TEACHING AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS:
EFFECTIVE USE OF THE WORD PROCESSOR IN ESL CLASSROOMS

by David Hughes

Zayed University

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

David.Hughes@zu.ac.ae

Introduction

In many English Language programs around the world there is a push to use computers in the classroom. At times, the task can seem overwhelming. But many institutions do not provide adequate ongoing IT training. As a means to remedy this lack of training, this article will address the issue by describing some ways to use a software program that most teachers already know and therefore require little or no training: the word processor.

Most teachers, and, increasingly, students, are very familiar and comfortable with word processing programs. This article explains some effective and motivating activities that use the word processor to improve students skills in spelling, vocabulary and grammar. Many, if not all, of the functions talked about in this article will be familiar to most readers.

Benefits of using word processing in the language classroom

There are several benefits that using the word processor has over traditional pen and paper activities. Students have a natural inclination towards using the computer. It has been my experience that if given a choice, most students would prefer to use a computer where they might have used paper and pencil. Additionally, the computer creates a different environment for students to engage in learning activities. This increases motivation and the amount of attention that learners give to a task.

There are also some benefits enabled by the capabilities of word processing software. For example, in the spelling activities described below students receive instant feedback via the spell checker. Additionally, once trained properly, students can perform tasks on the word processor many times faster that they would if they were working with paper. This increases the amount of practice they can get with some kinds of activities, such as the categorizing activity explained below.

Additionally, word processing programs have one strong advantage over network-based learning environments: they are very stable. Using word processors, one doesn't encounter system crashes, slow connection speed and disappearing websites.

Computer Training

Some of your students may not be adept at using the various functions of the word processor. Therefore, some training on the part of the teacher will be required in order for students to focus on the language activity rather than the technical aspect of the activity. Students need to have a sufficient level of computer familiarity so that they are focusing on *what* they are doing not *how* they are doing it. Teachers can do ad hoc training as the need arises or do an inclusive training session at the beginning of the term – with later mini reinforcement exercises completed before starting activities. This training, if done in the target language can give your students added listening practice.

Some students enter foreign language classrooms with no knowledge of word processors. In order for the activities in this article to be effective, students will need to have some basic word processing skills. These skills are listed below:

- highlighting text
- selecting text
- highlighting and dragging
- cutting/copying and pasting
- navigating a document using the scroll bar
- clicking on hypertext

In many of the activities described below, modeling is the best method of training students. After students become more comfortable with using the word processor as a learning tool instructions may be simplified or eliminated.

The following table gives an overview of which word processing functions can be used with each skill area:

function area & skill	cut and paste	bookmark & hyperlink	spell check	find and replace (Ctrl+F)	Highlight and Drag	font color/style	Navigation Keys (space bar)	Multiple Windows	Inserting Clip Art
Grammar	✓			✓	✓				
Vocabulary	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
Spelling			✓				✓		

Table 1. Word Processing features that can be used with certain skill areas.

GRAMMAR ACTIVTIES

Word processing programs can be used to aid students in recognizing, noticing, and manipulating various aspects of grammar. Use of the cut-and-paste function can reinforce students grammar knowledge by giving them practice in placing grammar structures into categories such as "correct / incorrect" or "takes –ing / does not take –ing". The highlight–and-drag function can facilitate recognizing question formation or any other aspect of grammar where things seem to "move." Activities using the find-and-replace function can aid students in noticing grammatical suffixes and constructing sentences with correct subject-verb agreement.

Using Cut and Paste

Activity: Categorizing Non-Progressive Verbs

Level: Upper Intermediate

In a class focusing on verbs that do not take the progressive aspect students could be given a list of verbs that fit into one of the traditional non-progressive categories. This will help students to focus on these verbs and help them build up a working knowledge of this aspect of English grammar. Here is an example of what this kind of exercise might look like:

Instructions: Cut and paste the following non-progressive verbs into the appropriate column.

love   *believe*   *know*   *wish*

care   *guess*   *wonder*   *hear*

consider   *hope*   *desire*   *smell*

taste	*matter*	*possess*	*understand*
look	*own*	*remember*	

emotions	mental states	preferences	the senses	appearance	possession

In a variation of this type of activity students could place sentences or phrases into categories of correct/incorrect:

Instructions: Cut and paste the following sentences into their appropriate columns.

