Chapter 15
The Role of Online Tools in Promoting EFL Writing: A Pedagogical Perspective

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ABSTRACT
Taking into account the paradigm shift we are witnessing because of the technological revolution, the call for drastic changes in writing instruction has grown louder and stronger in recent years. In this chapter, the potential for incorporating technology into EFL writing instruction is explored. It offers a detailed account of how to incorporate online synchronous and asynchronous communication into writing instruction and mentions the precedence of asynchronous tools in this respect. It then follows a description of possible online activities claimed to promote EFL writing proficiency as well as pitfalls that might be encountered. Clear guidelines are provided for online written communication, and emphasis is on the resulting drastic change in the teacher’s role. The chapter ends by explaining how to integrate online asynchronous communication and the process writing approach to enhance EFL written production.

INTRODUCTION: WRITING INSTRUCTION IN ONLINE CONTEXTS
The current change in the writing environment is referred to as “digital writing” (Ridolfo, 2006, Foreword, para.1). In comparison with conventional writing, digital writing is characterized as being more interactive, purposeful, and somehow more spontaneous. Thus, to accommodate this change, it is suggested that all writing courses should incorporate online communication to prepare students for their roles as participants in an increasingly digital and global world.

Not only is digital writing a necessity to keep pace with global demands but, pedagogically, it can also have a powerful effect on students’ language learning. Compared with face-to-face conversations, online written communication allows students more chance to plan for their interactional movements and hence they can activate a broader range of their latent or passive language
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repertoire (Sierra, 1999). That is to say, in online communication students can enjoy the spontaneity of interaction without losing the monitoring function crucial for building up their long-term language proficiency.

Empirically, it has been shown that EFL students’ achievements in online contexts, including e-mail, discussion forums, and resource links, have surpassed those of their counterparts in off-line environments (Thirunarayanan and Perez-Prado, 2002). This is even true of low-ability students.

Basically, Internet-assisted classroom discussion makes use of either synchronous (“real-time”) writing programs or asynchronous (“delayed”) writing programs (Warnock, 2007).

ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS TOOLS

Synchronous communication tools are often used in distance learning classes to create a virtual classroom environment, where students can ask questions, discuss, and even “whisper” to their partners in real time. Nevertheless, in regular classrooms settings, synchronous tools can also be helpful in assisting group work and peer learning. Synchronous discussion sessions can be run either in computer labs or out of the class as home assignment (Kuo, Wible, & Chou, 2001, p. 243). The most popular synchronous online tool is the chatting facility.

Chatting

Before the age of the Internet, one of the biggest challenges faced by EFL teachers was getting learners to use their new language skills in authentic settings. However, due to the development of electronic communication technologies, it is now possible for language learners of all ages and levels to communicate with anyone, anywhere, at any time in virtual settings.

Chatting is one of the most favored tools for supporting real time communication. As a result we can find a number of sites on the Internet that are specifically designed for EFL students to help them practice language and improve their performance.

For example, a chat room which has gained much popularity is SchMOOze University, a site intended for non-native English speakers which allows synchronous communication. A MOO is a text-based virtual world, which means that as users move around it, they will see written descriptions of places, including rooms, open spaces, etc. while the user exists elsewhere. The vast majority of the users of the site are players, who can chat, play games, and sign up for a chat room experience (Israeni, 2010).

Another example of a chat room is found in the English Club (http://my.englishclub.com/). It provides EFL learners with the chance to find and start chatting with anyone - native or non-native - who would tolerate their low linguistic proficiency. Messages can either be directed to the entire room or to any individual logged on at Chat Central. The layout of the chat room is shown in Figure 1.

Another important online chat site is clubcooee: http://en.clubcooee.com/. This is a 3D chat room that students can chat in and practice other interesting activities. After signing in, there is a 3D avatar via which students can move and interact verbally on the web. After creating an account, the teacher can invite students to enter one room. To prevent any unknown users/avatars coming into the room, the teacher can choose a password for room access and give it to the students. The interface of ClubCooee is shown in Figure 2.

However, in chat rooms students should not be left on their own; rather the teacher should adapt the session to fulfill a certain goal or teach a certain language structure. Some activities to be practiced during a chatting session might include the following: