

Computers in the EFL Writing Class:
Hindrancel or Help?

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要 約

EFL ライティング授業におけるコンピューターの役割の是非

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最近では、英語の授業において広くコンピューターが使われるようになってきている。しかし、従来の教育手法とは異なり、コンピューターを利用するには、語学学習には関係のないスキルが求められる。本論の目的は、大学レベルの英作文のクラスで用いられるコンピューターが効果的な道具として機能して学習プロセスを利しているか、それとも逆にその妨げとなっているのかを調査することである。二つの異なるサーベイ結果は、調査対象者がMSワードなどの文書作成プログラムを使いこなすために必要なスキルを習得しているのみならず、彼らが英作文をする際、紙に直接書くよりもコンピューターを使うことを好んでいることを示した。

Universities, as centers for higher learning, naturally try to take advantage of advances in technology to improve quality of the learning experience for their students. Audio visual materials, laboratory equipment, and of course, computer technology have all contributed to expanding the boundaries of the classroom. No one would argue that the advent of the computer has brought about the most revolutionary changes in education. Be it lectures enhanced by the use of PowerPoint, Keynote, or other presentation software, online classrooms, or the use of the internet as a research instrument, computers have come to be a valuable tool made use of by both teachers to teach and students to learn.

When teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the value of the computer can be immeasurable because of the versatility it offers. It can be used for interactive audio-visual activities. Through online quizzes and exercises, traditional grammar and reading comprehension activities can also be carried out with the added benefit of individual feedback provided to each student instantly. Chat rooms and message boards allow for an instantaneous exchange of ideas. These kinds of activities allow students to take a more active role in their own learning, and focus more specifically on the task at hand.

Unlike most other classroom tools though, in order to use a computer, one must know much more than just how to turn it on. In other words, when using a computer to learn, one must first learn how to use a computer. Yet, in our experience, all too often teachers have the expectation that their students already have knowledge of basic computing skills, and plan their lessons accordingly, forgetting that in the case of a non computer-literate student, the computer can become an obstacle to the learning process. Several studies (Heinssen, Glass, & Knight, 1988; Igbaria & Chkrabarti, 1990; Rosen & Weil, 1995) have shown that students can suffer from bouts of anxiety when faced with the prospect of using a computer.

When a writing class, especially one that is being taught in a foreign language, is being conducted in a computer-equipped classroom, the potential for computer-based anxiety can be high (Matsumura & Hann, 2004). As one must navigate through menus, the options (both necessary and optional) that are employed when using a word processor are not as intuitive to students as they are in other activities when the screen itself tells students to choose one option or another, or to "click here."

In the study reported below, we looked at whether or not students had the basic computer skills necessary to take advantage of using a computer as they studied writing in English.

METHOD

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to look at the role computers play in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classroom. It has been our experience as university-level EFL instructors that whenever possible, EFL writing classes are conducted in computer equipped classrooms. On the part of the teacher, there seems to be a supposition that the use of computers can enhance the EFL writing experience, one based on the assumption that students would feel the same way. But, this assumption doesn't take into account the possibility that a

computer causing anxiety could interfere with the learning process. This survey was conducted to see whether or not computers are perceived by the students as a hindrance or as a help.

Participants

This study was conducted using university students attending two different private universities in the Kansai area of Japan. A total of 36 students were surveyed: 15 third year students at Kobe College (KC), and 21 second year students at Kinki University (KU). Both groups of students were enrolled in required writing classes. All students were English majors. Both classes met for 90 minutes 1 time a week. Students at KC were in computer equipped classroom for roughly 50% of their lessons, while the students at KU were able to use computers for more than 90% of the year. Classrooms were equipped with computers running Windows operating systems.

Instrument

A two-part anonymous survey was conducted midway through the second semester of year long courses. The first part (see Appendix A) was a 19 item questionnaire asking students about their ability to perform specific computer skills relating to word processing. Though predominantly in English, this section provided Japanese equivalents to the English computer commands because it was felt that students would have a better understanding of what was being asked. The second part of the survey (see Appendix B), was a 15 item questionnaire asking about their comfort level with writing (both paper-based and computer-based), the ease they felt when editing on a computer, and computer usage in general. This section was written entirely in English.

The reason we divided our survey into two sections was because in addition to examining the role of computers in the writing process, we first felt it was necessary to check the students' ability to perform basic computer functions.

