MyeLearning as a tool to enhance the writing process in Spanish as a foreign language

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experience of a case study in which MyeLearning was implemented as a tool to enhance the writing process in the Spanish as a Foreign Language programme at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. The main objective was to produce texts in the target language as part of the grammar and composition class. Three different feedback strategies were mainly used. These strategies served to help students reflect on writing as a process whose main aim is to be read by an audience. This project emerged from the need to change the students' perception on writing as a final product rather than as a systematic process that requires reflection and careful thinking of the other, the reader, in order to produce coherence and cohesion.

Key words: writing process, myeLearning, feedback, peer-feedback, autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times foreign language (FL) teaching has undergone significant changes. Approaches and methods (Richards & Rodgers 2001) have often been revisited in the quest for best teaching/learning practices. Lately, the technological progress that has occurred worldwide and the broad access to services such as the internet has also played an important role in the emergence of new trends in FL education. The inclusion of technology as part of the FL learning process has been widely discussed by several researchers in the field who see in it many benefits and challenges. Carter (2004) advocates that technology enhances language proficiency as it supports the integration of skills; she also highlights the promotion of a "writer-reader perspective towards written texts".

In the effort to integrate communicative skills in the FL myeLearning (Moodle)[1] can serve as a powerful tool to overcome the challenges that classroom-based instruction presented. Depending on teachers' creativity myeLearning can allow the in-depth exploitation of reading, writing, speaking, and listening with its numerous possibilities. The particular focus of this study is on the writing skill in Spanish as a Foreign Language and how myeLearning served to enhance the instruction of this skill.

This paper results from a case study exercise of the experience of implementing myeLearning as part of the Grammar and Composition class of level II students at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. Special attention is given to the perceptions of the benefits and challenges that level II Spanish students experienced during its implementation in the academic year 2008/09.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Even though there seems to be no theoretical debate over writing as a process (Barnet 1989; Flower & Hayes 1981), classroom practices and students' understanding of this skill show that writing is still treated as a final and static product. This could be a perception in L1, L2[2] and FL. For the latter is even more complicated as writing has been considered a "low-priority skill" (Scott 1996 xi) as more attention has been given to grammar and speaking. In fact, writing in L2/FL has been used as a way to support and test learners' grammar. This is the

case of the "grammar and composition" courses that many language educators have to teach (Gascoigne 2000).

This used to be the case of the Spanish Degree Programme at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus where one of the six weekly contact hours was devoted to the teaching of "Grammar and Composition". This presented many difficulties starting with that of time constraints. The Grammar and Composition tutor had only 12 sessions, of 50 minutes each, throughout the semester to teach students both Grammar and Composition, in weeks six and twelve there are usually mid-term and end-term tests in which students had to demonstrate their competence on the two aspects. Usually, the instrument to assess this course was a composition that students were to write in a 50-minute test on a given topic that students should have become familiar with during the semester in the other components of the Spanish Language course i.e. Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, and Conversation. The product of this test was no more than a short composition that lacked coherence, cohesion, depth of content, and a good command of grammar and word choice.

Some other times, in search of effective teaching strategies instructors divided the course in two halves. During the first half grammar was taught and during the second half writing was taught. This can only confirm what Scott (1996) says about writing as a "low-priority skill" that does not address the needs of the population of this particular context: Spanish majors whose writing skills should demonstrate a high level of proficiency given their level of specialisation in the FL.

Research on teacher beliefs (Johnson 1992 as in Richards & Lockhart 1994, p.37) has found that there are three different approaches related to second language teaching: the skills-based approach, the rule-based approach and the function-based approach. The first of them focuses on discrete skills, i.e. reading, writing, speaking, listening; the second focuses on grammar rules, and the last one emphasises interaction and communication. The beliefs that teachers hold about teaching have a great impact in their teaching practices, their content choices and in the preparation and implementation of the curriculum. The context and the structure of the programme in which this study took place suggest that the people in charge of designing the curriculum mainly held skill-based and rule-based approaches. In other words, when curricular decision making took place, more importance was given to the development of individual skills through constant practice and the reinforcement of grammatical rules as the case of the grammar and composition clearly show. Little or no relevance was given to the interactive and cooperative aspects promoted by communicative language learning in which language should be taught and learnt in real and social situations.

