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**Instructional Technology, L2 Writing Theory,  
and IFL:**

**A Case-study Conducted in a British  
University among Tutors and Students**

**By**

**Daria Mizza**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Italian Studies

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

In addition, I declare that Chapter V, devoted to the research methodology, and Chapter VII, focussing on the analysis conducted among language tutors, incorporate a limited amount of data used for completing the written assignment for the Research Methods Module, taken at the Centre of Academic Practice of the University of Warwick in the academic year 2004-2005, and submitted in April 2007. While the data collected and analysed for the Research Methods assignment partly coincides with the data included in this research work, the treatment presented in the present study is original and independent from that assignment.



## ABSTRACT

This study reviews a series of theoretical models and educational experiences, in order to examine how some of the claims made in the existing literature regarding the role of IT – mainly computer technologies – in writing instruction play out in the case of Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL). With this purpose in mind, this study examines a specific context – three IFL modules taught at the University of Warwick – and uses relevant teaching and learning experiences as a case-study and data sample. By using qualitative analysis supported by some quantitative methodologies, this study triangulates data from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus-groups, field notes, classroom observation rubrics, as well as classroom artefacts, including online resources and educational software used over the course of the academic years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006.

The data collected is filtered through a tripartite framework – learning/instructional environment, IFL tutors, and IFL students – designed to address the need expressed in the literature for analysis of multiple dimensions in complex interactions (Abbott, 1997; Athanases and Heath, 1995; Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999; Snyder, 1997). The salient themes which emerge from the study are the critical roles of IFL tutors' and IFL students' expectations as well as the framework of values underlying these, along with particular features of information technologies themselves, in shaping participants' experiences and practices with respect to IT and writing, sometimes in unanticipated ways.

Finally, the study considers the ways in which the results of the present research support, contradict, or expand existing literature, especially in relation to a number of specific factors, such as: the type of IT used in writing instruction; the physical configurations of IT-enhanced classrooms; and students' as well as tutors' approaches to learning and teaching IFL writing with and without technology.

While the present work, like many other studies in the field of SLA and L2 writing, does not provide complete answer to the complex questions of language learning, it highlights the importance of both the instructional environment as well as the participants' framework of values. Only then, IT will be able to potentially enhance language instruction and become an integral component of learning. This research raises new questions, providing the basis for further research in the area of SLA theory and pedagogy.

## TERMINOLOGY AND ABBREVIATIONS

### **- Context**

In the present study “context” does not refer to the political, economic, and geographic situation of a university, but rather to the inherent organization, academic priorities and culture of learning present at the institution in question.

### **- Curriculum**

The term “curriculum” is used broadly and comprehensively to describe the enactment of teaching, learning and the content of such teaching and learning that people perform and experience in the context of a particular course (Stern, Allen, and Harley, 1992: 20).

### **- Foreign Language (FL)**

In this study “foreign language” refers to the teaching of a language to learners who normally read, write, speak, and listen in English. The classes taught by the participants to this study were of Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL).

### **- Information Technology (IT)**

For the purpose of this study, “Information Technology” includes, but is not limited to, computers and computer applications, the Internet, CD-ROM, laser technology, video, telecommunications, networking and other emerging technologies. Distance learning and online learning, per se, are not included in this study. The intent of this study is to examine instruction planned by language tutors rather than determined by persons outside the classroom.



## **- *Instruction***

Instruction is interpreted liberally to mean teaching. This study considers instruction to be anything a teacher does to direct or guide learning in a recognized course of study. One focus in this study is on how and why IFL tutors use technology when working with students. Tutors use technology as they present information, create environments in which their students use technology in the learning process, make information available online, or communicate with students via e-mail. Instruction occurs in the regular classroom and in computer labs to which tutors take their students. In the broadest sense, instruction includes activities such as homework and assignments students produced outside the classroom.

## **- *Second Language Acquisition (SLA)***

The term “L2 acquisition” is used here to refer to any situation in which adults learn a new language. Some SLA texts distinguish between the terms “second” and “foreign”, and between “acquisition” and “learning”. We will not make this distinction throughout this study.

## **- *Second Language Writing (L2 writing)***

With the acronym “L2 Writing” we indicate second or non-native language writing.

## **- *Syllabus***

The term “syllabus” is used to refer narrowly to a fixed plan for instruction (e.g., a course outline or program policy representing the basic elements of what is intended to be taught in the academic year).

### **- Teacher beliefs**

The debate about the difference and relationship between “knowledge” and “belief” is central to a variety of scholarly traditions. For the purposes of the current study, however, the distinction drawn by Pajares in his seminal work *Teachers’ Beliefs and Educational Research: Cleaning up a Messy Construct* will be used. According to the author, a “belief” can be defined as being based on judgement and evaluation, in contrast to “knowledge”, which is “based on objective fact” (1992: 313) Undoubtedly cases occur where the distinction between “knowledge” and “belief” becomes uncertain. This study, however, taps into IFL tutors’ feelings about “teaching with technology”, on which topic tutors will make evaluations and judgments. As such, their statements about the use of technology fall within the definition of “beliefs”.

**Dedication:**

**This dissertation is dedicated to all the students and colleagues I had in Hungary, England, Tunisia, and the United States over the past few years.**

**I will be forever grateful to each of my students. From your hopes and efforts, I have learned that my job is important and that I have to enjoy every single aspect of it.**

**You all are in my memory, and you will continue to inspire me to develop my mind and talents.**

**I hope each of you will aim high: this work is for you.**



# Introduction

Information Technology (IT) – the computer hardware, software, and peripheral devices used for networked communication and information dissemination – has become both ubiquitous and indispensable in the British higher education context, where projections of claims concerning the necessity of incorporating so-called “technological literacy” (Warschauer, 2002) into curricula appear regularly in education policy,<sup>1</sup> especially at university level.<sup>2</sup> IT is increasingly present, for instance, in First Language (L1) composition programs, in an effort to meet the necessity of preparing students for future employment. Furthermore, in recognition of this trend, IT has begun in the last decade to infiltrate foreign language (FL) teaching and is gaining a toehold in Second Language (L2) writing instruction (Egbert, Chao, Hanson-Smith, 1999).

