

A WORD FROM A TECHIE

CORRECTING STUDENT WORK WITH THE COMPUTER - USING DEDICATED SOFTWARE AND A WORD PROCESSOR

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Introduction

In the previous issues of *Teaching English with Technology* there has been a number of articles and lesson plans where teachers introduced word-processing in language instruction, encouraging their students to create electronic documents and submit them for correction. In such a case, it seems justified to respond to the electronic document in the electronic format, that is present students with their works marked on the computer.

As Holmes (1996) claims, there are numerous advantages of computerised work correction over traditional marking practices, such as: there are clear and colourful annotations with always having enough space, the system forces the teacher to make a conscious attempt at consistency in diagnosing and classifying errors, the system is much faster to work with, the essays can be easily archived and quickly retrieved, both in the original and the marked form, and receiving electronically-marked document encourages the editing process so that students correct their works directly on the screen.

When talking about computerised marking, there are various approaches to be adopted, also on various levels of computer competence. As the Journal is not intended for computer specialists but language teachers, I will present the simplest (though not the least sophisticated) solutions, only alerting readers of more complex possibilities. In this case, I will present two options: using a dedicated computer program, namely *Markin* created by Martin Holmes; and exploiting the possibilities of an ordinary word-processor. My presentation will refer to Microsoft Word XP, which is the program I use, but the solutions presented can be found also in other word processors. Finally, it needs to be stressed that my

presentation here does not serve any commercial purposes, and I am not in any way affiliated with any of the companies mentioned.

Using *Markin* in Computerised Error Correction

General Information

Markin is the educational program used for marking student work on the computer, developed by Creative Technology and Martin Holmes, and available on the Web at www.cict.co.uk/software/markin/. Marking a piece of work involves importing the student's text, either by opening a document file (RTF or TXT), then marking the text using annotations, comments, feedback and grades; finally exporting the marked work in a format suitable for a student (as an HTML file for old-version browsers; as an DHTML file for newer browsers - versions 4 and higher; as an RTF or TXT document). The program allows also making comprehensive statistics of errors, both from a single document and from multiple files. Among other advanced options enabled by *Markin* are adding Web links and frequently used pieces of text when marking, auto-marking (automatic search for and correction of other instances of the same error in a current document), translation (translating the user interface into students' native language).

Marking Students' Works

After having imported a text, either by copying and pasting or importing a word-processor file, the teacher can add annotations marking specific errors using a pre-defined set of buttons. For example, on seeing a spelling error, the teacher clicks on a "Spl" button, which means underlining a highlighted word and adding a "Spl" superscript abbreviation right after it. In this way, the teacher can quickly mark different errors, also using auto-marking option. Annotations can be positive and negative, with the former being for instance "Good", "Yes", "Excellent" or "Well-constructed sentence", and they can be assigned different values to mark the importance of errors in relation to others.

Another feature that can be used by the teacher is adding comments, when the teacher wants to be more detailed about some error, or wants to give a hint on how to correct it. Comments are endnotes marked with numbers in the text and added after the whole text.

To sum up the corrected work, the teacher can add two kinds of feedback after the whole corrected piece, where they can evaluate the student's performance in a current piece of writing. Usually one feedback refers to language performance, while the other to the content, both colour coded to be distinguishable. Finally, the teacher can add a grade, being either a

number, a percentage, or a description, to be displayed after the whole piece. Click here to go to *Markin* website and see a sample Markin screen with different kinds of marks.

After having marked an essay, it is exported either as a word-processor file (RTF or TXT) or as a website (HTML or DHTML) and the teacher can see the output right away. In order to deliver the marked work to the student, the file can be attached to an email message and sent to the student or uploaded to a class website and the teacher can just give the URL to go to. The latter way of delivery is also useful when the teacher wants to give whole-class feedback on some common mistakes or use some work as a model for classroom instruction.

