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COMPUTERS FOR TEACHING WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the computer has established itself as an educational tool in foreign language teaching. Although the debates and discussions about the proper place and the significance of this medium in the educational process still continue, there is little doubt that the machine has brought into the field a number of benefits both for the learner and the teacher. More and more CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) programs are being published which offer a wide range of alternatives depending on the learner's age and level, the scope of the material, and the type of activities.

However, most software currently available on the market, e.g. *ETeacher*, *Sortset* or *Vocab*, concentrate on teaching vocabulary and grammar. Although those programs are usually educationally sound and very attractive, they do not differ much from traditional, ink-and-paper exercises. The immediate feedback, on-line reference, and automatic scoring are sometimes not sufficient to justify the high cost of the computer and the software.

The methodology which is currently predominant in language teaching is based on the communicative approach. It requires that most classroom and homework activities should concentrate on the development of the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. However, very few CALL programs offer activities practising these skills. This evokes a lot of criticism and hostility towards the computer, which is accused of catering for obsolete methodologies and teaching principles. Very few teachers know that the computer can be successfully used to develop the four language skills and that these communicative activities may take advantage of the full potential of the machine.

2. COMPUTER FOR DEVELOPING THE WRITING SKILLS

All the four language skills can be practised using the computer. However, the medium seems to be best suited for developing writing. This is because the very nature of the computer promotes the practice of this skill, since written messages are the basis of communication with the machine. In addition, the computer is capable of storing and processing long texts.

3. WORDPROCESSOR

The programs that seem to be most effective and beneficial for developing the writing skills of foreign language learners are wordprocessing packages.

Wordprocessing is probably the most popular and well-known application of the computer and it seems that it alone could justify the invention of the machine. Wordprocessors are used where there is a need for a large amount of typed documents and have almost replaced traditional typewriters in offices or authors' working rooms.

At the basic level the wordprocessor works like a typewriter but is much more powerful. First of all, it makes typing easier by performing automatically some of the typist's operations such as carrying forward text to another line and paginating. Moreover, the wordprocessor makes it possible to edit a text. It allows not only the correction of minor typographic errors, but also changes to wording, or even the relocation of sentences and paragraphs. Changes and corrections can be made constantly, but the screen always displays a neat, clean copy. The wordprocessor also makes it possible to use a variety of typefaces. The final draft may be printed, or a text may be stored for later editing, correcting or printing.

The wordprocessor is also of great use for developing the writing skills of the foreign language learner because it enhances motivation. It has been shown that foreign language students who use wordprocessors for their writing assignments considerably change their attitude towards writing and their motivation increases [Davis and Higgins 1985]. The novelty of this technology is one of the factors which plays a very important role in encouraging the learner. The student is anxious to work with the computer as it is still a new and unknown teaching tool. Another reason which plays a very important role in motivating the student is his/her¹ notion of the

¹ For simplification, I will refer to the teacher and the student as 'he' throughout.

computer. For young learners who frequently play computer games, the machine is associated with the idea of having fun. Adult learners link the computer with the concept of professionalism and modernity, since nowadays computer literacy is a preliminary requirement for finding a good job.

The wordprocessor itself also has many motivating characteristics. If the learner uses such a program for writing his assignment the final result is a printed document of very high quality. Therefore, the learner is encouraged to put more effort into writing and proof-reading his text to ensure that the content of the work matches the quality of its appearance. Furthermore, the student enjoys using various letter fonts and different page formats which makes writing more interesting to him.

The most important feature of the wordprocessor which makes it such a good tool for enhancing the language learner's writing skills is its editing capability. When the learner prepares a rough draft of an assignment in handwriting, he can make very few corrections and changes, otherwise the piece of paper becomes illegible and has to be rewritten. This is why the student has to concentrate at the same time on all aspects of writing, such as the structure of the composition, the development of paragraphs or the choice of words. When using the wordprocessor, though, the learner can make an unlimited number of changes and the screen of the computer always looks neat and clean. Thus, the process of writing can be broken up into stages. First the student can do some freewriting and then move parts of the text placing his ideas in the correct order. Then he can correct the structure of paragraphs and improve their development. Further, the learner can pay more attention to his sentences, deciding whether they are grammatically correct and whether the choice of vocabulary is good. The final step may be correcting spelling and punctuation. In this way the student can concentrate better on each aspect of writing separately. Given such an opportunity, the student is less inhibited and feels freer to experiment with different arrangements of ideas or different sentence structures. This feature of the wordprocessor seems to be most advantageous to the fairly advanced learners, but even intermediate and beginner students can benefit from it.

