The teacher is also a coach and facilitator in the students' writing process. For example, during exploratory activities the teacher can help students find topics in which they can become involved; during drafting, they can support and problem solve with individual students as needed. The teacher, during revision, can provide guidance and individual or small-group instruction.

Creating a favorable atmosphere for an effective writing classroom is actually creating a social place. In such a classroom, students are responsible for their own growth as

> ### students' writing improves a great deal when students share their writing with each other

writers and for the learning and development of others; therefore, students are encouraged to share work in progress, help each other problem solve, and contribute ideas to the work of peers. Students who are not used to such an arrangement may at first have difficulty with this open approach to writing, and should be allowed to work independently. But we can encourage interaction by having students work with single partners initially; they will then become comfortable with sharing in larger groups.

We have observed that students' writing improves a great deal when students share their writing with each other. There are several ways that teachers can help students become effective peer responders: a) have students evaluate papers by other classmates, b) have them role-play successful and unsuccessful response groups and critique the interactions, and c) model appropriate comments using transparencies.

According to our experience accumulated with the implementation of writing workshops in our writing lessons, we may conclude that:

- establishing a writing environment for English majors reinforces the notion that writing for communication is an ongoing process;
- clear roles and expectations for students and teachers are essential;
- process writing also makes students realize that their first draft is just that, a draft, and that comments from peers can enhance their text layout, spelling, organization of ideas, grammar, mechanics, word choice, and so on; and
- the more students write, the more they read, and the more they read, the more they want to write and comment about the world.

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Computers and collaborative learning

Melinda Dooly looks at setting up collaborative learning projects over the Internet.

Background

The role of computers in the ESL/EFL classroom is increasingly important as today's students grow up in technologically advanced societies. The opportunities for using the Internet in the language classroom have grown as well and this has led to new interest in the Internet as a means of engaging students in authentic communication with other speakers of the target language. Traditionally the use of computers in language learning has been associated with self-contained, programmed applications such as tutorials, drill, simulations, instructional games, tests, and so on. However, the use of computers as a means of Network-based Language Teaching (NBLT) represents a new and different side of computer use in the language classroom, 'where human-to-human communication is the focus' (Kern 2000:1). Using computers to create situations where communication is key to the task has numerous potential benefits: it may 'enhance student motivation, supposedly by providing a less threatening means to communicate', provide 'stimulating

international contact', and 'facilitate work on meaningful projects' (Warschauer 1996: 31). According to Orlando Kelm, it can 'create a natural language environment in that the conversations focus almost entirely on content' (1996: 21). This 'shifts the dynamic from learners' interaction *with* computers to interaction with other humans *via* the computer' (Kern 2000: 11).

E-communicating: using the computer to collaborate in online projects

In a recent collaborative effort, two university classes in the US and Spain—one at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC); the other at the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona (UAB)—focused on the use of the Internet as a tool for student-centered collaborative projects. In both cases, the students were studying to become EFL or ESL teachers.

The students were required to set up small 'virtual' working groups consisting of members from both universities. The objective of the group was to investigate

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different NBLT tools (text chats, audio chats, MOOs, wiki, etc.) to see how they might be used in designing language-teaching tasks. The groups had to choose one tool and design a language teaching unit using that tool and then test it themselves. This was followed by a final report. Because the students were working together online to design their

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collaborative project, they were using the target language on two levels: as teachers in charge of designing a didactic unit and as members of a working group, using the language to accomplish various tasks.

Recommendations derived from the experience

Based on student questionnaires and students' final evaluations, some recommendations for network-based language projects which focus on communication and collaboration as key components have been compiled.

Incorporating Internet tools into the classroom
- It is imperative to find out how much the students know about new technologies before starting; scaffolding of Internet skills should be gradual and progressive. When the students do not feel confident in their NBLT skills, they can become de-motivated in the overall project.
- Negotiating with the students the amount of time to be spent with NBLT tasks (both inside and outside of the classroom) can help establish some guidelines and expectations about student autonomy from early on. Students need to feel that they are responsible for the final output but at the same time, they need to feel they have support and guidance in achieving the goals that they themselves have set.
- Recognition that each student has different levels of NBLT skills as well as varying limitations (access to PCs, Internet at home or work) helps the student feel that collaboration online is an added benefit, not an added burden to language learning.
- It is extremely important that the teacher is familiar with the different types of Internet tools which can be used to achieve the aims of the project and to choose according to needs of the project, ease of use and overall availability for the students.
- Plans for hands-on training time should be scheduled into the language class programme, preferably at the beginning of the term. This should be done even if the Internet tools to be used seem self-evident and user-friendly. Students may be familiar with certain tools for personal use but may not understand how to use them for

educational purposes and this can prove disorienting for them.

Collaboration online:

It is important to recognize that, on the whole, collaborative efforts aren't spontaneous (especially online and between students who do not know each other). Such efforts have to be orchestrated and this requires meticulous planning and explicit instructions and explanations in the initial set-up of the collaborative project. Online collaborative tasks should:
- have a carefully elaborated list of tasks for each participant or group, including deadlines (especially where input of one collaborator is necessary for another collaborator to continue in the development of the project);
- ensure that the collaborators understand the importance of the contributions; explicitly state the need for total collaboration—at the beginning, students could brainstorm ways to ensure that collaboration will be it successful;
- the tasks should be realistically designed so that they are, as Papert (1980, 1981) states, 'personally meaningful for learners';
- the tasks should be developed in a way which stimulates 'construction of knowledge' and which helps the learn to be able to both internalise and externalise their knowledge (ibid.); and
- allow sufficient time for the knowledge to be assimilated by the participants. This may include sufficient time for reflection, questioning and assimilating varying perspectives about the topic being investigated. All the components of the tasks do not have to be carried out online—'blended learning' environments allow for more time for reflection and put less pressure on students who are not completely comfortable with Internet tools, or who prefer face-to-face discussion to help them with complete assimilation of new material.

Conclusion

Changing the perspective of computer use from 'management' and 'drilling' to a viewpoint of the Internet as a tool for constructivist, collaborative learning may be one way to further integrate the Internet into language teaching. It can and does provide students with new learning incentives, and when used optimally, can help teach new means of knowledge acquisition, new communicative skills and help develop collaborative skills. As Westera and Sloep (2001) have pointed out, the Internet offers students boundless possibilities for exchange of ideas. Within the language classroom, the innovative teacher can help orient these new opportunities for communication in the target language towards collaborative construction of more and more ideas.

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