

Creating online collaborative models for ESL writing exercises

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Abstract

The goal of this project is to enhance university students' writing skills. The participants are enrolled in a five-year teacher-training program at the Pedagogical Faculty (PF) in České Budejovice, the Czech Republic. They have been used to submitting their assignments either printed out or handwritten, with the teachers penciling in their corrections and remarks. The students then either correct or rewrite their work. This process is definitely time-consuming. Moreover, it doesn't give the students sufficient control over their learning as they merely comply with the teacher's suggestions. For the purpose of the project, a class weblog was established in spring of 2007 with the aim of setting up a 'resources central'. Participation in creating it was voluntary and limited. The new project, to be launched in September of 2007, will require the students to submit at least part of their assignments online. The students will assume code names and work collaboratively by reading and commenting on each other's submitted work, either by posting suggestions or rewriting passages of others. Information about the authors' real identities will be revealed toward the end of the term when the whole experience will be re-evaluated. As the students in this group are future teachers themselves, it is hoped that the experience will enhance their training in evaluating written production.

Keywords: writing, peer collaboration, code names, weblogs

Introduction

Challenging for learners and teachers alike, writing plays an important role in our personal and professional lives. Hence the development of writing skills is of paramount importance at the university level, especially in teacher-training settings. The advent of new technologies has opened up new approaches for designing courses in writing, more suitable to large-group classes and learning at a distance. Formerly, teachers used to spend long solitary hours in evaluating and marking the students' written production. The proposed new model foresees peer collaboration online as a complementary feedback method.

The project described here originated at the Pedagogical Faculty in České Budejovice in February 2007 in response to the two observed factors:

- the students' perceived passivity in expecting the teacher to do most of the feedback work
- The reality of large classes: classes of twenty or more English-language learners not being uncommon

The students, prevalently current or future teachers of English, have had little exposure to the use of technology in their learning/teaching processes. The rationale of this project was to enhance or complement the current (classroom) teaching methods.

Writing processes: Previous research

First, an important question has to be asked: Can writing be deliberately taught? Krashen (1984) states that research suggests some aspects of the writing skill can be taught, but there are limitations. Citing a study by Shaughnessy (1977), he writes that students tend to limit themselves to one example drawn usually from personal incidents or observation and rarely do they choose to develop more than one aspect of a topic statement (pp.282-283). Moreover, students trying to improve their writing face the “lonely-ranger syndrome” (Feronha, 2006), meaning they perceive themselves as being alone in their struggles to improve.

Feedback in the writing process is obviously useful but when and how should it be given? The various correction procedures may be summarized as follows:

1. Correct all mistakes
2. Correct mistakes selectively
3. Indicate mistakes so that students can correct them
4. Let students identify and correct their own mistakes.

The traditional approach to correction of written work is for the teacher to correct all the mistakes. This is extremely time-consuming for the teacher and may be discouraging for the students if they see their work flooded in the sea of red (Byrne, 1988). Correcting mistakes selectively is more positive than total correction while this process lends itself to remedial teaching in an area the teacher has selected. Byrne is more in favor of the procedure number three which allows students to identify their mistakes according to a list of symbols devised for the purpose. “Using a list of this kind, you can get the students, individually, in pairs or in small groups, to identify at least most of the mistakes for themselves. If they cannot, then they should consult you. This approach certainly makes them more aware of the kinds of mistakes they are making and is therefore likely to result in something being learnt” (pg126). The fourth choice on the list can meanwhile provide a suitable diversion even if it is not necessarily most efficient among the techniques highlighted.

Feedback, writes Krashen, is useful when it is done during the writing process, i.e. between drafts, and not afterwards. Writing in a second language, however, poses extra challenges as the students are composing texts in as yet imperfectly acquired language. Krashen states that “very little is known about writing in a second language, despite the existence of a large number of published texts” (pg 38). One can only surmise that there are many variables at play, mostly related to second-language acquisition (SLA) theories, including for instance the nature of previous instruction, interference from the first language, the class sizes, etc. According to Krashen’s studies, error correction is not effective in second language acquisition; he adds that research had been focused more on sentence-level grammar, morphology and pronunciation, not writing quality (pg39).