The impact that IT may have on the writing process has been one of the major concerns among practitioners and researchers. Several of them have attempted to establish

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the good practice guides are currently available online from The Higher Education Academy Subject Network for Languages: <<http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/>> and <<http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/guidecontents.aspx>>. Other relevant articles are: Dempster, J.A. (2002). Are Institutions Ready for Collaborative Learning on the Web? *Interactions*, 6(1). Available online <<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/cap/resources/interactions/archive/issue16/ed/>> (Last accessed 27/8/05); McClintock, R. (1995). *Power and Pedagogy: Transforming Education through Information Technology*, New York: Teachers College Press. Available online <<http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/academic/texts/mcclintock/pp/title.html>> (Last accessed 12/08/07).

<sup>2</sup> The following titles include further specific literature: Laurillard, D. (2002). *Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London, UK: Routledge; Garrison, R., and Andersen, T. (2000). Transforming and Enhancing University Teaching: Stronger and Weaker Technological Influences. In *Changing University Teaching: Reflections on Creating Educational Technologies*, edited by T. Evans and D. Nation. London, UK: Kogan Page; Bahnot, B., and Fallows, S. (Eds.) (2002). *Educational Development through Information and Communications Technology*. London, UK: Kogan Page; Dempster, J.A., and Blackmore, P. (2002). Developing Research-based Learning Using ICT in HE Curricula: the Role of Research and Evaluation. In *Academic and Educational Development: Research, Evaluation and Changing Practice in HE*, edited by R. Macdonald and J. Wisdom, 129-139. London, UK: Kogan Page.

a rationale for a specific application of IT – computer-technologies – which has been regarded as the most suitable IT application for both learning and instruction of L1 and L2 writing.

While a great deal of enthusiasm exists for the implementation of computer-based activities in FL classrooms at university level throughout Great Britain, there is reason to be cautious about swift and widespread use in all contexts. As with any educational and classroom activity, it is important to have justification and theoretical grounding for any decisions concerning technology. Whether we acknowledge it or not, when we use computer-based activities in the classroom we are being guided by theoretical principles about how languages are learned. While IT, and more specifically computer technologies, offer numerous benefits in a variety of language learning activities, it is also true that they are not the goal in and of themselves. Therefore, it is important to consider the theoretical underpinnings of the study of IT applications in educational contexts. These include Second Language Acquisition (SLA) principles – in particular how they relate to the role of L2 writing and instructional technology –, and the studies related to FL teachers, whose beliefs and experiences underline frameworks of values about language pedagogy and L2 writing instruction.

With this purpose in mind, the present study will review a series of theoretical models and educational experiences. Then, it will examine how some of the claims made in the existing literature regarding the role of IT – mainly computer technologies – in writing instruction play out in the case of Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL), using relevant teaching and learning experiences at the University of Warwick (UK) as a case study and data sample.

The applied part of the research will attempt to respond to the need for contextualized investigation identified in the studies reviewed, by examining the attitudes



of the participants (seven IFL tutors<sup>3</sup> and 29 IFL students based in the Italian department of the University of Warwick),<sup>4</sup> as well as the learning and instructional environment in which they operate; the latter is mainly related, but not limited to, the classroom itself, both in its traditional<sup>5</sup> and IT-enhanced<sup>6</sup> forms. In those classrooms, IFL tutors apply various techniques and methodologies, bringing into play their pedagogical beliefs and frameworks of values. We will focus on the teaching and learning practices in three IFL modules which are characterized by the presence of a substantial or a prevailing component of writing instruction (respectively, the module *IT101: Italian Language for Beginners* and the two modules *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III*).

The collection of data was conducted mainly through in-class observations,<sup>7</sup> but also through other quantitative and qualitative research instruments.<sup>8</sup> The study will triangulate data from field notes, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus-groups conducted between October 2005 and November 2006.

---

<sup>3</sup> Those language teachers selected for the investigation in this study, conducted in the Italian department of the University of Warwick, will be indicated as *language tutors*, in order to differentiate them from the *teachers* operating in other educational contexts.

<sup>4</sup> Before conducting the data collection, selected participants were asked for voluntary consent in participating as a subject in this study. On that occasion, the main purpose, methods and procedures followed in the study were explained. The participants were assured that all their responses would be kept confidential and only the persons directly involved in the study would have access to the data. In addition, they were told that short quotations from tutor interviews and student focus-groups would be added as examples, but the quotations would be anonymous, and no information that would allow someone else to identify the speaker would be included.

<sup>5</sup> With the adjective *traditional* we indicate those classrooms which incorporate no IT facilities.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this study, *IT-enhanced classes* include both classrooms equipped with IT facilities (TV, tape recorder and CD player, data projection, and computers) and the four language laboratories located in the premises of the Language Centre of the University of Warwick, a designated central service unit which makes its facilities available to the Department of Italian and to its students.

<sup>7</sup> A description of one of the IT-enhanced classes, the “Language Lab”, is included in the relevant *Snapshot* in Chapter VI.

<sup>8</sup> Chapter V gives a detailed explanation of the research methods and instruments used for the investigation conducted in this study.

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it will attempt to refine our understanding of IT and L2 writing practices and instruction through the relationships among theories grounded in SLA, L2 writing research, instructional technology, teacher beliefs, and data collected in traditional and IT-enhanced classrooms. We will then consider the ways in which the results of this research support, contradict, or expand existing literature, especially in relation to a number of specific factors: for example, the type of IT used in classes; the physical configurations of IT-enhanced classrooms; and students' as well as tutors' approaches to learning and teaching IFL writing with and without technology.

On the basis of these findings, the study intends to contribute to the complex, ongoing discussion concerning the role of IT in L2 writing, leading to the construction of an effective theoretical model of writing that can accommodate IT within its framework. Though important to the theoretical foundations of writing research, a fully developed model of writing has yet to emerge from the many studies accumulated to date. This lack has been lamented repeatedly, for instance by Silva (1993, 1997), Cumming (1998), and most recently by Grabe (2001). The latter references preliminary models proposed by Hayes (1996) and Grabe and Kaplan (1996). He points out several ongoing issues and unanswered questions which these models have not yet addressed completely. He also calls for further research to expand the empirical foundations on which writing theories and models are based.

