# Teaching Writing in a Technological Age

# テクノロジー時代に相応しい英作文の授業とは

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大学にはパソコン教室がかなりあっても、そこで英作文を教える教員は殆どいない。作文を教えるためにパソコン室は必要でもないし、望ましくもないと主張する人もいる。しかし、学生にとって作文関連の大事な技術を効果的に習うために、パソコン教室は不可欠な場所である。パソコンを利用した書き方を学ぶと学生たちは TOEFL のような試験、留学、就職活動などがもっと楽にできるし、論文、レポート、リサーチペーパなども上手に書けるようになる。この論文では、パソコン教室はいかなる理由で便利なのか、どのような方法で作文のために利用できるのか、などの課題を取り扱う。1988 年から英作文の授業をパソコン室で教えてきた著者は、自分の経験と研究に基づいて具体的な例を挙げながら、テクノロジー時代に英作文を教えるチャレンジにどのように立ち向かうべきかを考察する。

## 0 Introduction

In contrast to even a decade ago, the current university situation is highly favorable to those who would like to teach language classes, including composition classes, in a computer room. Most educational institutions currently have computer rooms, and the number of language-learning software and internet resources has never been larger. Almost all students who enter the university too are moderately familiar with personal computers and the Internet. In spite of such opportune circumstances, however, hardly any teacher conducts English composition classes in a computer room. In fact, some even aver that a computer classroom is not only unnecessary but also inappropriate for teaching composition.

While teachers incompetent or uninterested in technology may prefer a conventional classroom, it would be erroneous to deny students the whole world of possibilities that a computer classroom offers. Since hardly anyone writes anything today by hand and since almost all jobs require competence in computer-based writing skills, it seems not only desirable but also imperative that university students are taught how to use technology for writing efficiently. Many issues related to writing, such as touch-typing, discovering and evaluating resources, avoiding plagiarism, and using efficient shortcuts to improve vocabulary, grammar, and style can be more smoothly mastered if composition classes are held in a computer room (cf. Britto & McLaughlin, 2004; Britto, 2005; Chang, 2004; CTER WikiEd, 2009; Cummings, 2009; Jones, 1999; Stott, 2008). As most students will have to take online tests, send in online job applications, make online submissions to firms, and search online for research materials, they can be better prepared if they attend a computer-based composition course (CBCC).[1]

Not only can students benefit by a computer classroom, but also the teachers, as they can access an inexhaustible amount of online resources, can adjust the course to the immediate needs of students, and can customize the content for each student. Perhaps the most compelling reason for using a computer room is that it makes it easy for teachers to apply whatever philosophy of teaching they follow. Whether they subscribe to form-focused teaching, forms-focused teaching, task-based teaching, collaborative learning model, learner autonomy model, student-centered approach, or even the age-old grammar-oriented pedagogy, they can use a computer classroom effectively (cf. Kaur, Singh, & Embi, 2007; Mills, 2000; Mynard, 2007a; Mynard, 2007b; Ng & Sung, 2007; Nozawa, 2007; Takayoshi & Huot, 2003).

Computers are so pervasive in educational environments that their use can be seen in all aspects of education, such as course management,

[1] I shall use *CBCC* as an abbreviation for a composition course conducted in a classroom where there is a computer for the teacher and a computer for nearly every student.

curriculum management, distance learning and teaching, error detection, corpus construction, testing, grading, and score analysis (see e.g., Britto, 2003a; Britto, 2003b; Britto, 2004; Valenti, Neri, & Cucchiarelli, 2003; Kulik, 2003; Whithaus, 2005; Yi, 2007). The best opportunity for exploiting such technological benefits is offered only by a computer classroom. It can be soundly argued that contemporary university-level writing classes *must be*—not simply *may be*—held in a computer classroom rather than in a conventional classroom (cf. Levin & Arafeh, 2002).

This paper is a reflection on the issues involved in teaching composition in a computer room: the environment, requirements, teaching strategies, student reactions, and so on. While teaching with technology is not for everyone, many who would like to teach don't, presumably because of techno-phobia, techno-diffidence, or a lack of know-how. This paper may be of interest to such enthusiasts and to those who may be simply curious to know how a composition course can be conducted in a computer room. I began teaching fresher composition in a computer classroom in 1988 and have taught all my composition courses since then only in such an environment. Also, every year I taught, I have had students weigh the pros and cons of the course and have fine-tuned my strategies based on their feedback. Naturally, my observations here are based primarily on my experiences and student reactions at Sophia University.

