

Teaching ESOL Using Word Processing: A Communicative Approach

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We found that while learners were mastering the basics of word processing, using computers helped them in many aspects of language development. Despite the range in our students' language abilities, common principles emerged in the value of computers to their education.

We began to integrate technology into ESOL when Steve taught an intermediate ESOL class in 1996 in Roxbury, MA. The majority of participants came from Latin America or Cape Verde, and had varied educational backgrounds and levels of computer experience. Most had attended high school in their country; a few, although more advanced in their oral English, had had very little or no formal schooling.

Steve realized that the students needed to become somewhat proficient in introductory computing skills before they could utilize educational software, navigate the Internet, or do any basic word processing.

At first, Steve saw his role as computer instructor: teaching computer basics without integrating much, if any, language learning. Students initially were very excited about being introduced to language learning software, but the enthusiasm soon diminished markedly. In a survey, the students responded that they felt that computers were interesting and helped in their practice of vocabulary and grammar. Yet, most said their ultimate goal was to speak English, and the more they went to the computer lab, the less opportunity they had to practice conversation.

Pair Approach

Steve reduced the time spent in the computer lab, but wanted to take advantage of the technology. Students had already been sharing computers. If they continued to share computers, they could work on a language activity for pairs that he would have normally used in the classroom. They could achieve their goal of interacting with each other rather than focusing on the technology.

One of Steve's first pair-approach activities involved a time-tested ESOL sentence-sequencing activity called a strip story. As used in the regular classroom, the teacher writes a brief story, putting each sentence on a separate line. The story is then cut into strips of paper, with one sentence on each strip. Next, the teacher puts students into groups and gives each group a complete set of the scrambled strips. Learners collaborate in creating a coherent story: they work on the skill of sentence sequencing while also practicing speaking.

Steve saw how learners could use the word processing program's cut and paste function to reorder the sentences. He developed a lesson plan for the sentence-sequencing activity.

Sentence Sequencing using Cut and Paste

Language Objectives: Reading, sentence sequencing, discussion.

Computer Prerequisite: Click to open documents on desktop, line return, highlight.

Preparation: Type at least five sentences, one sentence per line, into a word processi

naming it *check*. (This can be a story, a recipe, directions, or a list of historical events or area of interest that the class is already prepared to read about.) Then reorder it and *scrambled*, saving both documents on a disk. Load both documents onto the desktop student's computer. Prepare an additional "short list" of words or sentences to use in your demonstration of cut and paste. Bring paper, scissors and paste.

Activity:

- Introduce the vocabulary and concepts of Cut and Paste using real items and scissors and paste.
- Review prerequisite knowledge such as highlighting/selecting text as well as the function of the reading.
- On the computer, demonstrate how to Cut and Paste using your "short list" of words or sentences.
- In groups of two or more, students open the file named *scrambled*.
- After reading, students discuss the appropriate order of the sentences and use the Cut and Paste function to reorder them.
- When each group is finished, students discuss with the whole class the order they chose and why. At this point they can check the original document (the document named *check*). As a follow-up project and for those that finish early, have each student create his or her own paragraph, reorder it, and have the class put it in an appropriate sequence.

Our Observations

Diana began to use this approach with her intermediate ESOL students at the Jamaica Plain Community Centers' Adult Learning Program. When less experienced computer users were paired with more experienced, they could listen to the more advanced learner give instructions while applying them on the computer. The more advanced computer users could use English to communicate what they knew, practicing commands and bringing computer terminology into their working vocabulary. Students' incorporation of new vocabulary was evident in their improved ability to comprehend and follow instructions.

As learners worked together on the language aspect of the activity, they were also practicing grammar, vocabulary, and other communication skills. Students' overall fluency rose as they collaborated on group projects. In both of our classes, students' comfort and interest in working with computers grew. Learners' independent initiatives in the lab indicated their growth in confidence.

However, there are disadvantages to using word processing in a project. Students unskilled in typing are often hampered in their efforts to write their ideas down freely. Limited experience with keyboarding and with using word processing functions also can lead to frustration when learners attempt to make changes to their work.

