

Chapter 44

Use of Computer Technology for Writing Consultations: Tutors' Opinions and Implications

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the use of computer technology for writing consultations from the tutors' perspective. Tutors' opinions of the hybrid (i.e., a combination of face-to-face and virtual consultations) and the virtual consultation modes in an English writing enhancement service in a university in Hong Kong were collected. Questionnaires were administered to 10 tutors who had used the two consultation modes. It was found that the majority of the tutors were in favor of the two modes, and that they appreciated the benefits of online writing consultations and the text-only consultation platform design. However, they also expressed reservations about replacing the traditional face-to-face writing consultations with computers, because they could not see much increase in tutee-tutor interactions via the two consultation modes. In light of their opinions, recommendations are made to improve the text-only consultation platform and to develop tutors' professional knowledge and pedagogies for online writing consultations.

INTRODUCTION

Computers are a useful and effective teaching and learning tool in education, mainly because they provide convenient information access, effective communication, synchronous and asynchronous learning (Sife, Lwoga, & Sanga, 2007), and increased learning motivation (Son, 2007; Warschauer, 1997). Computer Technology (CT) has been enthusiastically used by language teachers to promote language skills in the classroom.

In spite of computers' versatility and teachers' enthusiastic use of CT in the classroom, research on the use of computers for instructional purposes beyond the classroom, one aspect of which involves writing consultations, is scarce. This chapter focuses on the use of CT for English writing consultations in the context of higher education. First, the author describes the design of an online English writing consulta-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7663-1.ch044

tion system in a university in Hong Kong. Then, she reports on 10 writing tutors' opinions of two online writing consultation modes — namely, the virtual and the hybrid modes — offered via the Internet. With reference to the collected opinions, the author recommends some areas for improvement in the text-only consultation platform, and in the related social and pedagogical skills for online writing tutors.

BACKGROUND

Using CT in Language Teaching and Writing Consultations: Teachers' Attitudes and Potential Problems

With the advent of the computer and the Internet in the 20th century, teachers are increasingly using ICT, including, but not limited to, videos, blogs, message boards, and computer games to optimize teaching and learning in education. In language education, interactive computer software and learning websites have been developed to help second/foreign language (L2) learners to better acquire the target language (Lee, Wong, Lee, & Cheung, 2009). Research studies have reported the success of using computers to learn oral and listening skills (AbuSeileck, 2007; Chiu, Liou, & Yeh, 2007; Romeo, 2008), writing skills (Braine, 2004; Colby & Colby, 2008; Lee et al., 2009, 2013; Yeh, Liou, & Li, 2007), vocabulary (Li, 2010), independent learning skills (Groß & Wolff, 2001), and distance language-learning skills (Comas-Quinn, Arcos, & Mardomingo, 2012). The success of the new instructional technique, to a certain extent, rests on language teachers' beliefs and perceptions (Abdullah, Abidin, Wong, Majid, & Atan, 2006).

Many surveys and interviews on in-service English teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward the use of computers have been conducted (Abdullah et al., 2006; Alshumaimeri, 2008; Krish, 2008; Park & Son, 2009). Findings showed that the majority of English school teachers and university professors in Asia had a positive attitude toward such CT use, and that they felt that computers were a useful teaching tool. There were many online materials, and they were willing to integrate and implement computers into their classrooms. Despite the positive and proactive attitudes, the results also pointed to some potential internal and external barriers, such as lack of time, financial, and administrative support from the school or government (Alshumaimeri, 2008; Lee, 2000; Park & Son, 2009), as well as students' communication preferences and readiness to use online technology for learning (Towndrow, 2004). The wealth of online materials and language teachers' enthusiasm, however, may not guarantee success in the use of CT for writing consultations.

Writing consultation plays a role in L2 learning because writing is a demanding task for L2 learners who are required to use the target language to perform academic communication. Writing consultation is important for L2 learners because they can acquire knowledge about writing and talk about their own problems with tutors (Harris, 1995). A large number of writing consultation studies concentrate on face-to-face tutorials, identifying sequential organization (Lee, 2012), writing tutors' behaviors and tutorial features (Ewert, 2009; Lee, 2000; Thonus, 1999, 2004; Waring, 2005). There has been discussion about the development and operation of online writing labs (Rilling, 2005), the different features of face-to-face and text-only online consultation environment (Fitze, 2006), and online tutor training frameworks (Hewett, 2010; Hubbard & Levy, 2006). Some notable online consultation features reported by various researchers include the asynchronicity of communication, lack of verbal clues and body language in online communication, language tutors' technical knowledge to manage online oral and written communication (Hampel & Stickler, 2005), longer average length of online tutoring sessions and specific

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