

# **THE COMPUTER IN THE CLASSROOM: DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS**

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## **Abstract**

Computers can be useful allies for helping our students improve their writing skills in a second language (in the first language too, but that is not the subject of this paper).

A computer can be best conceived as just another learning tool among several useful ones we may use; it is no panacea for solving all the problems involved in foreign language learning; it is not going to supplant the role of teachers, nor is it going to magically implant knowledge in the minds of students, but it can carry out in an efficient and friendly way a number of tasks related to learning a foreign language, especially those connected with the development of writing skills.

Since this is a paper based on a workshop, and therefore a basically practical session, we are not going to devote much time to the theoretical aspects of writing in a foreign language with the help of a computer, (those of you interested in more theoretical questions will find a basic bibliography at the end of this paper) but we will at least keep them in mind while having a look at several computer programmes which can be especially useful for the development of writing skills.

## **Writing is not a linear process**

When we write a text we go through several stages from its conception to the final version, which we could term pre-writing, writing and revision. These three stages are very often simultaneous and recursive. When we are writing with pen and paper (or typing), operations such as crossing out, re-phrasing, re-ordering of paragraphs and successive cutting and pasting or copying the text again in order to tidy it up are boring, and time-consuming activities that we have to carry out. Computer programmes such as word processors make all these tiresome tasks incredibly easier and faster.

Creative writing is a complex process (especially in a foreign language); many skills are involved when a written text is produced and therefore the help we can offer to our students is varied and manifold.

## **The computer is a good pedagogical tool**

The computer is a very useful tool for helping students develop their writing skills. The motivational effect computers have on young people and the good excuse they provide for organizing small group work can be a great help in the foreign language writing class.

Provided that we, as teachers, manage to produce good suggestions for composition exercises which are properly integrated in our general planning for the course.

I would like to emphasize the fact that computer programmes are mere tools at the service of our objectives, not ends in themselves. If we have clear, well stated objectives in mind and a general plan to carry them out, they will become great allies, otherwise the good impact they could have on our students will be practically lost.

### **There are useful computer programmes suitable for the different stages of the writing process**

There are different types of computer programmes which can help in the different stages of the writing process; some can be useful in the pre-writing stage by helping build up in the students' mind good basic structures of the foreign language or by reinforcing the acquisition of new vocabulary, or by helping them organize in a creative and structured way the various ideas which may come up to their minds during a brain storming session. Other programmes, such as word-processors, resident dictionaries or style correctors are best suited for the writing stage where they can greatly facilitate the task of producing successive drafts of increasing quality. And for the last stages those related to polishing the final copies, there are also desk-top editing programmes which can help produce a final copy of good graphic quality which can be integrated with other final copies to produce, for example, a school newspaper of professional quality.

### **Programmes best suited for the pre-writing stage**

I would like to distinguish two types of programmes at this stage: those which can help students acquire and practise elements of the foreign language such as grammatical structures or vocabulary, and those which can help them develop their cognitive processes of generating and organizing ideas.

Among the programmes which we could assign to the first group are, for example *English Prepositions*, *My English Friend*, *Matchmaker*, to mention but a few, which reinforce the use of given basic English structures and help practise vocabulary in context. These skills are very basic, since lack of them means a total blockage when trying to write in a foreign language. So, inasmuch as these programmes help students acquire these basic linguistic elements, they are useful. But, of course, knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures is not enough to start writing in a foreign language. Students also need help in developing cognitive strategies which will allow them generate and organize thought concerning a given topic.

Here is when the second group of programmes mentioned above may be of great help. Among the programmes which help students develop their cognitive strategies we could mention *Think Sheet*, or *Think Show* which could be termed as «idea generators» or «idea organizers». Through a certain kind of non-linear graphic display, these programmes help students to get started in the pre-writing stage, when different ideas occur, often in a hazy way, and have to be organized. Human thinking comprises intricate networks of connections and associations, often experienced as amorphous and elusively related. Programmes such as *Think Sheet* offer a pattern for holding thoughts, spreading them out, arranging them, relating them, connecting and classifying them. Students can type ideas, as quickly as they come to their mind, in «cards» which can later be cut up, moved around, piled up, linked to each other or hanged-up from others in different non-linear ways. The three-dimensional simulation displays graphically the web of connections which develop in the brain during the thinking process.

