

5th World Conference Educational Sciences – WCES 2013

Second Language Writing: use of the World Wide Web to Improve Specific Writing

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Abstract

Different strategies should be considered when teaching writing in a second language, as successful writing involves, among other things, the ability to integrate information learnt by the writer in different kinds of contexts. Nowadays, the World Wide Web is a very useful source of information for second language students, as they can obtain information about very specific topics and practise a second language. In this paper, our main objective is to detail how the use of the World Wide Web can benefit the language skills of university students. Apart from practising a second language, students obtain useful information related to the specific subjects they study to achieve an Industrial Engineering degree in Spain. The purpose of this pilot study is twofold, to improve their performance in a second language (English) and to widen their knowledge of specific topics. The results obtained in this pilot study are shown and the benefits of the use of the World Wide Web are detailed.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: Second language, the World Wide Web, writing, specific English;

1. Introduction

The ability to write autonomously in English enables students to draw on a wider information base and carry out research effectively. Furthermore, the professional market demands students to be able to write technical and scientific information in electronic form. This information has to be searched for, identified, and understood and after that, second language speakers should be able to produce additional ideas. The relevant details need to be extracted, integrated with data from other sources, and written to communicate with the receivers of our message.

The written word is a more durable and effective means of transmitting information. Furthermore, writing is also a mechanism through which we build up knowledge structures; it is a primary mechanism that allows human beings the creation and transmission of knowledge.

The main objective of this study is to explain how the use of the World Wide Web to practise writing can benefit the language skills of university students. We consider the fact that students use technology to practise language skills, and, in this sense, they have to write about the non-static information they get from specific fields. Apart from practising a second language, they obtain useful information related to the specific subjects they study to achieve an

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Industrial Engineering degree in Spain. Our purpose is twofold in this research, to analyse students' performance in a second language (English) and to observe if students widen their knowledge of specific topics.

In this study, it was believed that nowadays, students take into account if their teachers are reasonably competent users of technology, and if computer-mediated activities are incorporated in teaching materials (Lea, Clayton, Draude & Barlow, 2001; Imus, Ployhart, Ritzer & Sleight, 2004; Schrodt & Turman, 2005; Spodark, 2005; Li, 2006). Students are also used to the ease and speed with which information can be accessed and now expect online syllabus descriptions, assignments and materials. This change may also affect language skills and the way we communicate. Digital writing and digital reading are specific ways of communication that entail additional abilities that should be practised by second language learners. Students scan and skim multimodal discourse that includes texts, graphs, pictures, web sites, etc. This fact should be taken into account when teaching writing to students as teachers could take advantages of the teaching possibilities of the World Wide Web.

As a matter of fact, the development of the world Wide Web has resulted in fundamental changes in classroom practices and brought with it new responsibilities for language teachers. Indeed, successfully integrating the World Wide Web into a language course depends not only on theories of language learning, pedagogical principles or the design of tasks, but also on the access to online resources or the skills of language teachers.

The main advantages of using the World Wide Web for language learning are because it facilitates greater exposure to authentic language, access to a wide range of sources of information and to different varieties of language, opportunities for interaction and communication and greater learner participation (Carrió Pastor, 2009). Nevertheless, there are also some disadvantages: there has to be a sound pedagogical background for using the World Wide Web in language learning contexts, the volatility of the information in the World Wide web and the evaluation of language learning to name just some of them. The volume of information on the World Wide Web could prove difficult to manage. Furthermore, knowing which sites are trustworthy or keeping track of changes to the content or the address can be problematic. Nevertheless, as Luke (2006: 33) points out, as computers and related technologies steadily become an integral part of many societies and education systems "[...] the possibilities for computer use in language learning settings are bounded only by the creativity and ingenuity of the designer or instructor."

In this study, the fact of using the World Wide Web to practise writing was considered positive for second language learners, thus different activities were proposed to students to improve second language acquisition. We were conscious of the drawbacks, but the advantages of using real and specific material for students of a specific degree were a starting point to analyze the characteristics of digital writing.

2. Methodology

The students involved in this study were enrolled in the first year of the degree in Electrical Engineering at Universidad Polytechnic de Valencia during the academic year 2011-12. The group was composed of sixty students who were involved in the design and evaluation of the writing activities based on the World Wide Web. The students attended the optional subject called 'Technical English' that was taught during the second semester of the academic year. The language proficiency of the students involved in this study was A2, following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages described by the Council of Europe (2001). To determine the students' level of proficiency in the writing competences we initially designed a test based on the competences of the A2 level of the Common European Framework. When students finished the semester, a second test based on the competences of the B1 level was designed, as this was the level supposedly acquired by students after their training in the subject.