What is needed is therefore, at least in part, research aiming to expand theoretical models of L2 writing in order to include within them a technological dimension. Several features that characterize the specific context of the present study make the research undertaken especially fruitful in contributing to the expansion of theoretical and praxis-oriented understandings of L2 writing. First, the IFL dimension is of considerable interest, because studies of IFL remain somewhat scarce. While the English as a Foreign Language



(EFL) segment of L2 writing instruction is an expanding market (Santos, Atkinson, Erickson, Matsuda, and Silva, 2000), relatively little research has focused on IFL. A further interesting feature of the study is related to the IT experience itself, which involves writing tools developed for the teaching and learning of IFL writing (while most writing tools are so far designated to the teaching of EFL).

Thus this study provides a situated examination of an environment and a number of participants whose characteristics are relatively underrepresented in L2 writing literature: IFL taught in a university environment to students with English as their L1 and moderate to high level IT experience.

The first part of the study (Chapters I, II, and III) conducts a literature review and presents the rationale for the applied and analytical part of the thesis (Chapters VI, VII, VIII).

Chapter I outlines the history of L2 writing instruction, from the grammar-translation era to present-day-computer-based writing courses, addressing important notions about writing, including the importance of explicit writing instruction, and that of a process versus product orientation within it.

The following chapter (Chapter II) focuses on the teaching of writing at all levels through the support of technology. The chapter presents a review of relevant learning theories and empirical research literature associated with educational technologies, focusing on the use of computer technologies for FL teaching. The latter will be situated within the history of approaches to L2 education as well as the particular history of computer-assisted language learning.

Chapter III will be looking at the interest generated among researchers and practitioners by the (actual and potential) role of specific computer applications to writing in L2, such as software available for writing with the computer, Computer-Aided/Assisted Language Learning (CALL) software specifically designed for the development of the



listening, reading, writing and speaking skills, as well as computer networking for communication.

An overview of the learning and instructional environment as well as the participants in the case study is conducted in Chapter IV, where we will also clarify the rationale for and formulate the main research questions guiding the following analysis and interpretation of data.

Chapter V describes the research methods applied to the project, justifying the use of qualitative analysis supported by selected quantitative methodologies.

A mapping of the educational context is conducted in Chapter VI. We will focus on the classroom, both traditional and IT-enhanced, through descriptions of its physical features and observations of the dynamics between participants, i.e. both IFL tutors and students, operating with them.

Chapter VII conducts an in depth examination of beliefs, experiences and current practices of IFL tutors involved in the study, examining how these underlie and support their framework of values about L2 writing and technology. In order to uncover significant issues relating to language tutors' practice as well as to their behaviour and role in the classroom, two areas of tutors' beliefs will be explored.<sup>9</sup> The first part of the chapter refers to individual tutors' experiences, framework of values, and understanding of instructional technology in FL learning and teaching, while the second part focuses on reflections about the methodology used during instruction, and includes thoughts about managing and guiding writing lessons, as well as beliefs about the writing process. The findings will then be compared with existing literature on tutors' beliefs.

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<sup>9</sup> As Cuban (2001: 170) claims, teachers ultimately make decisions as to whether to include technology in their classrooms. In keeping with this observation, the present study regards teacher beliefs as crucial in impacting instructional decisions, and an examination of beliefs becomes essential to identify and understand IFL tutors' role and behaviours, especially in the classroom.

In order to complete the examination of the participant's domain, Chapter VIII will explore students' approaches to the learning of IFL writing with and without the help of technology. We will first explore the main difficulties they encounter with IFL writing, their views about the role of the IFL tutors, and their expectations and pedagogical values in relation to specific activities proposed by tutors. Then, the investigation will focus on difficulties and benefits that participants may have obtained while using IT, especially in relation to IFL writing. From these current practices and views, differences between IFL tutors' and IFL students' approaches to IFL teaching and learning will emerge.

The participants in the study are sometimes operating with different pedagogical beliefs about writing in Italian and the role of IT support. Final observations on Chapter VII and VIII will clarify relations – i.e. both areas of accord and areas of discord – between IFL tutors and their students with respect to L2 writing and technology. In examining participants' expectations and goals, and the frameworks of values underlying them, the study will first focus on the areas where conflicts of goals, expectations and values appeared between the IFL tutors and students. Such a focus, however, will not lead us to neglect the places where participants were in accord, or at least appeared to be headed in the same direction.

The final chapter (Chapter IX) will examine both similarities and differences in these IFL tutors' and students' frameworks of values. From the ways in which these shaped the dynamics in both traditional and IT-enhanced IFL classrooms, we can draw conclusions which offer a foundation for further, richer interpretation of future research concerning the roles of IT itself in contributing to the development of writing skills, the students' levels of motivation and engagement in activities, as well as students' performance on assigned written essays.



The findings of this study are significant in that they add to the existing body of knowledge on SLA,<sup>10</sup> reconsider the findings from previous CALL research<sup>11</sup> and improve our understanding of IT-enhanced language learning environments. First, this study puts together contextual elements related to the instructional/learning environment and individual elements pertaining to the participants, rather than looking solely at one separate variable, as most previous studies have done. The study provides, therefore, a fuller view of the complex interactions taking place in the learning and instructional context, and a more pragmatic picture of the nature of the classroom environment. Second, unlike much of the previous CALL research, this study focuses on the voices of both tutors and students in connection with their classroom environments, rather than exclusively on attitudes towards the computer as a separate entity, or on learner outcomes. Third, this descriptive view of the ethnographic approach to classroom research provides IFL researchers with rich and complex views, which can support further investigation of IT-enhanced language learning environments. A word of warning is needed at this point concerning some necessary limitations of the present study. First of all, the substantial qualitative component of this study relies on the participants' construction of their own educational beliefs and classroom experiences/practices.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, although the researcher has tried to ensure a measure of objectivity through the adoption of quantitative methods at relevant points in the research project, the findings of this study are characterized by the presence of an element of subjectivity and do not necessarily reflect the experiences of all IFL teachers. Second, data were gathered in selected language classrooms – either IT-enhanced or not – of a specific Italian Department, at a British University. Thus, the data do not fully reflect all IFL, technology-enhanced or traditional language classroom settings. If the findings of the study are