Developing a Curriculum

As we worked with our classes, we noticed that the students' overall knowledge of computing had a Swiss cheese quality to it: strong abilities and knowledge coexisted with surprising gaps. We had been using a predominantly constructivist approach to technology, in which the learners constructed knowledge by

assimilating new experiences. The class decided on a theme, we introduced the computer skill necessary for a particular lesson, and then learners worked on discrete tasks, group activities, and writing projects. We had not considered the sequence of the computer skills needed to complete the task. For example, when learners were ready to create a final written product, we needed to teach such skills as how to make capital letters, format and edit documents, and save them. We spent an inordinate amount of class time on teaching the computer rather than language skills.

This showed us the value of incorporating an instructivist approach: sequenced, direct instruction. By teaching word processing skills cumulatively, and in a sequence that made sense, students could fill the holes in their knowledge of word processing. We developed a good idea of what computer skills the students already possessed at a particular time, and knew what computing activities they would be able to handle. We could then take the ESOL curriculum for each of our classes - including appropriate content, grammar, and language competencies - and integrate them with computer topics that ranged from the names of the parts of the computer to the basics of word processing techniques.

Low Literacy Levels

We had initially thought that the integration of computers should await students' mastery of survival-level English. However, as more and more beginning learners asked for computer training, we began to adapt the lessons to their language needs. By adjusting the vocabulary and grammar structures, we found we could accommodate different levels of language proficiencies.

Diana's students comprised a range of abilities in reading, writing, speaking and listening. She used our approach to shape her course, so she adapted the book we had written - *Learning Computers, Speaking English: Cooperative Activities for Learning English and Basic Word Processing* (Quann & Satin, 2000) - for the language needs of very low level learners. She gave some thought to lessons that incorporated more basic language skills.

Diana learned that learners often confuse several similar-sounding letters: I, E, and Y; and C, S, and Z. In keeping with our idea of fostering communication among students, Diana developed a lesson that helped students learn about single clicking and to differentiate letters at the same time. For another lesson, she used a modified version of the Total Physical Response approach, in which she gave instructions, demonstrating as she spoke, and the students mimicked her actions on their computers.*

When students did not understand what to do, other students who spoke their native language explained the instructions in that language. Diana and her assistant circulated and assisted pairs with computer functions or language when necessary. Students sitting next to each other leaned over to see their partners' screen to read the name of the letter while the student sitting at the computer repeated the name and clicked on the folder. After trying this lesson out in three computer courses, Diana saw that it helped students learn to control the mouse better. Students said that they appreciated learning to discriminate the names of the letters and could communicate using them better than they had before. This indicated to us that learners, including those at a low literacy level, value the usefulness of both the language and the computer aspects of a lesson, and are able to succeed using technology in the classroom.

Conclusion

Our experience demonstrated that much of what we consider to be good pedagogic practice in the regular classroom can be adapted to the teaching of ESOL using word processing. We found it helpful to assess the language and computing needs, as well as the interests, of students before beginning. We learned that considerable thought has to go into teaching the progression of skills in computer use and word

processing, and that we must carefully analyze which prerequisite computer skills students must know before they can engage in a new project. Going to the computer lab only once a week demonstrated to us the need to reinforce recently learned computer skills. Working in pairs helped students to feel comfortable in meeting the challenges inherent in learning new computer functions, and provided a wonderful opportunity for language practice. Most significant was our successful use of communicative language-learning activities in the computer lab, through both instructivist and constructivist approaches. It made sense to spend time on communication activities that help in the teaching of a particular computer function before embarking on a project. Doing this, students are not simply taught a computer skill to complete a project, but also learn English in the process.

We believe that the integration of technology into ESOL instruction requires the advancing of learners' computer and language skills simultaneously. This empowers students to achieve both their educational and career goals and helps them feel more a part of our increasingly technologically oriented society.

References

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Summarized by Bella Hanson. This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=301>.

*Check the website for detailed instructions for "Letter Discrimination using Single Click."