

Oct 27th, 1:30 PM - 3:00 PM

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Recommended Citation

Sadiku, Alisa and Krasniqi, Ardian, "Computers' impact on students' writing skills" (2018). *UBT International Conference*. 121.
<https://knowledgecenter.ubt-uni.net/conference/2018/all-events/121>

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Computers' impact on students' writing skills

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Abstract. Learning new vocabulary comprises a significant factor for success within language learning since without the adequate knowledge of words and their meaning, learners are not able to use the target language efficiently. Moreover, vocabulary tends to be forgotten if it is not acquired and used through the right methods that will provide learners with language inputs in genuine target language environment. In this regard, the increasing access to different multimedia and technology resources facilitate spontaneous vocabulary acquisition for the contemporary age learners. In particular, movies with subtitles can be a great tool in bringing students closer to authentic real life communication vocabulary. As a result, previous studies have found out several benefits of using subtitled movies by confirming that subtitles indeed improve vocabulary development.

Keywords: movies, subtitles, vocabulary, incidental acquisition.

1 Introduction

Throughout the years, language learners have undergone through radical changes in language teaching and learning methods, as a result of various technological improvements. These language learners are nowadays referred to as digital natives, i.e. “native speakers of the digital language of computers, videos and the Internet” (Presnky, 2001). Learning in traditional settings can no longer satisfy their learning expectations since “their brains have physically changed” as a result of “different kinds of experiences that lead to different brain structures” (ibid). Therefore, as Wedemeyer (1981) suggests, in order to avoid teacher-centered techniques that are based on the behaviorist models and memorization of vocabulary and grammar, a new way of thinking should be encouraged, one that will provide students with opportunities to demonstrate and improve their language skills.

In this regards, being able to write effectively is one of the crucial aims of most language learners. Even more important is that by acquiring this skill learners intend to use the target language effectively in real context and beyond classroom settings. On the other hand, computers, as relatively new teaching means can have a

great impact on achieving these goals. As such, the usage of computers is an important factor in education, since the educational process itself demands improvement of the traditional methods and introducing more sophisticated teaching techniques. Besides these, as the availability of computers in schools has increased, new strategies of learning languages by using computers are more than welcomed, even though not all teaching environments are on the cutting edge of technology. According to Schuck, (2002, as cited in Gibson & Peacock, 2006) the reasons why there are still cases when computers are not involved in the teaching and learning process is that some of the teachers are constrained to do this because of lack of time and confidence in using technologies, as well as fear of computers replacing the teacher.

2 Background of the study

Writing, as a complex language process, incorporates different skills and techniques. According to National Commission on Writing (2006, as cited in Omar, et al 2014), one of the elements that make a good writing is clarity, accuracy and logical thinking. Besides these, “students writing improves when they are given multiple opportunities to write on a regular basis” (ibid), in which, word processors have been shown to be quite beneficial. In the same light, word processors are reported to be on top of the list of why students might use computers for educational purposes (Becker, 1999 as cited in Goldberg, et al 2003).

According to Macarthur (1988), there are several benefits that word processing software have when it comes to written compositions in comparison with the traditional technique of using paper and pencil. Through word processors, learners can make flexible edits of the text. Moreover, by using the visibility of the monitor, the written text can be more accessible to the public. Also, very often the printed version of these texts can be neater. Writing, as a mechanical process can be also easier to perform when typing rather than writing with paper and pencil. Furthermore, those who have poor handwriting or are prone to making mechanical errors can benefit from using word processors.

Word processing software help students plan and revise their writings, compose several drafts and produce a final, error-free text version which can be clearly understood by the readers. As most word processors give spell checking options, learners can correct them immediately, as well as delete, add or rearrange the content. In addition, word processors help learners save on their time, and with the spare time they can focus on important elements such as planning, organizing and reflecting their ideas. However, results from a study by Baker & Kinzer (1998) show that students using paper and pencil for writing have a more linear process of writing, i.e. they first brainstorm, outline ideas, write drafts, revise, proof read and then come up with the final version, whereas when using word processors, there is no linear process as students combine all these elements until they come up with the final piece of writing.