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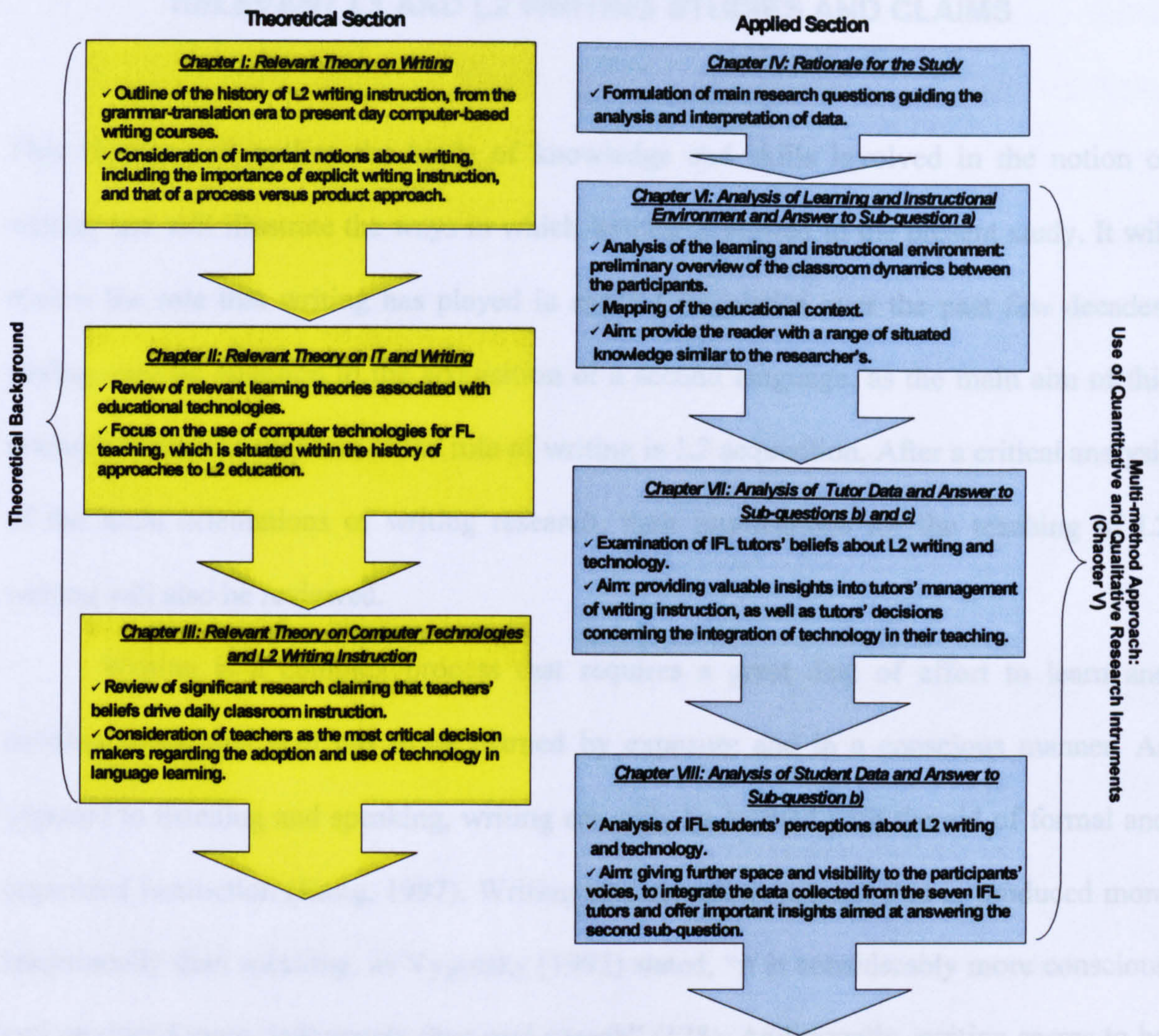
<sup>10</sup> For details of existing research on SLA see Chapter I, Section 2.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of CALL, see Chapter II, Section 1.1.

<sup>12</sup> Teachers' beliefs will be dealt with in detail in Chapter III, Section 1.2.

transferred to other settings, the context in which the research was conducted must therefore be taken into account.





**Chapter IX: General Conclusions**

- ✓ Identification of participants' – students and tutors – diverse framework of values
- ✓ Definition of the role of IT in L2 writing instruction: from neutral and transparent into a critical and visible component of learning
- ✓ Suggestion for future research in the area of SLA theory and pedagogy

Table 1: Synoptic Chart of the Overall Research Project



## **CHAPTER I**

### **RELEVANT L1 AND L2 WRITING STUDIES AND CLAIMS**

This chapter will outline the kinds of knowledge and skills involved in the notion of writing and will illustrate the ways in which writing is viewed in the present study. It will review the role that writing has played in applied linguistics over the past few decades, paying specific attention to the acquisition of a second language, as the main aim of this research is the investigation of the role of writing in L2 acquisition. After a critical analysis of the main orientations of writing research, their implications for the teaching of L2 writing will also be reviewed.

Writing is a complex process that requires a great deal of effort to learn and develop, since this skill has to be learned by exposure and in a conscious manner. As opposed to listening and speaking, writing can only be learned with the aid of formal and organized instruction (Emig, 1997). Writing is a conscious process that is produced more intentionally than speaking; as Vygotsky (1992) stated, “it is considerably more conscious and produced more deliberately than oral speech” (128). Additionally, writing seems to be more challenging than reading because it deals with creating a new text rather than interpreting already existing texts. According to Emig (1997), writing involves “originating and creating a unique verbal product that is graphically recorded” (8). Furthermore, during the process of writing, a writer has to meet special demands in order to convey his/her meaning, because of the lack of the supralinguistic cues available to the speaker or the listener. The only tool that a writer has to convey his message to the reader is the text, which requires the writer to be acquainted with the proper use of words and grammatical structures.

This complexity inherent in the writing process becomes even greater when a writer composes in a FL, and writing texts in the target language is possibly the most challenging

task that students face during their study. In fact learners may obtain a high level of proficiency in terms of grammar and vocabulary, but when they are engaged in a writing task requiring them to present their ideas and thoughts they may find significant organizational difficulties.

