Writing with Computers in ESL Classroom:

Enhancing ESL Learners' Motivation, Confidence and Writing Proficiency

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Abstract

Researcher's observation on his ESL class indicates the main issues concerning the writing skills: learners' low motivation to write, minimum interaction in writing, and poor writing skils. These limitations have led them to be less confidence to write in English. This article discusses how computers can be used for the purpose of increasing students' motivation and confidence, and their writing skills, by getting them engaged in a variety of writing activities with computers, either offline or online.

Keywords:motivation, writing, confidence, computers, online, offline.

Writing in my school

There are three main issues regarding writing skills in the secondary school where I am teaching: learners' low motivation to write, minimum interaction in writing, and poor writing skils. These lead to their lack of confidence in that particular skill. Nevertheless, they are very motivated and actively participating in speaking activities, as a result, their aural skills are much better than those of written ones. Furthermore, writing on papers or handwriting activities is the typical form of teaching and learning writing activities in most Indonesian secondry schools. This is caused by the lack of computers in each school which teachers and ESL learners can use for writing. In the case of the school where I am teaching, there are only less than 20 units of computers for almost 200 hundres students, from year ten to twelve and for teachers to use. These

computers are only used for computer lesson. Lack of teachers', school preparedness (Anderson, 1985. P.5) as well as learners' ability in making use of such a technology seem also to be the cause. By teachers'preparedness means that they are not very familiar in using the computers for ESL although all of them are computer literate. Even, as Dudeney (2007, p.2) observes that, many teachers ignore their existence despite the facts that a great change in computer use and advances spread quickly in education world. Consequently, handwriting activities keeps existing although students have the chance to write with computers.

However, a significant change recently has happened where Indonesian government has allocated a huge amount, 20 %, of the national budget to support education. With that funding, schools now can have more computers and teachers are encouraged to optimally use the facility for the sake of teaching learning activities. In spite of this, teachers' awareness in using computer for ESL classroom is still the remainding issue. Therefore, at this juncture, this article will discuss how computers can be used for the purpose of increasing students' motivation and confidence, and their writing skills. These would be done by getting them engaged in a variety of writing activities with computers, either offline or online.

Benefits of using computers in the ESL classroom compare to handwriting

Writing with computers would benefit both teachers and learners. Dowling (1999,p.xi) argues that "writing with computers is of special benefit to learners of all ages". The reasons are, as Dowling suggests, writing with computers enables the balance between process and product within the activities of writing. Learners are also free to explore and develop ideas, concepts and relationship through language. In additon, learners identified having learning difficulties, would find this helpful because computers allows them to write freely and flexibly. This, to a greater extent would ehance their confidence and status within their peer or group (ibid). Reflecting from what Dowling has suggested, it is obvious that writing with computers could be done by learners at any age of learning. They will certainly experience the process of writing and, more importantly, gain confidence. This, to some extent, would affect learners motivation to write.

Writing computers or offline writing

Writing with computers can be done offline or online. By offline means that writing process is separately done without internet connection. Offline writing can be done through word processor, i.e. microsoft word. Writing with word processors gives a broad range of benefits for writing. For instance, initial "correctness" like spelling, choice of words or sentence correction is no longer the issue (Dowling, 1999. P. xi) because in microsoft word, a range of programs are provided to do those tasks for the learners when writing. This will reduce learners' burden in writing. For instance with the spelling checkers, learners would feel confidence with their spelling (ibid.p. xii) since the facilities, like spelling checker, can directly show which words are misspelled along with the correct spelled words.

Writing with a word processor

Writing can be fun in that word processor provides facilities to a joyful writing activities. Dudeny and Hockly (2007, p.15) highlight that word processor such as microsoft word can be used in many inventive ways by both teachers and learners. For teachers, they can use it to prepare, create and share materials for their classes (ibid). For students, however, it allows learners to insert pictures they like and design the lay out of their writing in a very interesting way. They can change the fonts color and size, insert frames and explore their creatvity on their writing tasks. They can also change the text background which will make the text looks colourful or they might want to break the text into coloumn like a magazine. By doing such activitities, their texts may look appealing to them. With regard to this, Dowling (1999.p.1) argues that words processor can help learners to produce " a professional looking" work.

