

ESL Writing Instruction in India in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT:

The 21st century is an era of innovation, especially with regard to technology the integration of which makes teaching-learning not only interesting but also effective, and it depends on how teachers' competence and capability in handling various ICT tools and in instructional activities. This paper explores the possible application of ICT tools in Indian ESL writing classrooms contexts, keeping in mind the limited technological resources and competence available to teachers. It also explores the pedagogical potentials, appropriateness, effectiveness of these ICT tools in assisting the learners in various ways to develop and improve the writing skills of ESL learners and enhance their confidence to become an autonomous learner.

KEYWORDS: ICT, digital resources, social networking services, multimedia resources, online resources, process writing

INTRODUCTION:

The use of technology in its varied forms in language education, via the Internet through multimedia learning, online learning, web-based learning, ICT, Computer assisted Language Learning (CALL), Computer-mediated communication (CMC), and more recently technology-enhanced Language Learning (TELL), seems to have become a norm rather than an exception across various educational institutions the world over. With directives from governments around the world, tertiary institutions, in particular, have been working towards the incorporation of information technology (IT) into language education. Applied linguists like Chapelle (2003a) have suggested that changes in information and communication technologies have expanded dramatically the options for English language learning and teaching, thereby heightening the need for teachers to evaluate the learning opportunities through technology. Warschauer (2007) particularly emphasizes the profound effect information technologies are having especially on written communication. Moreover, with the evolution of the process of writing from pen and paper to a computer screen, it has been noted that technology could function as an important tool for writing. Pennington (1996) explains that the computer technology functions not only as tool, but also as a partner in creation and recreation of knowledge. As a result, with the ever increasing growth of technology in language learning environments, there is a growing need to examine various aspects involved in the adoption of technology, of which, the impact of the use of technology on conventional pedagogical approaches of language education, especially in writing, seems a significant one.

The development of sophisticated technology in recent years has brought about a shift in the discipline of applied linguistics - the shift in the role of the language teacher from instructor to facilitator of students' learning. A strand of research that has been noticed is the potential of information and communications technology to assist second language acquisition, based on contexts of traditional language teaching and learning in the classroom. As Schär and Krueger (2000) point out 'new technologies, when developed on the basis of cognitive, socio-linguistic or constructivist theories could provide 'limitless possibilities'. With respect to writing in particular, the novelty and innovation that technology brings along with it, may encourage second language learners to think of writing in English in new and positive ways as compared to writing in non-technology environments. It has been noted that for the non-native writer or for second language learners, the computer technology has become an especially valuable partner, as it promotes a simple writing process that spurs the language learner to a higher level of performance in writing (Pennington, 1996). Language education researchers have investigated of the role of different aspects of

technology for development of writing skills. Studies like those of Beauvois (1998) examining the use of networking or computer-mediated communication for English writing skills have shown active learning through increased learner interaction. Sotillo's (2002) study shows the positive potential of the ubiquitous access to the language learning programs made available through wireless connectivity. Other studies include, positive attitudes towards individual features of developed programs such as interactivity and feedback (Bikowski and Kessler 2002), comprehension (Chen, Belkada, and Okamoto, 2004), and learner autonomy and responsibility of learning (Yan and Xiaoqing, 2009). As pointed out by Barnes (1987), 'if language teaching is to put new technology to efficient use, there is a need for investing time on research and development, and in particular on the production and evaluation of suitable programs for students to work on'.

As development of new technologies gives rise to completely new ways of thinking and communicating, the potential of technology providing opportunities for language learning may lead to a readjustment of existing pedagogies, and in some cases, developing a completely new pedagogy. This in turn, could give rise to the principles in the design of a technology-enabled language learning program. Milton (2003) envisaged that an integrative design with online provision of language instructions and tools should support iterative stages of language exposure, review, practice and production, leading to communicative tasks. An integrative design would therefore help learners acquire relevant linguistic knowledge, skills and strategies by accessing comprehensible resources and tools of autonomous acquisition and relevant production. In other words, the design of the program or course should be coherent and planned while adhering to general cognitive learning principles by providing opportunities for self-discovery, problem solving, and collaboration. In other words, there has been a need for the production and evaluation of a suitable program, where language teaching could put various aspects of new technologies to efficient use. Nowadays, many instructors prefer to utilize ICT in teaching and learning as it offers a lot of advantages especially in creating an interesting learning environment. Currently, ICT is a common phenomenon among the society. The Net Generation is becoming more aware of the importance of ICT in today's life. This is due to the fact that ICT not only provides us with current information, but also aids us in learning. Computer is an interactive audio and visual technology which helps the users in enhancing the teaching and learning process to be more fun, interactive, cooperative, as well as effective in passing on the linguistic values. The reformation in the western countries especially in the United States of America (USA) has made the ICT as one of the important tools in teaching and learning processes. ICT has given a great impact and has influenced teachers to the progression of new perception and innovative teaching techniques. Nowadays, teachers integrate technology in order to help them with their work as well as making it as a part of the teaching and learning process. Moreover, by using the technologies, students will have the opportunity to learn to use the language as well as the technology. A teacher's broader perception of education is perhaps a more valuable indication of his or her ability or even desire to implement the use of technology into the classroom. In light of the fact that teaching with computers requires a shift from traditional teaching practices, teachers who hold teacher-centered beliefs of teaching and learning will be less likely to view technology as a fundamental learning tool.