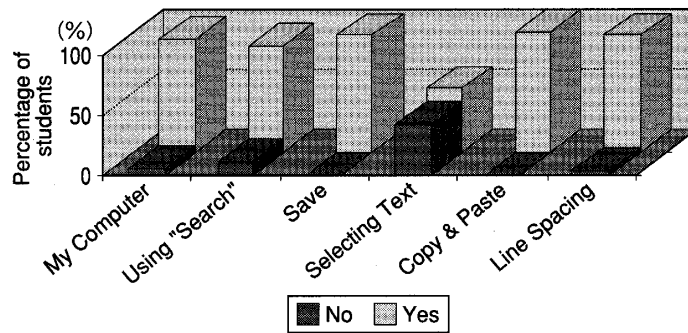
Analysis

In the first part of our survey, we divided the computer skills into 4 groups. The first being the absolute minimum ability required to write on a computer. These include being able to use the "Start" button to maneuver to desired programs, how to change/adjust fonts, and how to print. Of the students surveyed, 97% said that they were able to perform these functions. We felt that these were the most basic skills because all students would be required to access a word processing program (MS Word) (most likely using the "Start" button), change the font from Japanese to English, and then print what they wrote in order to hand it in to the instructor.

The second level of skills are those that require the ability to "Save" a file, and then find it again later, change the line spacing in MS Word, as well as the ability to use a mouse to select text, copy and paste. See Graph 1.

Again, we found that the vast majority of participants claim the ability to perform these skills. The relatively high percentage (42%) of students who said they did not know how to use a mouse to select text is probably more indicative of a problem understanding the survey question, as it was the only one not to include a Japanese translation of the skill (see Appendix

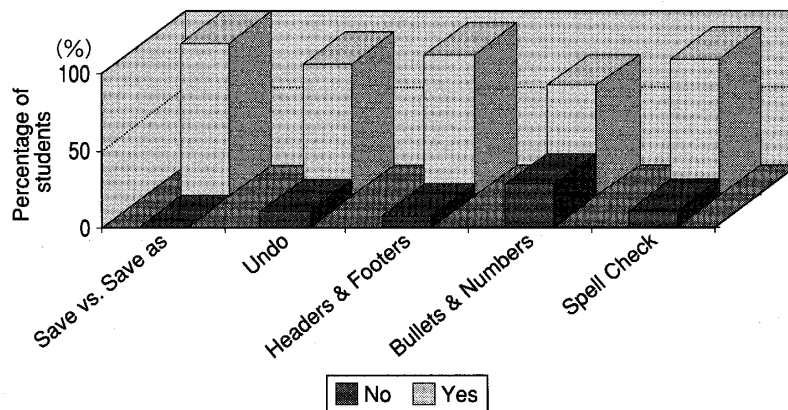
Graph 1: Level 2 Skills



A). As all of the students (100%) said that they could “copy” and “paste”, it must be assumed that they know how to select text if they can “copy.”

The level 3 skills were decided upon because it was felt that these were skills that were more related to editing and the cosmetic appearance of a document than to its actual production. These skills include the difference between “Save” and “Save as”, the “Undo” command, how to use “Headers” and “Footers”, how to use “Bullets and Numbering” for lists, and how to use the “spell check”. See Graph 2.

Graph 2: Level 3 Skills

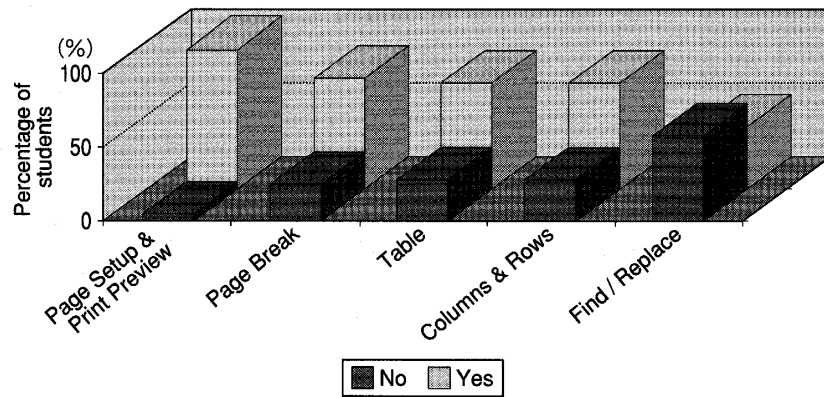


It seemed that the most difficult of these Level 3 skills was the ability to make lists using bullets or numbers, but still 72% of the students surveyed said that they could perform this function. There was very little difference between the two groups in this category.