Making the Most of the Program

The program is equipped with a "Bookmark" option, making it possible to insert bookmarks in the text to quickly find selected parts of it. Also, one can create a key to annotations, exportable as an HTML file, so that students can view it while correcting the marked work. Furthermore, the program enables the user to create a database of useful links (either introduced manually or imported from Internet browser's favourites or bookmarks files), which can be inserted in the corrected work so that a student can get online help when revising. That is especially useful if the teacher wants to relate students to some work already done on the class website or to grammar instruction. Another way of facilitating the teacher's work with the program is a database of commonly-used text, where some frequent feedback comments can be introduced and later on quickly retrieved, largely reducing the time of correction in case of similar errors.

Customising *Markin*

The program is worth recommending mostly because it allows to be customised to fit the teacher's needs. First of all, it is possible to change the program's interface to a native language one, which can be downloaded from the manufacturer's website (at the moment there is a Danish language interface available only, but it is hoped that in the future the users of *Markin* will contribute other language versions as well) or translated on one's own.

Probably the biggest advantage of the program is the flexibility in the work with buttons. It is possible to add, delete or edit the buttons already existing, but the teacher can also create their own button sets to fit the needs of the class. The program is also flexible as for changing the output, customising captions for buttons and headings, altering the environment, choosing buttons to appear on the toolbar. Finally, the teacher can set their own preferences as for colours of comments, commented text, errors, praise, annotated text, bookmarks, feedbacks

and grade. It is especially important to set the colours and use them consistently so that students can intuitively see their performance.

Availability of the Program

Markin is available as shareware - the demo version can be downloaded at www.cict.co.uk/software/markin/download.htm. The downloaded file of around 1.6 MB is fully functional, the teacher can import texts, mark them, export, and the only limitation is that this demo version works only on short texts, and to use the program with the longer ones it must be registered after having made a payment of £20 for a single user license. For more details on different pricing versions as well as education licensing, go to <http://www.cict.co.uk/software/markin/pricing.htm> and http://www.cict.co.uk/software/markin/education_site.htm. Because of the full functionality of the program in its demo version, the fact that the output of the program is platform-independent (a document file or webpage file), and because it is not necessary for a student to have the program to open a marked essay, it seems that teachers could be encouraged to go to the website and try the program for themselves.

Using a Word Processor in Computerised Error Correction

General Remarks

The major thing which needs to be taken into consideration is the word-processor version used. In comparison with using *Markin* to correct essays, which produces output in platform-independent format (RTF, TXT, HTML), using a word-processor requires the same program and the same version on the part of the teacher and the students, otherwise students will not be able to open a marked essay or see all the corrections made. Thus, it seems that this method of computerised marking is advisable in classes where students use computers at schools or where there is the possibility to standardise the type and version of word-processor.

The Inventory of Tools

As was said in the introduction to this article, computerised marking can be done with various methods on various levels of computer expertise. It is also the case with using a word processor, and the simplest way of marking student's works is using the tools available in a word processor. Some of them are:

- Using font formatting to show an error: font type, font size, font colour, font style (italics, bold, bold italics), underlining style and colour - highlight a word or a piece of text, then click "Format", "Font" and check a relevant box
- Using font effects to show an error: underlining, strikethrough, superscript, subscript, small caps, shading, text animations - highlight a word or a piece of text, then click "Format", "Font", "Text Effects" tab
- Using spellchecking to spot spelling mistakes - highlight a piece of text, then click "Tools", "Language", "Select language", choose the target language
- Using "Find" function to find next instances of the same error - highlight a word or a piece of text, copy it by clicking "Edit", "Copy", then click "Edit", "Find", paste the word by clicking Ctrl+V, then click OK
- Using "Revision" function to record all changes made by the teacher; deleted words are marked with an annotation, added words are in red, a student can go from one change to the other and either accept or reject it - click on "Tools", "Track Changes" to enable the feature
- Inserting text annotations to give students hints on how to correct errors - click on "View", "Toolbars", "Revision" to enable a Revision toolbar, then click "Insert New Annotation" icon
- Inserting voice annotations, where a teacher can give voice comments to be played by a student while working with the text - click on a drop-down menu next to the "Insert New Annotation" icon, choose "Voice Annotation", press "Record" button, then "Stop"
- Inserting endnotes, with comments or hints displayed at the end of the document as well as in the text proper after having moved the mouse pointer to the footnote number in the text - click on "Insert", then "Reference", then "Endnote"
- Saving versions, where each subsequent version of the document can be saved and retrieved, so that the teacher can compare the original and the corrected version to make sure that the student did make the changes suggested - click on "File", then "Versions", "Save Now", add a comment (e.g., "This is the original version of the submitted essay"), then press OK. Save each version in such a way, then you can retrieve it by clicking "File", "Versions", highlighting the required version and pressing "Open"

