CHAPTER 3

Use of CALL in Writing Skills

Introduction

The discussion in the previous chapters has shown that computers can be used as an effective tool in language teaching and learning. The review of various works and studies on the use of CALL in language teaching and learning has made this amply clear. This chapter focuses on the opportunities for students to develop writing skills by using computer.

Approaches to Writing

Writing, one of the four skills of language, is an extended form of thinking. It is a personal achievement and is valuable almost in every occupation. It is a continued process of discovery involving a series of steps. Through writing the writers express their ideas and thinking. According to Reinking, Hart, and Oshen (1988, p.3) there are many advantages of writing for both teachers and students:

a. There is an opportunity for the writers to express what they want, they can shape and reshape their written materials to their satisfaction.
b. Writing gives the advantage of effective and precise communication.
c. Through writing one can record one’s thoughts, actions and decisions.

A skill is a learned activity. It is something one can develop through practice and reflection. Writing skills are an important part of communication skills. Professional engineers are expected to write reports, e mails, memos, notices and letters to their peers, subordinates and the public as a whole for communicating with them for a variety of purposes. If any of these written communications is badly, incorrectly or inappropriately structured or framed, the
peers or subordinates will waste time trying to make sense of it. Badly written communication also open to misinterpretation.

Writing is the primary basis upon which the work, the learning and the intellect of a person will be judged—in colleges, in the workplace, and in the community. It is an active process of discovery and reinforcement. It prevents students from becoming passive.

According to Reid (2001) teaching ESL writing differs from teaching other language skills in two respects:

a. L2 writing was not viewed as a language skill to be taught and used as a support skill in language learning, and

b. With the gradual development of theory and practice, ESL teaching followed the native English speaker (NES) composition theory (p, 28).

Not much importance was assigned to the teaching of writing till late 1970s. However, L2 researchers have been stressing on the teaching of writing skills since the 1980s. Earlier, students were given grammar exercises to ensure accuracy in the English language but with the passage of time, especially in the early 1980s, teachers became aware of the importance of native English speakers’ composition theory and need for ESL in academic environments (Reid, ibid).

Writing is an aid to learning, e.g., to consolidate the learning of new structures or vocabulary or to help students to remember the use of new items of language. Each writing exercise has a purpose. Sometimes a number of purposes may be combined. Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, and Swann (2003) have outlined the purposes of writing: as assessment; as an aid to critical thinking, understanding and memory; as a means to extend students’ learning beyond lectures and other formal meetings, to improve students’ communication skills; and to train students as future professionals in particular disciplines (p, 21). Reinking et al (1988) have mentioned some other purposes of writing such as to inform, to persuade, to express oneself and to entertain. He has highlighted such qualities of good writing as fresh thinking, a sense of style and effective organization.
Students have to involve themselves in the process of communication in the classroom. To be able to communicate effectively in the classroom and outside it they need to develop their writing skills. As Brumfit (1984) has suggested, in the early stages the teachers should involve students in both controlled and guided writing exercises. Teachers should allow students to express their own ideas and produce correct forms of the language.

There are several approaches to the teaching of writing which gained importance in the 1970s. Of the various approaches to teaching writing skills product approach and process approach are mainly discussed in this section. The product approach to writing draws on the behaviourist theory of Skinner and on Audiolingualism which emphasized drill and practice in language learning. In this approach writing is regarded as a simple, straight-forward process during which writers planned, wrote and revised in a linear fashion. Within this approach, "writing is seen as a product constructed from the writer’s command of grammatical and lexical knowledge, and writing development is considered to be the result of imitating and manipulating models provided by the teacher" (Hyland, 2003, p.3). This approach is mainly concerned with the structure of language and hence teachers are mainly preoccupied with the grammatical accuracy of the finished product. Practice and repetition in the teaching process are regarded as essential for achieving accuracy in students’ language.

The process approach was the result of growing dissatisfaction with the prevalent practice of teaching writing i.e. the product approach. Tribble (1996) has defined the process approach as 'an approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models' (p.160). Thus, the focus shifts from the final product itself to the different stages of composing. Since writing is recursive process the learners have to go through these stages for developing their language skills.