First of all, it is important to understand the main notion of writing. Borrowing from the classification developed by Silva and Matsuda (2001), we will first consider the notions of context, instruction and text in more detail. Then, we will deal with the writers, taking into account the differences between L1 and L2 writers, as well as the variation among L2 writers.

## **1. The Notion of Writing: The Act of Writing and the Writers**

### **1.1 The Act of Writing**

The act of writing is always embedded in a rhetorical situation, in which constantly changing elements are combined in a complex web of relationships. In the following sections, we will describe three main elements: the context, the instruction, and the text.

#### **1.1.1 The Relational Aspect: The Notion of Context**

The extended notion of context takes from New Literacy Studies the idea that writing only makes sense within wider social and cultural practices, in which the writer, the reader, the text, and the reality interact between each other. The framework of the communication triangle described by Kinneavy (1971) can be of help in understanding this concept. It



posits four elements in every communicative situation: the encoder or speaker or writer; the decoder or audience; the message or text; and the reality to which the text refers. Of course a producer of text may emphasise any one of the four different elements and any of the possible relationships, as Kinneavy pointed out in his discussion of discourse production. Widdowson (1978), for example, insists on the primacy of the writer-audience relationship, and more in general, while conventional composition teaching focussed on the message or the product or the written composition, the new rhetoric investigates the process of writing itself and the development of writing abilities within that encoder, shifting its focus to the encoder or writer.

Skilled writers are able to create successful texts by predicting reader's background knowledge and anticipating what they are likely to expect from a particular piece of writing. According to Matsuda (2001), the writer's task is not simple, since he or she has to negotiate, through the construction of text, his or her view of the elements of writing, that is the rhetorical situation integrating writer, reader, text and reality with the views held by the readers. Although never exactly the same, similar situations tend to recur, giving rise to typified responses in particular rhetorical situations and functions. However, the varying and ever-changing nature of the elements of writing complicates the writer's task. In order to manage this complex process, writers adopt, develop and use various strategies.

### **1.1.2 The Strategic Aspect: The Notion of Instruction**

The strategies that writers use are often internalised and not used consciously. For most writers – especially the less experienced ones – it is helpful to have an explicit understanding of some of the strategies that can be internalised through practice. Understanding the strategic aspect of writing is particularly important for teachers of writing, because it is central to writing instruction that writers make progress as a direct

result of the instruction they receive. As a matter of fact, while a general level of proficiency in the target language is at the core of a student's ability to write clearly and accurately (Bardovi-Harlig, 1987; Cumming, 1989), there are also aspects of writing proficiency that are either specific to a student's writing or that may be developed through writing (Weissberg, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Tsang and Wong (2000), in their studies of the effects of explicit grammar teaching on student writing, hold the assumption that instruction affects student accuracy in the use of the target language, both in their writing and also in the range of choice of structure and vocabulary available to them. In 1994, Archibald investigated how the discourse proficiency of secondary school students writing in ESL developed in different age groups, finding that students improved in their use of discourse markers and developed a better feel for the contextual appropriateness of their language. In 1998, Shaw and Liu analysed the ways in which the features associated with academic register changed over the period of a pre-session course in English for academic purposes, finding an increase in impersonality, formality, and hedging in the students' writing at the end of the course. This was attributed to an increased understanding of the norms of academic writing. These studies demonstrate that instruction can affect learners' understanding of the cultural and contextual appropriateness of particular structures or vocabulary, as well as their understanding of the norms and expectations of the target genres regarding form, choice of information, and its sequencing and structuring.

Sengupta (2000) describes the effects of giving instruction in revision strategies to writers of ESL, finding that explicit teaching of these strategies had a measurable effect on the quality of the students' final draft. Similar reports by Cresswell (2000), Connor and Farmer (1990), Akyel and Kamisli (1997) hold the assumption that instruction has an

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth anticipating here that the present study confirms the assumption that instruction in writing does have an effect and that the knowledge required of a writer is learnable and the skills trainable.



effect on the students' ability to reflect on their writing and to produce more effective and appropriate texts in the target language.

These findings seem to confirm the importance of instruction both in the development of students' writing processes and in the overall achievement of their written products. It remains for us to look at the important role played by the textual aspect of writing, which will be examined below.

### **1.1.3 The Textual Aspect: The Notion of Text**

It is through written text that the writer constructs, represents and negotiates his or her conceptions of the writer, the reader, the text, and the reality. According to Halliday (1973), writers create several meanings: ideational, that is the meaning of their ideas; textual, the meaning that helps the readers navigate through the text; and interpersonal, which is the meaning relating to the relationship between the writer and the reader. The knowledge of how these meanings can be constructed through the use of particular written discourse features is a crucial part of the writer's competence. Written discourse achieves additional meaning through typographical features such as punctuation marks, capitalization, italics, indentation, etc. Beside the presence of morphological, lexical and syntactic as well as idiomatic knowledge on the part of the writer, the ability to write presupposes also the cohesion of sentences (Halliday and Hasan, 1976); and the coherence of the whole text (Witte and Faigley, 1981; Carrel, 1982). In order for the process of writing to begin, the writer has to assess the rhetorical situation and identify the primary purpose of writing, which may be expressive (emphasis on the writer); persuasive (emphasis on the reader); referential (emphasis on the reality) or literary (emphasis on the text) (Kinneavy, 1971).

The exploration of the three notions of context, instruction and text has clarified the notion of writing, but we also need to take into account the characteristics of the writers described in the next section.

## **1.2 The Writers**

For the purpose of this study, it is important to bear in mind two types of differences between writers: *a)* differences between L1 and L2 writers and *b)* variation among L2 writers as a group. As we will see, learners have their own personalities and their acquisition of L2 writing skills can be influenced by numerous individual variables.

### **1.2.1 Differences between L1 and L2 Writers**

Borrowing Canale and Swain's (1980) framework for communicative competence, we can say that potential L1 and L2 differences concern at least grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence.