Large monolingual classes

The English-language classes in Ceske Budejovice are almost exclusively unilingual. A couple of classes may include singular students coming from other backgrounds: Hungarians, Slovaks, and Israelis, for instance, but their number being tiny this fact does not influence the character of the lessons and the teaching methodology chosen. Atkinson (1993) writes that practice in multi-lingual classes can be very realistic and enjoyable because the only common language for the group members is English. In such situations, the students can work in small groups and be given questions or tasks to resolve and report about. They can only come to a consensus after they had conversed and worked together. In a unilingual group, this process is not readily applicable unless the group members are

confident or “extravert” as learners. In a separate article, Atkinson (1998) is in favor of using the students’ first language (L1) in monolingual classrooms – if and when necessary – while trying to use the second language as much as possible.

My observation was that many Czech students involved in group activities tended to agree (in Czech) on what they are going to ‘report’ to the large class rather than work (in English) toward a solution. An additional challenge were the cramped seating arrangements: the teacher could not (physically) approach some of the groups to give them feedback or simply to verify they were complying with any given instructions, and not talking about their boyfriends.

Monolingual classes are usually also monocultural, as such leading to a distinct lack of need to communicate in English; this practice being seen as artificial and arguably unnecessary. Among some of the learning groups there might not be enough curiosity about what other members of the class do or think. Also, if the class activity is interesting and/or competitive in nature, the students will be even more inclined to communicate in their native tongue (L1) in order to complete the tasks successfully and get ahead. Yet pair and group work should still be included as potentially motivating and useful activity (www.onestopenenglish.com). Such group activities could conceivably take the form of peer correction and feedback (on the students’ written production).

How to make the students more active and less inclined to use Czech? One solution is to pair them off according to either their abilities or perceived social rank. Podlesakova (1993) had devised a socio-metric questionnaire in an attempt to change the seating arrangement and pair off work partners according to a set of criteria. She reported positive learning outcomes when friends were prevented from working together, for instance. Similarly, she successfully matched students of the same ability. Quiet and unsociable individuals benefited from being paired with more outgoing people. This experiment, however, took place in a high-school setting, not at the university level.

Online possibilities in the Czech context

The vast majority of Czech students at the Pedagogical Faculty use word processing techniques to compose their writing assignments. In two classes of re-training teachers, totaling about 42 members, only one person persistently refused to type his work, claiming he was “against computers”. More than half use the Internet to acquire authentic materials for learning English. Electronic communication (e-mailing) is commonplace. So are these suitable conditions for initiating an online peer-correction project?

The project was started in February of 2007, with the aim of operating a class web log for the purposes of sharing resources and working on improving writing skills. The teacher set up the blog, added some linguistic resources and pictures, then asked the teachers to prepare oral presentations (mandatory) and add some written supplementary materials (voluntary) on the blog. In an initial survey, the group under study split about three ways: one third in favor of being “highly active” and one third being “occasionally active”, leaving the rest of the group in the “observer” category. As the term progressed, however, only twelve oral presentations included written backup materials. Only one out of 42 people included pictures as well. The common apology was lack of time. When the project was discussed at the end of the term, however, most participants expressed delight at having had the blog, if only for the purposes of reading. On the other hand, about ten people proclaimed the blog to be a waste of time. The general agreement was that for the blog to be successful, participation in its creation would have to be made compulsory with one or several leaders in charge.

The retraining program technology survey

The subjects were mostly women teachers of English, aged 35-50 years, with several years of teaching experience. They had signed up for a two-year “retraining” program at the Pedagogical Faculty with view to upgrading their qualifications. Most came from rural areas or small towns from across the Czech Republic. Very few were working in large urban schools. They were mostly scrupulous and on time in completing mandatory homework. Their level of English could be pinpointed as being Upper-Intermediate to Advanced.