Writing, as one of the key components of language learning is undoubtedly essential in tertiary education. However, studies have shown that students consider writing as an extremely difficult area in learning English. Students lack writing skills and they are de-motivated to write in English. Thus, discovering new ways of teaching and learning would be beneficial to all involved in teaching and learning. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in teaching and learning have offered many ways of improving the learner's writing skills such as using online forum, wikis, and weblogs. Although various studies have shown the possibilities of using weblog in accomplishing tasks in the classroom, in particular, using weblogs as online portfolios or journals where students can improve their writing, research on the use of weblog as a tool for the process writing approach is relatively new and it is an area for further research.

The digitalization of many ICTs has made it possible to design, develop, manage and assess the learning process. It increases the efficiency of the system and makes it more powerful. The new digital technologies used under ICT are following-

1. Laptop, Notebook and Multimedia PC

2. Digital Video
3. Digital Camera
4. Local Area Networking (LAN) and other Networks/Mobile Phone
5. WWW (World Wide Web)
6. CD-ROM and DVD
7. E-mail and Chat
8. Digital Books (Kindle editions)
9. Digital Libraries
10. Computer Mediated Conferencing- Video Audio Conferencing
11. Application of Software like Word Processing, Spreadsheet, PowerPoint and simulation, speech recognition

These new techniques used under ICT help students learn English by enabling them to communicate, edit, annotate and arrange text quickly and flexibly.

ICT AS STUDENT-FRIENDLY TOOLS WHICH ASSIST IN:

1. Access, select and interpret information
2. Review and modify their work to improve the quality
3. Communicate with others and present information
4. Evaluate their work
5. Improve efficiency
6. Be creative and take risks
7. Gain confidence and become independence or autonomous learner

ICT can be used to integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing. It enhances interactive teaching and learning styles. It also extends students' ability to exercise choice, work independently and make connections between their work in English and in other subjects. For example, ICT can help pupils:

1. use a wide range of strategies to explore contrasts, comparisons and connections dynamically
2. sort and process text and data quickly and efficiently
3. order and arrange text and data experimentally, using combinations of word, image, sound and hypertext
4. save, record, edit and adapt their work quickly and efficiently
5. retain evidence of the editing process so that it can be examined
6. change the organisational structure and qualities of texts to suit different audiences and purposes
7. select from a wider range of audiences, throughout the world
8. exercise choice of medium and design while composing

But before moving on to see how ICT tools are integrated in ESL language classrooms, we need to understand as to what entails the writing processes and their instruction in ESL classroom contexts.

TEACHING OF ESL WRITING:

Writing is certainly an essential part of language use and an important skill which needs to be developed both in the first and the second languages in order to communicate ideas, thoughts, feelings, and needs to others. It is not as easy as the speaking skills, but the most difficult of all language skills for it requires a lot of time and practice (cognitive as well as mechanical) on the part of learners to develop it. Being a long-time coping skill, it also requires a lot of patience on the part of learners, especially during the practice sessions, as they have to involve themselves in the problem solving activities and exercises time and again to develop, sustain and reinforce their skills (Hughey et al 1983). At times, it turns out for the learners to be a monotonous activity for which learners are required to show a lot of determination and courage. All these constraints make the development of writing skills challenging and troublesome, though writing researchers and scholars both in L1 and L2 languages have proposed and developed several strategies and techniques which make the painful activity of a writing task much easier for the learners as well as for teachers in their endeavour to guide their learners in the successful completion of a writing task. The process approach to teaching writing is relatively less troublesome, learner-friendly and

less constraining for both teachers and learners as it breaks down the writing tasks into several stages/steps for the learner to go through.

