

When it Comes to Teaching ESL Writing Online

Mei-ching Ho

Arizona State University

Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2005

This study investigates two ESL writing teachers' perspectives on their teaching with networked computers at the university levels. The goal is two-fold: 1) to better understand how writing teachers perceive their role and what technological and pedagogical constraints might have been encountered, and 2) to explore ways that could promote better future instruction.

As McCormick & McLaughlin (2000) have suggested, both teachers and students have active roles in the co-construction of knowledge within any kind of classroom settings, teachers' beliefs and experience are important sources for us to better understand the complexity of teaching writing with computers. This qualitative study explores the experience of two college-level First-year Composition (FYC) teachers who have taught a hybrid or fully online version of ENG 107/108 classes. ENG 107/108 classes are equivalent to ENG 101/102 and are required courses for students who are non-native speakers of English in many American universities. With an exploratory case study design, I conducted in-depth interviews and observed participants' instructional website on WebCT and Blackboard over a three-month period during the fall of 2004. I specifically explore the following research questions: 1) What are ESL writing teachers' views on their instruction with computers?, 2) What pedagogical and technological problems do ESL writing teachers encounter?, 3) How do ESL writing teachers perceive their role in an online or hybrid class?

Context and Participants

Two teachers, Dave and Lynn (pseudonyms) participated in this study. Dave was a full-time instructor in the English department in a community college in the southwestern part of the US. According to Dave, he was the first teacher who proposed an online version of ENG 107/108 and the only teacher in the entire district that had taught ENG 107 and 108 completely online. WebCT was the networked learning interface Dave used to conduct the courses. Lynn was a non-native English speaking graduate teaching associate in the English department at a large state university in the Southwest. Lynn originally came from Indonesia and was teaching hybrid ENG 107 and 108 classes at the time the study was conducted. The networked interface Lynn used was Blackboard.

Results

Teachers in hybrid and fully online classes have different pedagogical concerns. The lack of synchronous communication and face-to-face interaction is a major shortcoming in online writing classes, which leads to the teacher's uncertainty about the effectiveness of his or her instruction. The ways to check students' learning and progress are limited to giving online reading comprehension quizzes and examining the differences between students' drafts. The pedagogical challenges in hybrid classes, by contrast, relate to the technical glitches that can happen during actual class time in computer-mediated classrooms and some students' low L2 proficiency and computer literacy.

Technological problems usually lead to pedagogical challenges. Although the technological problems, according to Dave and Lynn, are mostly minor ones such as log-in failure and unstable network connections, they can interrupt the flow of the lesson or even make a lesson plan unfeasible. As Lynn suggests, “[one] need[s] to be flexible and not get frustrated easily and just accept that okay- well my plan today is not working because of external factors.”

Dave and Lynn have different attitudes towards teaching ESL writing with networked computers and perceived their role differently. Dave has somewhat reserved attitudes towards the effectiveness of online writing instruction for ESL students. Since Dave and his students never met during the entire period of instruction, Dave felt that it is difficult to keep track of students' learning, except for having them turn in assignments online or post responses by a certain time. In addition, Dave felt that the lack of synchronous interaction or an actual real time conference is a major disadvantage. Although Dave had incentives to conduct synchronous conferences, having students meet online at a certain time seems unrealistic, especially when there are students taking the class from other countries in different time zones. Therefore, Dave perceived himself mainly as “the assignment giver” and “the paper revisioner”, the one who gives written feedback to students' writing.

Lynn, on the other hand, has positive attitudes towards teaching ESL writing with network computers and thinks the courses she taught “was quite effective in getting things

done because on certain days students could do their assignments and submit them from anywhere.” Since Lynn had a chance to sit down with students and assisted them with problems in real time, she felt computer technology is a useful resource that facilitates instructional activities, such as peer review. As a result, Lynn felt like a computer/technical whiz and facilitator, the one who is actively involved in student learning by offering timely assistance. In sum, from the two teachers’ perspectives, a hybrid version of first-year composition seems to be a more effective format than a fully online one although more studies with a larger sample size might be needed to determine this finding.

Discussion

The findings of this case study support McCormick and McLaughlin’s (2000) argument regarding the complexity of teaching ESL writing with networked computers. In either hybrid or online classes, teachers need to deal with students’ L2 issues and computer literacy, which can add up to the challenges they may encounter. As a tool of instruction, networked computers can suddenly become “the object of instruction”, especially when most students have trouble following teachers’ instructions on how to do things on the computer (p. 17).

It has been found that the teachers, in either hybrid or fully online classes, encountered various pedagogical challenges, most of which relate to unexpected technological glitches or the limitation of online instructional settings. These challenges and limitations affect how teachers perceive their roles in the class.

Several suggestions can be made based on the findings. It was found that the teacher in the fully online setting is uncertain about the effectiveness of certain online activities due to the lack of teacher-student face-to-face interaction. To alleviate the problem, teachers can consider setting up online surveys to find out how students think of certain activities and how effective they think they are. Such surveys can help teachers better understand their students’ perceptions of the class and make better instructional changes.

In addition, more methodology classes on how to teach ESL writing online should be offered. Dave mentioned that there was no such class in the graduate level five years ago

when he first started teaching online and there are still none in nearby universities. As many institutions begin to offer online writing classes in ESL, more teachers will be needed. Therefore, there is a need for graduate programs on TESOL to develop such methodology classes so that both in-service and pre-service teachers can learn more about up-to-date theoretical frameworks on ESL online instruction.

There is also a need to develop a community among teachers who are teaching ESL writing in an online or hybrid format. Teaching in isolation seems to be a problem for many who are teaching first-year composition with computers, especially those who are teaching a completely online version. Dave mentioned how difficult it was being the only one teaching a fully online ENG 107/108 class in his institution. Under such a circumstance, it is hard to share ideas and get input from other teachers who have the same experience. If establishing an online teaching community is not possible due to the very small number of such courses in one institution, perhaps an online community or forum can serve as a potential solution. Through such online forums, the teachers who are also teaching fully online ESL writing courses from other institutions or other countries can exchange ideas and share experiences for better online instruction. Finally, more user-friendly software or e-learning interfaces are needed with a specific focus on teaching ESL writing. Many e-learning systems nowadays, such as WebCT, Blackboard, and Angel, are designed to facilitate online teaching in L1 settings in general and are not geared toward ESL composition instruction.

References

- McCormick, D. E., & McLaughlin, S. (2000). The context of ESL computer literacy: Participants, technology, language, and content. *Mosaic*, 7(3), 17-21.