I am loving you.	*I love you.*
I am hearing you.	*I hear you.*

Correct	Incorrect

Note: In order to expedite the process of selecting text, students should be trained to use the triple-click function. By pressing the left button on the mouse quickly three times all the text is selected up to the next return. For example triple-clicking somewhere in the text of "*I am loving you.*" selects everything from the first letter "I" to the full stop.

Using Highlight and Drag

The "highlight and drag" function of a word processor allows users to move text without having to use the cut/copy and paste feature. To use this function, first highlight the text and then drag it to where you want it.

Activity: Question Formation

Level: Beginner

Question formation is something that students of all levels need practice with. Here is an example of an activity to get students practicing and recognizing questions that are formed by inversion

Instructions:

- Have students type in the following sentence:
    - *The meal was delicious.*
- Students highlight "*was.*"
- Students drag "*was*" to the front of the sentence and capitalize the "w."
- Students change the capitalization of the T and change the period to a question mark.
- Students should now have:
    - *Was the meal delicious?*

Students then practice with a list provided to them on another word document.

In the following variation, students get practice noticing and manipulating the third person "-s" in question formation. This feature of English grammar can be seen as something that "moves" in question formation.

- Students type in the sentence "*The girl plays outside everyday.*"
- Following the teacher, students then:
    - Change the "T" in "*The*" to lower case.
    - Change the period to a question mark.
    - Type the word "*Do*" at the front of the sentence.
    - Highlight and drag the "s" from "plays" the right of the "o" in "Do"
    - Add an "e" to form "Does"

Students are then given more sentences with which to practice. This activity is based on one developed by Rendall and Davies.

Using Find and Replace

Activity: Regular Past Tense Endings

Level: Beginner

To draw student attention to a specific language function, for example the "-ed" past tense ending, teachers can use the find and replace feature to replace the target structure with an

underscore "_____". Students would then complete the exercise by adding the correct ending.

To create this kind of activity follow these steps:

- open the text to be manipulated
- press the "Ctrl" and the "f" keys at the same time (or, alternatively, go to the "Edit" menu and select "Find")
- in the "Find and Replace" window click the "Replace" tab
- enter the text to be found in the "Find what" area
- enter the new text in the "Replace with" area. If you wish to change the color of the "Replace with" text click on "More", "Format", "Font" and then "Font color"
- to begin the replacement process click "Find Next"
- if the change is acceptable click "Replace."

Teacher notes:

- Students initially have problems with using the find and replace function. They often change the formatting of the text to be found, for example changing the color, so when the computer searches it is looking for text that doesn't exist.
- Altering authentic texts in this way produces strange sounding prose. As an added exercise to promote student writing students can re-read the text and make changes that make the text sound better. Please note that altering any text without the author's permission breaks the copyright law.

Activity: Subject-Verb Agreement.

Level: Beginner, Intermediate.

A text written in the first person is given to the students. Using the "Find and Replace" function students find all the instances of "I" and change them to "he." The search and replace function does allow one to change the color of text as well, so the "I" could be changed into a red "he," making it easier for students to find the replacements once the complete text has been changed. Once students have made all the replacements, they then check all the sentences and make the necessary changes to the verbs so that they have correct subject-verb agreement. See Appendix G for a sample text.

To enhance learner motivation and interest, students can write their own first person paragraphs. The paragraphs would be sent to the teacher for redistribution or shared with classmates. These personalized paragraphs can be written with a common theme in mind, such as a description, or humor. Additionally, the paragraphs can be matched with any verb tense that the class is currently studying. To add a bit of fun to the activity students can change the "I" in their paragraphs to things like "my shoe" or "the houseplant".