What is more, writing through computers has a significant impact when it comes to promoting social interactions among students. “When writers revise and edit, they can take their peers’, teachers’, and editors’ ideas about the papers” (Strassman & D’Amore, 2002, as cited in Ulusoy, 2006) as they have the chance to share their work and the teacher can directly observe their writing process in order to understand how each student solves different writing tasks and can intervene if students face difficulties. Snyder’s (1994, as cited in 2) study indicates that when it comes to communication among peers, environments where students use paper and pens for their writing is more prone to initiating communication between the teacher and the students whereas in cases where students use word process to compose texts, the common communication tends to be among students themselves. In the same vain, Curtiss (1984) adds that the affordances of electronic tools for writing, promote student-centered environment. However, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) state that writing through computers might be a total autonomous process for the students, thus it might not include the necessary guided feedback or face to face conversation with the teacher.

In addition, word processors facilitate students writing instruction by helping them edit their texts easily and thus making the writing process more enjoyable. In regards to this, Daiute (1985, as cited in Macarthur, 1988) states that revising on the computer is easier for students to improve their writings as it encourages them to write freely without worrying about the errors since it is easy to make the changes after they compose the whole text. However, students who do not have sufficient typing skills, might feel frustrated and demotivated. In regards to this, Mac Arthur and Graham (1987, as cited in *ibid*) indicate that students who are proficient in typing would produce longer and more qualitative compositions using the word processors. Another benefit that computers provide students with is the possibility to offer them reinforcement when receiving feedback. Instead of receiving a paper filled with corrections, the computer offers a less personal way of critical feedback (Ramirez, 2007).

Nevertheless, there are still some downsides when it comes to using computers in the writing process, such as using word processors might lower students’ critical thinking and the option of coping and pasting can lead to higher rate of plagiarism. Word processors might cause laziness in students when it comes to correcting word spelling whereas students might spend more time on perfecting their fonts instead of focusing on planning and writing. Also, some students might need extra assistance in learning how to technically use word processors. (Omar, et al 2014).

3 Previous studies

Over the past few years, a lot of studies have examined the impact of word processors on student writing. A number of studies have involved as participants students who were not as accustomed with using computers for writing as the current

generations. Regardless of these obstacles, these early researches provide some evidence of positive effects. For instance, the research of Cochran-Smith (1991) on word processing of elementary school students found that students using word processors for text compositions provided longer and neater texts than students who wrote with paper and pencil. Their writings were also with less errors. Other researches, such as the meta-analysis of Bangert-Drowns' (1993) indicate that word processing also contributes in improving the quality of students' writing. Similarly, based on Goldberg's (et al, 2003) study, students using word processors for writing have created texts with higher quality than those with paper and pencil. A study by Dauite (1986) reports that when students write on computers they tend to produce longer texts and make more revisions. Likewise, according to a study by Grejda and Hannafin (1992, as cited in Goldberg, et al 2003) students using word processors make less errors when revising. In the same light, based on the research conducted by Bahr & Nelson (1996) if students use computers when writing, they may be encouraged to write for longer periods of time i.e. they can write longer and more detailed stories than those who write with paper and pencil. However, Shaw, Nauman, and Burson (1994) note that the quality and length of texts was higher on the students using paper and pencil, and refer to computer writing as less creative. In the same regards, a study by Hass (1989, 1996, as cited in Salomon, et al 2003) indicates that when writing in word processors, learners do less planning than students using paper and pencil.

4 Results and Discussions

The data gathered from the final sessions of both groups, one with students using computers when writing, and the other one with students using paper and pencil, showed the following results given in tables where the mean scores are calculated. The group of students using computers is referred to as Gr.1 whereas the other group using only pencil and paper is referred to as Gr. 2. Based on the results shown on the Fig.1 students using computers made less spelling and grammar mistakes than the group using pencil and paper for writing composition.