The Level 4 skills were those that were judged to be the least commonly used for basic writing assignments. These include using the “Page Setup” and “Print Preview” menus, how to insert a “Page Break”, how to make a “Table” as well as adding cells, columns, and rows to an existing table, and finally, how to use the “Find” and “Replace” commands. See Graph 3.

In the first 2 graphs, we found that both the KC students and the KU students were comparative in the computer abilities we asked about. At this level, we found the first major difference. While the total percentage for the Find and Replace command was 42% yes, and 58% no, 60% of the KC students understood these commands compared with only 29% of the KU students.

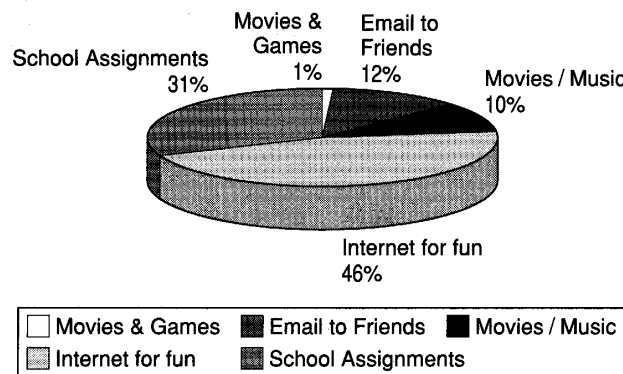
Graph 3: Level 4 Skills



Based on the results of the first part of this survey, we can conclude that the majority of students enrolled in these classes have, at the very least, enough of an understanding of MS Word to comfortably create a basic word processing document. This would seem to indicate that at least at a basic level, computers in the EFL writing class do not appear to be a hindrance.

Turning to the second part of our survey, we now look more closely at the writing process coupled with the use of computers. Graph 4 shows how students spend their time on computers. While internet usage made up most of the time (45%) students spend on computers, we found that almost a third of the time (31%) was for completing school assignments.

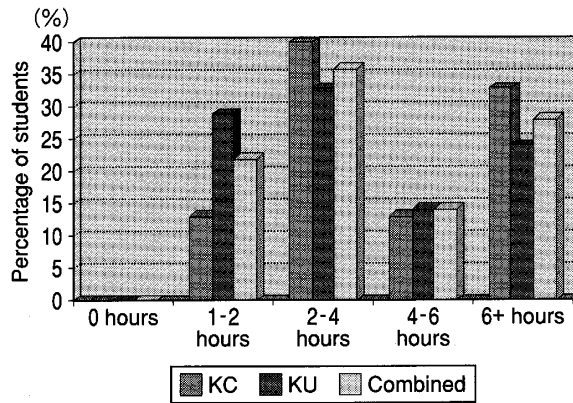
Graph 4: Computer Usage



As familiarity with a computer is one factor that could lower anxiety about its use, we asked how much time our students spend on a computer outside of the classroom. There was a fairly even spread from relatively light computer users who spend only 1 or 2 hours a week on a computer to fairly heavy computer users who spend more than 6 hours a week on a computer. See Graph 5.

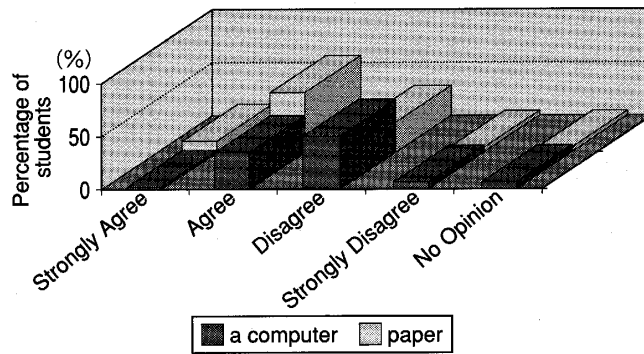
All of the students spend at least some time on a computer outside of class, with 42% of them spending more than 4 hours. This would seem to indicate that none of them have any particular aversion to using a computer. In fact, 73% of the students agreed with the statement that they felt comfortable using a computer. Only 22% disagreed with the statement, while almost 6% had no opinion.

