WRITING TOOLS FOR ESP

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Abstract. This paper is a retrospective narrative presentation of novel technology-enhanced writing (TE-W) projects I employed successfully with ESP students: blog writing in the case of Medical and Business English, creation of digital leaflets and booklets in the case of Tourism and Business English. Writing activities explored the affordances of different asynchronous writing tools such as: Littlebird Tales, Smore, and StoryJumper, embedded in Blogger and Edmodo platforms. Writing effectiveness is analysed in terms of revision and collaboration on tasks as well as multimedia diversity and communicativeness. Convenience of access anytime from anywhere, feedback transparency and peer learning, but also increased engagement, task attractivenes, and motivation were some of the identified strong points of the employed writing tools in ESP.

Keywords: writing tools, blog writing, ESP, Edmodo, New Technologies

Premises of Using Writing Tools in ESP

In-class learning has been the established, classical mode for ESP in Romanian higher education in terms of oral communication for reasons of immediacy, feedback in real time, and social interaction, with limited blended learning approaches, if any. In terms of ESP writing, however, this environment may prove to be less fluid both as dynamics (writing is a process involving subsequent editions) and time needed for carrying out a pre-established writing task. Moreover, unlike speaking, writing is a personal activity that requires a calm and peaceful environment besides longer time to be produced due to coherence and cohesion requirements, spelling and grammar accuracy, etc. (Weaver, 2008).

New Technologies provide original avenues for motivating, authentic, field-relevant and student-centred writing, while impacting positively on the course participantsř engagement, production and autonomous learning. Since writing is one of the most difficult to form skills, I considered that by offering students a chance to use writing tools which facilitate access to resources and documentation and allow multiple asynchronus and continuous feedback, it is more likely that their writing outcomes will improve.

This retrospective analysis will consider the writing projects I developed in the sub-fields of medicine, economics and tourism in an attempt to answer the question ŗHow is technology-enhanced ESP writing significant?ţ Writing was taught to students from these fields in a hybrid/blended learning formula: class activities enhanced by asynchronous writing and speaking in order to allow students the freedom of contributing anytime from anywhere and to motivate them to spend more time learning independently. More specifically, I included in this survey the outcomes of three ESP writing projects within the more complex technology-enhanced learning and evaluation design on different platforms and tools (blog, *Littlebirdtales, Storyjumper*) or Learning Management systems (Edmodo). ESP writing effectiveness was assessed according to the variables of: A) revision and collaboration, B) multimedia variety, and C) communicativeness.

Revision and collaboration

In this part I analyse blog writing to which first and second year students of Economics and Tourism of Dimitrie Cantemir University and students of Dental Medicine of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Tirgu Mures were exposed as complementary optional practice geared to the studentsř learning styles, proficiency level in multi-level groups, and specific writing needs for business, tourism and medicine. Leaflets, argumentative essays, abstracts, and advertising materials were the basic genres through which students practised the field-specific sub-skills of hypothesizing, debating, concluding, and bringing arguments. The empiric results herein are based on examination of written productions in terms of quantity and quality, but also on the studentsř reflections relative to motivation, engagement and confidence in asynchronous writing.

I used blog-writing for one semester with students of Dental medicine to augment and optimize their writing quality, following weak results obtained in the mid-term test. Students had performed rather poorly on writing tasks of average complexity, choosing inappropriate vocabulary and structures, and they misintegrated ideas. The Medical English writing project developed with UMF students demonstrated that a continuum of asynchronous individualized feedback on writing improved the studentsř writing competence.

Starting from the assumption that the cornerstone of Medical English is unfamiliar lexis, the Medical English Blog allowed dental medicine students to consolidate their vocabulary by writing on relevant topics that included dental procedures, general health and dental issues, preventive dentistry, childrenřs fear of the dentist, mouth screening checks, dental health, and nutrition. Besides recycling specific dental medicine vocabulary, the major objective of blog writing was accuracy of written communication on authentic topics and compliance with higher order writing elements such as paragraph structure, coherence, cohesion, turn-taking, politeness issues. Language optimisation in terms of dealing with specific medical genres (e.g. case studies, abstracts, patient information leaflets) was also envisaged. Blog writing (posting and commenting) subscribed to the process approach to writing and assumed that the cycle: [frequent writing Ŕ feedback Ŕ re-editing/re-posting] would conduct to better writing (Rahman, 2011).

As part of the personalised feedback on writing, I either encouraged self-correction in cases of minor errors or directly pointed to them and asked students to find a solution in case of reiterated ones. The more challenging a topic, the easier it was for students to contribute original ideas. In terms of writing accuracy, it seemed that students were willing to correct their peersř mistakes and their own only after referring to an online resource, which is desirable for developing life-learning autonomous writing skills. However, the time gap between writing a comment, offering feedback, and initiating correction remained a drawback for asynchronous writing, a significant amount of issues remaining unsolved since students did not return to the blog. This inconvenience could represent a negative influence from the long experience of paper writing activities students had, where corrective feedback from the teacher was singular, final and evaluative, failing to lead to a continuous editing/drafting cycle.

The most frequent writing mistakes students made pertained to negative transfer in translations (from Romanian and Hungarian, e.g. lack of sentence subject, pluralizing uncountable nouns), erroneous spelling of homophones (carries/caries), if-clauses and word order (adverb of frequency preceding the direct object). However, the fact that students continued to make mistakes and typos in blog writing can be inconsistent for different reasons, inculding time pressure, rather than just ignorance and dependence on teacher correction.