There have been numerous approaches to the teaching of writing in the history of language teaching. These writing approaches have evolved with the development of different approaches to teaching in general, which have in turn contributed to the changing role and status of writing. The pedagogical approaches to second language writing emerged at different times since 1960's. They are Product, Process, Post-Process, Socio-cultural and genre-based approaches which have contributed to the development of the writing pedagogy. The rise of the process approach marks the beginning of a new era for second language writing pedagogy. The traditional product-oriented view of writing which regards writing as linear and fragmented procedure is thus contrary to the actual writing process. In process-oriented writing, writers are able to make modifications to the written text or make changes in their original plans as they review their writing.

If the ESL learners are taught how to generate ideas, how to select and organise them with a certain purpose and audience in mind, how to translate them on to a piece of paper and how to write and rewrite drafts, learning to write would not only become an easy task but also an enjoyable activity for them. For the development of effective writing skills ESL learners are required to develop each of the sub-skills of writing. The composing processes and their component strategies (sub-skills) based on Flower and Hayes' model (1981) of expository writing are depicted below:

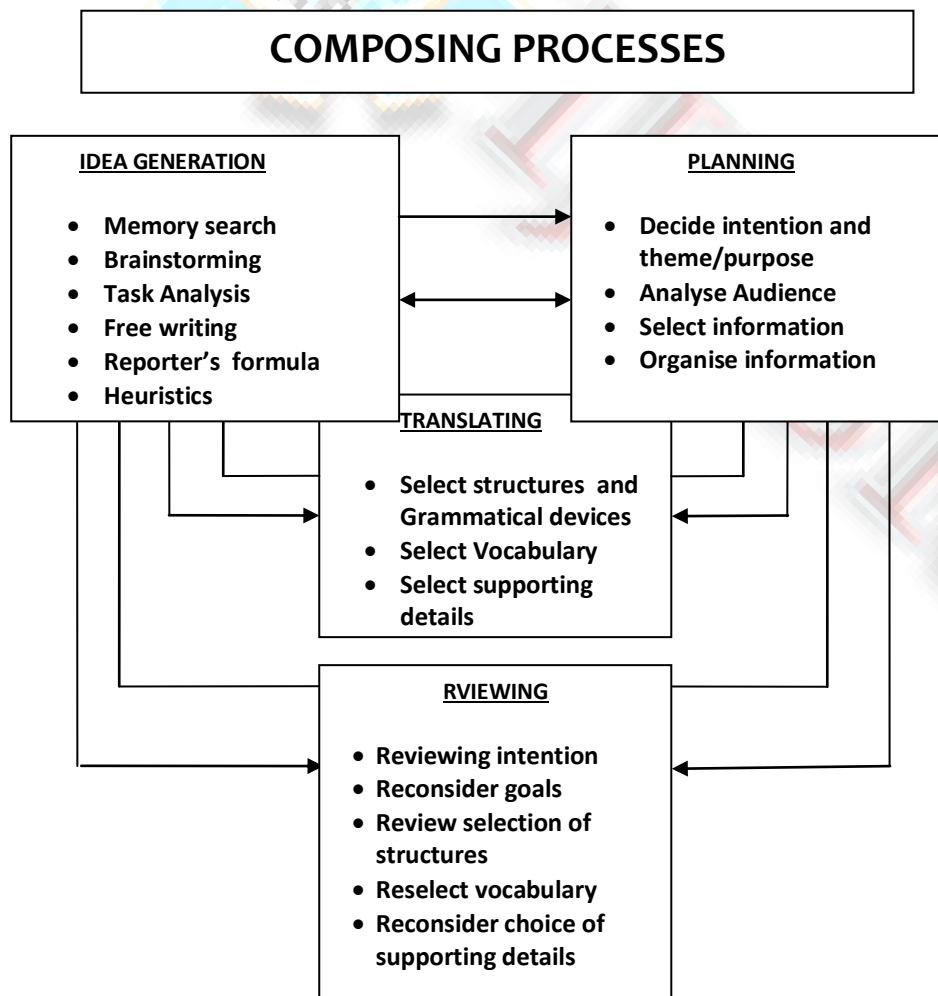


Figure 2: A Model of Process Writing (adapted from Flower & Hayes, 1981)

The arrows indicate that information flows from one box (or process) to another. Information in the *idea generation stage* can flow to the *planning stage* and it can also flow back the other way. What the arrows do not mean is that such information flows in a predictable left to right circuit. This distinction is crucial

because such a flow chart implies the very kind of the Stage model against which it has been argued. Further, the arrows show that idea generation and planning are not sequential steps in composing and are not over when translating begins, and reviewing does not take place only after translating is over. Instead, each process is recursive and can occur in any of the other processes.