## 1 Goals of a Composition Course

The *primary* goals of a CBCC cannot be any different from those of a conventional writing course. Indeed, if a CBCC does not even achieve what a conventional writing course does, then it has to be seriously flawed. In the context of Japan, the primary goals of a fresher writing course are to improve students' accuracy and fluency in writing. At the end of the course, students must be able to write more correctly and

more fluently on any general topic such as those given in standardized tests like TOEFL and be able to fulfill the writing tasks required of a fresher at an English-medium university. Circumstances related to the ability of students and the curriculum may require some modification of these goals, but are not likely to override them. Negatively put, the primary goal of a fresher CBCC is *not* to teach students how to make homepages, how to manage websites, or how to be active in blogs and social network systems. While an inventive teacher may exploit various technological services, devices, and resources (see e.g., Bicknell, 1999; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Krauss, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Mynard, 2007a; Pixlin, 2009), she has to subordinate technology to the primary aim of making students better writers. What distinguishes a CBCC is not *replacing* writing concerns with technology concerns, but *adding* technology to enhance writing or *using* technology to develop writing skills that are indispensable in this digital age. If technology is not at the service of writing, then it is only a hindrance in a writing course.

Nevertheless, a CBCC may—as a matter of fact, does—require that a teacher address the issue of imparting computing skills to students. Although most students enter the university having some familiarity with technology, and many universities, like Sophia, offer compulsory information literacy courses for freshers, a CBCC teacher is obliged to teach technology since the skills of students are uneven and the information literacy courses address only a fraction of the needs of EFL students. Moreover, as the technological environments in each university are unique, uninitiated students, knowledgeable though they may be, will find it hard to exploit the local resources. At Sophia, for example, a teacher has to teach matters related to Sophia *Moodle*, Sophia Web-Mail, Loyola Web, use of Sophia's free disk-space, Sophia's library search instruments, and so on in so far as these are required for enhancing writing skills.

To ensure that technology is subordinated to writing, a teacher may follow the following general principles:

- *Do not teach computer skills that are not immediately required.* Technology has many exciting and academic dimensions, but a teacher must resist the temptation to convert a composition course into a computer course. In practice, this norm demands that a teacher serve technology in small doses and avoid projects that require students to spend too much time in learning technology or in using technology for concerns, such as making web-pages, that have little to do with advancing writing skills.
- *Do not spend the whole class time for teaching technology.* Since the primacy of writing must be maintained, every class must address direct writing concerns. One suggestion is to allot, especially in initial stages, about 30 percent of class time for teaching technology, and then to reduce the time gradually and eliminate it altogether after about five or six classes.
- *Do not allot time during class for students to practice technology skills that they can acquire outside class.* The class time is precious as it brings together the teacher and students in direct contact. This important conjunction of personnel must be made the best use of, and must not be wasted on activities that students can engage in by themselves at home or elsewhere. So, for example, it will be inadvisable to spend class time for letting students practice typing, word-processing, or any such skill. After introducing such skills briefly and showing how students can get better at them, the teacher must leave students to master the skills by themselves outside of class hours.
- *Do not require students to use technology in a way you didn't teach them.* Given the primary goals of a CBCC, a teacher must do her best to reduce the computer-related anxieties of students by teaching whatever she requires of them. Any skill that is

beyond the ability of students to acquire fast must be ignored or discontinued.

In concrete terms, what are the content areas that a CBCC must deal with? Put differently, what are the skills that a student is expected to become competent in at the end of a CBCC course?

- **Technology-related:** Touch-typing, word-processing; using features of word count, thesaurus, dictionary, grammar check, spell check, outlining and idea-processing; measuring readability; counting words and letters; using corpora and concordances; finding collocations; writing proper emails, both for personal and professional purposes; composing posts for multi-user forums; netiquette; safe web-browsing; using podcasts and RSS feeds; using *Moodle*; using Flash drive for data transfer; using university-allotted memory space; saving data on DVD-R or CD-R diskettes (cf. Britto, 2001; Britto, 2003b).

A teacher has to address these topics only in so far as they are required by the circumstances. Students, however, must be required to submit all their assignments properly printed and to communicate with the teacher and peers primarily through electronic means (e.g., email or *Moodle*).

- **Accuracy-related:** Basic sentence grammar, covering such topics as pronouns, countables and uncountables, subject-verb agreement, antecedent-pronoun agreement, restrictive and non-restrictive clauses; punctuation related to the comma, period, hyphen, dash, colon, and semicolon; paragraphs (structure and development). A textbook like *Little, Brown Handbook* or an online reference like *The OWL at Purdue* or Charles Darling's *Guide to Grammar and Writing* can provide an extensive list of such accuracy-related issues.
- **Fluency-related:** In the context of writing, fluency may be defined as the ability to write much within a short time without sacrificing quality. Fluency must be so developed that students are able to compose about 300 words or more within 30 minutes

on any general topic, without making grave grammatical or stylistic errors. Nowadays many standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS) include a writing component, and a concrete goal might be to enable students to write such essays within the given time limit. Among the style-related issues that a teacher can address are sentence variety, figures of speech, coherence in paragraphs, concise writing, using specific words, removing trite words, etc.

