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DEVELOPING A WEBSITE FOR EFL WRITING SKILLS IMPROVEMENT IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING CONTEXT

Abstract: One of the focuses of the paper, firstly, is to discuss CALL background with the emphasis on the principles for teaching CALL in terms of writing skills. Secondly, the author explains the teaching context with the highlight on the age, level and needs of students in university teaching context in Serbia. Thirdly, this paper considers project rationale by giving the explanation of aims, description and evaluation of it according to the chosen criteria. Finally, in the paper, the author outlines broader implications of the given analyses.

Key words: CALL, English as a foreign language, website, writing skills, university teaching context.

INTRODUCTION

The number of technological innovations is growing rapidly every day along with the growth of the English language. These innovations are changing the way in which we communicate, learn and teach (Jarvis 2005). High technology, especially computers, is valuable resource for the modern language teacher who is expected to develop and enhance his professional skills. Language centres throughout the world know that computers are essential for learning purposes (Jones 2001). However, some teachers admit the importance of computer-

assisted language learning (CALL) but still remain uncommitted to it. *Computer-assisted language learning (CALL)* may be defined as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning" (Levy 1997:1). Nunan (2003: 248) defines CALL as "any process in which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his or her language". Accordingly, it is argued that "CALL should not be too closely associated with self-access or autonomy and that teachers are needed to drive the CALL process" (Jones 2001: 360). The author's aim is to show here, in this paper, how CALL concepts and techniques may enhance learners' writing skills.

BACKGROUND TO TEACHING WITH CALL

Computers have taken their place as a natural part of the language learning process (Warschauer 1999). In addition, CALL in the language classroom is developing as quickly as computer technology itself develops. It would seem necessary to explain here approaches to CALL in order to have a better insight into the theory related to relevant teaching focus.

In terms of approaches to CALL, Bax (2003) mentions *Restricted CALL* (where teacher's role is restricted to monitoring and the feedback is restricted to closed responses), *Open CALL* (relatively open in giving feedback to students, in teacher's role and in choosing software types) and *Integrated CALL* which does not yet exist to any significant degree, but in Bax's view represents an aim towards which we should be working. Now, Warschauer and Kern (2000) argue that we can understand changes in how computers have been used in language teaching within the context of *structural, cognitive* and *sociocognitive* orientations. According to Warschauer and Kern (ibid.), the role of computers in structural approach is to provide unlimited drill, practice, tutorial explanation and corrective feedback. In cognitive approach, computers' role is to provide language input while in sociocognitive approach computers' role is to provide alternative contexts for social interaction. Further, Nunan (2003:249) points out that still most common form of CALL programmes are *behaviorist* "computer-based gap-fill drills", in which learners fill in information in close exercises. Learners are rewarded by small positive responses including the right to move to a new level of drill. This approach is closely associated with Skinner's behaviorist theories that found practical application in programmed instruction or programmed learning (ibid.). Then, Nunan (ibid.) notes that knowledge we posses is organized into interrelated patterns which he defines as schema theory. He then goes on to explain that schema theory is the foundation of *constructivist* approach. A typical constructivist program involves the learner in a kind of a quest, in which the teaching and learning are achieved by completing some other task.

As a way forward, I will give an outline of specific approaches in terms of writing, which is the skill area I am focusing on. Warschauer (1999, 2002) explicates a study that examined how three different teachers integrated technology into their second language writing classrooms. Each of the teachers took different approach on what constitutes academic writing: *formalist, constructivist* and *social constructivist.* In the formalist approach, students used the computer to complete grammar exercises and formulaic writing tasks common to many basic writing classrooms. In other words, academic writing was seen as a set of sub-skills that led to a grammatically-correct product in the form of a traditional five paragraph essay. In the constructivist approach, writing is viewed not just an academic task but as having personal meaning where the teacher uses computers to involve his/her students in genres such as multimedia. Furthermore, Warschauer (1999, 2002) explains a social constructivist approach by pointing out that in this approach there is a shift away from viewing technology as the means by which conventional beliefs about writing and teaching of writing could be made more efficient, and toward a vision of technology as driving new approaches to literacy instruction.

The author's current interest is to use a computer and a website as mediators between teacher and learners who need a piece of advice, comments and feedback about their writing improvement. More research is needed on best applicable CALL approach in the relevant teaching context (university students of advanced level in Serbia), especially as teachers grow in familiarity with the programs, and students become more accustomed to writing on computers (Grimes and Warschauer, 2006).

Further, some authors draw attention to the basic principles for teaching CALL. According to Nunan (2003:252-4) there are four basic principles for teaching CALL: 1) evaluate the appropriateness of the software program or computer-based resource; 2) create an environment in which CALL is supported; 3) monitor learner participation in CALL programs and encourage autonomy and 4) encourage the use of CALL programs as a starting point for collaboration and learner interaction.