Silva evaluated 72 studies and, comparing L1 and L2 writing, found that not all the components of these models are appropriate in an L2 context. Texts written by L2 students were found to be less effective than those of native-English speaker peers (Silva, 1997) and various studies, for example Purves (1988), suggest that texts produced by L2 writers are generally shorter, less cohesive, and contains more errors. According to these findings, salient differences regard both the composing processes (that is planning, transcribing, and reviewing actions) and features of written texts such as fluency, accuracy, quality, as well as structure (discoursal, morphosyntactic, and lexicosemantic) (Silva, 1993).

A source of differences between L1 and L2 writing is the writer's relative proficiency in the target language, a distinction which clearly exists between writers



writing in their L1 and in their L2, and is particularly important for writers with low levels of proficiency in their L2, who often rely heavily on their first language resources (Manchón, Roca de Larios and Murphy, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000).

In the light of these findings, we can outline the main factors acting as potential sources of explanation for writing differences between L1 and L2 writers:

*- Impact of the first language on L2 writing*

The impact of the L1 on L2 writing may vary: in the case of languages with a common ancestry and a long history of contact, students may easily draw on their L1, but the presence of highly different languages may pose a considerable barrier. To start with, learners' development could be facilitated by the potentially positive influence of strategy transfer to the L2 context (Zamel, 1997). However, the research on L1 literacy transfer is conflicting, as the results are sometimes contradictory and much of the comparative research is characterized by small samples and lack of reliable significance tests. Despite the evidence provided by many successful adult writers in their first language who are able to bring cognitive abilities and meta-cognitive strategies to the task of L2 writing, research shows that linguistic and rhetorical conventions do not always transfer successfully across languages. Therefore, especially if we think of extreme cases where the orthography of the writing system itself poses considerable barriers, proficiency in first language literacy may not necessarily be an advantage when learning to write in L2 (Connor, 1996).

*- Cultural influence*

Cultural variations in assumptions about the nature of knowledge, learning, and writing may cause differences between writing in L1 and L2. L2 learner differences are also influenced by schemata, practices, and attitudes toward writing and learning, which relate students to social groups, allowing them to draw on bicultural and bilingual

understandings, and to bring their own language and cultural experience to bear on learning. Culture is not an easily defined phenomenon, but if we view language in all its forms as a social practice, then “culture becomes the very core of language teaching”<sup>2</sup> (Kramsch, 1993: 8). If students have individual identities beyond the language and culture they were born into, language teachers are often called upon to explain something that is by nature difficult to pin down. This is due to the fact that language and learning are inextricably bound with culture (Kramsch, 1993): on the one hand cultural values are reflected in language and on the other, culture makes available socially accepted ways to communicate in writing. While for teachers of writing it is particularly important to understand the potentially different ways that L2 writers might respond to their teaching, the effects of the first culture on FL learning have not always been recognized in teaching methodologies. In order to distinguish linguistic and cultural features, recognize the influence of cultural factors, and understand the way students prefer to learn and write, teachers should pay attention to research on cultural perspectives with regard to knowledge, texts, and the self.<sup>3</sup> Expectations that students may have about instruction can also act as a potential source of explanation for writing differences. In this perspective, L2 writing instruction is seen as an expression of culture. The idea of “situated cognition” is at

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<sup>2</sup> This question is central to a socio-cultural perspective on writing, which focuses on “the discursive construction of self”, which in turn means that writing is more than a simple transmission of information or thought, because it conveys the writer as well (Kramsch, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Different conceptions of identity may be reflected in writing. In a review of cultural conception of self, Markus and Kitayama (1991) contrast Western independent views, which emphasize the separateness and uniqueness of each person, with many non-Western cultures, which insist on the interdependence of human beings from each other. In the Western classroom, teachers frequently expect writers to voice their judgments, display their knowledge and give opinions on the basis that “good writing” is generally seen to involve individual creativity and critical thinking. In more collectivist or interdependently oriented cultures, writing aims to communicate what is socially shared and therefore the absence of a personal voice is irrelevant (Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999). This is linked to the fact that in these cultures students are typically oriented by their education to group membership, age and gender roles rather than to individual status (Heath, 1991).



the basis of the current dominant theory of learning, which holds that the setting and the activity of learning are inseparable from learning itself (Leake, 1993). Given the diversity of educational contexts and previous learning experiences, students may not be prepared for the kinds of tasks, assignments and assessment they encounter when learning to write in the new classroom. For example, on the basis that all cultures attribute different meanings to events and human relationships, writing topics might be culture-sensitive and therefore inappropriate for some groups. Some teaching techniques, such as peer response, have been criticized as culturally inappropriate for learners from more collectivist cultures,<sup>4</sup> since they may conflict with students' expectations. Such cultural factors may be used to recognize that there are various ways of producing meaning. The cultural expectations that people hold about the ways texts are organized and the effects these may have on L2 literacy development are another important aspect underlying the impact of cultural differences. Current research in the field of contrastive rhetoric suggests that the schemata of L2 students differ from those of L1 writers in relation to their preferred ways of organizing ideas, which in turn may interfere with the L2 writing (Connor, 1996). Having abandoned the original strong view that writing reflects actual patterns of thinking,<sup>5</sup> contrastive rhetoric currently sees L1 rhetorical structures as learned cultural preferences (Kaplan, 1987). Therefore L1 patterns represent tendencies which may influence L2 writing, rather than interfere with its processes, allowing us to predict how students from different backgrounds will write.

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<sup>4</sup> In Carlson and Nelson's study the primary goal of Chinese students in peer groups was social, that is to maintain group harmony, leading them to avoid criticism of peer's work and to avoid engaging in a dialogue about the comments peers gave on their writing; Carson and Nelson's (1996).

<sup>5</sup> According to contrastive rhetoric, and seeing both language and writing as cultural phenomena, each language (L1) has rhetorical conventions unique to it, which interfere with the L2 writing process (Connor, 1996).

### **1.2.2 Differences among L2 Writers**

Although linguistic and cultural factors may distinguish L1 and L2 writers, L2 students cannot be grouped together as an undifferentiated group. Although differences may be fewer<sup>6</sup> for writers who are more proficient in their L2, such individuals may write and use writing differently from their colleagues. This is due to different learning backgrounds, for example to varying writing experiences and different uses of meta-cognitive knowledge of their L1 in order to write. Personality factors including different attitudes and level of motivation, as well as different characteristics in terms of age, gender, and socio-economic status also influence their learning development. Understanding such potential differences and taking account of them in instructional strategies concerning writing is particularly important, because these are likely to be crucial factors in the successful acquisition of writing skills in an L2.

