



Extra-Dimensional In-Class Communications: Action Research Exploring Text Chat Support of Face-to-Face Writing

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Abstract

Two experienced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers transformed a traditional pencil-and-paper writing classroom that focused on sentence writing mechanics for Taiwanese graduate students by incorporating in-class text chat to augment students' regular classroom regime. This blended-style classroom afforded the teachers enhanced monitoring and guidance of students during the writing process. Students practiced sentence writing, offered peer support during learning, and interacted in real-time practice of sentence patterns taught. The incorporation of text-chat into the traditional classroom increased the amount of interaction amongst students as well as between students and teachers. Findings revealed that students often supplemented their in-class text chat on-line writing with spoken discourse but seldom utilized other on-line technologies available. This action research investigating technological innovation in a writing course facilitated the identification of emerging issues within EFL academic writing classes mediated by in-class chat-rooms, namely: peer support, self-correction and punctuation.

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Writing is an essential component of academic English coursework, yet it is challenging for teachers to provide in-class feedback to individual students regarding their writing. Students of English as a foreign language (EFL) have numerous problems in English writing difficult to resolve, and in particular, those who are speakers of non-Western languages have distinct difficulties with English punctuation and advanced sentence patterns. A writing instructor confronted with problem writing may seek to devote a significant portion of class time to providing individualized one-to-one writing instruction (sometimes referred to as “conferencing”), but in even moderate-sized classes, this approach quickly reaches its limits. It is more common for teachers to restrict their feedback to the marking of compositions, but due to the time necessary for marking written work, teachers highlight incorrect turns of phrase, and students reviewing graded writing assignments have difficulties recalling why they made those particular errors. A compounding factor is that passive learners rarely review error corrections to an extent necessary for internalizing natural patterns of the written language.

Instruction is vital in the development of written language, yet mastery of a language or writing does not come simply through learning the techniques (Vygotsky, 1962). The construction of meaning within the context of social interaction with teachers and peers is necessary for learning the intricacies of language as a system (Pena-Shaff &

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Nicholls, 2004). In the digital age, online text chat has become one of the most commonly utilized forms of social interaction (Lim & Meier, 2012). A text chat environment provides multiple computer users with a shared area in which they can communicate using text; computer users are able to see a history of previous comments and can type their own comments for others to see. In-class text chat provides a medium for the exchange of ideas and a channel for receiving the assistance of peers (Jones, Garralda, Li, & Lock, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2005; Sauro, 2009). Accordingly, we propose a technological approach for teachers to ensure that all students, even those less capable, gain maximal benefits from in-class writing.

Teachers are eager to increase the productivity of both teachers and students, but the use of technology is often met with caution. Educators raise concerns that the introduction of technology is to the detriment of valuable student-teacher contact time. Although computer technology allows writing instruction to move from a focus on composition towards “writing, response and revision,” Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) approaches for writing have primarily centered on writing assignments or on computer tutorial programs (Stan & Collins, 2002). Fortunately, unlike in the past when CALL was widely viewed as something only for beginners and not something suitable for the improvement of academic writing (Levine, Ferenz, & Reves, 1999), now CALL is considered to be a possible solution to problems experienced by advanced language learners as well as teachers with time-constraints. Innovations brought about by CALL research have provided advanced learners with a means of noticing previously undetectable errors in writing such as miscollocation (Shei & Pain, 2000; Wible, 2008; Wible, Liu, & Tsao, 2011), putting them in positions to produce writing in a more native-like manner through the incorporation of longer phraseological language units (McAlpine & Myles, 2003). Jing Xu and Susan Bull (2010) showed the potential of open learner modeling for assisting advanced second language (L2) speakers to self-correct grammatical rule usage. Likewise, with the advances in CALL technology, teachers are able to monitor students during the writing process with unobtrusive computer screen recordings or the review of user logs; these advancements provide insights into L2 learning that are not possible with traditional writing research or teaching (Glendinning & Howard, 2003).

When used appropriately, technology can transform a classroom, especially when it affects the communication among the participants. Carol Chapelle (2003) suggested that computer mediated communication allows learners to benefit from planning time before production, and learners self-correct more often, which may result from signals received by interlocutors. It is our thesis that graduate-level EFL students can be well served by the use of software that forms an environment in which social interactions are well suited to the focused study of writing mechanics. In this action research, we implemented a system that could bridge the communication gap between teachers and students, with the hypothesis that by incorporating synchronous chat into a writing class, teachers could provide just-in-time feedback to students about their writing. In this one-to-one classroom, each student and teacher had their own notebook computer, allowing them to access a bespoke text chat environment that not only enabled learning of advanced sentence patterns and punctuation, but also enabled real-time correction and discussion, both oral and text-based. Additionally, the communication medium could increase the amount of interaction amongst students as well as between students and teachers.

1. Literature review

The use of computers and technology in the field of language learning has been prominent since the early days of computing in the 1960s. Computer technology has numerous well-established positive effects on the learning of writing. Likewise, blended learning has enormous potential to improve EFL writing classes. For example, a comprehensive 46-study meta-analysis of any form of online learning indicates that blended learning, which uses both an in-class and an online component, is superior to either an online-only or offline-only mode of instruction (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). The transformative influence of blended learning is related to how it can promote connections between “people resources” and “information resources” (Cummins, 2000). Blended learning can amplify the potentials of the classroom by providing immediate access to assistance from teachers and peers. In view of such a context, we present the following review of related literature. In Section 1.1 background literature on corrective feedback of grammatical errors is reviewed, followed by Section 1.2 where the need of providing L2 writers with corrective just-in-time feedback on not only grammatical errors but also punctuation errors is discussed. Next, in Section 1.3, the benefits of incorporating computer-mediated discussion tools into traditional classrooms are considered. Finally, in Section 1.4, the reasons for selecting text chat as the

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