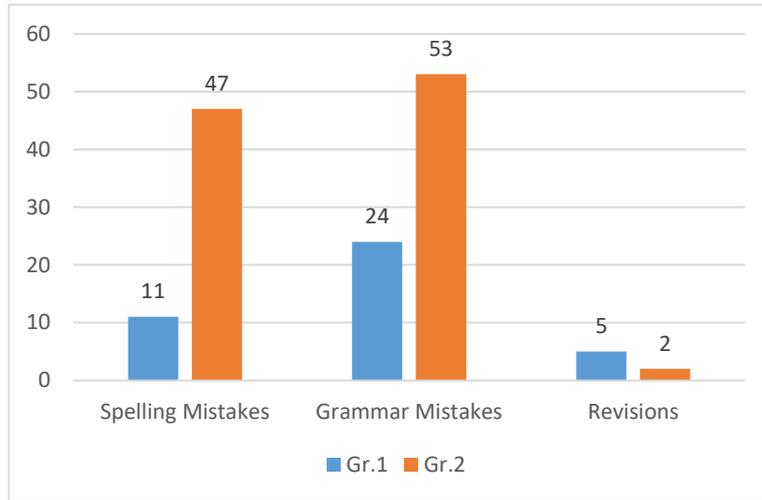


Fig. 1 Comparisons of the average scores of spelling, grammar mistakes and revisions between Gr.1 and Gr.2

Results shown in Fig. 1 and 2 indicated that the quantity of writing and number of revisions done by students using computers was higher than students using paper and pencil. The majority of revisions made by Gr2. were changes in capitalization and spelling whereas Gr.1 made changes such as adding sentences and changing words.

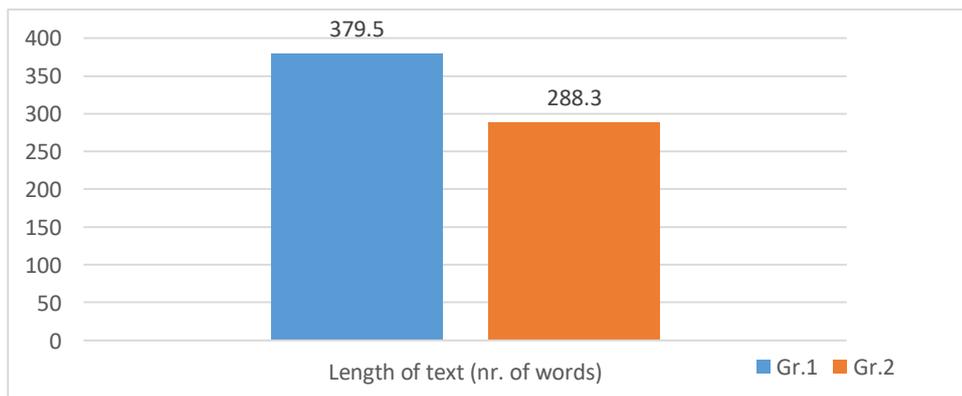


Fig 2. Comparisons of the average scores of the length of texts between Gr.1 and Gr.2

The following Tables (1-6), show the percentages of the questionnaire responses of students from both groups regarding their attitudes and experiences toward writing, and specifically writing through computers. In general, students from Gr.1 seem more motivated to write after using computers whereas students Gr. 2 find writing less enjoyable.

1. What do you think of writing skills	Gr1	Gr2
Easy	78%	39%
Common	15%	27%
Difficult	5%	24%
Very Difficult	2%	20%

Table 1.

2. How often do you write for composition?	Gr1	Gr2
Never	29%	27%
Hardly ever	17%	21%
Sometimes	25%	19%
Often	16%	14%
I don't know	13%	19%

Table 2.

3. Writing through computers is an effective way to learn writing skills.	Gr1	Gr2
Strongly Agree (SA)	83%	74%
Agree (A)	9%	12%
Neutral (N)	5%	11%
Disagree (D)	1%	3%
Strongly disagree (SD)	2%	0%

Table 3.