In order to evaluate the appropriateness of the website, firstly, we should consider teachers' and learners' motivation to use this particular website as well as their needs for using it. Secondly, we should explore website objectives in order to find out whether they are realistic. Thirdly, website authenticity should be taken into account as well as the quality of feedback given to students, then, role of the learner/teacher and technological appropriateness should also be considered. Since students, at the university level, are of advanced level, the author believes that they would be interested in using this website because it would give them the possibility of self-planning and free navigation through its pages. Also, they receive brief feedback by completing a test that could be easily reached by

choosing a link. Fourthly, creating an environment in order to support students' interaction by sharing ideas in terms of their common progress may be done by creating a blog. Students will be in position then to send comments to each other or to ask questions. Fifthly, a website like this would encourage students, to take on the responsibility for their own learning (e.g. Dickinson 1992, Lake 1997). Finally, we believe that the website, mentioned previously, may encourage collaboration as the learners simultaneously search for information to support in their discussions. Thus, it may be argued that websites designed for language learning may enhance learner's language skills as well as his/her writing skills. The teacher is no longer the only source of language. Instead, he facilitates the process of learning by advising students how to get exposed various linguistic examples online. This was exactly the author's intention when she was making plans to create a website. Therefore, it goes without saying that empirical research is needed to test the usefulness of the website for the particular teaching context.

TEACHING CONTEXT

The internet with its versatility opened new approaches to teaching and learning foreign language. In and out of the classroom, students find the language on websites and they communicate ideas with other people speaking the target language. The website was designed for adult learners, that is, for students in university teaching context in Serbia. Students, from 19 to 24 years of age, are of advanced level and they have been studying English for about 8-12 years. For these students effective writing instruction involves providing individual feedback on their essays. That is extraordinary time-consuming. University English teacher will have over 150 students in their various courses. For this reason, the ability to provide detailed feedback on writing demands high level of skills and training of a teacher (Warschauer and Ware 2006). This idea finds an echo in Sullivan and Lindgren (2002) where they point out that extra request is placed on L2 teachers of English who need to provide school leavers with life-long learning techniques that will help them learning English without being teacher-dependant (Dickinson 1992). Hence, the author created a website in order to give students an opportunity to manage their learning more independently and to give their teacher a possibility to easily guide and monitor his/her students through the website during the lessons.

PROJECT RATIONALE

According to Warschauer and Ware (2006), greater attention to foreign language writing began in the 1980s, and has continued to increase until today, due to demands of many universities that require high scores for writing tests. Yet, not many teachers in university teaching context have time and space to prepare their students for passing tests (e.g. IELTS, FCE, CPE etc.). For this reason, the author's intention was to create a website that would give students the possibility of learning and enhancing their writing skills both in classes with the teacher's assistance and in their own time. The aim of the project was to improve students' writing skills and help them to overcome the difficulties they encounter. The purpose of creating a website was to provide an opportunity for a learner to plan his own learning and to seek information he needs. In this way, we suppose that a student will be more enthusiastic for a task and will have more success in autonomous learning situation (Lee 1998).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The website, the author created, consists of six main pages, that is, home page, photos, useful links, CALL webfolio (see Appendix 1), favourite links and students' corner page. In home page users are introduced to the purpose of the website in terms of writing skills improvement. The next page 'photos' provides a photo gallery with photos from students' seminars and workshops. The intention for creating this page was to motivate students to take part in group discussions and to post their classmates' photos and their own. The 'useful links' page provide students with links that are leading to language tests and explanations, online English grammar, tips for good writing, assessment tests, practice revision and editing a text. ELTD CALL blog page is made for the purpose of exchanging ideas and comments, so the interaction between students is taken into account. By using this page students may ask their teacher a question and the teacher may use this page for answering that question. Also, other students will be able to see this question as well as the teacher's reply. Hence, this will highlight the teacher-student and student-student relationship and improve the online communication process.

Further, page 'favourite links' provides some links that are leading to language quizzes. Teachers and students might benefit from developing and using such an online quiz, which would not require sophisticated authoring tools (Chapelle and Douglas 2006). This is also an opportunity to practice writing skills and have fun at the same time. Finally, the author has created 'students' corner' where students are allowed to leave their comments or other information

which can then be viewed and added to by other visitors. Exploring the website, students might be expected to manage their learning more independently. However, the teacher's role in guiding students and helping them in their learning is also very important. Jones (2001) argues that students can only learn from computers with the instruction and supervision of teachers and he adds that CALL will not be effective without this essential interaction of teachers and students. Therefore, teachers should be given time to develop pathways for their learners and for those teachers who are more committed to provide adequate training in using website materials in their language classrooms.