VOCABULARY ACTIVITIES

Word processing programs can also aid students in developing and refining their vocabulary. The cut and paste function can be the basis of activities where categorization is the main focus. The hyperlink, bookmark and ClipArt features can be used together to create independent weekly word lists. Additionally the font color, navigation keys, space bar, and opening multiple windows can be used to aid in vocabulary development as well.

Using Cut and Paste
Activity: Word Families

Level: Any

If you are teaching word families, students could cut and paste words according to the parts of speech each word represents. Here is an example:

Instructions: Cut and paste the following words into the appropriate columns

culture	*succeed*	*compute*
cultural	*success*	*computer*
culturally	*successful*	*computation*
cultured	*successfully*	*computational*

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb

After students get feedback on the appropriateness of their answers, they could use each word in a sentence or write paragraphs.

Using Hyperlinks/bookmarks

Activity: Weekly Word Lists

Level: Any

This activity is a new twist on the traditional use of vocabulary lists. In using this activity students are able to develop personal vocabulary lists and personalize assessment as well.

Procedure:

- Students are given an electronic copy of the "Weekly Word List" form (see Appendix A) and save it onto their computers.
  Each week students enter 5 (or more) vocabulary words with definitions, an example sentence and a clip art image that reflects the meaning of the vocabulary item. These words can come from whatever source the teacher and students feel is best.
- The hyperlink/bookmark feature allows students to test themselves in the same way they would use flashcards.
- Students should revisit the lists occasionally, and class time should be given to do this.
- At the end of a course (or whenever the instructor sees fit) students compile a list of their vocabulary words. This list is given to the teacher in electronic form to be used as the basis for individualized assessment.

For an explanation on how to make a hyperlink/bookmark document see Appendix B.

Using Font color/style

Activity: Colors

Level: Beginner

One benefit of using computers is that they have a visual focus. This activity allows students to develop their vocabulary of color words by actually using the colors.

Procedure:

- The word document is electronically distributed to the students. (See Appendix C)
- Students change the font color of each word to match that word. For example, the word "red" is changed from black to red.
- Students check each other's work by looking at each other's screens.

Using Navigation Keys (and Space Bar)

Activity: Word Snakes

Level: Any

One aspect of vocabulary learning is the ability to recognize words. Students need to have a mental image of what the word looks like before they can know its meaning. This activity gives students practice in recognizing word boundaries.

Procedure:

- A list of vocabulary words is strung together with no spaces between words. For example:

    redgreenblueyelloworangepurple

- Students move the cursor to the beginning of each word and press the space bar, making each word separate. This activity is one based on Rendall & Davies.

Using Multiple Windows

Activity: Making vocabulary lists from on-screen reading.

Level: Any

Procedure:

- Students who are doing an on-line reading open the text in one window and the word processing program in another. The windows should be adjusted to facilitate ease of cursor movement between the two windows. If necessary, the teacher should model this.

- Students cut and paste new/unknown words into a word document that has the following table:

Word	Definition	Example sentence and picture

- After or during the reading students insert the definition, example sentence and a Clip Art picture. The picture should be one that helps the students to remember the word.

- One advantage to this approach is that students can cut and paste whole paragraphs quickly and easily to contextually represent the words.

Using Clip Art

Inserting Clip Art files can be used as part of a larger program for vocabulary development. If making vocabulary lists in word documents (instead of using a more traditional paper notebook), pictures can be added to the lists to (a) make the exercise more interesting and engaging and (b) aid in retention. Some students are visual learners and the added input of a picture with a definition and examples can help these students.

Additionally, searching for pictures that might fit with a specific vocabulary item in itself is an exercise that helps students to develop hierarchical or categorical thinking and classification. For example, a student is working with the word "desalination." After they write a definition and example they may want to insert a picture to help them remember the meaning. But on entering the word "desalination" into the search function of the Clip Art window, they receive no returns. Instead a student could think of words that might be more general. So, instead of "desalination" the student enters "factory" – which is where desalination takes place. The student sees several pictures to choose from. From these they must choose an image that fits in with their internal notion of what a desalination factory might look like. This process of selection reinforces the student's internal definition of the new word. If they do not understand the word, they cannot choose an appropriate picture.

