



ICT in the Writing Classroom: The Pros and the Cons

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Abstract

Being one of the four language skills, writing poses its own challenges for EFL learners. Over time, educators have suggested different methods to cure some of these challenges faced by students. In the 21st century, we suppose that technology should be part of the solutions to be introduced. The potential of technology in teaching writing is able to yield positive results compared to pen-and-paper writing. From drafting to publishing, technology eases the matter a lot. However, technology seems to have some shortcomings that may hinder both teachers and learners from achieving favourable results. This paper is about weighing some advantages and disadvantages of introducing ICT in the writing classroom.

Keywords: EFL writing, ICT (Information and Communication Technology), computer literacy.

1. Introduction

The idea of using technology to improve EFL teaching and learning is not considered a novelty for it is already established in academia as well as in the literature that proves its efficacy and positive impacts (cf. Barr, 2004; Chapelle, 2003; Chapelle & Douglas, 2006; Dudeney & Hockly, 2007; Lewis, 2009).

Nowadays, in order to be considered a competent language user, there is the need to acquire the expertise of Information and Communication Technology use. Accordingly, language teachers are supposed to adhere to ICTs and integrate these tools in their teaching practices. In this sense, Warschauer (2002, p. 455) – citing the example of emails – stresses that “language teachers must not only use e-mail to promote English teaching . . . but also teach English to help people learn to communicate effectively by e-mail” and thus learn the English language.

Writing on computers, as opposed to writing in longhand, gains its usefulness from the great advantages of using computers themselves:

[T]he advantages of the computer are so great that it seems almost irresponsible to pass them up. A computer greatly accelerates editing procedures, allowing you to take a piece through far more drafts than you could otherwise. On-screen correction is so easy that people of all ages find the process relaxing, even pleasurable. (Fowler, 2006, p. 1)

Today and more than ever before, there is a tendency to practise more and more writing on computers and the like (Gerrard, 2012); likewise, more and more people have adopted the habit of on-screen reading¹. Therefore, it stands to logic that ignoring the role of ICT in the writing classroom is not rational.

In this paper, we suggest using ICT to the advantage of practising EFL writing. We address the following question: is there any need or benefit at all for our students to write on computers instead of pen-and-paper writing in our country/community? To our belief, the benefits of composing on computers are likely to outweigh the disadvantages and problems that may arise. We suppose that if students – together with their teachers – are able to use ICT effectively, then they are due to overcome many difficulties in EFL composition.

2. POTENTIALS OF ON-SCREEN COMPOSING AND PUBLISHING

There seems to be a number of positive benefits gained from composition using computers and related technology. In what follows, we try to list some of these advantages:

2.1 Neatness

Composing on computers means that the generated texts are perfectly arranged; legibility of handwriting is no more an issue. Moreover, editing does not affect the neatness of the typed text. Similarly, rewriting – or rather retyping – is not necessary, as the copy and paste function does the job. It is also possible to get quotes, proverbs, or idioms from different sources to enrich the written product; this is something unfeasible when the work is written in longhand.

2.2 Non-linearity of Writing

On computers, writing is non-linear in the sense that there are no clear-cut stages of writing that the writer must go through. Students can write as they think; then, it is easy to revise and edit what has been written. The usual “sharp division of composing into three stages of planning, writing, and revising breaks down in a computer context, in which

planning as well as revision occurs as part of the writing process.” (Pennington, 2003, p. 291). Also, recurrent revisions do not impact the neatness of the text. This is unlike the conventional method of writing where editing is not so practical.

2.3 *Varied Spaces of Writing*

Another advantage that is really appreciated in computers is the variety of spaces of writing. Practicing writing can be done in websites, blogs, wikis, online forums, discussion boards, and social networking sites. Whether synchronous² or asynchronous, these online spaces have made communication between people an easy task. “[T]hey can be a medium of real communication in the target language, including composing and exchanging messages with other students in the classroom or around the world” (Oxford, 1990, p. 79).

Cost also is not an issue as many of the provided online services are free of charge.