4. Making changes in the text was...	Gr1	Gr2
Very Easy	61%	24%
Easy	25%	16%
Neutral	12%	29%
Difficult	1%	19%
Very difficult	1%	12%

Table 4.

5. How often do you use computers for writing a composition?	Gr1	Gr2
Never	0%	0%
Hardly ever	3%	4%
Sometimes	37%	25%
Often	49%	56%
Always	11%	15%

Table 5.

6. In the future, do you think you will use computers for writing?	Gr1	Gr2
Yes	92%	90%
No	2%	3%
Not sure	6%	7%

Table 6.

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of using computers as writing tool on spelling, grammar, quantity of writing, number of revisions, and attitude towards writing. In other words, the objective behind this research was to gather data that shows whether or not computers have an impact on increasing students' writing abilities whilst learning second and foreign languages. Particularly, the results obtained from the study answered the following research questions:

1. Does using word processors show improvements in spelling and grammar of students writing?

Students benefited from using the writing software, as it helped them improve their organization skill and their writings were more organized and easier to read than the ones created by hand. These students produced writings with less grammar and spelling errors as a result of the advantage of word processors in correcting spelling and giving suggestions for their grammar mistakes which most of the time are corrected automatically by the software.

2. Does using word processors have an impact on students' quantity of writing and number of revisions?

The length of writings produced on computers was higher than writings produced on paper. Students using the word processing software wrote more often, for longer periods of time, and produce more writing than those using paper and pencil. In addition to this, when using computers students spread their knowledge by reading additional info related to the writing skill and gradually applied them in their writing, making it more qualitative. Students using computers made more revisions than students using paper and pencil. They were more willing to make changes in their compositions whereas the group using paper and pencil made only small changes like word choice or edits. The number of drafting was also higher in the group of computers.

3. Does students' enjoyment and motivation increase when using word processors for learning and practicing writing skills?

Students enjoyed using the computers when writing. They seemed more motivated and enthusiastic about writing especially the reluctant writers. When writing in computers, the process of composition became a social interaction among the students, as they shared their work with their peers, enhancing their collaborative and cooperative behavior and making this an interesting and enjoyable task. The results from the questionnaire shown in the tables 1-6 indicate that the group using computers had a more positive attitude towards writing and particularly writing through computers which shows that this experience has had a positive effect on their motivation. Making changes in the text was easier for the computer group and rather frustrating for the group using paper and pencil, since when they needed to revise their writing they had to write a whole new draft all over again. Both groups were approximately positive that they often use computers for writing composition and would probably continue to do so in the future.

5 Limitations & Recommendations

There are several limitations in this study. First is that keyboarding can be a difficult skill for many students to master. Also, because of the small size of the participants, these findings cannot be generalized to the larger scientific studies. Furthermore, I do not think that a semester is enough time to determine if computers have an impact on

the quality and quantity of writing. I would also suggest this study to be conducted in various grade levels, especially college students or elementary school students. Moreover, it would be even better if the sample group would be larger than 10 students per class.

6 Conclusions

The constant evolution of technology has brought many changes in the process of teaching and learning languages. Nowadays, students have access to different software that assist them in advancing their language skills one of which are word processors as tools which help extending students' writing skills through a wide range of opportunities. The results of the experiment that were done with the two groups, one with students using computers when writing, and the other one with students using paper and pencil, clearly showed that students' motivation and interest was increased when computers were used in their writings. If we make a comparison between the group which had the teacher and the textbook as a source of information, and the other one which used the computer as a source, including the Web, students from the second group had better results, as expected. This is so, mainly due to the fact that they had a wider range of sources to use and the revision was mechanically easier to perform, thus the number of written drafts was higher and their compositions were longer. Also, their writings consisted of less grammar and spelling mistakes as a result of having the autocorrect option in the word processing software. To sum up, the use of computers in education increases students' writing skills as word processors offer a great assistance in writing and as teachers' aim is to introduce many different kinds of writing experiences, activities, and strategies, computers can definitely help them achieve this.

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