A study of using computers to foster students’ self-expression in English

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Abstract

This paper investigates how computers can be used to enhance students’ English skills and how they can be helpful to express themselves and improve their learning experiences at college level. Practical ways to use computers for producing multimedia programs and for a writing class are described. The teacher’s roles in a computer class are also considered. The findings suggest that considerable improvements in the students learning could be gained by using these methods. The paper concludes that perhaps the greatest benefit from using computers may be in supporting more flexible methods of learning.

1. Introduction

It has been repeatedly told that language learning at college level is not effective and efficient enough to meet the students’ needs. One of the reasons is the way students are taught things in the classroom. For example, the problem of large lectures is that students see themselves on a production line where academic staff deliver lectures to a large passive audience. A large number of the students expect and want passive learning. This is an enduring and persistent mind set that our students seem to share. It has been recognized by most university teachers that new teaching strategies are needed.

Using computers in a classroom can be one of the solutions for this problem. Recent years have seen an increasing use of computers in the secondary and higher education classrooms. As computers become more widely used in schools, it is clear that they have potential.

Recent development of computer technology has enabled us to handle texts, graphics (still or motion) and sounds on the same platform. Computer assisted language learning arose with this technology, in which programs have been made to teach students grammar, listening, writing, and so on.

However, in this study, students are not taught these skills by computers. Rather computers are used as a tool to express themselves in English. Specifically students made
presentation programs, actually using both English and computers. The main aims are the computer-based activities, collaborative learning and for students to be more in control of their learning. This may sound educationally more sound, especially at college level.

To meet this need, we feel that some college courses should be student centered and activity based. We designed a course where the students author a multimedia product or presentation program using English and where they use computers to express themselves in English. It can be expected that the course which consisted of a mixture of student centered activities, presentations self-monitoring and evaluation, peer assessment plus discussion and feedback can lead to students' active participation in acquiring and expressing themselves in English.

2.0 An example of English class activities using HyperCard to produce "self-introduction stack"

One kind of program for presentation which is called "stack" was produced in English Workshop classes. In producing a "self-introduction stack", each student inputs their identity, likes and dislikes, personal history, pictures, and voices in English into the program. In the process of producing their own stacks, students were encouraged to use English, spoken or written, in a meaningful way, and it was hoped that students' four skills would be developed as they produced their own stacks.

2.1 Developing and creating stacks using English

Students in Kumai's EWS classes (2nd year) formed some groups to work together to work on this multimedia producing project.

In educational terms multimedia can be something students actively do rather than have done for them and can come into its own when they compile their own presentations and projects. It can also allow for an integration of language skills. It offers several advantages over more traditional methods of storing and presenting information. It can be said that the technology can empower students to become more creative, resourceful and productive in their study.

To produce the self-introduction stack, we used Macintosh HyperCard program. Macintosh has user-friendly interface with a pull-down menu and mouse support, easy to use. We used Macintosh computers because we didn't want to spend much time on teaching how to operate the computers. HyperCard is a multimedia authoring software that can incorporate video, sound, and graphics in addition to text. One of the reasons we used this software is that it has this multimedia creating function, and it's easy to use. Another reason is that it comes with every Macintosh computer for free so there is no need to buy the software and moreover the stack made can be run on every Macintosh. (To use the color function, a full set model is needed.)
2.2 Project described

These are the descriptions of the project which our students worked on.

Task: Create a self-introduction stack

Intended Audience: The students themselves, high school students who are interested in coming to Bunkyo, friends and family, contributions to Internet FTP site, campus orientation and information for visitors

Setting: Private Junior College, Department of English and English Literature Students: 2 classes (each class had 16 second year students)

Time frame: Half a semester, meeting twice a week for 90 minutes (approximately 20 classes)

Technological specifications:

Hardware: Macintosh LC 520, LC630 with video capture card, Apple OneScanner, Video Camcorder, 35 mm camera, QuickTake 100

Software: HyperCard 2.2 J, MacWrite II(J), Kid Pix 2.0J, Avid VideoShop 3.0, Adobe PhotoShop 1.5LE

Goals: 1. Students take initiative in designing and creating a multimedia program which shows their identity and experience.
2. Through creating their own stacks by writing and narrating text, or interviewing their native English teachers, the students practice and improve their speaking, writing and presentation skills.
3. Students are motivated to increase both the quality and quantity of their input and output of English.

2.3 The content of the course

The 1994 EWS class was conducted in the following procedure. The academic year 1994-95 is the subject of this article. They were all women. The students made a pair to work together because there were only 8 computers in the room. This was good because the use of computers by a pair of students gave a mutually enhanced learning experience.

