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What Teachers Should Know about Online Writing Tasks

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Abstract

The presentation will show the types of online writing tasks that can be integrated in online courses, online discussion forums, blogs, wikis...etc as a supplement to in-class writing instruction. The types of online writing tasks include the following: Tasks that focus on specific writing skills; tasks that provide free writing activities; tasks that provide extension activities; tasks that require students' comments; pre and post-writing instruction assessment tasks; error correction tasks; remedial tasks; self-improvement and study skills tasks; electronic searching tasks; tasks that require reflective thinking and others. Online writing tasks can be performed individually, in pairs or in small groups. They can be performed synchronously or asynchronously; independently, interactively or collaboratively. Examples will be given to illustrate the task types and task phases, i.e. pre-task phase, task cycle, post-task phase, and assessment.

Keywords: online task, writing, ESL, L2 teaching, L2 learning, technology integration

1. Introduction

Improving college students' writing skills in English as a second/foreign language is a challenge for many teachers and students. Many EFL/ESL students have difficulty generating, expressing and organizing ideas, make grammatical and spelling mistakes and others. To promote writing skills in the ESL/EFL classroom, many teachers integrate a variety of technologies such as word-processing, e-mail, online course management systems, online discussion forums, blogs, wikis, Internet websites, social networks, mobile and others in the teaching of writing.

A review of the literature has shown that numerous researchers have investigated the utilization of different kinds of technology in writing instruction and that the integration of those technologies proved to be effective. For example, Mair (2012) developed an online resource and used it with 10 undergraduate students to facilitate reflective writing. The resource proved to be effective. It empowered and ultimately enhanced students' learning through the development of metacognition. Likewise, Conroy (2010) trained Australian EAL university students in Internet-based tools and techniques for language learning. Findings indicated that the students became enthusiastic and reasonably competent in using those tools and techniques to independently correct their writing errors.

Another technology that Ritchie and Black (2012) was integrated in a third-year French composition course was public Internet discussion forums. The results showed that participation in the forums had a positive influence on students' argumentative writing skills. The forums forced the

students to choose a topic, read about it, obtain different points of view, and develop their own. They served as a community of practice where language accuracy was important.

In Taiwan, Lin and Yang (2011) integrated wiki-based writing projects and social interaction in the process of writing with 32 sophomore students at an English department. Self-reported reflections revealed that most students felt positive about their ability to apply the Wiki and feedback they received from their peers in writing. Meaningful social interaction appeared to play a significant role in the students' perceived benefits of a collaborative writing process.

Web-based social media platforms were used by some researchers as well. For example, Boas (2011) employed a blog and a Ning network as a supplement to regular English writing classroom activities. The activities showed that web-based social networking tools offered excellent opportunities to conduct the pre-writing, drafting, peer review, and revising steps of the writing process, in addition to developing important writing skills in English, and learning to work collaboratively on projects.

Moreover, Englert, Zhao, Dunsmore, Collings and Wolbers (2007) used a web-based environment that scaffolded disabled students' performance by prompting attention to the topical organization and structure of ideas, while they were composing expository papers about self-selected topics. The researchers found that disabled students in the web-based scaffolding condition produced lengthier pieces of writing, scored significantly higher on writing quality, produced better topic sentences and generated more topically coherent pieces overall than students who used similar writing tools, but in traditional paper-and-pencil print format.

Findings of a study by Al-Jarf (2004) showed that EFL freshman students who received online instruction in which they posted their own threads, short paragraphs, stories, or poems on Blackboard's discussion board, located information related to themes covered in the writing textbook from Internet sites, word processed their paragraphs and checked their own spelling using Microsoft Word made higher gains at the end of the semester than students who were exposed to in-class writing instruction that depended on the textbook only.

In another study, Huang (1999) introduced several Internet programs to 24 Taiwanese students majoring in English, and they could use the Internet throughout the course. Results revealed positive student attitudes towards using the Internet in writing instruction.

At King Saud University (KSU), in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, all faculty members are assigned a Blackboard account for each of the courses they teach and students enrolled in a course are automatically enrolled in Blackboard. However, very few instructors actually use Blackboard in their teaching. In an exploratory study conducted by the author that aimed to explore why faculty at KSU do not use Blackboard in instruction, results of questionnaire-surveys with 45 instructors who teach EFL courses at KSU and who are not users of Blackboard showed that instructors do not know which types of online tasks, in general, and online writing tasks, in particular, can be integrated in online courses and used as a supplement to in-class writing instruction. They reported that they do not know the sources of online writing tasks, how to select online writing tasks that are appropriate for the students, nor which instructional stages can be followed when using online tasks. They also expressed a need for examples of writing websites that target specific writing skills.