Emig (1971), in her case study, identified five stages in the composing process:

a. Prewriting (brainstorming, generating ideas)
On the basis of these stages it is considered that writing is a recursive process rather than a linear process – since students do not appear to follow these stages in a strictly straightforward order. Once students have finished their revision they may move back to prewriting stage if they think that the content of their papers is not adequate or sufficient or if they feel that they should incorporate fresh ideas.

At the beginning of the 21st century, a new pedagogy has begun to develop in teaching writing; a balanced approach has been adopted in writing classrooms and ‘writing is viewed as a communicative social act’ (Reid, 2001, p. 29). Teachers are involved in practicing individualized process of writing activities for developing learners’ language skills. In the present study experiments involving individualized processes of writing activities in some selected tasks were conducted (see details in Chapter V).

**Writing with the Word Processor**

In today’s world of advanced information technology, a computer has the following technology tools in writing (Pennington, 2004)

- composing and revising text (word processor)
- correcting text (spell checkers and grammar checkers)
- storing and reproducing text (disks and printers)
- sending text electronically (email and Internet)
- creating new kinds of computer text (hypertext and web pages).
There are many ways in which computers can facilitate and ameliorate language learning process but the word processor is regarded as the commonest and most frequently used tool in the majority of the institutions. In particular, Hyland (1993) has claimed that ‘word processing is perhaps the most accepted and universal use of computers in education today’ (p.21). A large number of researchers have recognized and discussed the potential of word processors to facilitate and enhance the writing experience (Daiute, 1985; Pennington, 1993; 2003; 2004; Phinney, 1991; Stevens, 1999). Warschauer (1996b) has said, many composition and language teachers believe that word processing encourages new pedagogical relationships in the class by facilitating student revision and collaborative writing. Brierley & Kemble (1991) have described it as the most enabling and beneficial of all the processors for EFL learners as it facilitates different types of computer-based activities (p.17). Becker and his associates (1999) conducted a survey among teachers to know the objective of students’ use of computers (as cited in Kulik, 2003). They found that 44% of the teachers believed that computers helped students to express themselves in writing. Again 55% of the teachers reported that their students were using word processing software regularly. The survey has also revealed that students are able to write less self-consciously and more freely, and for longer periods. They can also write longer texts. According to Stevens (1999) the word processor has a positive effect on the development of students’ proficiency in writing. He designed several word processor-based exercises and activities, and suggested the following to be used in the computer-writing class:

a. Finding the missing word and writing it.
b. The use of search and replace letters in a certain text.
c. Double-clicking a word, cutting it, and asking a student to paste it in the correct place.
d. Editing: the teacher presents a text with errors, and students work individually or cooperatively (in groups or pairs) to revise it.
e. Sentence completion: the teacher gives students a number of open-ended sentences or cloze exercise to complete.

Thus it is easy to edit a text with the word processor. As Tuman (1993) has said:

While there are other advantages of word processing-- flexibility in page layout; spell-checking and other forms of file-checking; and new, economical, and flexible means of storing and transmitting files--it is this first advantage of editing that has been at the center of the initial attraction to computers for most writers and teachers.

While talking about the effectiveness of CALL in improving students' performance in the basic skills, specific skill areas, grade levels, and content areas, etc., Neu and Scarcella (1987) highlighted the following findings:

a. writing quality of students can be improved by using word processors;

b. higher grades tends to be achieved for word processed assignments;

c. attitude towards writing and motivation can be improved; and

d. students want to write multiple drafts when word processing is used.

Before using any type of word-processing software, one needs to be familiar with certain terms. In Microsoft Word, some technical terms are used to articulate certain features of the software programme, its function/navigation methods, and common word-processing terms: arrow keys, close, save, save as, border, click, double click and many more. According to Brierley & Kemble (1991), there are seven major applications for the word processor in writing: formatting, cutting and pasting, insertion and deletion, search, editing up, editing down, and editing across (p.33). These functions can be performed through the Word 2003, the word processor which is used in this study. It has: “Edit”, “View”, “Insert”, “Format”, “Tools (track changes),” etc. For writing skills editing is very important. By editing – deleting, moving, or adding characters, changing font styles, inserting bulleted items, and altering the color of the text- one can modify a document. On this function of the word processor, Kulik (2003) has observed,
‘with regular use of word processors, young writers might even get into the habit of revising and reorganizing their compositions, and this habit might affect the quality of their writing even when they were writing with paper and pencil alone’ (p.3).