In considering the case of writing being taught in isolation and as a means to reinforce the language system in terms of grammar, it appears that what these kinds of practices, together with the separation of skills, promote is a misleading idea of writing. It is seen as a final product rather than a systematic process that involves more steps than simply putting words together, and the idea that language is just a set of rules that can be learnt if lots of practice is carried on out of context.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Ramírez (2004) states that the production of any discourse act results from one's need to achieve something. In other words one writes, reads, listens, and speaks in order to fulfil a need. In the case of writing, it is clear that whenever we write we have an objective in mind that leads us to the act of writing; this could be to persuade, describe, expose, or narrate something about the world.

However, this act is not as easy as it seems. Writing is a systematic process that involves organised steps that facilitate effectiveness in the message being conveyed. Cassany (1988) describes three sub-processes or stages within the writing process: planning, textualisation[3],

and review. At the planning stage the writer should look at the objectives and contents s/he is to write on in order to start to get a sense of the topic and organise those ideas. At the textualisation stage the writer translates his/her thoughts into words having to make linguistic decisions i.e. word choices, syntax, semantics, punctuation, etc. The last sub-process of review entails the reading and rereading of the text in order to evaluate the result of the previous sub-process of textualisation and determine whether the text met the objectives proposed at the first stage and make the necessary changes to make the text understandable, coherent and cohesive.

In keeping with the idea of writing as a process White and Arndt (1991) identified various processes:

Diagram 1. A model of writing (White and Arndt, 1991, p.11).

White and Arndt proposed a writing model in which all sup-process go around the sub-process of re-viewing. The fact that re-viewing is at the core of the entire writing process implies that the production of a written piece requires a permanent review that starts from the drafting of the structure and the ideas to the evaluation of the focus of the paper. The writer therefore needs to pay close attention to the process bearing in mind that his/her piece of writing exists to be read by others.

Brown (2004, p. 220) posited four types of writing performance, which are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Brown's writing types.

Types of Writing	Characteristics
Imitative	Basic skills: spelling of words, punctuation, writing of brief sentences. Meaning is not a primary concern.
Intensive/Controlled	Production of vocabulary and grammar structures "up to the length of a sentence" (2004, p. 220) within a context. Meaning becomes somehow important.
Responsive	Higher discourse level, up to the length of paragraphs. Learners are able to produce narrations, descriptions, reports, summaries, etc.
Extensive	At the peak of a learner's performance. Learners/users should be able to produce essays, term papers, research project reports, or even theses.

Each of the categories described in Brown's types of writing should be kept in mind depending on the students' level and the focus of the course as they refer to different cognitive stages in the writing process. In the case of the context and population of this study,

the activities were designed to foster the responsive type of writing as the cognitive level of the students allowed the exercise of higher discourse levels.

WHY IMPLEMENT MYELEARNING IN THIS PROCESS AND HOW?

In light of the background and context presented, together with the literature review, I saw a gap in the writing practices that were taking place before the implementation of myeLearning in the Grammar and Composition class. Time constraints impeded a true writing process as writing was being utilised as a means to teach and test grammar at the expense of a meaningful and academic writing that was the result of a reflective process rather than the pressure of a fifty-minute test.

As teaching Grammar and Composition both at the same time proved to be a challenge I decided to take writing out of the classroom and make it an autonomous and real process via myeLearning. This, I thought, would allow students time to write at their own leisure and reflect on their ideas, structure, review, and evaluate them before submitting any final paper. In this process a lot of emphasis was given to feedback in all forms and fashion for students to understand that writing is a social activity and the final goal of writing is to be read by an audience.

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN

Students were given clear instructions at the beginning of the semester that included dates and text types. To provide feedback there were three strategies, the first was teacher feedback (Keh 1990), the second was 'autonomous' feedback, and the third was peer feedback (Grabe and Kaplan 1996). The Table 2 explains the feedback process.