Such programmes also allow a print-out of the work done at any stage. The print-out may be obtained optionally as an outline, as a numbered list or as continuous text which can be further re-elaborated with a word processor. Activities such as brain-storming (either individual or in small group), sentence and paragraph writing, or production of outlines and first drafts will find an excellent support in this type of programmes.

### **Programmes best suited for the writing stage**

When a first draft is already more or less formed in the students' mind, a word processor will enable them to proceed with the elaboration of the final version in a very comfortable way, since with a word processor they can, very easily and quickly, type, retype, cross out, insert, move around, give different typographic formats, store and print all kinds of words, paragraphs and texts. These features are more than enough to make us welcome such programmes, since they help eliminate, or at least greatly reduce, the toil work of writing successive versions of the same text during the process towards a final (hopefully good) version; and in fact most professional writers use them nowadays for this reason.

Word processors can be used for simplifying the writing and re-writing process in guided or free compositions. Many different types of such exercises making especial use of the above-mentioned features can be proposed to the pupils. A simple correction code can be discussed and agreed with the class and the pupils themselves can correct, in small groups, each other's intermediate printed drafts of their compositions.

Thus, the task of incorporating the (peers' and teacher's) suggested improvements to the earlier, less correct, draft, becomes lighter and the penalizing effect involved in «correcting mistakes» and «copying the whole corrected version again» is avoided, since making changes on the computer screen is very easy, and each new intermediate version comes out of the printer clean and neat.

### **Programmes best suited for the revision stage**

There are other programmes which used separately or in conjunction with a word processor, can enhance the effect it can have in the writing skills of our students. This is the case of style correctors such as Grammatik, which can detect several textual, syntactical or rhetorical errors (e.g. excessive length of sentences, too much right or left branching in subordination, excessive repetition of the same word, heavy nominalizations, etc.). Resident dictionaries (either monolingual or bilingual), thesaurus and spell checkers can save a lot of consultation time and thus facilitate a more correct and richer use of the language, ensuring that there will be no spelling mistakes and offering alternatives for over-used words in a given text.

Nowadays most word processors, even the simpler ones like *Writing Assistant* have built-in spell checkers as one of their features; many, such as *Word* or *Word Perfect* have a built-in thesaurus as well.

In case students should like to give their papers a more professional final look, or even arrange them collectively into a newspaper, including graphics, tables or drawings, they can do it quite easily with the help of desk-top editing programmes such as *First Publisher*.

The classification of computer programmes mentioned in this paper into three main groups was intended for purposes of presentation only and does not mean that they are only useful in that particular stage of the writing task under whose label I have presented them here, nor do I intend to present the task of writing in a foreign language as a discrete process having three clearly separated stages.

As I remarked at the beginning, writing is not a linear process, it is rather a circular one, allowing for successive improvements.

It is quite obvious that we cannot, or rather should not do all activities involved in writing in a foreign language with the help of computer programmes. It would not be advisable, either, to try to use all the above mentioned programmes in a class.

My intention in presenting the whole array of programmes in this paper is to give you an illustration of the many possibilities the use of computers can offer to the foreign language teachers, especially when they try to help their students develop writing skills.

Which program to use and when to use it depends on the particular needs of a given group of students or on the previously set objectives to be reached.

We are going to work in this workshop with a number of programmes, most of them fairly widespread and currently used in various schools (especially those taking part in the Atenea Project), which the Programa de Nuevas Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación has distributed to the Centros de Profesores (CEPs). In case the participants should find them interesting to work with, they can find help and support for further activities from the Monitor/a del Proyecto Atenea at their local CEP.

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