2.4 *Easiness of Publishing*

The top benefit of composing by computers is the fairly easiness of online publishing because of the many solutions provided by the Web. This can work as a motivating factor for students; they would compete to produce more and post their writings online. Reading and interaction, thus, will be much easier. Moreover, posting on blogs or wikis, for example, does not require professional expertise by the user (Raimes & Jerskey, 2011; Henga & Marimuthua, 2012). Students with very basic knowledge of computers can fulfil the task themselves.

2.5 *Audience and Interaction*

By posting online, more people from all over the world can read one’s compositions. Speaking of blogs, Raimes and Jerskey (2011, p. 312) state that “[they] provide an opportunity to learn how others are thinking and to express [one’s] own views for a special audience or for anyone who happens to read [one’s] entries.” Furthermore, interaction is possible between a variety of language users of different levels (including native speakers and/or proficient users of English); this can help in learning the language from each other. The interaction (be it synchronous or asynchronous) is likely to provide feedback that can be useful for the student writer.

2.6 *Feedback*

Once texts are posted online, students can get feedback from a variety of audiences and not necessarily from their fellow teachers. In this sense, Richards and Schmidt (2010, p. 59) maintain that “[blogs] also have potential in second and foreign language learning, encouraging both reading and writing, promoting discussion and providing feedback.” Moreover, we think that posting online and getting positive (or even negative) feedback will encourage students to make more efforts to improve their writings.

2.7 *Rich Content and Multimedia*

By means of computers, it is possible to add images, videos, graphs, drawings, and hyperlinks to other websites to accompany the posted text and this could make the meaning more comprehensible (Herrington & Moran, 2009). This is typically of great benefit as far as creative writing is concerned because it makes the content so vivid and so enjoyable for the readers.

2.8 *Availability of Tools*

There are a number of tools available online to help improve students’ written products such as online dictionaries, thesauri, grammar and spelling checkers, encyclopedias, and on-line writing labs (OWLs). Likewise, reading materials are numerous – ranging from newspapers and magazines to books of all kinds. There are also websites that help them learn new vocabulary, translate or even proofread. And even without an Internet access, a number of these tools can be installed on computers such as CD-ROM dictionaries and the like.

2.9 *Willingness to Write*

On computers, students can practice writing about topics related to their interests. Instead of assignments on dull topics of writing that do not necessarily interest and attract students or topics on which they have very little information, students would write about ‘real’ topics in real contexts. They will be interested in what they write because it is real and not imaginary. For instance, they would be able to write about their daily lives in English, which can largely motivate them.

3. CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES

There are also a number of difficulties that might arise when it comes to practicing writing on computers; this is especially true when there is lack in using and integrating ICT facilities in the daily lives of people.

As far as the Algerian setting is concerned, the following constraints might hinder an effective use of computers in the writing classroom.

3.1 *Computer Literacy of Learners and Teachers*

In order to integrate ICTs successfully in writing classrooms, teachers and learners have to be computer literates. A ‘computer literate’ is someone who is able to “communicate and analyze information [by] working online or using a computer in other ways.” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 111). Warschauer (2002, p. 455), as for him, distinguishes between four types of ‘electronic literacies’: computer literacy, information literacy, multimedia literacy, and computer-mediated communication literacy:

[C]omputer literacy (i.e., comfort and fluency in keyboarding and using computers), information literacy (i.e., the ability to find and critically evaluate online information), multimedia literacy (i.e., the ability to produce and interpret complex documents comprising texts, images, and sounds), and computer-mediated communication literacy (i.e., knowledge of the pragmatics of individual and group online interaction).

Whether all of our learners and teachers have these kinds of literacies that enable them to meet the challenges of using ICTs is questionable; unfamiliarity with ICTs is likely to impede its integration in classrooms of written expression. (See Fig. 1 for some issues related to computer literacy).