Previous research considers that blog writing is effective in enhancing studentsř writing quality and attitude (Fageeh, 2011; Nepomuceno, 2011). My Medical English Blog writing results replicate these findings:

- whilst in the case of class writing feedback was linear (teacher-student only) and therefore highly-personal (nothing to be learnt for peers), in blog-writing, feedback and revision were ongoing, transparent, and often participative: students were pointed towards troublesome areas that encouraged self-correction.
- being transparent, blog-writing feedback contributed to peer-learning: students could see models of good writing, self-correction and fair treatment (Pop, 2014).

When commenting on a blog, as in real life conversation, students responded to the blog author but also to other contributors. These aspects of collaboration and cooperation were evident in the blog-writing project as the following three-layered instance of blog exchange demonstrates: (teacher-student1-{teacher-student2-student3)}.

Blog-writing increased the studentsř motivation to write. Motivation was measured as number of contributions/participant: the 25 participating students produced 772 comments and they became more engaged in drafting. Unlike discrete synchronous writing activities, blog writing was a continuum, students contributing whenever they had some spare time. By responding to teacher and peer feedback, blog writing raised the studentsř awareness of the necessity of multiple editing and revisions for achieving academic success.

Blog writing results are also significant in that they demonstrate the participantsř ability to articulate original and logically elaborated points of view on the proposed topics while eliminating the possibility to produce copy-pasted comments due to interactivity and plagiarism detection when writing in the public space. Students took greater responsibility for their learning and were able to self-correct when their attention was explicitly drawn to occasional errors. This also instilled their awareness about the difficulty of obtaining adequate writing quality unless writing is approached as a process that involves refinement through successive drafting and editing.

Multimedia variety

This section brings evidence about writing activities based on digital pesentation leaflets for Business English and digital books for Tourism English writing. Unlike pencil and paper writing relying solely on the studentsř imagination and knowledge, digital writing engages students in a variety of linguistic experiences (image, video, music) that extend and amplify their exposure, task attractiveness, and informativeness. Presentation leaflets represent a basic marketing and advertising genre that business and tourism students should master. In order to assist them with writing digital presentation leaflets in terms of structure and accuracy improvement, I used *the genre approach to writing*. First, students were exposed to a leaflet model to detect specialised language, configurations of the text, (Badger and White, 2000), then deconstructed and eventually re-constructed personal leaflets on specified topics. Knowledge of formal and functional leaflet properties, i.e. text structure, its communicative goals and the linguistic features assisted, especially lower-intermediate students, in writing advertising leaflets. The selected tool was *Smore* (https://www.smore.com/nnc8), which transposes leaflet-writing into the 21st century by including visual images, music, and links to other relevant information.All participating students were able to produce good quality leaflets in terms of structure and advertising requirements. Students also received asynchronous feedback from the teacher and comments from peers, which increased their confidence and pride of being published writers.

Digital books in English for Tourism. First and second year Tourism students used the Edmodo virtual learning platform as a framework for extension of their time spent in the

target language environment, augmented asynchronous communication, facile content delivery, as well as formative and summative assessment. As in the case of business students, I used the genre approach to writing and targeted the basic formal and functional properties of: advertising leaflets, tourism reports, and descriptions (Pop, 2013). *Littlebirdtale* was one of the tools used for a mixed speaking and creative writing activity in advertising the studentsř native town highlights. At linguistic level, apart from accuracy, the genre-based approach translated into employment of commendatory language and other advertising techniques such as repetitions, vague language, and invitations. TE-W with *Littlebirdtale* allowed concomitance of writing concisely around naive hand-drawing or professional picture-based presentations and the studentsř own voice over, in a complex multimedia experience which made writing more realistic and definitely more captivating.

Another example of writing activity refers to the final assignment for the evaluation portfolio which required students to give feed-back on their year-round learning and communication with Edmodo under the form of a digital book entitled *Creative reflections with StoryJumper*. About 52.8% (N=37) of the students participated in the project and contributed in different proportions to the various assignments. In their reflections, students appreciated Edmodo versatility and ability to re-edit after examining models by peers made public.

Communicativeness in blog writing

Communicativeness is a characteristic of blog writing in that, as final evaluation interviews demonstrated, students considered writing on the blog a means of expression and debate rather than a writing tool, which is likewise indicative of the perceived task authenticity. This trait of blog writing could be defined by a pronounced orality, i.e. shorter and more frequent writing pieces, sometimes a simple sentence, use of abbreviations (the type of replies we use in conversation). Economics students (N=150 students) voluntarily engaged in the blog-writing project that ran for four years (2010-2014), including different generations of contributors (http://www.English4usdc10.blogspot.com).

Trying to find a common denominator to working in the public space through a class blog, I would include the following quantifiable benefits in terms of writing:

1. significantly increased amount of writing input: if writing is fun, engaging, and meaningful, students become rich content creators. Students wrote more than they could have possibly written in real time.
2. writing was task-based with focus on communication and content (debate, description, argument) rather than on form.
3. studentsř attitude towards blog-writing was superior to that of classical writing, most activities being perceived as topical and professionally-relevant.

Conclusion

To conclude, the models of TE-W that I experimented in the fields of medicine, business, and tourism English accommodated more active writing through exploitation of digital tools that transform a linear, often times monotonous and individual activity into a fluid, motivating and productive writing-as-process exercise. Quantitatively, the amount of asynchronous ESP writing, time and involvement would have been impossible to obtain in an exclusively classical approach. Likewise, individual but also transparent feedback and awareness of the importance of successive editing and drafting were TE-W added values, hardly possible to accomplish in a more traditional format. By writing in the public space, students learnt through access to models by peers and extended exposure to the language. All

in all, students improved significantly at both macro and micro-level, revising and improving their sentences, paragraphs, reports, and leaflets, while writing on field-relevant topics.

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