Teachers may differ in their approach (see 3.3), but it seems essential that students be required to write several essays, each 500 or more words long. Given that Sophia, like a number of other universities, has no uniform policy about student obligations, currently class requirements vary, and in some classes students never write anything longer than 250 to 300 words. In my class, students are normally required to write an essay of 600 words every other week, or roughly six 600-word essays per semester.

- **Research-related:** Information retrieval techniques related to library software, Google Books, online journals, and search engines; criteria for judging the reliability and credibility of online resources; norms for citing online resources; academic style sheets (at least APA and MLA); taking notes; referencing; constructing a bibliography, preferably with a software tool like *Reference Manager*.
- **Ethics related:** Proper understanding of what constitutes unethical copying; how to write without plagiarizing; how to quote; how to summarize; and how to "retell" somebody else's ideas in one's own words (Britto, 2004; Britto, 2005).

These are only some of the topics that may be covered during a CBCC course. As suggested above, a textbook like *Little, Brown Handbook* or an online resource like *The OWL at Purdue* can offer many additional topics and hints. While a conventional writing course too can cover many of these topics, a CBCC can do so faster, with better illustrations, and with greater ease.

## 2 Layout, Hardware, and Software

In most universities, language teachers may have little to say about the layout of computer classrooms since the administrators tend to decide on a layout motivated by economic concerns, space availability, and the needs of other educators. The situation may be less than ideal for language teachers. For example, in some computer rooms, students may have to sit facing the wall, and in some, the seating arrangement may prevent a teacher from maintaining visual contact with students. A teacher has to be aware of such restrictions imposed by the layout, and find innovative ways of increasing interaction with and among students, for example, by organizing his classes into segments of lecture, group work, mutual feedback, etc., and by exploiting the network tools (cf. May, 1999; Taguchi & Allen, 2005).

Any computer classroom with a relatively recent PC for each student may be sufficient to teach composition, but some extra features make it more suitable. The minimum configuration of a PC must include *Windows* (any recent version, or a *Mac* platform), *MS Office* (or equivalent, e.g., *Open Office*), *Internet Explorer* (or equivalent, e.g., *Firefox*), free USB ports (for flash memory devices), a DVD/CD writable drive (for storing data), access to a printer, Internet connection, microphone, and headphones. A highly beneficial piece of additional hardware is an extra monitor for each student or a pair of students to view the teacher's screen. A wireless microphone can help in making students address the whole class, and a PC-display projector can help in showing the contents of the teacher's monitor on a large screen.

A couple of special software items are highly recommended: a program to teach touch-typing (e.g., *TypeQuick*), another to enhance classroom interaction (e.g., *CaLabo*), and another to manage the course (e.g., *Moodle*). A typing program is essential since all students must acquire touch-typing skills and those with basic skills must increase their typing speed. A good program can save much time for the teacher

by guiding students from beginning to end. Free online tutorials may be used if no typing software is provided, but their functionality may be limited, their operation may be slow, and, above all, their flickering and glittering ads may be distracting (See *Typing Tutors*). The interaction program is essential, especially in a composition classroom, since the teacher can monitor any student's screen at any time and display any student's screen to the whole class. The monitoring function serves also as a deterrent to wayward students who would rather watch a soccer match or a pop idol on YouTube than take part in the class. A course management tool like *Moodle* is absolutely necessary for a CBCC since it makes realistic communication and a variety of interactions possible. Fortunately for Sophians, all these items of software are currently available in the CALL rooms (cf. Britto, 2006).

Other pieces of language-related software, such as an encyclopedia (e.g., *Encarta* or *Encyclopedia Britannica*), a dictionary (e.g., *Oxford ALD, Longman's*), a concordance (e.g., *COBUILD*), a reference manager (e.g., *Reference Manager*), and a writing assistant (e.g., *WhiteSmoke Writer*), can increase students' learning opportunities. In addition to such over-the-counter software, teachers can use many exclusive software tools if they adopt any of the latest textbooks sold by major international publishers (see 3.2).

## 3 Teacher Tasks

The tasks of a teacher in a CBCC may be grouped under the following four headings: technology-related, textbook-related, tasks-related, and teaching-related.