*Spelling and Grammar*, one of the standard tools in word processor, can also help the learners in improving their knowledge of vocabulary. Two grammar checkers *Whitesmoke Writing Software* and *Serenity Software Editor*, developed in the 90s, can be used for checking mistakes and they offer suggestions for correcting the potential grammatical errors. Since good grammar is essential in writing, students can make use of it while composing texts in the computer.

Dictionaries and thesaurus are also available for the student in the word processor. They can use them ‘interactively’. Dictionary is used in language learning as a resource and learners can use this resource for developing language skills, especially writing skills.

Another important feature available with most of the word processors is that learners can also learn synonyms and antonyms while using a computer. As Ahmed et al (1985) have remarked, ‘supplying synonyms and antonyms can be dealt with very neatly by requiring learners to match items from lists of words’ (p.108). Thus it is observed that word processing has brought about interesting developments in the way writers write.

The advantages of the use of word processor in developing written language can be summarized in the words of Chadwick and Bruce (1989): Computers change the writing process in that their various text manipulation features allow writers to jump backwards and forwards in their texts, revise and rephrase, delete and insert and at the same time provide the writer with a hard copy at any stage. Once the first draft is completed the student can read and reread, make any number of changes without the generation of non-productive labour or fear of spoiling the presentation of the text. The student no longer faces the frustrating dilemma of whether to
rewrite the whole, involving meaningless copying, or leave changes with he or she knows should be made but wants to avoid .... The student can therefore exhaust his or her own intuitions about what is good or bad, what needs changing or leaving alone, before requesting feedback from a tutor or teacher (p.18).

Writing in E-mail Communication

E-mail, a form of asynchronous computer-mediated communication, has been called "the mother of all Internet applications" (Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2000, p. 3). Electronic mail (E-mail) is used to send and receive messages. One can send e-mail practically to any one with an e-mail address, anywhere in the world. Hundreds of millions of people now use email daily for countless purposes, from carrying out administrative tasks and distributing announcements of public events to sharing recipes and keeping in touch with family and friends. In its simplest form, e-mail is an electronic message sent from one computer to another. Now days, one can send or receive personal and business-related messages with attachments like pictures with sounds, graphics and other documents. In this type of communication, one can communicate quickly and easily with millions of people around the world anytime 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Email communication can be group-based (newsgroup, discussion group and so on) and two-person email communication.

E-mail is considered an important form of CALL. Many books on the use of E-mail in developing writing skills of the learners have been published. One of the important books is Warschauer's E-mail for English Teaching (1995) which stresses on the role of e-mail exchange in developing linguistic proficiency, cultural knowledge, and communicative competence in L2 learners. Students can use e-mail and share files and thus they can collaborate together with other classmates, peers and teachers. Belisle (1996) has observed that networking electronically can help learners create, analyze, and produce information and ideas more easily and effectively. Students can also communicate, send messages to
native speakers and in the process of exchanging messages they can increase their social awareness and confidence. Many people have observed that composing an email message feels like talking even though it is written; others have noted that at least in some respects it even looks like talking—some of its linguistic features resemble those of speech (Danet, 2002).

Many researchers have found various ways and means of the use of E-mail for language teaching and learning. According to Smith and Baber (2005), the following are some of the uses of e-mail (p.16):

a) Homework and feedback by email: The simplest way to incorporate email in teaching is to give the students homework via email. This homework can be corrected in the class or outside the class and then sent to the students with feedback. Writing tasks, or exercises such as filling in gaps or matching exercises, etc may be suggested as homework. The teacher can include the homework directly in the text of the email. He/ she can also compose the homework in Word and send it as an attachment.

b) Student activities: The students can use email to work on exercises and tasks alone and collaboratively. They can send their writings to other students (one-to-many) of the class and in this way email can be used for various student activities. Email can also be used (among students) for information gathering and transferring classroom activities into email text.