Research has so far focused largely on three broad aspects of the learning process and related types of learning style: the cognitive dimension (distinguishing field-independent learners, who are mainly analytic and prefer structural instruction, from field-dependent students, who prefer interactive activities and feedback in their writing); the affective dimension (differentiating students who depend on social and emotional factors from those who rely more on logic); and perceptual learning styles, distinguishing among visual, auditory, and tactile or kinaesthetic students. Research suggests that students have their general approaches to learning and that these are at least partly shaped by their prior cultural experience (Hyland, 1994). As a matter of fact, individuals within a culture tend to

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<sup>6</sup> Similar studies conducted by Matsumoto (1995) and Beare (2002) found that proficient bilingual writers tend to use the same strategies when writing in both L1 and L2.



exhibit consistent patterns of learning when compared with those of other cultures (Oxford and Anderson, 1995).<sup>7</sup>

While acknowledging the importance of the cultural aspect for the question of L2 writing, the present study will not pay further attention to it since the writers taken into consideration for this study present a common cultural background.

Having clarified the main aspects implied in the notion of writing, we will now devote our attention to the research on and instruction of L2 writing skills, which will also require a quick review of L1 writing theory and models.

## **2. Past and Current Status of Second Language (L2) Writing Research and Instruction**

Writing and its teaching are currently the focus of considerable attention both in the field of L1 and FL methodology. In almost any issue of applied linguistics or educational journals we can find papers on aspects of writing, and a number of journals are entirely devoted to the subject.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, the focus has been on both the nature of L2 writing as a discipline or area of research with its future direction (Matsuda, Santos, Atkinson, 2000); and its standing in relation to fields like rhetoric, composition studies, foreign language studies/acquisition and linguistics. This interest, however, represents a fairly recent development, since writing and its teaching emerged as a scholarly discipline only in the 1970s and before that time, writing was considered as a mere orthographic representation of speech. On the one hand, researchers regarded writing as a source of

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<sup>7</sup> The most well-known study linking learning styles and culture is Reid's (1987) self-report survey of the perceptual learning style preferences of 1234 students from various cultures.

<sup>8</sup> Mainstream current research is published in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*. Other journals that carry relevant articles are *Language Teaching Research*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Assessing Writing*, and *Research in the Teaching of Writing*.

tangible and relatively stable data for analysis, as well as a way of recording speech, since technology for sound recording was not widely available; on the other hand, both L1 and FL teachers used writing only to the extent that it assisted the learning of speech, assuming that anyone who had the knowledge of spelling and grammar would be able to write.

In the FL context, writing also represented, for many years, a neglected area of instruction, since it was not considered to be one of the proper goals of language learning. The Direct method followed the traditional view of the notion, and the main assumption in presenting a differentiated, analytical order of presentation and acquisition was that the acquisition of spoken proficiency had to take precedence over the learning of written language. Most often used to check mastery of the structures studied in class or for dictation, writing provided a way of monitoring students' language production. Thus, the learning of speech was considered the ultimate goal of language learning, and language teachers refrained from introducing writing early in the process, because they were afraid that discrepancies between speech sounds and orthography might interfere with the proper learning.<sup>9</sup>

The first recognition of the importance of teaching writing as a skill is linked to the widespread adoption of Communicative Language Teaching. Unlike the previous methods, Communicative Language Teaching insists on the development of all four macro-skills, taking a more holistic approach to language teaching. In this perspective, writing should be seen as a parallel way of representing language, as teachers and researchers find it more productive to define writing as one of the modes of linguistic expression and communication, rather than secondary or subservient to speech. Practically speaking, though, in the communicative FL classroom, particularly at early stages of language proficiency, face-to-face interaction still plays a major role at the expenses of interactions

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<sup>9</sup> As Matsuda (2001) observes, many of the assumptions that have limited the place of writing in language teaching and research date back to the nineteenth century, when phonetics was at the heart of the emerging field of linguistic sciences.



that occur through literate or other visual media. This is linked to the fact that writing is regarded as limited in value, because it is possible to learn to speak a foreign language without learning how to write it.

However, there are compelling reasons for starting writing instruction early in the FL acquisition path. Learning to write is a complex process that takes long practice and extensive experience (Petrosky, and Brozick, 1979: 101). Among the four macroskills, writing is the most difficult to acquire, and for many language learners, it is the skill in which they are the least proficient. Determining purpose in writing, that is, allowing students to see the point of doing writing activities, can represent an important element of instruction, although not always one which is obvious to them. In the early stages of a course oriented towards oral proficiency, for example, writing could have a variety of pedagogical purposes, such as the development of language skills or the desire to fulfil institutional requirements. These strongly suggest that, while we should still concentrate on aural-oral skills, we can make good use of writing, as part of an integrated skill approach to language learning. In addition, writing is not a skill which can be learned in isolation. In the apprentice stage of writing, the activity helps to consolidate learning in the area of listening comprehension, speaking and reading. In its more advanced form of composition, it is itself dependent on the progress in the other skills (Rivers, 1971: 240-260).

In recent times the study and teaching of writing is assuming a central position, in comparison to the one occupied twenty or thirty years ago, both within the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as well as in the case of languages other than English.<sup>10</sup> The main reason for this success is to be found in the characteristics of the present world, driven by a global digital network of text and numerical data. Good writing skills are the key of success in communicating ideas and

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<sup>10</sup> Since the development of teaching methods and techniques on IFL writing has been closely dependent on EFL and ESL research and teaching, the literature review of this study will make specific reference to L2 writing in the EFL and ESL contexts.

information effectively through this kind of network. With recent technological changes, we experience an increasingly social aspect of written communication in our daily lives. The advent of the Internet and of computer-mediated-communication technology has made conducting real-time written discussions, negotiations, or collaborations in distant locations – entirely through electronic communication – a common practice. A further reason for the strong emphasis on writing can be identified in academic research. Scholars in the fields of composition studies, L2 writing, genre theory and contrastive rhetoric have expanded our knowledge on the nature of written texts and writing processes, creating the conditions for today's active interest in new approaches to the teaching of L2 writing.