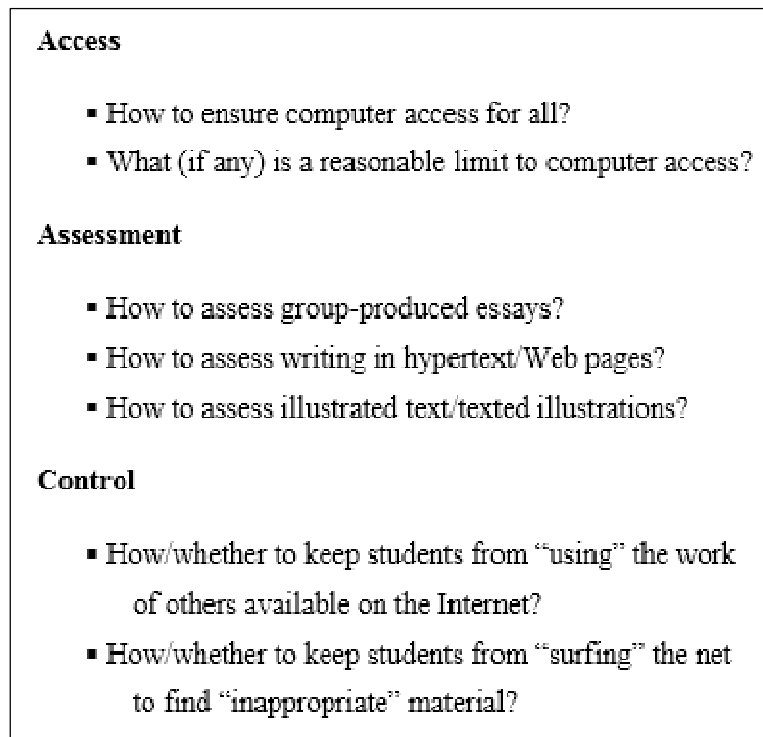


Figure 1: Issues of literacy on computer (Pennington, 2003, p. 306)

A main difficulty in our country is that accessing computers is too limited in primary, middle, and secondary schools; many students come to the university less familiar and prepared than they should be. Indeed, according to the Global Information Technology Report of 2014 (issued by the World Economic Forum) which assesses 54 separate indicators in each country, the ‘Internet access in schools’ indicator ranks Algeria 138th out of 148 countries in the world.

3.2 Lack of Local Online Anglophone Spaces

Students when encouraged to compose and post their contributions online could face the difficulty of finding proper ‘online’ anglophone spaces that offer no cultural barriers in anyway. Online spaces where students can find country-related content in English and people who share the same interests seem to be very limited. Our students might feel kind of ‘outsiders’ when contributing to foreign websites designed for specific nationals because they “need to understand expectations and norms of discourse communities” (McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013, p. 197). Failing to do so could result in their contributions to be evaluated as inappropriate and even rejected by these communities (for example, when failing to avoid cultural prejudices and clichés in writing).

In Algeria, and apart from one unique magazine³, there are hardly any other periodicals published in English language, with the exception of some academic journals published by some universities. This situation does not motivate our learners to write and publish online quite frequently.

3.3 Formal or Informal Style?

Another issue is that students might not take the task of composing in English seriously and tend to write informally, neglecting the rules and conventions that characterize the academic language. Some online spaces are not necessarily educative or controlled by academics. If we take online forums of discussion, for example, what matters more at the end is to communicate the idea whatever the kind of language one uses. (See the appendix)

In addition to that, some students might make derogatory comments about their peers by disguising under non-recognizable aliases or pseudonyms.

Yet, this does not mean that there is no place to practise academic and formal English; Wikipedia (one of the best-known wikis) can be a good example here where academic English is used.

3.4 Plagiarism

Another concern that might arise is the easiness of online plagiarism which is due to the easiness of searching for

information, copying, and pasting it on computers. “Although there is no evidence that web-derived plagiarism is any more widespread than other kinds . . . instructors are understandably concerned about the ease with which students can plagiarize, either intentionally or not” (Gerrard, 2012, p. 426). By claiming others’ works as theirs, students could never improve their writing skill.