PROJECT EVALUATION

In order to evaluate the website we may use, firstly, the 'Checklist: Evaluative criteria for computer-delivered language learning systems' that was presented in the Invitational Symposium on Assessing and Advancing Technology Options in Language Learning (AATOLL) in February 1998 in Honolulu . Secondly, we will evaluate the project according to guidelines for evaluating web sites for ESL learners based on Graus (1999) and Nelson (1997) given in Chen (1999). Finally, we will evaluate the website by comparing it to BBC British Council Teaching English website.

According to the checklist, mentioned above, it is important that the writing software or a website provides written text at the appropriate level of difficulty with the choice of type of input. This is what our website provides. It does not provide videos or listening passages. Then, in terms of writing activities, writing tasks have counterparts in the real world, they are at the appropriate level of difficulty and students have a chance to choose the task. Further, we may note the lack of writing strategy instruction which is left for a teacher to do in language classes. As far as writing tools are concerned, we may say that the website provides templates for organizing the writing tasks, online thesaurus, grammar instructions, spell checker and grammar checker. Lastly, we believe that students are given enough time for task completion because students may study on their own and plan their time. Users' queries may be kept as records by using the blog page as well as providing a space for group work. There is no option for printing or saving successful drafts. Therefore, according to the criteria evaluation list we may conclude, on a cautionary note, that the website, we have created, has a potential but need to be improved.

Chen (1999) evaluates websites according to the combined criteria of Graus (1999) and Nelson (1997) that he revised. So, Chen (ibid.) suggests that websites should be evaluated according to the source (is it trustworthy, rated by known authority), purpose, pedagogy, design, contents, access and learners' needs. The website we have created is not rated by known authority, yet it is crea-

ted for the purpose of enhancing writing skills in the specific teaching context, in our case, in university teaching context in Serbia. In terms of pedagogy provided, we may say that feedback and instructions are provided with the combination of teacher's guidelines in classes. Design should be improved in order to navigate the website more easily. Accurate information and comprehensiveness is provided by choosing relevant links. Then, we may say that the website is easy to reach and the downloading time is about 3-5 seconds. Finally, in terms of learners' needs, we believe that the website corresponds to their needs and language difficulties by providing useful information in one place. Thus, learners do not need to wander through web in order to find writing tests and explanations; all they need is just to enter the website that is designed for them.

BBC British Council Teaching English website is very useful website both for teachers and learners of English (see BBC website at http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/). It provides articles on various topics (e.g. planning a writing lesson, using peer response, exam-based writing skills, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation etc.). It may be sad that BBC website gives very broad choice of topics. On the other hand, our website is designed to provide information only on writing. BBC website also provides links for teachers and for learners (this is similar with our website which is based on links to already made websites). All in all, BBC website is highly professional and useful for enhancing various skills as well as writing skills. The website we have created should be improved and upgraded according to this or some other accredited website for ESL or EFL.

In the university teaching context, websites may provide students, teachers, trainers, and school supervisors with more insight into the development of practical knowledge, teaching behaviour, and learning processes overall (Tanner, et. al. 2000). By choosing a website and by independently selecting tests to assess themselves, students may become more aware of the quality of their writing skills as well as having better insight in their overall improvement.

To sum up briefly, we may say that websites are an extremely valuable way of encouraging students and English teachers, to work on their own professional development either by creating a website for their own purpose or by using those already exist.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Websites vary greatly in the quality so they require continuous appraisal/evaluation, which means more work for the teacher who is willing to use them in his/her language classroom. For this reason, the author believes that both teachers and students should use web sources in their language teaching/learning only after the critical evaluation of the offered webpages.

It is vital to create opportunities to make the teachers implement CALL technology by integrating it into the syllabus and not to be an extra add-on which is used whenever 'there is time' (Ioannou-Georgiou, 2006). A process which schedules technology into regular syllabus activities helps teachers and students view and use technology as an integral part of the lesson and in the same time provides a chance to act as agents of change within their own classrooms.

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КРЕИРАЊЕ ВЕБСАЈТА ЗА ВЕЖБАЊЕ ПИСАЊА НА ЕНГЛЕСКОМ ЈЕЗИКУ КАО ЈЕЗИЧКЕ ВЕШТИНЕ НА УНИВЕРЗИТЕТСКОМ НИВОУ

Резиме: Рад има за циљ да истакне значај учења енглеског језика као страног и развоја вештине писања на том језику употребом рачунара и вебсајта који је креиран од стране наставника за потребе наставе. У раду се такође разматра учење енглеског језика на универзитетском нивоу као и специфичност образовног контекста у коме се сајт употребљава.

Кључне речи: учење енглеског језика употребом рачунара, настава енглеског језика, вебсајт, писање као језичка вештина, учење и подучавање на универзитетском нивоу.

APPENDIX 1

STUDENT'S CALL WEBFOLIO