

Chapter 21

An Innovative Approach to Training International Students in Workplace Written Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT

According to the “Employability Skills for the Future” report (DEST, 2002), communication skills are one of the essential employability skills, which contribute to a productive and harmonious relationship between employees and customers. This chapter discusses an innovative approach to the design, delivery, and evaluation of the “Workplace Written Communication Skills for the Hospitality Industry” program. The delivery of the program is based on blending traditional approaches with incorporating a custom-built e-learning program in teaching how to read e-texts effectively while applying metacognitive reading strategies. The results of the program demonstrate both qualitatively and quantitatively that students improve their written communication skills required for the workplace and their success in the university study, as well as increase their motivation and self-confidence. This, in turn, has implications not only for the development and teaching of the program; it suggests new ways for the overall development of communication skills programs and training international students.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4458-8.ch021

INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been a lot of discussion which raised concerns about the ability of a number of students (including those of non-English speaking background), to cope with the linguistic demands of their study as well as after graduation, when they enter the workforce in Australia (AUQA, 2008a; AUQA, 2008b; Birrell & Healy, 2008; Hawthorne, 2007). Employers want employees to be capable in terms of delivering proficient oral and written communication. In this respect, it becomes vital for educational institutions to teach post-secondary students to perform oral and written communication effectively.

The evolvement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has enabled communication, including oral and written communication, to be performed via the Internet. Therefore, one of the key skills that students in the 21st century need to master is to search and comprehend online information successfully.

Comprehending online information, referred to as e-texts or hypertexts, requires more skills than comprehending conventional written texts, and includes navigation and link selection. Salmeron and his research fellows (2005) argued that “reading comprehension strategies in hypertext can be considered as the decision rule that a reader follows to navigate through the different nodes of a hypertext” (p 174). It is suggested that link selection strategies have impacts on the results of hypertext comprehension, since they influence readers’ ability to link ideas and information in hypertexts (Salmeron, Kintsch & Canas 2006b).

Three types of link selection strategies have been addressed in prior research, known as coherence, interest and default screen positions (Salmeron, Kintsch & Kintsch, 2010). The coherence strategy refers to readers choosing hypertext links that are semantically related to each other. The interest strategy describes the phenomenon that readers choose links that interest them and discriminate links that are less interesting while

reading hypertexts. The default screen position strategy is defined as readers selecting links based on their physical positions on computer screens while reading hypertexts (Salmeron et al., 2010). It is concluded that the coherence strategy improves hypertext reading comprehension regardless of participants’ levels of prior knowledge. This is due to the fact that the coherence strategy allows readers to connect information fragments and build appropriate mental representations of hypertexts. On the other hand, the interest strategy may benefit hypertext readers with high levels of prior knowledge, but hinder the comprehension of those who have low levels of prior knowledge. This happens because the interest strategy may lead readers to discriminate between those links that are of interest and of no interest. However, those less preferred links might be those links that are semantically related to the previous text. In this regard, readers with low prior knowledge may not be able to establish proper mental representations of hypertexts being read (Salmeron, Kintsch & Canas, 2006a).

Furthermore, Protopsaltis (2008) conducted a research study to investigate the influence of the default screen position strategy on comprehending hypertexts. The results revealed that over 85% of participants selected the first link they encountered while reading hypertexts. In other words, the location of links on computer screens has an important influence on hypertext readers’ link selection decisions. Besides, Protopsaltis (2008) also concluded that coherence and personal interest are two factors that have impact on hyperlink selection. While Protopsaltis (2008) emphasised the importance of coherence and personal interest in navigation, he did not use participants’ prior knowledge on hypertext topics as a variable. In this regard, his research did not specify if readers’ prior knowledge would affect their hyperlink choices based on four strategies in his research.

Students’ hypertext comprehension performance may vary according to different hypertext structures. McDonald and Stevenson (1996, 1998)

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