Another benefit of using wordprocessors for writing assignments is the possibility of storing a text for later correction. It has been proven that the student loses interest in a text when he has submitted it to the teacher. When the teacher returns the corrected paper he barely looks at it and puts it away. With the computer, he can be asked to work again on his text, even a long one, and submit a corrected copy of the assignment, since he no longer needs to rewrite the entire text [Davis and Higgins 1985]. Correcting the assignment reinforces the correct forms and, in this way, it is an additional activity contributing to the improvement of writing skills.

4. ADDITIONAL TOOLS

The important advantage of the wordprocessor is that it offers a variety of additional tools such as *spellcheck*, *grammarcheck*, and *thesaurus*. Moreover, *electronic dictionaries* can work in conjunction with it. Thanks to these extensions writing becomes much easier.

Electronic monolingual and bilingual dictionaries are usually separate from the wordprocessor but they can be easily used with it. They have all the characteristics of a traditional book dictionary except that information is presented on the computer screen instead of in the pages of a book. However, electronic dictionaries have some advantages over traditional ones. The first and the most important benefit is the speed of access. Looking up a word in a book dictionary usually takes some time and when the student is confronted with several new vocabulary items he gets discouraged very easily. Electronic dictionaries deliver the answer instantaneously. Another advantage of this type of software is that it can execute a variety of searches which would be impossible in a traditional dictionary. All these advantages encourage the student to use electronic dictionaries more frequently which improves the quality of his writing.

The thesauruses are a very useful feature offered by the wordprocessor. Instead of wasting time on browsing through a traditional dictionary of synonyms, the student can have the answer almost at the press of a key. Moreover, the student's attention is not distracted by going back and forth between the screen and the dictionary. Thus, the student is encouraged to use the thesaurus more often and in that way he improves his writing.

Spellcheck is offered by most wordprocessors. It proofreads the entire text, finding all typographical mistakes and spelling errors. Each time the spellcheck finds a flaw it highlights it on the screen and presents the student with a list of possible correct forms (Figure 1). In such a way

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Doc 1 Pg 6 Ln 7.67i Pos 1i

A. highlights

Not found: 1 Skip Once; 2 Skip; 3 Add; 4 Edit; 5 Look Up; 6 Ignore Numbers: 0

Figure 1. A screen dump from a wordprocessor *WordPerfect 5.1*

the spellcheck draws the student's attention to the spelling errors and it reinforces the correct form by suggesting the correct possibilities from which the student has to choose.

The grammarcheck is usually not very sophisticated and it is difficult to rely on it implicitly. However, it can be useful to check if all parentheses are paired, all sentences start with capital letters or if they are not too long. The grammarcheck can also correct the s-endings in the present simple third person singular, and other small errors of that kind.

Another useful feature of the word-processor is the possibility of breaking up the screen and working with two documents at the same time. Such a possibility allows making notes in one document and writing in the other.

5. DESK-TOP PUBLISHING SOFTWARE

Desk-top publishing packages are even more powerful wordprocessors. They offer a range of facilities enabling the user to create and print materials which previously could be produced only through professional printing methods. They allow different kinds and sizes of typefaces to be used. A text may be printed in columns; shapes (such as boxes and circles), graphics and pictures can be added and a document may be wrapped around them. If a laser printer is available the result cannot be distinguished from professionally produced leaflets, brochures or even newspapers.

Desk-top publishing programs may be used for individual or group-work writing projects. For example, students may create a brochure about their school or their city in a foreign language. They may also publish a school newspaper of professional quality. They may create posters advertising after-class activities, for example watching a film in its original version without subtitles.

The main benefit of desk-top publishing packages is that they are highly motivating for the student. The idea that he can create professional-looking materials which may, and probably will, be read by people other than the teacher encourages him to put a lot of effort into his writing.

6. COMMUNICATION SOFTWARE

Communication programs enable users to communicate directly by means of their computers. Communication may be established between

machines in different rooms in the same building, or in different buildings, towns and even countries.