The following is a summary of what we actually did in the class.

From the start of the course, the students were introduced to a on hands session where they were taught how to use Macintosh computers by playing some freeware games. Our approach was experimental, rather than descriptive and explanatory.

Class 1: Introduction to the course
- Introduction to the course
- Questionnaire about computer literacy
- Introduction of some shareware stacks and games

Class 2: Introduction to Macintosh computers
- How to use mouse and keyboard
- Demonstration of the use of word processing software

Class 3: Introduction to HyperCard software
Class 4: Using word processing software
   To get used to the word processing software, students practiced writing a letter asking
   for a catalog from shops in the United States and other countries.
Class 5: Start writing their own self-introduction in English on their computer.
Class 6: Continuation of class 5
Class 7: Introduction of some graphic software
   Drawing some pictures on the computer screen.
   e.g. Drawing their partner’s face.
Class 8: Introduction to PhotoShop
   Scanning some pictures through the scanner.
Class 9: Informal discussion in small groups about the subject matter
   Start making their own self-introduction stacks
Class 10 - 14: Continuation of Class 9
   Practicing self-introduction for video recording
   Start taking video clips and taking pictures
Class 15: First presentation and get feedback from other students. Our students were
   encouraged to enhance their abilities through analysis and discussion of their per-
   formance.
Class 16 - 19: Continuation of developing stacks
   In the meantime, teachers helped them check grammar when students were editing
   written text.
Class 20: Presentation of the stacks and evaluation
   At the end, the stacks made by the students were compiled into a large program by the
   teacher. The completed program was shown for evaluation both from the students and
   teachers.

2.3 Some examples of the “self-introduction stack”
   The following are some examples of student-made “self-introduction stack”. As shown,
   almost all the students used pictures and some used QuickTime movies in their stacks. Since
   these stacks have hypertext structures, all you have to do to browse the stacks is click the
   buttons on the computer screen.
Introduction

My name is Makiko Koike. I'm 20 years old. I live alone separate from my family to go to college. I have a dream related with English. I'm going to study abroad next year. I've wanted to do so since I was a junior High School student.

I'll study in Canada. It's my favorite country. I'm looking forward to studying there. And I think next year will be an unforgettable one in my life.

family

There are four members in my family. We live separate now, but when we (brother and me) go back to our house, we often go to a hot spring near our house. I love my family.

My Brother

My brother lives alone in Tokyo to go to college. He is a very kind boy. He is good at sports. He likes basketball. He and I often go shopping. He is a good friend of mine.
**PERSONAL DATA**

**KAORU STORY**

School Life

- Music
- Apartment
- Hometown
- Photograph
- Go to Menu

Music

I like music very much and I have about 90 CDs. But most of the CDs are European music. Especially, I like ROCKABILLY and REGGAE music. My favorite artist are "STRAY CATS" and "ADWAD", "INNER CIRCLE". These music are very comfortable and feel refreshed for me. And there isn't person who like ROCKABILLY much, but please listen it once. Then about a Japanese music, I listen "Mr. Children" recently. My favorite song is "Tomorrow never knows". It's theme song of the TV program. And it's very popular now.

School Life

When I was a freshman, I went to school only on Mon. Tue. Wed. Fri. But when I was senior, I went to school on Mon. to Sat. Usually I become senior, the number of class are fewer. To go to school by bus was very hard because almost buses didn't come in time and very crowded. Sometimes I fall to rest in school this reason.

And in afternoon, I ate lunch at room of 101 with my classmates. I always ate box lunch and Dolang tea. In winter I often "KITSUNE UDON", because it is very reasonable. There were some event of this college, theater-going Shakespeare, Kibiki, Speech Contest, and so on. It was very moving for me because in the usually life, there were no chance to see plays rarely. So I'm glad to join a CS class. I could spend a very great happy time with them.

Travel!

You go to abroad, and you can see yourself. It's very difficult. You must know yourself who can't do anything by difference of language and custom. But to come across yourself like this, it's very valuable. About myself, I want to England last summer. This was my first trip to abroad. Every day was fresh and had a lot of things to learn. I visited some cities in England, and there I learned culture too. I felt like I become a little big when I returned to Japan. A sense of values was changed on my mind and I was interested in England. But there are lot of things what I don't know. So I want to visit to England again. And I hope to visit to other various country, for example Australia and Jamaica like this, and I want to compare with Japan.