3.5 *Feedback Not Constructive*

Posting written products online and getting constructive feedback is not always guaranteed; it is hard to expect academic feedback from internet users or at least it is not useful all time.

Moreover, teachers may find difficulty in providing their students with feedback. Problems may arise when trying to track students’ posts online; it is likely to be overwhelming for teachers. It is just not feasible to surf each student’s blog, for instance, and read all his/her posts. A suggested solution here is to agree on a given blog beforehand, then teachers can read and comment on some selected works. Alternatively, the website of the university can serve as a space where students can gather, post, interact, and get feedback in an organized way.

3.6 *Commitment in Students*

When it comes to commitment, there are a number of questions worth asking in this particular context:

- To what extent can we motivate our students to write and interact online?
- How to restrict them to use the academic language if they are to improve their English?
- How to guarantee that students have the facilities and literacies needed to use these technologies effectively?
- Once provided with formative feedback, are they going to edit their posts regularly to improve their compositions?

It seems that the answers to these questions are not typically favourable.

3.7 *Distraction and Inappropriate Content*

When online, students can be distracted by the entertaining side of computers; we did notice this behaviour in students when teaching in language laboratories. Likewise, surfing inappropriate websites on the Internet can be also harmful.

Another issue is that some students tend to spend more time on social media sites. Facebook, for instance, does distract users with flooding ‘stuff’ from friends and acquaintances from all over the world; the serious task of composing on facebook seems less motivating compared to the appealing aspect of hanging about with ‘virtual’ friends. Students might play and chit-chat with friends rather than limiting themselves to the serious task of composing long essays. Moreover, using these particular sites as a tool to improve the skill of writing has always been questionable.

3.8 *Lack of Stimulation by Current Curriculum*

Being a student myself then a teaching assistant at the same department at university, I have come to realise that the current written expression curriculum gives limited occasions for students to compose in English. Students are not required to write more than twice a week. The official syllabus does not teach students how to compose and publish online; it does not even refer to the many types of writings done exclusively online nowadays such as blogging and exchanging emails. Without suitable syllabus, ICT cannot help a lot for “[t]he tools of technology . . . provide the most beneficial results when integrated into a strong curriculum and when clearly matched to instructional purposes.” (Ware & Warschauer, 2006, p. 113)

This situation caused a number of our students to lack the necessary capacity to write in plain English even at advanced levels in their academic career. The approach adopted at our department is not clear-cut most of the time; it is rather a mixture of the process and product approaches (eclectic). Graduates are not meant to be prepared for the workplace requirements – which are too demanding and strongly related to ICT.

4. **Why Using English At All?**

After highlighting some of the advantages together with some disadvantages of ICT in the writing classroom, we stress the need for our students to have the know-how of both English and ICT. We want our students to interact online and join online international communities and be able to contribute effectively. Some examples include the following: commenting on an international sport competition like the World Cup, responding and expressing own views about a piece of news read in an international newspaper website, or even contributing to writing reviews about own favorite movies, books or hotels. Similarly, blogging about own points of views, creating pages on Wikipedia about topics they know, and so are all interesting outcomes of using ICTs in the writing classroom.

The ultimate outcome is when our students are able to discuss, for example, the current affairs of their society in English in suitable spaces created and supervised by our teachers.

5. **Conclusion**

There seems to be many advantages of composing on computers though it is likely to be difficult to change some teachers’ beliefs about the efficacy of ICTs versus conventional methods. This, in part, is related to the lack of computer literacy in some teachers who tend to struggle to use a PC, let alone manage online content.

This paper has suggested extending the opportunities where students can practice their English on real people and in real contexts; this is achievable by encouraging and training them to use ICT effectively for them to plunge into the task of composing in English and sharing their written products online. Publishing is so easy and this encourages learners to interact with each other and produce more.

We want to see more and more of our students online using their English in useful ways. If they are not taught how to do so then they are deprived from many benefits of online communication (Boudjadar, 2013). The syllabi must change and training for both teachers and learners is needed in all schools. We do not have the choice but to adhere to technology; it is good to use it to our advantage and the advantage of our country's social and economic development and welfare.