### 3.1 Technology-related

Technology is simply a tool, and its success depends to a large extent on who wields it. Not even the best tool can produce good results if the wielder is incompetent. Obviously, besides having interest, a teacher

must be competent in technology in order to make a CBCC a success. Since many universities, like Sophia, have full-time technical support during class hours, teachers do not have to be certified experts, but they must be creative and savvy enough to use appropriate tools, offer imaginative variation, exploit diverse resources, and troubleshoot in case of emergency.

Although teachers may be familiar with the basics, it will help much if they acquaint themselves with as many advanced skills as they can. For example, in *MS Word*, they must be able to exploit features such as styles, headers, footers, tables, indexing, outlining, spell-check, grammar-check, readability indices, word count; tracing revisions; multi-user editing; importing and exporting a variety of files, such as images and tables. In *Moodle*, they must be able to schedule events; send email; post text files, image files, and links; import video and audio files; create chat rooms, forums, assignments, web-pages, podcasts, RSS feeds, and quizzes; handle scores and grades; compress, export, and back-up files. The teacher will also find it to her benefit to know how to edit, copy, and move a variety of documents, graphics, audio and video segments (e.g., avi, bmp, doc, gif, jpg, mp3, mp4, mpg, ppt, pdf, tiff, txt, xls, wma files) across different platforms and programs.

It will help students enormously if the teacher puts out the complete schedule of the semester in *Moodle*, including weekly assignments and other demands made of students. Students are also grateful if the teacher posts in *Moodle* a summary of what was done in class after the completion of each class, and announces what will be done in the next class (cf. 5.2).

A teacher must have a variety of online resources, like *The English WebLab*, at his command for the convenience of students. He may construct a resource webpage of his own or resort to a ready-made one like *The English WebLab*, which is freely accessible. There are many other technological shortcuts that a teacher can use to facilitate learning. For example, to teach *MS Word* quickly and enable students

to write well-formatted essays fast, one may begin with *TaskTemp.doc,* a template-like document, which makes numerous styles for entering block-quotes, references, headers, and headings immediately available (Britto, 2007; Kelly, 2009).

### 3.2 Textbook-related

Finding an adequate textbook too is part of a teacher's responsibility, and it may demand careful exploration and judicious deliberation. Tastes and teaching philosophies dictate the selection of a textbook, and there may be teachers who do not like to use any textbook at all. My own annual surveys reveal that students like to have a textbook even when they have free access to much of the book's contents online.

There are at least three major considerations in selecting a textbook: (1) suitability, (2) scope, and (3) sources. Most composition textbooks published in Japan are too elementary or too focused to suit the needs of university freshers. Books published overseas, especially of the *handbook* variety, such as John Warriner's *English Composition and Grammar* series; *Little, Brown Handbook*; Addison-Wesley Educational's *SF Handbook*, and Diana Hacker's *Bedford Handbook*, seem much better. Such books usually cover a wide range of writing concerns that freshers must be familiar with, including sentence grammar, punctuation, essay writing, business writing, and online writing; they also contain numerous exercises. Even though a book of this genre tends to cost more than the average 'textbook' of the throwaway variety, it can be used all one's life, and most freshers appreciate such a treasure.

It is essential to select a textbook that offers a variety of resources either on a CD/DVD or online. Most international publishers (e.g., Addison-Wesley, Longman, Oxford, and Pearson) nowadays routinely offer online support, allowing the teacher and students to access a vast quarry of resources, study materials, reference works, and quizzes. One notable feature of such online support is that students can have

the results of the quizzes they take sent directly to the teacher without doctoring the results. This frees the teacher from having to construct, conduct, or correct individual quizzes; all she has to do is simply to assign the quizzes, set a deadline, and then collate the results.

### 3.3 Tasks-related

Nearly twenty years ago, Tony Silva (1990, 18), a Second Language Writing researcher at Purdue University, bluntly confessed that the diversity of approaches in the field of second language writing "has a number of negative effects on the discipline" and "generates more heat than light and does not encourage consensus on important issues" and that "such a situation engenders a great deal of confusion and insecurity among ESL composition teachers." That the situation has not changed much is revealed in this bitter comment of Ali (2009), a professional language teacher:

> L2 teachers have been bombarded for decades with so many 'NEW' methods, from the Direct Method, Grammar-Translation Method, Audiolingual Method and Cognitivism to the more recent Suggestopedia, Delayed Oral Response, Silent Way and the Communicative Independent-learning Approach. To make it worse for teachers, the literature is always full of contradictories such as integrative vs. instrumental motivation, deductive vs. inductive grammar, teacher-centered vs. learner-centered class, etc.