My Hometown

My hometown is Tachigi. There are place of interests Museum, Museum in Tachigi. I was born and grew up in Ashikaga-city. This is become modernized city on Tsugunomiya. Ashikaga is located at the south west of Tachigi and near by Sunna and Saitama. History of Ashikaga is very old. And there is "Ashikaga gokoku" that is the oldest site of the school in our country and "Yusumori" in connection with Tawara (1) Ashikaga. It's important culture in Japan now. The evening sun in Ashikaga is very beautiful and great. If you have a chance, you should visit Ashikaga.
2.4 How did the project work?

We believe from our observations of the students directory, via questionnaires, and via written comments, this project had many positive advantages:

1. The majority of students worked hard in understanding the use of software and computers.
2. They worked hard to create their own stacks. This was due to the fact that motivation among students was boosted due to the use of computers in their project.
3. They took more responsibility for their own learning. They set their own objectives and worked at their own pace with the help of the teacher. They also made peer assessments of their work and kept getting feedback from their peers.
4. The informal and frank relationship between students and the teacher led to a more comfortable atmosphere for learning. Here the teacher stopped being the giver of all knowledge. The environment promotes an atmosphere of creating a community of learners.
5. The project helped the students' personal development. They were able to reflect on their identity and experiences.

2.5 Course evaluation from the students

After the class was completed, we conducted surveys concerning how students felt about what they did in this class. 93 percent of the students involved in this project commented that they enjoyed this class even though it was difficult to operate computers. They also said that they were greatly motivated to produce their own stack on the computer. They even said that they “couldn't stop writing English and improving their stacks because it was a lot of fun.” This is a phenomenon which we can't see in our existing courses. We discovered that the students were not only interacting with the computers but they were also engaged in language learning on their own terms.

All thirty-two students in the English Workshop responded in favor of this activity based computer class. During the course of this project, they always used English with a purpose. They tried to communicate their ideas to the audience in an understandable way. When they videotaped their interviews, they wrote what they wanted to say in the video and practiced and practiced in English in order to take good scenes. This helped them a lot to practice speaking in English. They actually used English to communicate. The students always kept their prospective audience in mind so that they were conscious of communicating their ideas to someone else.

The learning value here is best described in their own words. (Some grammatical mistakes are left as they are.)

Student 1. When I began to learn this computer, I didn't know what I do. So I was very uneasy. But now I think that this lesson was good. Because I enjoyed operating computer and I could understand one little by little.
Student 2. I had not used Macintosh before this class began. I felt uneasy about using computer, because I didn't like the Information Processing Class much. But in this class I didn't just hit the keyboard. I drew pictures and wrote in English. I had not thought I could do these things. Gradually my uneasiness went way.

Student 3. This lesson was very difficult to learn about a computer. And we wanted much time to get used to and play with a computer. But we had a good chance. And I made my stack helping with my classmates. I'm so interested in a computer recently that I worked hard. I could make a nice work.

Student 4. I enjoyed studying in this class. But I was worried about the computer first. I could understand about computer. I could study how to explain in English though it was difficult for me to explain in English.

Student 5. I am interested in computers. It is not difficult for me to use computer. I think that I tried very hard. Especially I practiced to speak English to our native teachers because when I interviewed them to take pictures and video.

Student 6. I could enjoy English and computer. It was easy for me to use a computer. But it was hard for me to make English letters. When I was absent a day, my partner worked very hard. I thank her so much. When Rie and I had no class, we came and finished the subject. While we were using a computer, it broke suddenly, and we couldn't put the color we liked. We had some trouble. After a while, it began to run. We were relieved and we continued our work. It happened to us, but it was very fun.

However one of the students commented that this class was “a computer class using English”, rather than “an English class using a computer”. This is because it took more time for them to learn how to operate a computer and also how to use the software than we had expected, so the time they could use for writing and revising their English was limited. Another drawback of the course is that students are likely to be occupied to learn how to operate the computer, rather than to focus on expressing in English using the computer as a tool. This is an inevitable pitfall for such a short course.

However we have to keep trying to avoid this. Some students said that if they had had more time, they could have made better stacks. They went on to suggest that they should spend a year to learn to use the computer and software before they actually produce something with the computer.

3. Ideas for writing and the roles of the teacher in a computer classroom

In a computer classroom the roles of the teacher shifts so that consideration needs to be given as to how to better enable students to develop their overall writing skills in this different environment. Computers make it possible for students to have greater autonomy for their own learning. When students are more involved in their overall learning, assuming more responsibility for it, hopefully, in the long run they will actually learn more. Wright (1987) has defined the major roles of the teacher as the enabling, management function and the instruc-
tional function. These roles are difficult to separate, but from the above findings it would seem that a shift needs to take place in classrooms to more of the teacher as an enabler, so that the conditions in which learning can take place are created. The teacher then works as a resource person, a guide, an organizer and an evaluator.