To meet the needs of EFL instructors revealed by the results of the questionnaire-surveys, the present study proposes a model for integrating Internet writing websites with different types of EFL writing tasks that can be integrated in online courses, online discussion forums, blogs, wikis and other technologies used as a supplement to in-class writing instruction. Specifically, the study gives examples of writing websites that target specific writing skills and shows the types of online writing tasks that students can perform on their own and the instructional stages that can be followed in performing those tasks. It also gives guidelines for selecting and performing online writing tasks.

Online writing tasks provide EFL students enrolled in writing courses with extension activities and additional opportunities for practicing writing in EFL. Helping students acquire writing skills in English is important for their success in the subsequent specialized content courses that they take in the program they are enrolled in.

2. Context

Students majoring in translation at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), KSU, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia take 4 English writing courses in the first four semesters of college: Writing I (4 hours), Writing II (4 hours), Writing III (3 hours) and Writing IV (3 hours) where they practice the process of writing. In addition, they take 4 listening, 4 speaking, 4 reading, 3 grammar, and 2 vocabulary building courses. The textbook used in the freshman writing course (Writing I) is *Interactions I: Writing (Silver Edition)* by Segal and Cheryl Pavlik & Margaret Segal (2007), McGraw-Hill Higher Education which was assigned by COLT. The aim of the book is to develop students' ability to write a cohesive paragraph that has a topic sentence and supporting details with correct grammatical, spelling, punctuation and indentation. The book consists of 10 chapters, each of which has a theme and is divided into the following parts: Exploring ideas, building vocabulary, organizing ideas, developing cohesion and style, some grammatical points, writing the first draft, editing practice, writing the second draft and journal writing as a free writing activity. In each chapter, tasks and skills are practiced one at a time, before the students put them all together in their paragraph.

3. Materials and Tasks

3.1 Selecting Online Writing Websites and Tasks

The course instructor can make a list of useful English writing websites related to the writing skills to be covered in the course. He/she may assign weekly writing websites to be checked by the students. Writing websites selected should focus on a single writing skill. The following is a summary of the writing skills to be targeted by the online tasks:

- A. **Sentence writing skills:** Fragments and run-on sentences; simple, compound complex; periodic, loose and balanced sentences; parallel structure improving sentence structure and others.
- B. **Paragraph writing skills:** Writing topic sentences, supporting details, concluding sentence, types of paragraphs (introductory, concluding, descriptive, narrative, argumentative, compare-contrast, cause-effect...etc.), cohesion and coherence, and using transitional words and phrases.
- C. **Essay writing skills:** Writing the thesis statement, introductory paragraph, concluding paragraph, writing descriptive, narrative, argumentative, compare-contrast, cause-effect, how-to (process), and classification essays.
- D. **Writing Mechanics:** Grammatical structures such as Parts of Speech, Subject-Verb Agreement, use of idioms, prepositions, articles, singular and plural forms; spelling rules, spelling changes and spelling variants; capitalization; punctuation; homophones, homonyms and homographs.
- E. **Stages of writing:** Developing the topic, identifying the writer's audience, organizing ideas with note cards, prewriting, drafting/writing, revising and proofreading.
- F. **Standardized writing Test skills:** Identifying sentence errors, choosing the better sentence, editing and revising paragraphs, improving sentences, writing the SAT, TOEFL or IELTS essay.

Websites selected should provide definitions, explanations, examples, supplementary exercises for extra practice and instant feedback. When you post a website, check the website to see if it is appropriate for the writing skills under study, if it matches the proficiency level of the students and if it

contains sufficient material and items. Post several websites that target a particular writing skill to accommodate different proficiency levels and different learning styles. Then the instructor can give a brief description of each website and give clear, specific, and detailed instructions on how a particular task should be performed.

The students can also search for writing websites on their own by enclosing the topic of interest such as “*topic sentences*”, “*organizing ideas*”, or “*supporting details*” in quotation marks in the Google search box and by connecting search terms with “*and*”.

The teacher can use an online course, an online discussion forum, a blog or a wiki to post the writing websites, post the tasks, provide practice, hold the discussion and provide interaction and feedback.