The process writing can thus be represented as consisting of the following broad stages which are to be adopted by ESL learners, first individually and then all together, depending on their level of proficiency and competence in English language. These steps give the learners what they are expected to in every stages before moving on the multiple drafting stage.

THE WRITING PROCESSES

PREWRITING:

Clarifies the *purpose* of writing, thoughts are generated through talking, drawing, remembering, brainstorming, reading, note-taking, searching for information, free associating and questioning to generate ideas.

DRAFTING (MULTIPLE DRAFTING):

This is a rough, exploratory piece of writing in which ideas are organized and written up into a coherent draft, this stage of writing should not be evaluated, but supported. Topics and concepts are generated through quick-writes, free writing, graphic organizers, journals, learning logs.

FEEDBACK:

At this stage the writer receives the most guidance on how to improve his or her writing skills. Responses at this stage typically focus on meaning, not correctness. Activities include conferencing, getting feedback, sharing work; responding to comments, suggestions, reflecting on own writing (meta-writing). Through the questions and comments raised by the instructor or peers, the writer discovers, clarifies and refines his or her writing. Accepting criticism/comments is important at this stage.

REVISING:

re-writing the draft, building on what has been done, in order to make it stronger; Revision adds coherence, variety, transition, emphasis and details. Revision eliminates irrelevance, wordiness and inconsistencies.

EDITING:

Editing is to check for and correct errors in grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, vocabulary and spelling.

FINAL DRAFT AND PUBLISHING:

In this stage students share their final versions of writing with an audience.

Technology can be used in multifarious ways in the development of language skills of ESL learner, but using it in ESL writing skill development requires a lot of commitments on the part of learners and teachers. Its judicious integration into ESL writing classrooms will certainly enhance learner's interest, motivation and efficiency.

INTEGRATION ICT IN WRITING PROFICIENCY DEVELOPMENT

USING ONLINE MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES THROUGH WIKIPEDIA, YOUTUBE, ETC.

Online resources provide students with several types of writing materials to be incorporated in the writing tasks they are involved in – audio, video, graphic, document, etc from various sites such as Wikipedia, YouTube, etc. Students can tap on these sources, select writing materials and information, and organize them in sequence before writing the first draft. Audio and video and graphic materials can add to the sensory perceptions of the learners as well.

In fact the “Getting started” stage is the most difficult stage for any student. These online resources provide immediate relief and easy tensions far as generating ideas and writing materials are concerned.

Some useful websites or search engines for learners and teachers are as follows:

1. Altavista – www.altavista.digital.com
2. AskJeeves – www.askjeeves.com
3. Google – www.google.com
4. Hotbot – www.hotbot.com
5. Lycos – www.lycos.com
6. WebCrawler – www.webcrawler.com

STUDENT WEB PAGES

1. www.geocities.com
2. www.tripod.com
3. www.anglefire.com

ONLINE WRITING LABS:

1. Natural Writing Centres Association <www.departments.colgate.edu/diw/NWCAOWLS.html>
2. Purdue OWL – <owl.english.purdue.edu>
3. The Online Writer (Missouri) - <web.missouri.edu%7Ewritery>
4. The Writing Machine (HKU) – <ec.hku.hk/writingmachine/>
5. HK PolyU Writing Centre - <elc.poly.edu.hk/CILL/writing.htm>
6. Colorado State Writing Center - www.colostate.edu/Depts/English/wcenter
7. Michigan State Writing Center - <pilot.msu.edu/user/writing/>

USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES (SNS):

A social networking service (SNS) is an online platform or medium used to established social networks and social relations among individuals who share interests and activities (Yunus, Salehi & Chenzi, 2012). Most social networking services allow users to share their opinion, interests, activities and events within their individual networks. The SNSs are web based and provide means for users to interact over the internet in various ways such as email or instant messaging. Among various kinds of social networking service (SNS), Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, MySpace, Orkut are well known which are being effectively used by individuals the world over for various personal and commercial purposes.