This shift in roles from the usual teacher centered, instructional role to that of enabler and resource person is consistent with theory and research findings in writing classrooms and in computer classrooms. Computers used in writing classes for the most part have been used to aid in processing text, to move, to delete, in providing spelling checks or even grammar checks, and in aiding the composing process, although there is not yet much software to help in this latter function. The results of a study done by Hartley (1993) indicate that students evaluate using a word processor by saying that "... writing with a word processor is easier, more efficient, more effective, more enjoyable, or some combination of these virtues" (Hartley, pg. 29). He goes on to predict that students using word processors will write more drafts, longer texts and that all will be of better quality. Only time will tell if his predictions are accurate, but word processors will become more and more a part of the teaching of writing skills in second language classes as well as in the first language.

As students gain greater self-directed autonomy in their writing and language skills, the teacher's role will shift to that of planning and enhancing a learning environment for students and teacher alike. Teachers will not be out of a job, but rather will focus upon planning and organizing so that the teacher can act as an active facilitator and resource person during writing class. More and more computer aids would provide students with self-help in the composing process. Teachers need to facilitate students in their usage of such software and in encouraging them to become more in charge of their own writing.

From what this teacher/researcher has learned from working with the students involved in this study, language learning does not come easily and is not a straight forward linear process. Of primary importance teachers are needed to assign a variety of writing tasks that call for different kinds of writing for different purposes and with different levels of formality required. This would mean that students would have to write some pieces with accuracy, using a more formal register. At other times, assignments might be such that students will know in advance that the journal they are writing is for themselves and perhaps only 2 other readers, maybe peers, maybe a teacher, but in either case, this assignment is not for corrective feedback but for communication.

Using a word processor can greatly enhance the ease with which students are able to produce a variety of assignments. Assignments might include personal journals, business letters, use of internet to collect data for a research paper to be written via the word processor, creative writing, e-mail with a pen-pal anywhere in the world; the list depends upon the needs and interests of the students and the creativity of both the teacher and students. The computer aids available to students would make the onerous parts of writing less tedious. A printed piece looks clean and neat and is that much easier for a reader to read.
A second role of a writing teacher in such a classroom would be to read the students' pieces. At times, the teacher might be reading only for content without making comments on the accuracy, but then the teacher might enter into a real "conversation" with the student about that content. The teacher's reply, also via word processor, would provide the student with a model of language with appropriate use of formality. By concentrating upon contents, a student can learn where a reader gets into trouble with a particular message and work to make corrections in order that the intended meaning will be understood. That then, becomes another role of the teacher and other readers as well--to point out clearly and directly which lines are troublesome to understand. Also a teacher can comment upon the style or form of the piece, indicating appropriateness and level of formality. As students read such comments, they might gain greater mastery of the language, as the teacher's feedback serves as a model for formality and correctness.

The teacher can also comment upon the accuracy of language used when that is appropriate to the task. It does not have to be the automatic first response to a piece of writing, but when the piece is for a formal purpose, accuracy is required, and students can learn to aim towards it. This would encourage more drafts and final pieces of a higher quality.

Another role of the teacher in a writing classroom which uses computers could be to use the computers as sources for models of good writing. Students will be reading a variety of messages on their computer screens--some terse and business-like, some in very academic language, some creative in form and content. The teacher then might set tasks using these models. For example, a teacher might assign a class to order a product they find via internet. Or a teacher might be interested in creative writing and asks for manuscripts via internet. Students could read on their screens or print out some stories and then work on the word processor to write either a new beginning or a new ending for that short story. If students are not that advanced, a model might be used to have students underline on their computer screens all of the verbs in the past tense used in the story, or all of the transition words, or all of the pronouns. The possibilities are many and can be decided by constantly thinking about the needs and purposes of the students and the course.

The teacher's role as instructor will continue as a necessity, for students will most likely have many questions which they cannot answer for themselves, not only about the language they are using, but also about the contents of what information they are reading on their computer screens. Plus, students will need instruction as to how to use their computers and the software required. Hopefully, this latter role will not take up too much class time, but as this study indicates, students need time and help to become accustomed to using a computer for expressing themselves in English. Time is also necessary for students to become used to working more independently so as to take on more responsibility for their own learning.

4. Conclusion

This paper has described an application of multimedia designed to be used as a tool for
self-expression in English. As we have seen so far, Multimedia which can deliver video, audio, written text, graphics and the integration of these media may prove to be a useful tool for motivating learners to express oneself in a foreign language and for helping them to practice and integrate language skills. It is for further research to investigate how effective this project can be.

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References