Table 2: *Strategies used in semester 1*

Semester 1			
Teacher Feedback			
Text type	**Pre-submission dates**	**Deadline for Teacher Feedback**	**Submission**
Expository	Weekly drafts with fixed parts of the composition: Week 1: Introduction (100-130 words)	Weekly	After 5 weeks a final 400-word paper
'Autonomous' Feedback			
Text type	**Pre-submission dates**	**Feedback**	**Submission**
Narrative	Weekly drafts	Students were free to visit the lecturer during office hours to receive feedback.	After 5 weeks a final 400-word paper

Table 3: *Strategies used in semester 2*

Semester 2				
Peer feedback				
Group 1	**Text Type**	**Pre-submission Date**	**Deadline for Peer Feedback**	**Submission Date**
Student X	News	Feb 27th	Mar 6th	March 8th

Student Y Student Z Groups were purposefully arranged to make sure that there was at least one student with a better writing level.	Report	Students submit their complete work to their peers in order to receive feedback on: -Grammar -Vocabulary -Content -General impression At the same time students should read their peer work and give them feedback via forum.	Students receive feedback on their paper from the members of their group via forum.	After the process is completed students are given two more days (weekend) to review their paper again and make the final editing.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach in which the ultimate goal was to explore and understand participants' perceptions and responses on the implementation of myeLearning as a pedagogical tool in the learning process of writing. More specifically this piece of research took the form of a case study (Creswell 2007) in which one group, level II students of Spanish at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, were analysed and served to illustrate the issue explored (Creswell 2007, p. 73), in this case the implementation of myeLearning. The investigation of this particular group was a process of observation in which the researcher conducted an in-depth exploration during an academic year, 2008/09, to find out the kind of reactions that students displayed when a new model of teaching was implemented.

The population was purposefully and conveniently chosen as the teacher-researcher was appointed as the instructor and level coordinator of this particular group.

Myelearning as a research instrument

MyeLearning or MOODLE, proved to be a useful instrument to conduct research. The whole idea of MOODLE as a virtual learning environment VLE (www.moodle.org 2009) offers different sources and alternatives that make the teaching and learning experience an interesting one. As a research instrument MOODLE provides detailed information on each one of the participants in a course. This is how a tutor can view information such as the days and times when students have accessed the course, the specific sections of the course that students have viewed (readings, videos, forums, tasks, etc.), and general statistical data of activity within the course. All these applications make systematic observation an easier task and an excellent option to conduct educational research.

As a result, much of the data collected for the study was accessed and retrieved from the course in myeLearning.

Data collections strategies

The instruments to collect the data on participants' responses and perceptions to the strategies were:
-Observation of activity reports available on myeLearning.
-Communication via myeLearning in the form of messages and forums.
-Other communication settings apart from myeLearning: emails, informal chats, student liaison meetings.

RESPONSES AND PERCEPTIONS TO THE STRATEGIES

The observation of students' perceptions and responses during the year produced the following categories:

Autonomy and Responsibility Online work demands higher levels of autonomy and responsibility as the student becomes the owner of his own time. At the beginning and until the middle of every semester students expressed their discomfort for having to work the written component of the course on their own. Some of them complained that they needed further explanation on how to write certain text types as they did not know what argumentative and expository texts were. Interestingly, when checking the activity reports these students did not read any of the explanations available in the course. Instead, they simply read the topics and started to write without taking into account the guidelines and examples provided. As a result, in many occasions the outcome of their work was not as expected as they did not carefully read the instructions provided. The following extract taken from a formal letter of complaint lodged by the students illustrates this category:

> *"On a positive note, we do applaud the Language coordinators in their attempt to revolutionize the teaching of Spanish through the incorporation of activities online. However such activities have presented major realistic, technological problems, thus resulting in a significant amount of undue stress for students. (…) four of the five elements in the level two program (…) incorporate activities online. These assignments are mandatory since they account for a percentage of the final grade. They also carry specific deadlines which are often rigid."*
>
> Letter of complaint written by level II students (19th Feb 2009)

Also, when asked to visit their lecturer at their convenience to receive oral feedback, only those students who demonstrated a better command of the written and spoken language in class and online assignments were interested in finding ways to improve their writing skills and to become aware of their mistakes; as opposed to the majority of students who needed even more help and never attended any of the one-to-one sessions.