Communication programs allow users to interact in many ways. Electronic mail is the most popular application of this software. Each user can have his own mail box which receives information sent to him, even if he is not working with the computer at the moment. The user may come later and read all the messages which have been mailed to him. He may also send messages to other users. Another option offered by communication packages is conferencing. Users sit at their computers and have a conversation by means of the keyboard and the computer screen. Electronic bulletin boards are another possibility for communicating. They enable the user to put information up for public viewing. There is also a range of services the user can subscribe to, such as multilingual dictionaries, on-line databases, or mailing lists.

Communication programs are also a valuable application for improving writing. They create the same opportunities for language learning and acquisition as corresponding with a foreign penfriend. However, they are more motivating as they reduce the time between mailing a letter and getting an answer to a minimum. A shorter answer time encourages a more frequent exchange of letters and messages.

Communication software may also be used to establish links among schools, classes or groups of students from different countries. The project may be started by a class and its teacher writing a notice and putting it up for public viewing on an electronic bulletin board. The notice may ask foreign student groups or schools to get in touch. If someone answers, students may start to exchange electronic letters individually or as a class. Students can exchange their creative and expository essays, or try to write a story together (one group writes one page and then waits for the other group to write another page).

The benefit of this type of software is that it allows the student to write in a foreign language for the most natural and realistic purpose which is communication with other people.

7. TEACHER'S SUPPORT

It is crucial to realise that all the programs mentioned so far were not designed with the foreign language learner in mind and they were supposed to serve other purposes than teaching writing. That is why it is unrealistic to expect these programs to develop the writing skills of the learner by themselves. The wordprocessor, the electronic dictionary and the com-

munication software are only the tools which facilitate writing; they do not teach it. As Ken Hyl and suggests [1993] the machine can assist writing but only the teacher can improve it. Without the teacher's support the computer can do very little for the student.

This is why the teacher has to offer the necessary help and encouragement to the student using the programs mentioned above. He has to teach the student how to take advantage of the full potential of the machine and all the facilities it offers.

Initially, the teacher has to ensure that the student is familiar with operating the computer and running the software. The learner has to know how to switch the computer on, how to access the program and how to exit it. He also should be able to save a document and retrieve it, or to call up a resident dictionary or a spellcheck. Otherwise, the effects of the programs on students writing may be far from desired.

Moreover, the student has to be taught and encouraged to benefit fully from the editing capabilities of the wordprocessor. He has to understand that editing does not only involve minor lexical corrections, but that it gives the possibility of moving whole blocks of text, reordering ideas and changing the structure of a composition. The teacher must offer a variety of introductory activities on the wordprocessor such as rearranging portions of the document in order to familiarize the student with the features of the program.

The student also should be prepared and encouraged to use spellcheck, grammarcheck, electronic dictionaries and thesaurus in order to improve the quality of his language. On the one hand, he should realise how helpful they are and how much they can improve the accuracy of his language; on the other hand; he should be aware that he cannot trust them blindly, as sometimes they are not sophisticated enough.

As far as the communication software is concerned the teacher also should not leave the learner on his own. If the teacher wants his student to exchange electronic mail with a foreign penfriend he should help to set up a contact first. It is also good to establish links among groups of students first before encouraging more personal and informal writing.

8. PROGRAMS FOR TEACHING WRITING

The kinds of programs discussed so far were not created specifically as Computer Assisted Language Learning software and they were not primarily meant to develop writing skills. That is why they cannot develop the learner's writing by themselves, but all they can do is support the learner by offering him a perfect environment for composing and drafting.

However, there exist CALL-dedicated programs which are designed specifically for teaching writing. Those programs actually show the student how to compose ideas and how to put them in well-formed sentences.

f1 = Ideas
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

FAVOURITE FOOD?
bananas_

Figure 2. A screen dump form the *Monster*

One type of this software presents the learner with some ready-made forms of documents and asks him to supply the variable information. For example, a program by John Higgins called *Monster* is designed to teach children how to describe objects. The learner is supposed to describe a monster. The program starts with asking the learner to draw a monster and then it asks questions about the colour of the monster or how many legs it has (Figure 2). When the learner has answered all the questions the program gives him a well-formed description of Monster (Figure 3). The same kind of programs exist for adult learners and they may teach, for example, writing business letters.