According to Krashen and Lee (2004), "There is no evidence that writing contributes to writing competence; those who write more do not write better and increasing writing does not result in better writing." According to Truscott (1996), correcting students' grammar errors is not only ineffective, but even harmful, and so it "has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned." The diversity of opinions

among researchers is so wide that teachers can find support even for not teaching at all (cf. Bland, 2007; Ferris, 1999; Gray, 2004; Muncie, 2000).

Although such is the cacophony of professional advice, my own 'action research' shows that students not only want and appreciate grammar teaching, grammar corrections, and writing tasks, but also display observable progress in writing—provided the teacher tangibly assists them and makes even bitter subjects palatable (cf. Britto, 2000). A computer room is of enormous help here, for teachers can create enthusiasm among students by offering variety and peer support through *Moodle* and other online tools.

Normally, I require students to write six essays of 600 words each over a period of one semester (14 weeks). Each student's essay usually goes through the following six stages of development. (1) Each student writes the essay in her PC at home or elsewhere outside of class hours. (2) The student posts the essay in a specially created *Moodle* Forum, making it available to all the students and the teacher. (3) Each student reads at least one essay of a peer and comments on it in the Forum itself. [The teacher, of course, has to teach students how to make comments and corrections, especially in a *Moodle* Forum.] (4) Each student revises the essay based on the remarks of peers and posts a revised version in the Forum. (5) The revised version is also submitted to the teacher in print, which the teacher reads and comments on. (6) The student receives the commented-on essay from the teacher, revises it again, and submits the final version both in print and in *Moodle* (as a completed *Assignment*). The process of correction and revision may be repeated in some cases.

The students and the teacher are kept busy in this model of process writing, as students have to coordinate their authoring, editing, and revising of several tasks, each of which may be at a different developmental stage, and the teacher has to closely follow each student's progress. Overall, though, most students get the rhythm

after a couple of weeks and manage to finish their essays as scheduled. This process of writing—going through the stages of developing ideas, drafting a rough version, reading and revising with a peer, and finally revising after teacher's comments—results in the emergence of a very mature essay that students are indeed proud of.

The *topic* for the essay too is very important since it can stimulate or stunt the enthusiasm of students. Topics related to fashion, horoscope, and techniques for learning English seem popular among freshers. Using an image, audio or video clip as a stimulus can also be exciting to students. For example, a teacher can ask students to write an objective description or an interpretation of events after watching *Adora* (2009a, 2009b), the *Vancome Lady at the Makeup Counter, The Monk and the Fish*, or a similar clip. A painting or a photo, e.g., Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*, or an audio segment from the *Grammar Girl* or *CNN Student News* can fire up the imagination of students to write a story or an essay. "Describe a campus scene" is another topic quite popular with students, as they write enthusiastically about the way other students dress, act, and communicate. They also learn to describe in painstaking detail the ordinary events they observe at a campus location such as the cafeteria, the library, or the main square. When teachers cannot come up with original topics, they can make use of the *Writing Topics* suggested by ETS for TOEFL candidates. The ETS topics are usually motivating to students as many are intent on taking TOEFL or a similar standardized test. The Internet abounds also in essay topics conceived by teachers (see e.g., Pixlin).

In addition to the six 600-word essays, which form the core of students' obligations over a period of 14 weeks, teachers may offer several quizzes, optional or prescribed, as additional tasks. Inventive teachers may construct their own quizzes in *Moodle* or *Hot Potatoes*, or direct students to any of the quiz sites listed in *The English WebLab* or the quiz site of the textbook. As mentioned earlier (see 3.2), teachers

can have students' answers automatically graded, without having to spend any time in manually correcting the quizzes.

It is a good practice to display, after each quiz or test, the scores of all students for the whole class, usually in a bar graph or pie graph—of course, without revealing the identity of individuals. Such a display, especially in *Moodle*, provokes students to compete enthusiastically with their peers and grow out of their tendency to complain that quizzes and tests were extremely hard. Above all, when so exposed to their relative position in class throughout the semester, they are better prepared to accept their final grade without complaint.

### 3. 4 Teaching-related

The greatest challenge to a CBCC teacher is perhaps to spend the 90 minutes of class time in a computer room with a bunch of students who generally show little enthusiasm for learning to write. Years of exposure to dry grammar rules while at school and the belief that oral 'communicative' skills are more important seem to leave most Japanese freshers with hardly any interest in a writing course. It is an uphill task for a teacher to find ways of making such a course attractive, interesting, and above all beneficial.

Fortunately, the computer classroom offers more options than a conventional classroom to make the class enjoyable. Since the Internet resources have become nearly inexhaustible, inspired teachers can resort to a variety of techniques to spend the class time. Above all, *Moodle* gives an excellent opportunity for students to write casually, correct each other, revise, and improve their writing. Without elaborating, here let me suggest some hints.

