Chapter 67
Developing Young EFL Learners' Writing Skill in Wikis' Collaborative Environment

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the impact of corpus-based vocabulary teaching/learning on vocabulary retention among EFL learners with different levels of language proficiency is studied. Four groups of students (two experimental and two control) participated in the study. The experimental groups received vocabulary instruction based on the techniques and procedures of the lexical approach. The control groups were taught with conventional techniques of vocabulary teaching. Vocabulary learning and retention were assessed by two vocabulary tests taken immediately after the treatment and with a 2-month delay respectively. The result showed that the lower proficiency experimental group outperformed other groups in the first vocabulary test, while in the second vocabulary test no significant difference was found between the experimental groups with different language proficiencies.

INTRODUCTION

For many people, writing is the most important skill in learning a foreign language, and many educated people believe it to be the primary representation of language and the cornerstone of all language skills. It is an important tool for students not only in learning but also in communication. As a productive skill, it equips them with the communication and thinking skills to participate effectively in life especially in today's modern world where a person can communicate a variety of messages to a closer or distant reader or readers. Writing is especially important for the instruction of second language learners for three reasons: first, writing well is a vital skill for academic or occupational success, but one that is especially difficult for second language learners to master (National Commission on Writing, 2004 as

cited in Warschauer, 2010). Second, writing can be an effective tool for the development of academic language proficiency as learners more readily explore advanced lexical or syntactic expression in their written work (e.g., Warschauer & Ware, 2006). Third, writing across the curriculum can be invaluable for mastering diverse subject matter. This is because written expression allows learners to raise their awareness of knowledge gaps, abstract problem-specific knowledge into schemas that can be applied to other relevant cases, and elaborate mental representations of knowledge that can be more easily retrieved, while simultaneously allowing teachers to better understand the students' state of knowledge and thinking process and thus adjust instruction as necessary (Warschauer, 2010).

On the other hand, writing is a skill that many teachers find difficult to teach, particularly to young learners, and, as a result of this, a skill many learners do not enjoy. Achieving success in a written task does not lie solely in learning the grammar and lexicon of the language. Learning to write in a foreign language implies much more than acquiring the linguistic tools needed to communicate meaning, and it is, in fact, not an isolated classroom activity, but a social and cultural experience. That is why during the last two decades there has been a surge in the introduction of new techniques for helping students become better writers (Reilly & Reilly, 2005; Rao, 2007). Several accounts of the history of second/foreign language (L2) writing pedagogy and of the discipline itself document the development and growing importance of L2 writing studies as a field of practice and investigation (Matsuda, 2003; Silva & Brice, 2004; cited in Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008).The traditional view in language classes that writing functions primarily to reinforce patterns of oral language use, grammar, and vocabulary is now being supplanted by the notion that writing is a worthwhile enterprise in and of itself (Weigle, 2002). Consequently, there is an active interest today in new theoretical approaches to the study of written texts as well as approaches to the teaching of second or foreign language writing that incorporate current theories and research findings. One of the fields that seems to be able to offer some solutions to the problems associated with the teaching and learning of writing in a foreign language is the field of computer and Internet technologies.

Computers have brought significant changes to almost every aspect of people's lives, including education, and many innovations of the digital revolution continue to have an impact on the way educators endeavor to teach foreign languages. Presently, young foreign language (FL) learners are learning Internet skills and the language of the Internet (or 'Cyber English') just as they learn basic literacy skills. Since being electronically literate means not only acquiring technical skills, but also working with English, teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) are in a position to kill two birds with one stone (Lewis, 2004). At the same time, multimedia possibilities allow them to introduce content in diverse ways and, thus, appeal to the learning styles or 'intelligences' of different young learners.

The evolution of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) over the recent years has attracted many enthusiasts' attention in the field of English language teaching (ELT) to explore the ways in which the computer technology can be exploited to provide likely remedies for many of the problems students encounter during second language learning such as having apprehension or lack of motivation (Khoii & Aghabeig, 2009). Recent innovations like blogs, wikis, and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds may be less familiar but offer powerful opportunities for online collaboration for both language professionals and learners. The fast pace of changes in the communication revolution are also affecting the ways foreign language teachers use the information technology to develop learners' language skills. Given the importance of the writing skill in the process of communication, the difficulties that young learners have with learning this skill, the problems that teachers might encounter in teaching it, and the contributions that the computer technology can make to foreign language learners in learning this skill

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