The Pinky

A Pinky is a very big pink creature with 7 legs. It isn't particularly scary though it is well known for speaking Chinese.

Its favourite food is bananas but it isn't very fond of spinach. When it eats, it sounds like a sheep.

It lives in a cave and sleeps in a bath. It usually gets up at 4 and goes to sleep at 5 in the morning. Apparently it often dreams about becoming the President of the USA.

If you met Pinky you'd certainly recognise it because you're so intelligent. Have YOU ever seen a Pinky?

Fig. 3. A screen dump from *Monster*. The words in italics are a student's answers to the questions asked by the program

Another program called *Hype* acts on the principle of the hypertext. The hypertext has become a very popular application in CALL. It allows the arrangement of a large amount of texts not linearly, like in a traditional book, but in the form of a net. Thanks to such a layout, the learner acquires easy access to all the information he needs and is interested in, which makes him assume more control over his learning process.

Hype allows the creation of texts which can branch off in many directions. It may be used in class for teaching creative writing. The teacher may set up a project in which the learners are to write an interactive story, i.e. a story in which a reader can choose the further course of events. The students start writing the beginning as a group but then with each branch they have to divide themselves into smaller teams to continue each strand of the story. The story can branch off so many times that at the end each learner has to write the last part of the story by himself. However, by this time each learner should have gained enough preparation and practice to be able to carry out the task individually.

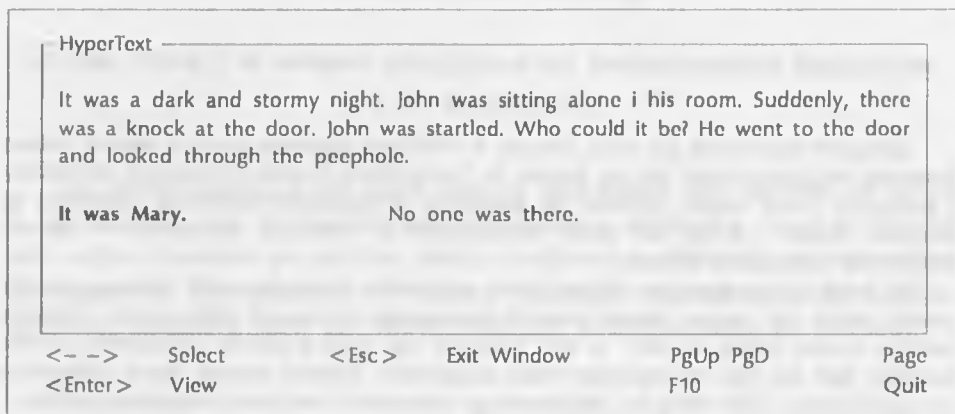


Fig. 4. A screen dump from *Hype*

9. CONCLUSION

As this paper has attempted to show, the computer does not have to be used exclusively for teaching, practising and testing grammar and vocabulary in a foreign language. It may also be used to develop the four language skills and it offers quite a number of activities to improve writing. It is up to the teacher to use the full potential of the machine and put it to good use.

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SOFTWARE LIST²

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PROGRAMY KOMPUTEROWE DO NAUCZANIA PISANIA W JĘZYKU OBCYM

Komputer ugruntował już swoją pozycję w dziedzinie nauczania języków obcych, jednak zazwyczaj wykorzystywany jest on jedynie do tradycyjnych ćwiczeń dotyczących słownictwa i gramatyki. Celem autorki artykułu jest pokazanie, że prawdziwe możliwości komputera są znacznie większe i mogą one służyć komunikatywnej metodyce, szczególnie w zakresie polepszania umiejętności pisania.

W artykule przedstawiono kilka typów programów komputerowych wspomagających pisanie, takich jak: edytory tekstu, słowniki elektroniczne czy poczta elektroniczna. Jednakże autorka zwraca uwagę na fakt, że sam komputer nie może poprawić umiejętności pisania uczniów, jeśli nie jest on wspierany przez nauczyciela. Artykuł omawia także różnorodne oprogramowanie, które służy do bezpośredniego nauczania i ćwiczenia umiejętności pisania.

² The software is listed in the order of appearance in the text.