#### With the Teacher or a Student as the Leader

- Do the conventional (All activities done in a conventional classroom, including teaching from the textbook, lecturing,

and paper-based group discussions, can be done in a computer classroom.)

- Correct the most common errors (As the essays of all students are in *Moodle* forums, real-life erroneous constructions can be shown to all. Privacy concerns may be addressed by extracting only the questionable constructions and creating a separate file.)
- Exploit online tools to help students avoid errors or improve their style (Any of the targeted quizzes, online lessons related to the textbook, or any other online resource can be presented.)
- Show and tell/teach (A variety of audio lessons, *PowerPoint* presentations, Internet movies, and DVD movies that actually teach writing can be used either as lessons, or as stimuli to inspire ideas.)
- Use multiple references (A computer makes it possible to consult simultaneously different references, e.g., a dictionary, a phrase book, a concordance, a thesaurus, a grammar reference, a style reference, and so on. *Even for this single merit alone, composition classes must be held in a computer classroom*.)

**Peers among themselves, with Teacher Guidance**

- Read a peer's work and comment (As *Moodle* contains the essays of every student, any pair of students can be brought together to read each other's work, comment, and offer suggestions to improve.)
- Discuss corrections with a peer (A teacher's cryptic remarks or the reasons for corrections can be discussed with a peer for better understanding.)
- Watch/listen and brainstorm/discuss for ideas (After watching an audio/video clip or observing an image, students can help each other to understand the clip, observe more keenly, develop ideas, etc.)
- Solve tasks (e.g., a quiz) with others (Collaborative tasks that can be solved in pairs may be given, the collaboration being techno-based or face-to-face.)

- Watch/listen and learn (Escape for a tired teacher! Introduce to students any of the excellent substitute teachers online; then the students have only to follow the online teacher! To be used sparingly!)
- Play EFL games to increase vocabulary & knowledge of grammar (Escape for tired students! Only imagination is the limit! There are many computer games for learners to acquire a variety of skills related to writing (cf. Reinders, 2009; *Study Stack*). To be used sparingly!)

Readers may find a short list of resources at the end of this article to help them start off.

## 4 Student Reactions to CBCC

Ever since 1988, when I began teaching composition in a computer classroom, I have asked students to express their reactions to the class. The PC was not at all a popular machine in Japan until after *Windows 95*, and students rarely showed enthusiasm for learning with computers until the late 1990s. Many students were then disinterested in learning to write essays on a PC, and some even detested the experience—though the daring and earnest ones were extremely grateful. The dislike was augmented by the command line interface (DOS and UNIX), which required students to memorize many commands. Moreover, most Japanese families then had only a dedicated word-processor (not a PC with Internet connection), and most teachers were satisfied with handwritten submissions.

Since the late 1990s, when Web browsing became more common, however, students have shown great enthusiasm in learning to write with technology. In recent years, they have come to appreciate technology and even call the computer room a better environment than a regular classroom for learning to write. The favorable reaction of students has remained steady for the past several years. The summary below is based on recent end-of-the-course surveys.

### 4.1 Change of Perception

Several students reported that they began the course with great apprehension and diffidence. Some had never received any computer education; some had never written more than a couple of sentences in *MS Word*; many had never written an essay of 600 words; and no one had ever heard of *Moodle*. As no other fresher class had composition in a computer room and few other fresher classes required six 600-word essays per semester, they also felt they were 'unfairly' treated.

The same students, however, confessed that by the end of the course their perception of the course had completely changed and that they felt extremely happy about having taken the course. Among the reasons for their satisfaction, they listed their mastery of typing skills, their acquisition of numerous word-processing skills, their improvement in standardized test scores (e.g., in TOEFL), their tendency to make fewer grammar mistakes, their progress in proofreading skills, and their increased confidence in facing essay tasks. Several students also pointed out that, besides being enjoyable, the computer room was far more suited to learn writing than a conventional classroom.

### 4.2 Benefits of Technology

Students attributed their success in mastering various skills and tips to the fact that the classes were conducted in a computer room, where they were required to use several software programs in every class. Among the specific skills they listed were: proper formatting, editing, and printing of essays; moving texts and images across platforms; pretty printing; using headers, footers, and drop caps; being able to create block-quotes and bibliographical entries; and using numerous shortcut keys. They observed that technology definitely helped them write better and faster since they could write a random first draft, rearrange words and sentences, correct mistakes, make outlines, send copies to others, have their essays corrected by peers, and consult dictionaries, phrase books, concordances, and thesaurus.