The first step was the design of written activities that implied the use of the World Wide Web. The second step was to design three questionnaires based on one-minute paper to test the improvement of students. In this way, students' progress was identified through the writing activities proposed and the questionnaires. The level of language acquisition was determined following the competences designed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). We considered for the design of writing activities following the descriptor of the CEFR: to write simple connected text on topics, which are familiar or of personal interest. In this study, specific topics were selected as students were enrolled in a specific degree, Electrical Engineering.

In the assessment of the writing performance of students, a grid based on the CEFR document was designed to facilitate the evaluation of their progress, which can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Written assessment criteria grid. Level B1 (adapted from Council of Europe, 2001)

Written assessment B1 level	Criteria grid	Students
Overall	(1) The student can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence. (2) The texts are understandable but occasional unclear expressions and/or inconsistencies may cause a break-up in reading	
Range	(3) The student has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events.	
Coherence	(4) The student can link a series of shorter discrete elements into a connected, linear text.	
Accuracy	(5) The student uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used “routines” and patterns associated with more common situations. (6) The student occasionally makes errors that the reader usually can interpret correctly on the basis of the context.	
Description	(7) The student can write accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions in simple connected text. (8) The student can write a description of an event, a recent trip – real or imagined. (9) The student can narrate a story. (10) The student can write straightforward, detailed descriptions on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest.	

This assessment criteria grid was used to evaluate the writing tasks and questionnaires of the students involved in the study. Once the written proficiency of students was evaluated, we classified the students taking into account if their English proficiency was A2, B1 or B2. Once detected the students who were not able to improve their

proficiency in written English to B1 or B2 using the World Wide Web, we analysed in detail their writings to detect the most frequent errors and the cause of the pedagogical approach used.

3. Results

Some of the exercises designed to practise and improve second language writing taking into account different web sites were:

(Example 1) <http://science.howstuffworks.com/airplane.htm>

Click on the image that is in the section ‘Floor Plan’ to see a complete floor plan of Air Force One. It will open in a separate window so you can toggle between the article and the floor plan. Describe the different parts of the plane including all the specific vocabulary that is included in the picture.

(Example 2) Go now to section ‘History’. What do you know about the history of USA? Write two historical events you remember. Do you think the history of USA affects us or do you think they are too far away to influence our economy or political situation? Give reasons to support your answer. Write the name of the presidents mentioned in this section and look for more information about them in the WWW. Write a short biography of each one.

(Example 3) www.energyquest.ca.gov. Information gathering.

In the section “Super Scientists” you can find biographies of major scientists. Choose one of them and summarize his/her life and works briefly. Why was he/she important in your opinion?

Within the “Energy Library” section, you can access a part called *Internet Citations*. Write down a short written composition (about any topic of your interest) including at least 2 Internet citations from selected websites.

As we can observe, in examples 1, 2 and 3, students had to visit some web sites to answer the questions, producing a writing activity, which was evaluated following the grid shown in Table 1. Once evaluated the sixty students involved in this study, taking into account the results obtained after the evaluation of the different activities done during the semester and the average mark of the three questionnaires, the different levels of English proficiency acquired can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2. Assessment of writing activities and questionnaires

Students	A2 proficiency	B1 proficiency	B2 proficiency
60 (100.0%)	13 (21.6%)	44 (73.3%)	3 (5.0%)

As can be seen, most of the students (almost 74%) could achieve the proficiency level in the writing skill that was the objective of the English course, i.e. B1 level. Some students could not get the B1 level and did not improve their writing with the activities based on the World Wide Web. After the manual analysis of the writings produced by the almost 22% of the students, we observed that most of the errors were classified in the overall and accuracy levels. Most errors were due to the use of incorrect words that the reader usually cannot interpret on the basis of the context. Some errors detected in the writings of the students with a lower level were also caused because the student could not write straightforward connected texts by omitting the linking of shorter elements into a linear sequence.

4. Conclusions

The conclusions of this study provide several aspects that should be taken into account when using the World Wide Web to improve second language learning:

a. The activities should be designed considering first the goals and aspects to be improved or the activities could be very time-consuming.

b. The assessment criteria should also be delimited and, as a consequence, students could be conscious of the tasks that should be done to obtain the objectives set.

c. The individual characteristics of each student should be taken into account a not all the students obtain the same results in the training period, so individual tutorials are recommended during the training period after the results obtained during the semester.

Summing up, the results presented in this study are part of a pilot study that focuses on the benefits of the use of the World Wide Web to improve language acquisition. In this paper, some results related to writing are shown, although listening, speaking and reading activities are also being designed and analysed at present. The results and methodology of the analysis of the language skills with the use of the World Wide Web, not included in this paper, will be explained in future studies.

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