Facebook owns an application called Note which actually function's as Blog. Students and teachers can create and share blogs to be treated as blackboard, and teacher can save all the students' works; further, teacher can post and introduce articles to students; students could chain their blogs in order to share information. This is much easier for Facebook users. Teacher should encourage students to post appropriate and topic or task-related images, ideas, comments and messages about the assignments and events.

Social interaction technologies have great benefits for lifelong education environments. The social interaction can help enhancing the skills such as the ability to search, to evaluate, to interact meaningfully with tools, and so on. Education activities usually take place in classrooms with teacher and students being face to face, but it can be carried out through social network technologies including discussion and assessment. It also affects learner motivation and strengthens students' social networking practices. Thus integrating SNSs into ESL classroom can turn students into digital natives; they will have larger audience, fostering a sense of global interaction; they can bring multimedia interaction such as audio, video, graphics, links, and so on; they will take responsibility for their work due to the larger audience; students can read comments for the class as a whole and also comment directly and individually on them; this maximizes the feedback and the contact with the teacher.

Through social networking services (SNSs), group brainstorming activities (*Planning*) can be done in the most efficient ways; students can share thoughts, photos and images, web links to have information on the topic being discussed or written.

USING WEBLOGS

The process writing approach emphasises writing as a process or a developmental task in which *prewriting*, *multiple drafting*, and *revising* are considered important in assisting learners to develop their writing skills. In the process of multiple drafting, *peer review* which is referred as *peer editing*, *peer evaluation*, or *peer response* comes in as a step where the writer is exposed to meaningful interaction with peers, a greater exposure to ideas, and new perspectives on the writing process. Weblogs would be considered to be an effective tool in various stages of writing process, especially on the stage of peer feedback and revising.

In implementing weblogs in the writing process all the students in the class are supposed to have their own weblog provided by Blogger.com, a free website where anybody can create a blog free of charge in a few easy steps.

ADVANTAGES OF INTEGRATING ICT IN WRITING CLASSES :

1. ICT can enable learners to understand, visualize and interpret difficult texts. Students with learning difficulties who use CAI in reading, increase performance in reading, decoding and reading comprehension.
2. ICT use attracts students' attention, facilitates students' learning process, helps to improve students' vocabulary and promotes meaningful learning.
3. ICT also enables the learners to go beyond the text and relate the text with real life.
4. sensitizes the students with various issues
5. online resources provide wide, varied and real exposure to language use of the learner
6. ICT in practice means going beyond the classroom - Thus ICT not only makes language learning easy and fun but also spices the text with real life experiences which make a learner more broad minded and humane.
7. ICT when used properly enables a student to go beyond the textbook to have the feel in real life situations. For example, a lesson on *Child Labour* encourages a student to get more information about the condition of child labour in different parts of the world and also to think and devise the ways to help and support them. The students may be also asked to carry out small research related with the topic. This undoubtedly will sharpen their mental abilities and make them more creative.
8. With the use of technology the learner succeeds in developing awareness, world view, perspectives and sensitivity towards issue, tasks or topics of writing.
9. ICT use in the classroom kindles the spark of imagination, making students aware of the reality existing outside classroom, stretching their perception, sensitizing them with the values, refining their perceptions.

Thus ICT has become now a need of the modern classroom as it broadens a learner's outlook of life by bringing the whole world at his command. Neglecting it would mean confining oneself within narrow walls so language teachers should try to use more and more ICT in the classroom.

DISADVANTAGES OR OBSTACLES IN USING ICT:

1. It has been found that using ICT creates discipline problems, the difficult class control, distraction and the students' tendency to use short forms in their writing. It was also revealed that teachers are generally weak in managing problems and planning activities involving the use of ICT in the teaching of ESL writing (Yunus, Salehi & Chenzi, 2012).
2. Cost and affordability of technology
3. Cost and availability of specialized trainings for teachers
4. Lack of computer literacy among learners and teachers in remote areas of India
5. Teacher or instructor must be comfortable with using technology
6. Cost of media, software, e-content, e-learning materials, etc.
7. Technology not 100 percent fault proof
8. Access issue outside classroom – access failure, break-ups, slow connection, congestion in web services/servers or busy servers etc.

It is hoped, however, that many of these obstacles would be overcome in due course of time, as the governments are encouraging, promoting and financing (to a certain extent) the use of technology and ICT in higher education. In the recent future, the use of ICT might become the norm of teaching ESL classes.

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