Graph 5: “How many hours a week do you spend on a computer outside of class?”



The writing process is one that can be difficult in one’s native language let alone in a foreign one, and the preference to write on a computer as opposed to writing on paper is a personal one. Graph 6 looks at how students feel about writing on both paper and on a computer.

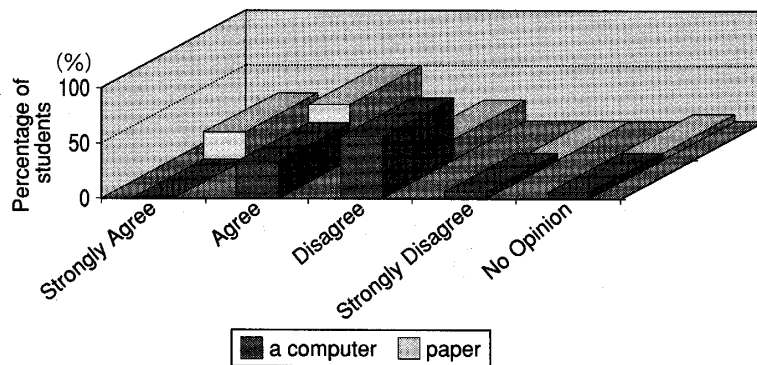
Graph 6: “It is easy for me to begin a writing assignment on (paper/a computer).”



Among the students surveyed, only 1 agreed with the statement that it was easy to begin on paper, and then disagreed with the statement that it was easy to begin a writing assignment on a computer. One other student also had no opinion in regards to beginning on paper and disagreed that it was easy to start on a computer. While 56% of the students disagreed that it was easy to begin a writing assignment on paper, that number fell to 31% when talking about computers. So, while accepting that the writing process itself can be difficult, more students felt it was easier to begin to write on a computer than on paper. In fact, 59% of the students surveyed felt that they wrote faster when on a computer than when writing on paper.

As taught in our classes, writing is a cyclical process involving proofreading and revision. When asked, 67% of the students felt that it was easier to proofread on a computer than on paper. This high number could be due, in part, to the automatic functions of MS Word that indicate misspelled words and possible problems with grammar. But proofreading and editing involve more than just correcting mistakes: this is also the chance for the writer to modify the content of his/her own writing. Graph 7 looks at how the students feel about making these changes on both paper and computers.

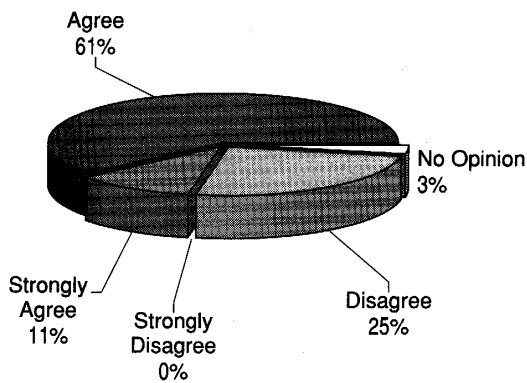
Graph 7: "It is easy for me to make changes on (paper/a computer)."



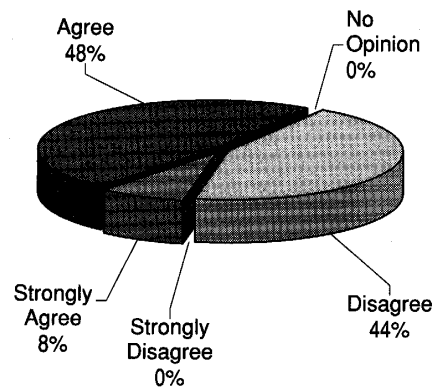
Looking at the middle of Graph 7, we can see that 56% disagreed that it was easy to make changes on paper, yet only 19% felt that way in regards to a computer. While revising and editing are complex processes, 25% of the students strongly agreed that it was easy to make changes on a computer versus 0% who felt that way about paper.

Up to now, we have looked at the writing process without regards to language. As this survey was given in EFL writing classes by native speaking instructors, the students might have been predisposed to assume that they were only being asked about writing in English. The following graphs (Graph 8 & Graph 9) show how they feel about writing in Japanese (their L1) on a computer and compares that to how they feel about writing in English on one.

Graph 8: "I feel comfortable writing in Japanese on a computer."



Graph 9: "I feel comfortable writing in English on a computer."



