to writing effectively.

Introduction

Every learner is an individual with his/her own interests, priorities, personality traits, learning habits as well as learning strategies and styles. An individual's motivation plays an important role in language learning. When it is a question of learning English as a Second language, both the teacher and the taught have to strive hard to meet their expectations. Methods and materials applied in an ESL class have to be adopted according to the needs of the learner. In an ESL situation, the teacher has to adorn the mantle of a facilitator of learning. The first question that looms large in front of every language teacher is that if it is possible to teach any language at all. We have the experience of a child learning its mother tongue on its own without being tutored by the mother though we call the language of the child its 'mother tongue' and not 'child tongue'. As soon as a child is born the mother does not teach the child to speak. She does not speak to the child the words it will require in future either. However the speed with which the child acquires its language has amazed all of us. In her *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Marlene Nourbese Philip, an Afro-Caribbean Canadian writer narrates the story of an African mother who puts all the words of her language into the mouth of the newborn child:

The mother then put her fingers into her child's mouth – gently forcing it open; she touches her tongue to the child's tongue, and holding the tiny mouth open she blows into it hard, she was blowing words – her words, her mother's words, those of her mother's mother and all their mothers before – into her daughter's (56).

It is impossible for the teacher to play the African mother's role in an ESL classroom. However it is imperative for the teacher to play the role of a catalyst who creates an environment of learning rather than involve himself/herself to the teaching of a language.

Teacher's Role in an ESL Class

Teacher interference in an ESL class can get in the way of learning. It is necessary for the teacher to allow the pupils to interact in English. The ESL student is an English patient who has to take medicines to overcome the difficulties of learning English. The doctor does not take the medicine prescribed for the patient. The student has to try hard to get rid of the problems s/he faces in developing language skills. It is also necessary for the students to shed the inhibitions that keep them away from communicating in English. Thus it is the student who has to learn the language and hence s/he has to act and interact in a situation and develop the skills of language. However, the role of a teacher in an ESL class is important as s/he has to create an environment and monitor students' activities that will lead learners to develop their language needs. It is also very important for the teacher to act as a guide who promptly provides help when the students are stuck in their attempt to communicate either orally or in writing. When they are unable to get a word or a phrase or want to know if particular structure is intelligible enough if used in a particular situation, the teacher has to give proper guidance to students to overcome their problems. It is a good idea to involve peers to work out solutions to such problems. The teacher has to be a manager who should be able to steer clear of hurdles in the way of creating a friendly atmosphere conducive to learning and also assist his/her students in solving their own disputes and differences.

It is also very vital to take the learners into confidence and motivate them not only to interact among themselves but also to create an environment of peer evaluation. Researchers may be required to study how peer evaluation can promote language learning in ESL situations.

Mendonca & Johnson (1994) feel, “Because peer reviews have become a common activity in L2 writing instruction, researchers need to broaden our understanding of the nature of the interactions that occur during peer reviews and determine the extent to which such interactions shape L2 students’ revision activities”. As we look forward to the researchers to provide us with the necessary help, it may not be out of place here to discuss the effect of peer evaluation in writing. Peer reviews, if employed in the right spirit, can reap rich dividends. Peer review makes the students involve themselves in problem solving activities. When learners take charge of their own learning, they feel that they have achieved something and this sense of satisfaction enhances their motivation.

Writing Skills

Writing is an active skill. A learner can just listen to or read something without involving himself or herself. I have used the word ‘can’ here because it is also possible to make the learner an active listener and reader depending on the tasks prescribed in each case. But in writing and speaking the student has to be an active player always. Writing skills consist of various sub skills like note-taking, note-making, writing for media both electronic and print as well as writing slogans for political, social and commercial purposes. Script writing and writing business letters, reports, projects and personal letters demand various kinds of sub skills of writing. Sending e-mails and SMS require a diverse kind of writing skills too.

Academic writing is another skill that should help one write articles and research papers. I wish to highlight the task of academic writing in this paper. Academic writing also involves a variety of sub skills of writing. A student may be called upon to write an assignment/article, a research paper/report, a project or a summary of an article or a chapter of a book or a review or a critique of a book. The major concerns of this paper are how a teacher can help students write effectively; to what extent peer evaluation can play a significant role in developing writing skills and how far computer can be employed in helping students write efficiently. We have to explore the possibilities of setting man and machine to cooperate in the successful development of writing skills.