Generally, students cannot perform this kind of search without some initial guidance and modeling. The teacher should go through several examples with students and show the class how a person thinks through a situation like the one described above. Then guided practice should be followed by freer practice.

Aside from the benefits this kind of exercise has for vocabulary building it also helps students develop the skill of searching for information in the target language. This activity of searching for a more general (or more specific) words or terms will aid students with developing information literacy.

It should also be noted that not all vocabulary items can be enhanced this way. Some words will simply not have picture equivalents or parallels in the clip art gallery. However, if students have access to the Internet they might use a search engine that can specifically search picture files. Google.com (http://www.google.com) has such a function.

Activity: Vocabulary Review

Level: Any

Procedure:

1. Distribute to students a word file with a blank table consisting of ten rows and two columns. (See Appendix D)

2. In groups, students insert one Clip Art picture into each of the rows in the left column. Each image should correspond to one of the vocabulary words being studied, but students are *not* to put in the word that the picture represents. It is important that students are working from a common list. If they are not, then guessing which word the picture represents is near impossible.

3. Each group gives their file (paper or electronic) to another group. At this point, students should have only pictures in front of them, not words.

4. Now each group decides which word corresponds to each picture and writes/types the word in the right column next to the appropriate picture.

5. The files are given back to the original group for correction and feedback.

SPELLING ACTIVITES

In conjunction with the navigation keys, the spell checker can be used to help students improve their spelling. Additionally, the technology allows for greater management of independent word lists.

Using Navigation Keys (and Space Bar)

Activity: Electronic Spelling Log

Level: Any

Procedure:

In a new word document, on the first page students should make a list of all spelling words to be learned. Next, a table similar to the one below should be copied several times into the next page.

Correct Spelling ⇒				
Practice ⇒				

The student then enters the spelling word to be learnt in the cell next to the one labeled "Correct Spelling." In the example below "neighbor" is used.

Correct Spelling ⇒	**Neighbor**			
Practice ⇒	neighber [1]	neighbor	neighbor	neighbor

After the student has typed the spelling word in, he/she studies the spelling and tried to retain it in memory. Next, the student uses the scroll bar on the right of the Word window to hide the spelling word, but still be able to view the cells next to "practice." The student then attempts to spell the word correctly in the first cell to the right of "practice." If the word is spelled incorrectly a red line will appear under the word. If this occurs the student should scroll up to check his/her error. Again the student attempts to type in the correct spelling. If there is another error the student should check again. If the student spells the word correctly, then he/she practices a few more times, filling in the remaining cells.

Using Multiple Functions (including Inserted Comments)
Activity: Correcting Spelling Mistakes in a Text
Level: Any
Procedure:
Students are given a word document that has spelling mistakes. Students correct the mistakes in any way that the teacher sees fit.. See below for a sample text:

Mirriage is on of the life nids. There is phrase in Arabic used to difine miriage as the golden cage. Some times marriage become a problem if the family Mary there children early when are 18 years or even yunger then that! This is called as early marrige. All thought miny people agre with earlly marriage, it has many harmful efects for the sosaity.

After students make the necessary changes they can submit them to the teacher, or share what they have done with a partner. The answer key can be emailed by the teacher, or put somewhere on a shared network resource. For a more technically advanced answer key use the insert comment feature of word to give the correct answers. See Appendix F for an example of this kind of answer key.

Ideally the text, like the one above, should be taken from samples of student writing.

CONCLUSION

The ideas described in this article are meant to be starting points for ESL teachers to develop a broader understanding of various applications of one of the most ubiquitous computer tools available: the word processor. With a little creativity and experimentation this program found on almost all computers can benefits ESL class by increasing motivation and varying routine. Generally, word processing programs can be seen as a "value-added" tool to English language learning. They are not essential for learning the language but their effective use can increase student motivation. They can also be a tool to increase the effective use of time in the classroom. It is imperative for teachers who use the word processor for activities like the ones described above to make the learning objectives as clear and transparent as possible to the students. If the learning goals of the activity are not clearly focused and made clear to the students, then they may focus more on technical operations rather than on language learning.