It is pleasing to see that a clear majority of students felt comfortable writing on a computer in either language. It should not come as a surprise that a higher percentage of students (72%) feel at ease when writing in Japanese than in English (56%).

CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Research Findings

The findings of the first part of this survey seem to indicate that a majority of students, by the time they have reached our classes, have knowledge of the basic computer skills necessary to use a word processor such as MS Word both effectively and efficiently (Graphs 1-3). In fact, 86% of them said that they had received instruction in using a word processor. It should be noted though that 58% also said that they would like to receive further instruction. So, as far as

the use of the computer as a tool is concerned, it does not appear to be a hindrance.

The findings of the second part of our survey, more related to the use of the computer for writing, showed that students had a clear preference for using computers rather than doing paper-based writing assignments. While more students felt comfortable using a computer to write in Japanese, a clear majority also felt comfortable using a computer to write in English. So, the results of this part of the survey also seemed to indicate that computers in the EFL writing class are more of a help to students than a hindrance. Given the prominence of computers in today's society, it is reassuring to know that our students are comfortable in making use of the latest technology has to offer as an aid in developing their EFL proficiency.

Limitations of the current survey

Though our results indicated that the use of computers in the EFL writing class can be a help, our subjects were all 2nd and 3rd year university students with experience in using computers in EFL writing classes. The small sampling of students surveyed might not represent the overall student population, particularly those just entering university, or those who have not yet been exposed to computer enhanced classrooms.

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Appendix A

Do you know...	
How to use the Start (スタート) button to maneuver to desired programs?	Yes / No
How to use of the Search (検索) for Files or Folders command?	Yes / No
How to use マイコンピュータ to look for folders and files ?	Yes / No
How to save (上書き保存) files to a floppy disk?	Yes / No
The difference between Save (上書き保存) and Save As (名前を付けて保存)?	Yes / No
How to use the Page Set-up (ページ設定) and Print Preview (印刷プレビュー) menus?	Yes / No
How to Print (印刷)?	Yes / No
How to use a mouse to SELECT TEXT ?	Yes / No
How to Copy (コピー) and Paste (貼り付け) commands (both within a single program, and between different programs/files)?	Yes / No
How to Change Fonts (フォント), Font Sizes (フォントサイズ), and Font Features (フォントスタイル) (Bold , <i>Italics</i> , etc.)?	Yes / No
How to change Line spacing (段落の行間) in Microsoft Word?	Yes / No
How to start a new page (改ページ)?	Yes / No
How to Make a table (表)?	Yes / No
How to add/delete columns and rows (表の列や行を挿入/削除) to an existing table?	Yes / No
The UNDO (元に戻す) command?	Yes / No
How to use Headers and Footers (ヘッダーとフッター)?	Yes / No
How to use Bullets and Numbering for lists (段落番号の付いた箇条書きについて)?	Yes / No
How to Use the Spell Check (文章校正)?	Yes / No
How to Use the Find (検索) and Replace (置換) commands?	Yes / No

Appendix B

1. It is easy for me to begin a writing assignment on paper.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
2. It is easy for me to begin a writing assignment on a computer.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
3. It is easy for me to make changes on paper.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
4. It is easy for me to make changes on a computer.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
5. I write faster on a computer than on paper.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
6. It is easier to proofread on a computer than on paper.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
7. I feel comfortable using a computer.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
8. I feel comfortable writing in Japanese on a computer.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
9. I feel comfortable writing in English on a computer.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion
10. How many hours a week do you spend on a computer outside of class?
a) 0 b) 1-2 hours c) 2-4 d) 4-6 e) 6+ hours
(If you answered "a", then go to #12)
11. Please describe how you spend your time on computers:

Internet for fun: ____ % of the time	}	Total should be 100.
Email to friends: : ____ % of the time		
Movies/Music: : ____ % of the time		
Games: : ____ % of the time		
School assignments: : ____ % of the time		
12. How many classes do you have this semester? _____
 How many of those are taught by Japanese professors? _____
 How often must you type assignments in Japanese? ____ times a semester
 How often must you type assignments in English? ____ times a semester
13. Have you received instruction in using a word processor (MS Word, etc.)? Yes / No
14. Would you like to receive instruction in using a word processor? Yes / No
15. I prefer to do my assignments on a computer.
Strongly agree agree disagree strongly disagree no opinion