Perception of the writing skill: ***Concern about results*** One result of what Freire (1970) calls 'banking education', in which students assume a passive role in their education, is the perception that most students have of writing as a product rather than as a process. The practices within the same university where a way of assessing the students is to have them write an essay in an hour makes the student think that what matters is the final product that will be read and marked by a teacher who will give a numerical value that will determine success or failure. The following quotation illustrates this category:

> *"The weekly submission for grammar was too time-consuming and the final product of the essay was not satisfactory. The final marks did not reflect the amount of work put in and the corrections were not displayed."*
>
> (Minutes of the "Student/staff liaison committee held on Thursday 13th of November 2008)

This is the perception that was found among many students who did not see the strategy as a benefit but as a burden imposed by a teacher who wants to give them work to waste their time. Many complained of the weekly submission of 100-word drafts and in the process of complaining did not devote the time to reread their work and see how it could be improved.

Also, they expressed their dissatisfaction with respect to the time allocated for the teaching of grammar (note that their concern is about grammar and not composition even though the two components are taught in the same class):

> *"There is a problem with grammar being only one hour as this is the foundation of the language. It was recommended that time could be taken from another component."*
> (Minutes of the "Student/staff liaison committee held on Thursday 13th of November 2008)

The above quotation illustrates that students also perceived language in a "rule-based" manner (Johnson 1992) and that may also affect their perception on writing as they did not mention or request more tutorial time for the development of this skill.

Feedback was beneficial for those who reflected on the process and gave it second thought. Unfortunately, this was the case of a few independent learners. Many either ignored or did not understand the feedback sent by teachers, this was evidenced in the final submission of papers in which many of the same mistakes that had been previously corrected appeared again.

With respect to peer feedback, we could say that there was a group who seriously and responsibly devoted time to read and give constructive feedback to their peers. In other cases students either gave very vague and irrelevant comments or did not comment at all as they did not find that peers could help in any way.

It is also important to note that peer feedback is a strategy in which more advanced students can help weak ones. However, the former is at a disadvantage as the feedback they receive from their peers does not serve to improve or gain awareness of small technicalities. It is therefore recommended that these students receive feedback from tutors, otherwise they feel left behind.

Motivation and confidence Nevertheless, at the end of the course students showed a greater level of adjustment and a general feeling of improvement which increased their motivation. Evidence of this can be that in the second Student/liaison committee students did not make any allusion to the writing assignments. Working writing as a process gave students a sense of empowerment as they were forced to think and read at least twice before submitting. Also, the feedback exercises served as a way to bringing awareness of the kinds of common mistakes students make at this level although not for all students. Peer feedback, for those who benefited from it, helped students compare and learn from the mistakes and the strengths of others.

CONCLUSIONS

Change takes time and requires effort and patience. This experience shows that students are still very used to being passive learners. This role brings a set of perceptions and beliefs that is difficult to modify. That is the case of writing. Implementing myeLearning as a tool to enhance the written competence among level II Spanish students at UWI St, Augustine, proved to be a challenge as students, for the most part, showed resistance. However, myeLearning also proved to be an excellent tool to make students aware of the responsibility they need to take as learners as they understood that learning as students, learners and citizens they have deadlines to meet and challenges to overcome. They also learned that learning is an active process that involves doing and redoing.

With respect to writing, myeLearning allowed more freedom to work on the different steps involve in writing. Great emphasis was given to feedback as a way to make students more reflective of the social aspect of writing and the importance of reviewing and reconsidering what they write before being able to make it public. In terms of the quality of their writing I can say that despite the complaints for not receiving instruction in the classroom and having to work writing on their own, students still had work to do, and they did it. If I have to compare the quality of their writing based on their first assignment and the last one, I would say that the

time students had to write and rewrite is reflected in their writing as the steps of the writing process helped them to articulate better.

I can conclude that the new virtual learning environments VLE that new technologies offer as a resource in different learning contexts bring many advantages for those involved in the teaching and learning process. However, virtual environments demand higher levels of commitment, autonomy and responsibility for students who are used to being passive receptors and learners, and whose response to any attempt of change is resistance as they feel that their comfort zone is being affected. Yet, the challenges that virtual environments present us with are necessary in order to produce the autonomous individual and citizen that our society needs. This is the responsibility of this generation of educators with the new generation of learners.

ENDNOTES

1   It is a web application that teachers can use to create effective online learning sites. (Moodle.org, 2009)
2   L1 First Language, L2 Second Language according to Gass and Selinker (2008).
3   In Spanish *textualización* which is the act of writing per se

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