Tutor and computer could play a major role in teaching writing. Writing is an active skill which has to be developed through practice. Practice can help a person write meaningfully and powerfully. With the limited resources available in my institution, I have tried to employ students to use computer to write small paragraphs. Students who lacked the skills of word processing were happily taken care of by their peers who were experts in using computer. It was an experience to watch the students draft, redraft and also process their own writing because computer provided an easy way of correcting, changing and constructing structures and sentences according to the needs of learners and the subject matter or topic in question.

Revision:

Revision is an essential component of writing. Revision is significant partly because under certain circumstances it may enhance quality of final written work and partly because, when writers use revision to rework thought and ideas, it may powerfully affect writers' knowledge. Revision not only helps one take care of the nitty-gritty of the language, but also reorganize one's thoughts. Murray defined revision as "what the writer does after a draft is completed to understand and communicate what has begun to appear on the page" (87). To refer to the mental aspect of revision, Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) coined the term 'reprocessing'. According to them 'reprocessing' is more appropriate than 'revision' because "it refers to what goes on mentally rather than being tied to differences in surface behaviour" (790). Further they reiterate that reprocessing "spans everything from editing for mistakes to reformulating goals. Revision is a special case of reprocessing, applied to actual text" (790).

It is essential to study writings of good writers before venturing into any serious kind of writing. A good writer keeps the audience before him/her while writing. A writer seldom deviates from the main theme or focus of writing. Various styles of writing will emerge from the writings of good writers and they will certainly lead one to effective writing.

Planning is very crucial to academic writing because it is addressed to those involved in writing articles, preparing projects, presenting papers, writing research and term papers, assignments and reviews. The tutor has to motivate the taught to begin with writing short paragraphs. It is very vital initially to make several drafts and reviews of even a single

paragraph. Selection and use of words are important in academic writing. The writer has to keep his or her audience in mind while selecting phrases and structures.

Students have to be made aware of the most important devices of writing. Transitional and cohesive devices will definitely add coherence to one's writing. Punctuation marks are another area of concern for those who want to write accurately and appropriately.

Teaching academic writing can be set in the following stages:

1. Pre writing task: Conceptualizing the subject (individually)
2. Pair interaction
3. Group work
4. Global discussion leading to the selection of the topic
5. Framing, reframing the title for the topic
6. Selecting the right vocabulary
7. Writing down the points
8. Writing the first draft
9. Redrafting
10. Self evaluation
11. Redrafting on the basis of self evaluation
12. Peer evaluation
13. Redrafting on the basis of peer evaluation
14. Reprocessing before handing over to the teacher
15. Teacher's comments
16. Final draft

Classroom Dynamics

The teacher introduces the topic or leaves the topic selection also to students. Then the teacher asks the students to work in pairs and identify words that could be used to write a paragraph on that topic. A student each in every pair is asked to present the words; the teacher makes a list of the words and presents them for a global discussion. Thereafter students are asked to make the first draft. It is a good idea to set a word limit. It is here that the technology plays an academic role. If the students have access to computers, they can

make their drafts and make a power point presentation. Word processing could help them select appropriate words to a certain extent. If the writer makes a right click, an option 'synonyms' appears and the list of words that appear can help the writer choose a suitable word according to the context and the theme.

Each student presents his/her draft and in the short discussion students raise their opinions and suggestions about the drafts. This leads the students to the second draft and the teacher fixes the number of drafts to be made before the final version. It will be easier for students to make their drafts on computers. At this stage the teacher can introduce peer evaluation. Students' evaluation of their peers is collected separately. Then it is the teacher's task to study each write-up and to make suggestions to improve in terms of choice of words, structures, style and syntax. Finally the teacher compares his/her evaluation with those handed over by students. The most surprising aspect will be that the evaluation of students and the teacher would match in most of the cases.

Conclusion:

The learner, teacher and computer can complement each other in developing writing skills. To make writing a meaningful activity, one has to have patience and self confidence. Sharing and caring for each other in learning situations take the learners a long way in developing their language skills. Hard work is the hall mark of any success story and to develop writing skills one must be ready to put in his/her best efforts.

The teacher or the researcher is exhorted to apply the above guidelines to help students develop their skills of academic writing in real life situations. Here it is necessary to keep in mind the fact that the methodology that works in a language class is the best for learning. Finally it is necessary to know that "Teaching is an art as well as a science, and irreducibly so, because of the constantly varying nature of the classroom as a learning community... There can be no one best method however much research evidence supports it, which applies at all times and in all situations, with every type of learner" (Mitchell & Myles 195).

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