Basiccaly, there are two main writing activities that students can do on word processor like microsoft word. As Dowling (1999. P.19-25) mentions, students can use microsoft word for individual and collaborative writing. In this context, collaborative means students can write in pairs, groups or write with the whole class. For individual writing, Dowling (ibid) suggests a range of activities such as writing " blind", filling in details, finding and replacing-exploring style, finding and replacing-exploring grammar, cutting and pasting-playing with sequencing, spaced out, etc. More explanation about all these

types of activities can be seen in Dowling's book, *writing and learning with computers* (1999).

Individual writing

As mentioned earlier, word processor facilitates teacher and learners. For teachers, they can assign the students to compose a story or write about their family or their pets. In designing the writing activities, it is suggested that teachers apply the process based approach which emphasises the idea of writing as problem solving (Dudely-Evans & John, 1998. P.117). In this approach there is a range of steps that a learner has to go through before coming at the writing product. Robinson (1991, in Dudely-Evans & John, 1998. P.117) reviews the thinking stages of writing within this approach which starts with draft 1, revision, input, draft 2, feedback, and draft 3. All these processes will keep continuing until the learners arrive at their writing final products. This approach certainly needs time investment from both teachers and learners.

To make individual writing more attractive, there is a variety of activities that teachers can get their students to do. Dudely-Evans & John (1998. P. 21) suggest that students can use word processor for creative writing. By creative writing means that students can add sound, pictures or videos to support their writing. For instance, they might write about their family. On their text, they can insert their family photos. With the same text, they can also change the colour for the names of their parents and their siblings. Adding to that, the can insert frame for thei text which would make their family description looks more personalized and interesting. Overall, all the facility in word processor will allow the learners to develop their creativity as well as encourage them to produce more writing.

Not only for the purpose of building students' creativity in writing can be achieved through this program, it also allows the learners to practice language and develop their vocabulary. For instance, learners can practice fill in the gap activities, sentence reordering, adding titles to paragraphs, and soon (Dudely-Evans & John, 1998. P.22). These activities are made possible because word proccesor allows the learner to undo and redo along with copying and pasting more easily and less time consuming (ibid).

Furthermore, with the thesaurus, they can find the synonym or antonyms of certain words. This would enrich their vocabulary although they might have a problem with the right word choice.

Collaborative writing

As well as promoting individual learning activities, words processor also allow a range of collaborative writing activities, either paired and grouped work or whole class activities. For instance, they can write a dialogue, stories, or the other types of text. They can also practice to be editors (Dowling, 1999, p.28). In this sense, they can proofread, edit or change some parts of their friends' work by using track change (Dudely-Evans & John, 1998. P.19). More importantly, they can work together to write for presentation (ibid, p. 25) or for assessment purposes ((Dowling, 1999, p.29).   These activities will not only enable them to communicate their ideas and improve their writing skill from their peers' feedback, but these also could increase their confidence and motivation to write in English.

Writing with computers online

After feeling confident with writing with computer, students, afterwards, can be encouraged to write on a more interesting phase, that is to write on the internet or online. Linda (2000) believes that "when computers and Internet technology are integrated into regular instruction, they can become an effective tool to facilitate language learning" (para. 17). By writing, posting or publishing their written work on the internet, ESL learners would certainly increase their motivation in writing. However, prior to do such online writing, teachers should be aware of students' background skills or familiarity with the internet. In other words, teachers need to identify what the learners have been able to do and what they cannot do. Teachers' awareness with these issue would enable them to plan some initial activities like introducing the learners with emails, wesbsites, blogs, wikipedias, etc..These activities can be done along with the writing process.

Conclusion and recommendation

The advances of computer technology, like word processors, has made writing process more easily to some extent. Not only allowing the students to write individually, by employing process based approach, it also promotes collaborative writing activities. Students with less interest in writing could be encouraged to write with computers as the facilities in word processors allow them to write freely and explore their creatvity. It also allows them to personalize their writing and make them look appealing. This will certainly increase their motivation. More importanly, writing with computers can enhance their confidence, which is a good starting poin to write on a higher stage that is to write on online pages, like weblogs or websites. However, apart from those benefits, teachers should be aware of some challenges they might encounter before or during the implementation of such a program, for intance the limited of access to computers and school unpreparadness to support such learning activities.

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