For future research, we suggest more studies about ICT use in higher education in Algeria together with studies about attitudes of our students towards integrating technology and its impacts on their learning.

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Notes

1 By way of illustration, the renowned Newsweek magazine ceased its US paper-based edition in December 2012 and turned entirely into the digital version because of the decline in readership of the print edition.

2 Synchronous interaction refers to communication done in real time (e.g. chat).

3 We refer here to “**50_Fifty Magazine**” which is said to be the first Algerian general-interest magazine completely in English.

APPENDIX

SAMPLE POSTS FROM A LOCAL ONLINE FORUM

To serve as an illustration of online composition, we include in this appendix the very first 10 posts of a thread that contains over 30 posts (so far) by some contributors who identify themselves as 'students'. The posts are taken from the forum "DJELFA FORUMS" (in Arabic *منتديات الجلفة*) which is ranked 30th in Algeria by Alexia – the famous website that provides web traffic data. The forum is of multi interest and has a section that is devoted only to Anglophones. Users' names have been replaced by numbers.

Thread's Title: Your story with English. Available from: <<http://www.djelfa.info/vb/showthread.php?t=1390276>>

User no. 496676:

hi everyone
i know that every one have a story with english
how did you meet her and why do you love her.
bye

User no. 466568:

Well, english was easier for me then another language, it's easy to learn easy to speak, since my first year in middel shcool, and actuly it was love at first sight ☺; then year after year i started interest about it more and more, and i start searching for new vocabulary in every thing till now and i thank god becaus i had many chances to devolope my speaking and listening like reading books, sites in the internet TV shows and so on.

and now "elhamdo lillah" and i thank my god because he gave me this grace, and now i'm teaching it for the students of the middle school. and i hope to be better and better, it's like a dream come true and that's it ☺
so pray for me to make my dream come true

User no. 497913:

i dont love inglish, may be a littel, but i have to learn it and speak it, aince i was born my mother always have tought me inglish, but untill now i am still not so komfident with it

User no. 501421

Well to be honest, i grew up watching movies with my mother and brother, lol thanks to MBC 2 and english's love grew up with me, when we had internet i started studying it on my own, talking english with everybody else, and i still do it, i can express myself easily in english while i can't in arabic, i have no idea it's just easier than any other language. that's my story thanks for the topic.

User no. 501461:

well. i meet english in my first year in middle school. seems that I love her because our teacher was so lovely and so cute with all of us she was a great teacher I wish her good luck and all good thing.

User no. 443376:

Well that's a very good question which directly

after reading it .. ideas came to my brain like a storm hhhhh ... i love english since my secondary school first year because of the teacher who i thank a lot ..and because of its sweetness ... english is so easy and adorable ...even though i used to be scientific at high school .. but after succeeding in the baccalaureate exam .. i choosed to study English ... u know ... it makes me happy and very relaxed .. now am hoping to carry on and become a Dr or even a professor ... why not ^_^

User no. 496676:

yes way not.
i enjoyed so much with your stories and i think that is my turn to say mine
well when i meet english for the first time i wasn't like her she was like a disaster for me
Although I know that it was more easier than french or any other language.
i fond a difficulty in speaking or writing And i feel jealous when i saw the other speak and write english so Easily .

so i started stady english in the internet and books And that's how realized that english is easy and i have just to stay it very hard.
now when i remember how i was hate english i feel that i was in a bad dream and then i woke up suddenly and i love her but The only thing that I know that i somehow become love english.

User no. 443376:

Helloooooo [User no. 443376] .. i really enjoyed reading ur story because u r a strong girl who faced a serious problem and succeeded in making the change she wants i noticed that u used HER and SHE to express English and that's mean u r really in touch with the language ... nice expressions ..carry on in ur hard work and never lose hope because u r the hope [User no. 443376]

User no. 496676:

thak you so much Your words make me feel more better and stronger

User no. 502220:

hi [User no. 466568] my name is [User no. 502220] i looooooove language of english more than other languages