Thanks to technology, the students reported, communication among classmates and the teacher was much better than in a conventional classroom. As *Moodle* contained detailed announcements, class summaries, lesson plans, task lists, memos, deadlines, etc., they could always make sure what was expected of them by opening the class homepage from anywhere at any time. They could submit much of the homework from home at their own convenience. They could use *Moodle* forums to post and answer queries, to ask for clarifications from peers or the teacher, and even to offer suggestions or think aloud. In brief, students implicitly favored 'learner autonomy,' for what they found most attractive about the CBCC was the autonomy it gave them, for example, to pick and choose from a variety of learning materials and to submit tasks at their own pace from different locations (cf. Mynard, 2007b).

Another major benefit of CBCC that students pointed out was that they came to know a vast array of online resources, which helped them not only in the composition class but also in other classes (e.g., *English Skills, American Studies*, and *British Studies*). Most students noted the advantages of *The English WebLab, tasktemp.doc*, and numerous online movies, podcasts, and RSS feeds introduced in class (e.g., *Adora, Jennifer, BBC Learning*). Some felt proud that they were able to help students of other classes who did not have the benefit of a computer classroom, by teaching them shortcuts and showing them beneficial online resources they had come to know in the writing class. A couple of students also said that the resources helped them in doing their part-time job of teaching English, e.g., at a cram school or as a private tutor.

### 4.3 Peer Support and Stimulation

The most appreciated contribution of CBCC was that it offered a platform for students to get peer support and stimulation, especially through *Moodle* activities. Many students mentioned that they could not have improved their writing as well as technology skills without

the peer interaction that was routine in class. Students confessed that peer interaction helped them not only to learn from others, e.g., new words, phrases, collocations, idioms, and points of grammar, but also to challenge themselves and to engage in a healthy competition with others.

The class had offered students the following interactional opportunities: (1) interviewing and collaborating with peers face-to-face in order to complete a task; (2) brainstorming and developing ideas with peers either face-to-face or electronically; (3) reading the writings of peers, especially in *Moodle* Forums; (4) proofreading and evaluating the writings of peers, synchronously or asynchronously; and (5) seeing the scores of peers (without name-identification) and realizing how one fares in comparison with peers.

As each task was initially posted in a *Moodle* forum, everyone had a chance to read the works of others, and as everyone was expected to comment on at least one other person's composition, many spontaneously developed the habit of proofreading and correcting. Students pointed out that this reading and correcting of others' writing challenged, inspired, and taught them. Several diffident students got encouraged by seeing others' mistakes, and several complacent students realized their weaknesses by seeing better essays. Similar sentiments were expressed regarding the public display of all scores, as students acknowledged that seeing the lower scores of others helped them build up confidence, seeing the similar scores of others helped them not to give up, and seeing the higher scores of others helped them strive to emulate them.

### 4.4 Areas of Discontent

Since the year 2000, there has been hardly any serious complaint from students directly concerning CBCC. Overall, students had nothing but praise for CBCC, and the few expressions of discontent usually concerned peripheral issues like the following:

- *Workload too heavy*. Almost every year, some students tend to argue that their workload is heavier than that of their peers in other classes. Unfortunately, little can be done about this disparity since Sophia University, perhaps like many other universities, does not prescribe a fixed syllabus or uniform workload for all freshers. Teachers are free to do pretty much whatever they want, and so it is impossible for individual teachers to make the workload uniform. Discontented students, however, are usually convinced by the end of the course that their workload was not excessive in absolute terms—for they observe many of their own classmates finding the workload adequate. They also come to realize that without the heavy workload they could not have learned so much.
- *Textbook too weighty*. As the reference book assigned as a textbook tends to be a hard-cover edition of more than 500 pages, students are right to observe that it is too weighty and cumbersome. One way of resolving this issue is to require that students bring the textbook to class only occasionally, and specify in Moodle the lessons or pages that will be dealt with in class. As the Internet offers many resources equivalent to the contents of the textbook, teachers may use them as often as possible.
- *Peer interaction too difficult*. Occasionally there are students who feel embarrassed to display their writings for other classmates to read and feel incompetent to comment on the writings of others. This is a difficult problem to address as it involves the attitude and temperament of individual students. A teacher has to bring in his counseling and parenting skills in such cases, adopting appropriate strategies to alleviate the anxieties of concerned students. At the same time, she has to challenge students to make their writings public since the goal of a university-level composition course is not simply to make private journal entries—for their own or for their teacher's eyes only—but to communicate with a real audience. It is also good to advise students that the purpose of peer corrections

is more to help them develop proofreading skills than to make them play the role of a teacher, finding and correcting errors.