c) Proofreading students’ documents: Students need to write texts in English—business emails, academic writings, technical reports and newspaper articles, etc. They can send their writings to the teacher through email for proofreading and the teacher can return the same to the students with comments and suggestions for modification.

d) Keeping students informed: The instructor can inform the students via email about various issues such as website address, a newspaper report, and so on. He/ she can recommend to his/her students relevant topic(s) to read before starting the next lesson.
e) Email discussion groups: The teacher and the students can join email discussion groups namely, Yahoo, Google, Rediff, etc. An email discussion group is normally devoted to a single topic such as Word processor and developing writing skills, Internet as resource tool and so on. Any member can initiate a discussion on a specific topic and all the members will get the mail sent by another member because all the members will be given one email ID to send messages. In this way, a student can develop his proficiency in English by participating in and contributing to the discussion.

Researchers such as Gonglewski, Meloni and Brant (2001) have described the pedagogical benefits of E-mail. Some of these can be mentioned below:

a. E-mail extends what one can do in the classroom, since it provides a venue for meeting and communicating in the foreign/second language outside the classroom.

b. Email provides a context for real-world communication and authentic interaction with other native and non-native speakers.

c. Email expands topics beyond classroom and gives learners an additional context for discussion.

d. Email communication promotes student-centered language learning. Instead of trying to produce a mistake-free composition a student can communicate with another person in the target language.

e. Email encourages equal opportunity for participation in the class. Research suggests that those students who are reluctant to speak in face-to-face contexts are more willing to participate in the electronic context.

f. Email connects speakers quickly and cheaply and allows students to communicate with native speakers of the target language or with other learners frequently.
It is obvious that E-mail can be used for a variety of purposes in the second language classroom. Students can send messages to their counterparts in e-mail discussion groups and in turn each of them receives reply in his/her mailbox. The students get opportunities for authentic communication with the native speakers and with others all over the world. They can carry out collaborative projects through E-mail.

Through e-mail a teacher can interact with his/her student or group of students at a convenient time; it may be inside the classroom. However, it need not be confined to a classroom. It is easier for the teacher to group the mails by the names of students, by dates received or by project names. This process of collaboration and communication helps the learner in developing and improving his/her language skills with the help of practice with peers and teachers. The frequency of communication between teachers and students, and among students can be increased through dialoging. Belisle (1996) has experienced three types of dialoguing in ESL writing class:

(a) Student to teacher:
   (i) The student can ask questions and answer those questions;
   (ii) They can also send progress report and updates on their study.
(b) Teacher to student: The teacher can send message of announcements, assignments and home works.
(c) Student to student: A student can communicate via e-mail to another student or group of students. They can also create interesting messages. They can send messages on social events and announcements.

The text of email can be composed online and offline but the language used in the text is different. As Danet (2002) has said:

Email composed offline is likely to be relatively more writing-like in its linguistic features than email composed on the fly when logged on. In offline, there is time to edit; one can use a word-processor and import the letter into the email interface or enclose the edited text as an attachment.
CALL Activities in Writing

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs have been found to be effective in many language learning studies (Almekhlafi, 2006, Cunningham, 2000; Hegelheimer et al, 1996). The results of the studies have shown that those students who used CALL programs performed better than those who used traditional programs. CALL programmes can provide individualized instructions and allow students to work at their own pace. de Szendeffy (2005) has described eight writing activities in CALL for a wide range of communicative purposes (p.32-51). A brief description of all these activities is given below:

Activity 1: Word-Processing Basics—The main objective of this activity is basic text manipulation. In this activity students can correct a paragraph while learning to manipulate the text. The required software is word processor.

Activity 2: Academic (Manuscript) Formatting—The main objective of this activity is formatting academic papers. In this activity, students will be able to know how to format a paper ‘partly to meet the expectation of teachers and others reading them and partly to shift their focus from how the text looks (big, funky, colourful fonts) to what it says’ (ibid, p.36). The required software is word processor.