CZECH TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TO COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY (2007)				
Regular access to Internet	Yes	Yes, fast-speed		No
	26	22		4
Hours spent on the computer (weekly)	20 hours and more	Around 10 hours	Around 5 hours	Less than 2 hours
	0	12	12	6
List of activities done on the computer	1. e-mail (30) 2. preparing lessons (24) 3. online reading (14) 4. learning English (12) 5. digital photography (13) 6. searching lyrics, music listening (8) 7. blogging (4) 8. doing research (4) 9. designed a web site (1)			
General attitude to computer technology	Happy to use it and experiment	Happy to use it	Neutral, it's a must	Dislike it
	11	11	4	4

Total number in the research sample: 42

Surveys completed: 30

My survey called “Czech Teachers’ Attitudes to Computer Technology” included questions about access to the Internet, the average time spent on the computer, general attitudes, the range of activities done with the help of a computer, the opportunities enabled by this technology, etc. Thirty teachers (out of 42) completed the questionnaire while nine chose to complete only certain parts. Three participants returned blank forms. Most of the participants signed the questionnaires even though they were not asked to do so. The results of this survey showed that the vast majority of the teachers can access high-speed Internet regularly, if only at work. Most of the teachers were keen on following new trends in teaching, be these with or without the use of technology.

It must be noted, however, that this sample was composed of people who had voluntarily signed up for their retraining courses. They had paid about 10 000 Czech crowns (350 Euros) for this two-year course (out of their own pocket). They attended the required courses each Friday often commuting up to four hours to Ceske Budejovice, and they appeared to be highly-motivated.

The continuation of this project

The new project to be launched in September of 2007 (with a different class) will use the same blog but for a slightly different purpose: to post short writing samples and then have students evaluate each other's writing, correct mistakes and even re-write certain passages, as they deem fit. The important part of this project will be the adoption of code names. As I have observed, the teachers were reluctant to comment on their classmates' work. They were also loath to experiment with their language, thinking instead of some imaginary grade they might get for their writing at the end of the course. Although we had about ten writing assignments during the academic year 2006-07, most were written in a "safe way", so as to meet the posted requirements.

We will start by working out a list of editing and correcting symbols suitable for online use. We will do a warm-up exercise on paper first. We will discuss and (hopefully) agree on other standards and techniques to be used. Participation will be mandatory. The class under review will be training teachers this time, not practicing teachers. Their average age is 22-25 and they are expected to be more technology-friendly. On the other hand, they will have had little experience in teaching.

Access to the Internet: Czech connectivity

One stumbling block I foresee in this project is the shortage of computer terminals in the university premises. Additionally, as has transpired from the survey quoted earlier, only a small minority of Czech people have access to high-speed Internet service from their homes. Most of the students at this university stay in this town only from Monday to Thursday and they have been complaining about access to computers. So they often take their work home where in turn they might have only a dial-up service. Without the benefit of broadband, it might prove to be quite frustrating to work on a blog.

According to a 2005 European Union (EU) survey, conducted by the Czech Statistical office, the Czech situation is rather convoluted. Corporate use was outstripping private use by an extremely wide margin.

On one hand, only 24% of all households owned a computer, the majority being in the City of Prague (38%). The vast majority of the computer owners were connected to the Internet (one in five households in total). The Czech Republic, therefore, was below the average for the EU, where the average Internet connectivity rates reached 45%.

On the other hand, almost all companies with more than ten employees used computers (96%) and Internet connections prevailed, with 90% of all companies being connected, and two thirds operating their own web sites. So the prevalence of company-owned web sites and Internet use in the corporate environment was above average within the EU, and was comparable to that of Austria. Similarly, e-mail communication was available at all central and regional offices and the total number of 207 municipalities. At the administrative level, two thirds (67%) of companies with more than ten employees used the Internet: for mutual communication (53%), for acquiring information about public competitions (37%) and compiling research data (26%) (www.czech.cz, 2007).

Due to the recent robust growth of the Czech economy, it can be safely assumed that the number of computer owners and Internet connections has rocketed in the past three years (since the EU study was conducted), but private use might still be lagging behind the corporate sector. As of July 2005, there were 607,000 high-speed connections in the Czech Republic using different technologies; thus the penetration rate had approached 5.9%.

What this means is that Czech students, as they have privately told me, will frequently use their parents' or friends' corporate networks when they need to access high-speed Internet service. As they are not using their own PCs, they do not have the luxury of time to experiment with online activities and to become more comfortable with computer technology. It should be up to the university, therefore, to provide more terminals with high-speed connections.