When selecting and using online writing websites and tasks the following guidelines should be taken into consideration: They should teach the writing process explicitly, increase students’ awareness and promote noticing, focus on metalanguage, contextualize writing instruction, use a task-based learning framework, provide guidance, provide answers with concise explanations, integrate exchanges between learners, and provide ongoing training and technical support.

3.2 Types of Online Writing Tasks

(i) Online self-assessment

Websites should provide pre- and post-instruction self-assessment, should include self-grading and interactive writing quizzes, should accommodate the different proficiency levels, and should help the students diagnose their weaknesses, and enable them to assess their mastery of a specific writing skill. The following is an example:

- <http://www.world-english.org/writing.htm>

(ii) Websites that explain writing skills or provide definitions such as:

- <http://www.time4writing.com/how-it-works/>

(iii) Single writing skill exercises and practice

- Topic sentences: <http://www.stickyball.net/writing.html?id=511>
- Topic sentences: <http://www.time4writing.com/writing-paragraphs/topic-sentence/>
- Topic Sentences (advanced): http://eslbee.com/topic_sentences2.htm
- Supporting details, concluding sentence, transitional words: <http://www.time4writing.com/>

(iv) Error correction tasks

- <http://www.world-english.org/correctingsentences.htm>

(v) Remedial tasks

- *Correcting Sentences*: <http://www.world-english.org/correctingsentences.htm>
- *Correct The Mistake*: http://www.world-english.org/correct_mistakes.htm
- *Correct Word Order*: http://www.world-english.org/correct_word_order.htm

(vi) Production tasks such as:

- Combining reading and writing tasks such as reading a short story or an article and writing a summary of it. In writing about “*natural remedies*”, each student might select an herb or a natural remedy of interest to them, search the internet for information about it, read it and then write a paragraph about it in their own words.

- Using story starters such as "I can't believe it...", "Tomorrow, I'm going on vacation to...", "I just saw a tragic movie about..."
- Using writing prompts:
 - <http://www.pearsonlongman.com/ae/marketing/sfesl/generaltopics.html>
 - <http://www.esl-galaxy.com/writing.html>
- Using exercises and worksheets:
 - <http://www.esl-galaxy.com/writing.html>
 - <http://www.elcivics.com/worksheets/writing-worksheets.html>
 - Using Phrasal Verbs and other grammatical structures in Sentences.

(vii) Free writing tasks

- <http://www.time4writing.com/learning-how-to-write/creative-writing-exercises/>

(viii) Leveling up tasks

Leveling up means practicing the language in an online language learning community. This can be done on websites like SharedTalk.com, which is a community of people from all over the world, dedicated to language exchange and language learning. According to SharedTalk.com, groups of two or more people exchange their knowledge of languages and help each other to practice a foreign language. They practice with a native speaker, discover other cultures, share hobbies and interests, learn slang and informal expressions, can ask their partners for explanations about vocabulary and grammar, and receive encouragement and support. Other websites for language exchange are Paltalk, Polyglot club.com, Skype and Facebook.

(ix) Differentiation Tasks

According to Tomlinson (2001), differentiation involves providing students with different opportunities for acquiring content, processing, constructing, or making sense of ideas. It also involves developing teaching materials and assessment procedures to help all students learn effectively, regardless of differences in proficiency level. The teacher creates an environment that is positive, structured, and supportive for each student. For example, in writing about "natural remedies" or "celebrations", each student can write about an herb or a celebration that is of interest to him/her and with which he/she is familiar. When grading students' paragraphs, the instructor can focus on strong points and areas of improvement in each student and commend those, then point out one or two weaknesses for each student to work on, starting with the simplest to more complex ones, depending on the students' competency level.

(viii) General reference websites:

These might include writing resources, dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias, grammar, online tutoring, prefixes and suffixes, punctuation and spelling guides depending on the students' needs. The following are examples

- Free Writing Resources by Category: <http://www.time4writing.com/free-writing-resources/>
- Irregular verbs: <http://www.englishpage.com/irregularverbs/irregularverbs.html>
- Regular verbs: <http://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/regular-verbs-list.htm>
- Irregular noun list: <http://english-zone.com/spelling/plurals.html>
- Collective noun list: <http://www.ojohaven.com/collectives/>
- Prefixes and suffixes: <http://www.advanced-english-grammar.com/prefixes-suffixes.html>
- Idioms: <http://www.goenglish.com/Idioms.asp>
- Idioms: http://www.learn-english-today.com/idioms/idiom-categories/alpha-list_A.html
- Phrasal verbs: <http://www.learn-english-today.com/phrasal-verbs/phrasal-verb-list.htm>