Activity 3: Using Built-in Language Tools—Most of the modern word-processors have tools menu such as spell checker, grammar checker and thesaurus and these tools can be used for the purpose of developing writing skills. In this activity, students are taught to use these tools properly. Most spelling tools suggest alternative words based on those with similar spellings or sounds. The thesaurus tools ostensibly offer the prospect of introducing students to new words whereas grammar checkers may point out errors such as incomplete sentences, comma splices, faulty subject-verb agreement, or case mistakes. The required software is word processor.

Activity 4: Using Other Writing Resources—The main objective of this activity is to use dictionary and encyclopaedia programmes or sites while composing.
manipulating, editing the text in the word-processor. Students are taught to use CD or free web-based dictionaries that offer audible pronunciation of words and hyperlinked definitions in order to develop writing skills. “Encyclopaedias in the target language, either online or on CD or DVD, provide good, general resources to language students in writing classes and encourage exploration of related or adjacent items or random discovery” (ibid, p.42). The required software is word processor, dictionary and encyclopedia programme or online versions.

Activity 5: Story Starter—The content objective is collaborative writing (among students). In this activity, students write a story whose first line is given to them. This activity can be done in either synchronous or asynchronous mode or it is possible to use both the modes. While contributing writings students get an opportunity to introduce themselves to collaborative writing tools. This activity can be done in word processor, e-mail programme.

Activity 6: Interview—The content objectives are interviewing, note-taking, writing interviews, etc. In this activity, students can interview each other in pairs or in a chain on any interested topic.

Adding photos or other graphics in the text document is an expanding interview activity.

Activity 7: Business Writing—The content objective is to use business templates for many different kinds of documents, such as correspondence, inter-office memos, resumes, newsletters, brochures and manuals. While formatting documents students can add content to placeholder text.

Activity 8: Editing Student Writing—The objective is to use proofing tools while editing students’ writings. Now a days, more and more students in writing classes submit their writing assignments electronically to their teacher as e-mail attachments. Teachers can make comments on a student’s paper and then send a copy back to the student by e-mail or by saving to the designated saving location for the class. Word processor with comments and track changes feature is the required software to edit students’ writing.
Limitations of Computer

The advantages and effects of CALL in developing writing skills, so far, have been discussed. Though computer has an inherent advantage which can help learners in developing language skills, it has also some limitations.

Thus a computer:

a. cannot judge unexpected input,
b. cannot provide individualized feedback beyond a predetermined list of messages,
c. cannot engage learner in rich negotiation of meaning, a characteristic of face-to-face interaction,
d. cannot motivate depth and quality of engagement, a characteristic of human interaction.

Computers do not have any ability to make use of natural language. According to Kemp (1992), “…computers can not grasp the meaning in text and therefore are helpless in evaluating the rhetorical elements that modern composition studies feel to be the most important in producing effective writing: audience, purpose, tone, and context”.

Some other limitations of CALL are mentioned below:

a. Some CALL hardware and software are very expensive. It is difficult for the schools/ institutions that have limited funding to acquire them.
b. A cooperative teamwork is needed to design a good CALL software.
c. Not all students can access CALL (e.g. the internet). In many developing countries, there is a problem of "have" and "have not" Internet between the rich and the poor. Teachers of ELT may have negative attitudes towards CALL.
d. There is fear that CALL might replace teachers.
e. Many ELT teachers are not enthusiastic about CALL because they have limited skills and experience in CALL theory and delivery.
f. A lot of CALL activities (e.g. Behaviorist CALL) are limited to certain types of exercises such as multiple choices, true false, matching, ignoring question-answer interactions.

g. A lot of CALL software (e.g. Drill and Practice type) focus on teaching separate, discrete language skills and components, ignoring discourse, contexts, and cultures.

Conclusion

Teachers can implement CALL programmes for teaching writing depending on the situation suitable for the learners and their requirements (needs). The teacher can decide that a certain part of the syllabus can be handled on the computer. Many teachers nowadays ask their students to write essays, letters, stories and send these to their classmates, and other students who in turn may correct the writings and give suggestions.

In India, however, not much research or meta-analysis has been conducted in this field. It would indeed be worthwhile to find out if Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has the potential to bring about increased achievement in the Indian context. It would also be interesting to see how it compares with general classroom teaching.

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