Note

1. The misspelling is intentional in order to show a potential student entry

References

Fandrych, I. (2001) "Word Processors' Grammar and Spelling Assistance: Consequences for Second Language Learning and Teaching." *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. VII, No. 6, June 2001, http://iteslj.org/Articles/Fandrych-WordPro.html.

Haezewindt, P. (2002) "A word processor is more than a writing machine." *Virtual Teacher Center*. March 11, 2002. http://curriculum.becta.org.uk/docserver.php?docid=2536.

Hopwood, T. (1989) *The Use of the Word-Processor in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language to Adults.* Academic Reports. Cambridge: Bell Educational Trust. ERIC ED 312 892

Rendall, H., Davies, G. (eds.) "ICT4LT Module 1.3 - Using text tools in the modern foreign languages classroom." *ICT4LT Project*. January 3, 2001, http://www.ict4lt.org/en/en_mod1-3.htm.

Yu Hong Wei , Davies G. (1997) "Do grammar checkers work?". In Kohn J., Rüschoff B. & Wolff D.

(eds.) *New horizons in CALL: proceedings of EUROCALL 96*, Szombathely, Hungary: Dániel

Berzsenyi College. March 3, 2002 http://www.camsoftpartners.co.uk/euro96b.htm.

Appendix A: Weekly Vocabulary Study Template

WEEKLY VOCABULARY STUDY

                                                                    Date:
                                                                    Name:

This week's words:

1.

Test myself

2.

Test myself

3.

Test myself

4.

Test myself

5.

Test myself

SELF TEST:

1	Definition:
	Example Sentence:

Back

2	Definition:
	Example Sentence:

Back

3	Definition:
	Example Sentence:

Back

4	Definition:
	Example Sentence:

Back

5	Definition:
	Example Sentence:

Back

Appendix B: How to make a Hyperlink/Bookmark Vocabulary File

Step 1: Make the bookmark (the bookmark is the destination of the hyperlink in your text)

- Decide the destination of the hyperlink.
- Highlight the text.
- Go to "Insert" / "Bookmark."
- Name the bookmark / Click "Add.."

Step 2: Make the hyperlink
- Highlight the text you wish to link to the bookmark.
- Go to "Insert" / "Hyperlink."
- Under the "Link to:" column on the left click "Place in this document."
- Select the bookmark on the right.
- Click "OK."

Appendix C: Changing font color

Instructions: Change the font color of each word to match the color the word says.

RED
BLUE
YELLOW
VIOLET
GREEN
ORANGE
BROWN
DARK RED
PINK
LAVENDER
TURQUOISE
SKY BLUE
TEAL
ROSE
INDIGO

Appendix D: Vocabulary Review

Picture	*Word*

Appendix E: Electronic Spelling Log

Correct Spelling				
Practice				

Correct Spelling ⟹				
Practice ⟹				

Correct Spelling ⟹				
Practice ⟹				

Appendix F: Sample Spelling Exercise Answer Key with Inserted Comments

***Mirriage** is on of the life **nids**. There is phrase in Arabic used to **difine miriage** as the golden cage. Some times marriage become a problem if the family **Mary there** children early when are 18 years or even **yunger then** that! This is called as early **marrige**. All thought **miny** people **agre** with **earlly** marriage, it has many harmful **efects** for the **sosaity**.*

Appendix G: Sample Text for "Find and Replace" Subject-Verb Agreement Activity

A Happy Life

Every day is a good day. Each morning I get up and have a wonderful breakfast because my wife is such a good cook. Then I drive to work in my dream car. I know it may sound strange to you that I drive a 1983 Honda, but I love driving it. When I go to work I can take several route, and all of them are beautiful. Once I get to work I have a great time because the people I work with are all wonderful. I can't think of a better job than the one I have.