

COMBINING IN-CLASS AND ONLINE IN EAP WRITING

by **Susan Esnawy**

American University in Cairo,

Cairo, Egypt

sesnawy@aucegypt.edu

This paper presents an example of using CMC tools to support a face-to-face EAP writing course for graduate students. It describes the course, in-class activities, and the online component which was an integral part of the course. Students' reactions to the course and ways for expanding the online component are also presented, as well as examples of the teacher's guidelines and a student's corrected essay.

Introduction

What can a teacher do when s/he has to teach a writing class but with limited in-class time and several writing assignments? The administration also requires that each student have a portfolio that includes his corrected essays and drafts. Computer mediated communication (CMC) tools come to the rescue of such a teacher.

With the spread in the use of the Internet, the use of CMC in ESL and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes has increased (Warschauer, 2004). Combining the use of both face-to-face with online instruction, which is known as blended learning (Marsh, 2001; Smith, 2001), has been implemented in many ESL classes, and especially in writing classes in different settings and for different purposes (Warschauer, 2004, 2002). The different forms of interaction provided by blended learning facilitate student–student and student–teacher communication, support the classroom, and enhance learning.

The purpose here is to show how using both in-class and CMC instruction was applied in an EAP graduate writing course.

Description of the course

This academic writing class is the first in a series of two courses whose aim is to help graduate EAP students improve their academic writing skills so that they can do graduate studies in

English. Students enrol in this class either with a TOEFL score of 535-549 or 202-212 and a TWE score of 4, or after taking one or two courses in an Intensive English Program to improve their level of proficiency in English. This course's objective is to teach students to write an academic essay. The second course teaches them research paper writing. Each of these classes meets once a week for 90 minutes during a regular 14-week semester. This course is also offered in the summer semester, which is seven weeks, and meets once a week for three hours, as was the case with this group.

In-class instruction

Since the allotted time was very short, class instruction was devoted to developing writing skills. Students were introduced to the patterns of organization in English rhetoric, e.g., illustration, cause and effect/problem-solution, analysis, and argumentation. This involved outlining and analyzing essays, and exercises in writing thesis statements and paragraph structure, i.e., main and supporting ideas. Grammar-for-writing exercises were also done in class. Besides, students were taught how to cite sources in their writing and to avoid plagiarism.

Writing assignments

For this course, students were required to write three essays, with three drafts per essay, and sit for two essay exams. The second and third drafts of each essay were graded. Each writing assignment focused on a theme and a pattern of organization: an argumentation essay on a gender issue, a problem-solution essay on urbanization and unplanned settlements, and an analytical essay on the digital divide. For each assignment, students first read an article, and for one assignment they also watched a documentary film, and then responded in writing to (i.e. critiqued) what they read, and watched, in class. Next, they discussed the article in class with the teacher as a facilitator. Then, they were given the writing prompt whose topic was related to the article, but not focused on it, so that it served as a source of information. Each assignment was discussed in class before students wrote at home. The teacher had conferences on the essays with the students on the day the class met. Students also, in pairs, reviewed each other's essays and received peer feedback. After that, they wrote the next draft. Due to the limited time available and using the process approach to writing, a tight schedule for the due dates of essays and drafts was set, in which some of the drafts overlapped, which was a burden for the students and the teacher (see [Appendix A](#)).

Technological component

Access to the Internet and few technical skills are required. All that is needed is knowing how to: use email and having an email account, attach files to and download them from a message, and use the Internet and search engines.

Email was used for teacher-student and student-student communication. Students wrote at home and submitted their essays by email to the teacher who printed and corrected them, then returned them to the students on the day the class met. The teacher responded to students' queries and sometimes sent them guidelines for writing using email (see [Appendix B](#)). Thus, during the week, the teacher and students communicated by email. Students also exchanged email messages in which they discussed issues raised in the classroom, related to the reading passages, and peer taught each other.

Students were given, and encouraged to use, web sites of some universities, such as the Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL), <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>, and the Guide to Grammar and Writing, <http://webster.comnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>, as an extra resource that is available to them outside the classroom for looking up information and further practice. Students accessed the OWL and looked under the "General Writing Concerns" at such pages as "Argumentative Writing Fallacies" and "Reaching Logical Conclusions", and "The Paragraph;" under "Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling," students read the explanation of certain points, did the exercises and corrected them, (e.g. "Improving Sentence Clarity" and "Tense Consistency"). They consulted the "Research and Documenting Sources" pages for information on citing sources and the APA Style format. They accessed the Guide to Grammar and Writing for the latter as well and other relevant pages, e.g., "Maintaining Objectivity" and "Avoiding Plagiarism." Under "Principles of Composition", they looked at the different composition patterns, and at "Getting Started Outlining" and "Paragraph Development and Topic Sentences". They used the "Index" page of the Guide to find grammar points, power point presentations, and exercises, such as the "Run-on Sentences, Comma Splices" exercises. As regards information for writing, they used the Internet to find other articles on the writing topic, which was optional.

The teacher had to correct an essay on the computer and send back the corrected version by email to the student; to satisfy the administration, the teacher printed the two versions and put them in the student's portfolio. The teacher used "Tracking Changes," from the "Tools" menu in MS Word, which allows the use of a different colour in adding comments, to highlight the changes made, and draws a line in the margin next to the line where the comments are inserted. The teacher also used very clear symbols and brackets so that her comments on the essay would stand out and be very clear even when a black and white printer was used (see [Appendix C](#)).

This made the teacher think of the possibility of expanding the online component by doing the same with all essays. Due dates need not be a week apart, since the students would not need to wait until the class meets to get their corrected drafts. In this way, they would receive feedback faster and the schedule would not be as tight, which would reduce the load on both the students and the teacher. Student essays could also be posted online, or simply students can send them to other students by email, and so they could review and receive feedback on them outside class, which would reduce the class time devoted to peer review of essays.

Student feedback and achievement

In evaluating the technological component of the course—email and the Internet, all students highly praised the use of email for submitting their essays and communicating with the teacher and each other, and said that it was a great method that helped them a lot, especially that they all had demanding full time jobs. When asked, they welcomed the idea of receiving their corrected essays by email, just like the teacher did with the one student mentioned above. This student highly praised this method and said that he wished it had been used all along. However, he cautioned that without easy access to the Internet, it would have been difficult. It should be noted that access to the Internet outside the university was all through dial-up connections.

Students' achievement was a source of their pride and satisfaction. They became more independent learners and their writing skills improved remarkably. Since the teacher was only a guide/facilitator, they depended on themselves in almost all tasks: discussing articles and writing prompts, using the Internet to find articles, looking up information on writing, whenever they had questions, and doing grammar exercises online to improve their grammar. The quality of their essays and drafts improved gradually, which was reflected in their grades on the drafts of each essay and their final exam essay.

Conclusion

Combining in-class and online instruction is beneficial for the students. The inclusion of the online component here supported the class and allowed effective use of class time, which enhanced learning. Students enjoyed the benefit of interacting with the teacher and other students both in-class and out of class. Hence, the use of computers and the Internet in ESL/EAP classes, whether as an out-of-class resource or for student-teacher or student–student communication, should be encouraged.

Note

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