- Adding mistake comments can be facilitated by inserting autotext sentences, so that the teacher does not have to type the same sentences again and again - to introduce autotext, highlight a piece of text, then click "Insert", "Autotext", "New", then press OK. To insert an autotext sentence, click "Insert", "Autotext" and choose the required sentence
- Inserting audio files, either recorded by the teacher or some other files, which can be hints for students on which word to use - click "Insert", "File", then choose the file from the disc and press "Insert"
- Inserting images, so that a student can use the word presented in the picture instead of a highlighted word - click "Insert", "Picture", "ClipArt" or "From File" or "From Scanner", choose the image file and press "Insert"
- Inserting bookmarks, when a number of mistakes refer to the same comment, the comment can be bookmarked and all mistakes can be linked to it - put the cursor in the place of a bookmark, click "Insert", "Bookmark", type the name of the bookmark, press "Add". Then to link a mistake to the comment highlight a piece of text, click "Insert", "Hyperlink", "Bookmark", choose the name of the bookmark and highlight it, then press OK and once again OK
- Inserting hyperlinks to reference sources on the Web or on the hard disc, so that students can go to a dictionary, a grammar compendium or an encyclopedia - highlight a word or a piece of text, click "Insert", "Hyperlink", choose one of the websites used currently ("Visited webpages"), one of the recently opened files ("Files used"), a file in the current folder ("Current Folder") or a website (type the URL in the "Address" box)

Using Macro Tools

The procedures given above are fairly simple and no programming knowledge is necessary to use them. However, there can be more complex methods of computerised error correction given by a word-processor. It is possible to create a macrostructure, which will execute the instructions specified (e.g., write "Spell" in red 10-point Bookman Old Style superscript font to indicate a spelling mistake). For the convenience of use, a number of macros can be collected into a toolbar, which can be activated from the "View", "Toolbars" menu. It is beyond the scope of the present article to explain the procedure of creating such a toolbar, but the readers might try the Marking Toolbar created by Martin Holmes (to be downloaded at

.....). The downloaded package contains the instructions on how to make the toolbar file the part of the Normal template, so that it can be used in any file opened in the word-processor.

Correcting Students' Works in a Word-Processor

As it can be seen from the above presentation, there is a wide range of tools that can be used in computerised marking. The teacher should consider them all and adopt a consistent procedure, using different solutions for different categories of mistakes and different procedures. It is important that students learn, remember and have the key to annotations at hand: that red coding means a mistake, green coding means praise, an endnote is what gives general feedback while a footnote is used to give a hint. In such a case the visual side conveys some message on the student's performance, and students learn consistency in classifying errors. The advantage of using a word-processor in error correction is that students learn the details of the program they will surely use in the future at work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that computerised marking is definitely unavoidable when using computers and the Internet in the teaching process. The present paper focused on two solutions, with the two programs (*Markin* and *Microsoft Word XP*) serving as examples, but in fact they could be replaced by many others of the same kind. The idea of the author was to show how writing error correction can be largely facilitated with electronic methods, and to encourage even computer beginners to implement such computerised marking methods.

Reference

Holmes, M. (1996) "Markin Student Work on the Computer". *The Internet TESL Journal*, vol. II, no. 9, September 1996, <http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/Articles/Holmes-ComputerMarking/>