How other teachers cope

In an interesting project done in Brazil, educational-technology researcher Maria Lourdes Feronha (2006) set up a blended-approach experiment for university students in transition between undergraduate and post-graduate levels. English is compulsory in all Brazilian high schools, but not required at undergraduate university level, so most students returning to do their postgraduate studies have often slipped up in their knowledge of written English. At the postgraduate level, however, most reading materials are in English and all written work must be submitted in English.

Feronha who has come up with the description of the "lonely ranger syndrome" for insecure learners, states in her research paper that the returning students often have "emotional baggage", thinking their English is not good enough. To alleviate their doubts, the project created an ergonomic model of remedial learning. The students were invited to attend a lab session at the university and were first welcomed with familiar smells, flavors and smiles, such as drinks, flowers, music, and human tutor support. Each student was then asked to work on a computer station for a while, doing a bit of reading and a bit of writing. The welcoming message on the computer was: "You already know a great deal." The students then had to swap places and provide peer-to-peer feedback to others, both via the computer and face to face.

Future possibilities

In the Czech context, it is conceivable that those students with regular access to Internet-connected PCs will be able and willing to try out the outlined feedback and correcting techniques (involving pair or small-group work online). As Feronha's study has shown, the students' state of mind should also be taken into consideration. Otherwise, lack of confidence and a desire just to get a passing grade can hamper the best of efforts.

It would be unfair, however, to require all the students to collaborate in this way. Hence any project undertaken in this field might have to adopt a blended approach, allowing those who do not have regular Internet access to simulate the same techniques, possibly with the help of e-mails, as outlined by Warschauer (1995).

Conclusions

Overall, more research is required in the field of writing as practiced by second-language speakers. It would be interesting to compare how speakers of different language backgrounds fare, for instance. It can be proposed that both the learners' linguistic (first language interference) and cultural backgrounds (familiarity with English-language cultures) play a significant role. Other important variables should be the students' previous methods of instruction and the amount of English used in the societies concerned.

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www.czech.cz

www.onestopenenglish.com

APPENDIX:

1. The first questionnaire used in this project:

Hello Everybody!

February 19, 2007

Can you please take a little time and fill out the enclosed questionnaire which seeks to find out your attitudes to new technological solutions and your willingness to try out something new. To start with, most online projects will be STRICTLY VOLUNTARY.

QUESTIONNAIRE

(Attitudes to computer technology)

1. Time spent on the computer (per week):

More than 20 hours Around 10 hours Around 5 hours less than 2 hours

2. Activities done on the computer

E-mailing Preparing my lessons, etc. Playing games Learning English

Online reading Listening to music, searching for lyrics... Doing research

Doing digital photography Blogging Taking part in online discussion groups

Other.....

3. In your attitude to computer technology you are:

Very happy to use it, keen to experiment Quite happy, but not over-enthusiastic

Neutral, it's a must Not so happy, prefer I didn't have to use it No opinion

4. Apart from Microsoft WORD, which other software can you use?

Microsoft Excel Powerpoint Photoshop Other

Thank you

2. The second questionnaire used in this project:

Questionnaire for English Teachers

Full name:

Domicile:

E-mail address:

1. How many years have you been teaching English?

_____ year(s) How old are your students? _____ years

2. What do you enjoy most about your job?

3. When teaching English, which activities do you consider as most important?

4. What do you think are your main challenges?

5. How do you practice English outside your job and this course?

6. What are your personal goals for this course?

7. Do you have regular access to the Internet?

1) Yes

2) No

If yes, how do you use it to help you with your English?

8. What other ways do you use to practice your English?

9. Please circle the areas which you think are your most problematic. Make additional comments overleaf if you wish.

Language skills:

- a. Listening (understanding native speakers.....)
- b. Speaking (feeling confident to speak up....)
- c. Reading (having sufficient vocabulary...)
- d. Writing (structuring sentences in an "English way".....)

Pronunciation:

- e. Word stress
- f. Pronunciation of individual sounds
- g. Linking and blending of words
- h. Intonation
- i. Speed of delivery

Vocabulary:

- j. Learning vocabulary in general
- k. Learning idioms and phrasal verbs
- l. Learning how to pronounce individual words

10. Can you make any other useful comment? 

This paper was written for:

<http://www.eadtu.nl/conference-2007/default.htm>