## 5 Conclusion

Twenty-two years ago, Professor Andrea W. Herrmann (1987, 12-13) observed:

> Educators can choose to view change as either threatening or liberating. Education's successful leap into the technological age requires much more than the purchase of greater numbers of computers. Significant modifications must be made in the way things have always been done. As educators we cannot refuse to address the emerging problems, unless, of course, we do not intend to meet the challenges of this era. For without the informed and collaborative efforts of educators, it is unlikely that the conditions necessary for profound, rather than cosmetic, change in the use of writing with computers will occur in our schools.

Even though personal computers appeared on the market in the early 1980s, most language teachers in Japan started using them only in the late 1990s. Likewise, there was a delay of about 10 years from the time the Internet, including email, was available in most campuses to the time a sizeable number of teachers actually started using them (cf. Britto, 1996). Technology seems hard for teachers to catch up with, and it is no wonder that many simply ignore it and continue teaching as they used to. Even those who dare use technology seem to prefer teaching oral skills to teaching writing skills since the latter calls for more demanding work and more technological knowhow. Teachers may be content to teach without technology and students may benefit by such classes, but many learning opportunities are wasted when

students are deprived of a chance to exploit the technological treasures already available in campuses.

If they do not want their department or faculty to be left behind in a pre-digital age, curriculum planners must proactively encourage courses that integrate technology in classrooms, and hiring committees must look out for teachers competent enough to harness technology for academic growth. The Faculty Development Committee may also do well to offer workshops and tutorials to bring faculty members up to date on the use of technology (cf. Atkins, 2005; Chang, 2004). A Luddite antipathy—or even apathy—to technology can only be a drag on academic progress.

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## A Sample of Online Resources

As there are many Internet search tools these days, it may seem relatively easy to find useful resources. Unfortunately, the challenge is to wade through the plethora of search results, weed out the worthless ones, and identify the useful ones. Granting that the ideal is for each teacher to compile her own favorite list, I offer the following mainly as suggestions and as ad-hoc resources for immediate needs.

### General resources

*(All online resources were retrieved on September 12, 2009)*

Britto, F. *The English WebLab*. http://pweb.cc.sophia.ac.jp/britto/weblab-e.html

Britto, F. *TaskTemp.doc*. http://pweb.cc.sophia.ac.jp/britto/dnlbritto/tasktemp.doc

Byrne, R. *Free Technology for Teachers*. http://www.freetech4teachers.com/2009/09/reading-levels-in-google-docs.html

Criterion® *Online Writing Evaluation*. http://criterion28.ets.org/cwe/

Darling, C. Guide *to Grammar and Writing*. http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm

ETS (Educational Testing Service). *Writing Topics*. http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/989563wt.pdf

*Grammar Ninja*. http://www.kwarp.com/portfolio/grammarninja.html

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. *Great Source iWrite*. http://www.greatsource.com/iwrite/students/s_grammar_hndbk.html

Pearson Online. *Essay Scorer*. http://pearsonkt.com/phdemo/

Pixlin, J. *Writing Prompts on Twitter*. http://twitter.com/writing_prompts

*The OWL at Purdue*. http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

## Games, Podcasts, RSS feeds, and Video Clips

Adora (2009a). *Amazing child genius!* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lowYW2HlMZc

Adora (2009b) *Nine-year-old Adora Svitak—Talks about her story writing*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYWb0npz1aQ

*BBC Learning English*. http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/index.xml

*CNN News Update*. http://rss.cnn.com/services/podcasting/newscast/rss.xml

*CNN Student News*. http://rss.cnn.com/services/podcasting/studentnews/rss.xml

*English as a Second Language Podcast*. http://feeds.feedburner.com/EnglishAsASecondLanguagePodcast

*English with Jennifer*. http://www.youtube.com/user/JenniferESL

*Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing*. http://www.qdnow.com/grammar.xml

*MyLanguageExchange.Com*. http://www.mylanguageexchange.com/Hangman.asp

*Study Stack*. http://www.studystack.com/EnglishVerbs

*Talk About English*. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/worldservice/tae/rss.xml

*Technology and Writing Centers*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n00HkDcXQWA

*Tir Nan Og*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNF6zH3pjDU

*The Monk and the Fish*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y37cWnjdhdM

*Vancome Lady at the Makeup Counter*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVEftcbAUUc

*VOA [Voice of America] News Special English*. http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/words_and_their_stories.cfm

*Writing Lessons: How to Teach Writing by Using a Computer*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVDk9vhOjFA

*Writing With Technology*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywWrV420WCU

## Typing Tutors

*Typing Lessons Online... Improve your typing*. http://www.powertyping.com/qwerty/lessonsq.html

*Sense-Lang Typing Tutor*. http://www.sense-lang.org/index.html

*Typer Shark*. http://games.yahoo.com/console/tps

(See more tutors listed in *The English WebLab*, under the section *Resources*)

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