- Acronyms and abbreviations: <http://www.acronymfinder.com/>
- Online Writing Tutors: <http://www.rong-chang.com/writing.htm>
- Online tutors: <http://www.rong-chang.com/tutor.htm>
- Free Online writing tutors: <http://www.socc.edu/writing/>
- Collaborative Online Tutoring: <http://www.etutoring.org/>

3.3 Instructional Stages

3.3.1 Orientation

Instruction with online tasks can proceed in the following steps: (i) Introducing the students to the online course, blog or online discussion forum to be used for posting writing websites and performing online writing tasks; (ii) giving the students the URL and asking them to register and enroll themselves; (iii) posting a sample website or task and show the students what they are supposed to do, how and where to respond; (iv) telling the students what is expected of them; and (v) showing the students how they can search Google for writing websites targeting specific writing skills by selecting specific search terms, enclosing search terms in quotation marks and using Boolean operators (and, or, not).

3.3.2 Pre-task Phase

In the pre-task phase, the teacher checks the websites, exercises, quizzes to make sure that they match the writing skill under study, students' proficiency level, different learning styles, and the aim for which the students are using them, i.e., assessment, diagnosis, remediation, or practice. In this phase, the instructor sets goals for a particular task, and introduces the website and the writing skill it targets, posts written instructions on how to perform the task and tells the students what they need to do and focus on.

3.3.3 Task Phase

In this phase, the students perform the writing tasks on their own before or after a class session. Online writing tasks can be performed individually (each student works on the task on her own), in pairs (two students work on the task together) or in small groups (three or more students work on a single task together and produce one answer). They can be performed interactively (one student answers, another reacts, responds to or comments on the answer) or collaboratively (working together). They can be performed synchronously (live or occurring at the same time) asynchronously (occurring at different times). The students check the websites and perform the tasks any time at their own convenience. They post their written output online. To help the students make the most of online tasks, they should do interactive exercises in which they take an active role. While doing the task, the students should be required to engage and participate in, respond to and be actively involved in the task.

3.3.4 Post-task Phase

In this phase, the students discuss and comment on each other's paragraphs and essays. The teacher can clarify or help with problematic areas in students' writing. The students may keep a log of the topics and paragraphs they have written and subskills they have practiced and mastered. They can also perform post-instruction assessment tasks and those who need extra help can do remedial writing tasks.

3.4 Role of the Instructor

The instructor serves as a facilitator. His/her guidance is crucial in facilitating the use of online tasks to improve students' writing skills. He/she creates a positive and supportive online learning environment that is secure for making mistakes while writing. He/she praises good performance and

encourages the inadequate one. He/she encourages the students to respond to and comment on each other's paragraphs or essays. He/she encourages error correction by peers. He/she responds to students' needs, answers queries and provides technical support. To motivate students to perform the online tasks, the instructor can give credit or include online website content on tests.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Use of online writing websites and tasks is becoming more and more popular in language teaching. To help ESL/EFL college instructors select appropriate online writing tasks and use them effectively and help college students acquire basic writing skills in English, the present study recommends the use of online writing tasks that the students can perform on their own, as a supplement to in-class writing instruction, based on writing websites that focus on single and specific writing skills. The students can check Internet websites, and perform relevant tasks before or after class lectures.

Use of supplementary online writing tasks has several advantages to EFL college students. The students can access them any time and perform them at their own convenience. They are in charge of their own learning. They learn independently and learn by interacting with their classmates and instructor. Thus they learn from each other, as they have a chance to view excellent, average and poor written outputs. They discuss, and comment on other students' written output. They can express their needs and pose questions whenever they feel the need to. They can follow up their own progress. Resources posted can serve as a reference and can be re-used after the end of the course. Students can refer to the resources posted as many times as they wish and whenever they need. Students of different levels and instructors teaching different writing courses can join, share and interact together using online writing tasks.

Furthermore, the present study recommends that a writing website repository (library) be created by L2 writing instructors and students in which writing websites are classified and stored according to the specific writing skill they target. The writing repository should have a comprehensive alphabetical index that facilitates the searching process and allow writing instructors and students' quick and easy access to the writing repository via the Internet. Students and instructors should be able to store, search and retrieve writing websites to be used as supplementary material. The online writing repository should be interactive. Students should be able to post questions and receive answers and feedback to their queries. Writing websites used should be constantly updated and reviewed, with new websites added and malfunctioning websites or those with broken links removed. Those are believed to enhance students' acquisition of EFL writing in language programs and institutes.

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