At a practical level, furthermore, writing can be regarded as an important skill also because university students are generally assessed through exams which take a written form, and not only in departments of foreign languages. Finally, writing classes represent the last opportunity students have to practice this skill before taking up writing in their future professional worlds.

As the importance of literacy has grown in contemporary societies, and its relative complexity has become widely recognized, the traditional view of writing informing early applied linguistics has become obsolete, especially from the point of view of writing teachers and researchers. In addition, there are potential incentives for literate learners to make use of writing in their acquisition process. At a basic level, as already mentioned, writing is handy. It serves as a mnemonic strategy to construct lists of vocabulary or common phrases, and can also serve analytic purposes for writing down examples of grammatical rules or diagramming sentences. On a broader level, it represents the possibility for language learners to interact without the pressures of face-to-face communication, allowing them to slow the pace of activities, and to put contributions in editable form. Different learning styles and needs may require the introduction of some forms of writing; for example, individuals with a tendency towards introversion may prefer



quietness for reflection and therefore written forms of communication, while extroverts may prefer the sounds and eye contact associated with face-to-face communication.

Due to the importance of writing as a skill on its own, current researchers and practitioners are devoting more and more interest to the study of writing, as well as to the development of methods and techniques to teach this skill. Much linguistic theory in the twentieth century, however, was inimical to the study of writing. Although applied linguists have come to recognize its importance and complexity, writing continues to be marginalized in mainstream Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research (Harklau, 2000; Leki, 2000). This is confirmed by many popular introductory linguistics textbooks which are still perpetuating the view of writing as an orthographic representation of speech, and also by the lack of foreign language texts devoted to the development of writing skills. Many current applied linguists are focusing their attention on face-to-face interaction in classroom studies of SLA, overlooking the role and the potential contribution of writing and reading. For example, Larsen-Freeman and Long's (1991) comprehensive overview of SLA contains no explicit references to the effects of modality and its index includes no mention of literacy, reading, writing or text. According to this tendency, writing and reading are peripheral concerns in studies of SLA.

Fortunately in the last two decades the number of linguists willing to consider writing as an important form of language has seen a remarkable increase, and the body of research focusing on writing and writing instruction over the last few decades is increasing. In contemporary linguistic theory there are thus growing possibilities for grounding studies of writing and FL learning. Notable examples are represented by the contributions of Davies (1995), Grabe and Kaplan (1992), Johnson and Johnson (1994).

The act of writing became an important focus of research and instruction in L1 and L2 writing with the development of the field of L2 writing. As previously mentioned, L2 writing became an important instructional issue in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and, by the early

1990s, it had begun to evolve into an interdisciplinary field of inquiry encompassing many disciplinary and instructional contexts.

Historically, the field of L2 writing has tended to focus on the teaching of writing to international ESL writers at institutions of higher education in North America, where the need for advanced writing instruction became most conspicuous in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. In the 1990s, however, the dynamics of the field began to change, as L2 writing gained recognition as a legitimate field of inquiry with its own disciplinary infrastructure. Although ESL writing for international students in North American higher education continues to be an important concern, the last 15 years have seen an increased interest in addressing diverse groups of L2 writers in a wide variety of contexts, including L2 writing in non-English dominant contexts in languages other than English (Brauer and Reichelt, Valdés, Haro, Echevarriarza, 1992).

While the teaching of writing has received widespread attention among ESL researchers and teachers starting from the 1970s, specialists of Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL) have started to place some emphasis on it only in the last 15 or 20 years. As a matter of fact, during this period, Italian Studies programs abroad have noticeably increased in terms of the number of students enrolled. In the British academic context, this phenomenon was partly due to a nation-wide trend towards the reinstatement of Italian in the high schools of several cities (London and Edinburgh, among others). More in general, the increased interest toward IFL outside Italy was also due to the effort of newly qualified teachers in providing students with the best learning skills. Recently Italian has been taught almost exclusively through the communicative method, stressing the pragmatic aspect of learning a language in order to speak and function in it, to appreciate its inherent beauty, but also to use it as a tool for work, travel and further educational aims. Interactive communication, ability to compare one's culture with the Italian one, comprehension of fictional and non-fictional Italian texts (newspapers, film, short stories, television



programs), semi-controlled and free writing compositions in Italian of different genres are some of the most important goals of this kind of IFL programmes.

The remaining sections of this chapter aim to offer an overview of the main facets of the complex field of writing. With this purpose in mind, we will be examining the theoretical issues which are at the core of both L1 and L2 writing, and reflecting on a range of pedagogical implications, specifically in the teaching of L2 writing. The main aspects of the act of writing will also be explored.

## **2.1 Models of L1 Writing Instruction**

The fact that writing was left largely unexplored in much linguistic theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not mean that there was lack of investigation or concern with writing. On the contrary, the study of writing has an old and rich tradition within rhetoric and education. However, while teachers of writing have accumulated a great deal of knowledge, writing research relied for a long time on informal observation, introspection, and correlational methods. For example, cognitive science researchers did not seem to know how to theorize about writing processes within their new framework, so the approach that characterizes cognitive science has taken a long time to take hold in the area of writing research. Eventually literature on writing seen from a cognitive perspective disseminating new knowledge beyond the research community underwent rapid progress. Within the study of the higher cognitive processes, writing research could assume its rightful place. A high-point in this development was marked by Bereiter and Scardamalia's *Psychology of Written Composition* (1987). By presenting the beginnings of a theory of writing and the development of writing skills, which emphasize the control process in writing, their views had a strong impact on future theorizing and model building in the field.

Such valuable research done on L1 writing forms a useful basis for researchers into L2 writing skills. Much of the research on L2 writing has been closely dependent on L1 research and some L1 models have had a significant influence on L2 writing instruction as well as on the development of a theory of L2 writing.

The work on process writing, in particular, has been used by second language researchers and is proving useful for developing teaching programmes. The model of writing processes most widely accepted by L2 writing teachers is probably the original planning-writing-reviewing framework established by Flower and Hayes (Flower, 1989; Flower and Hayes, 1981). The basic model of writing has been elaborated to further describe what goes on at each stage of the process and to achieve greater integration of cognitive with social factors (Flower, 1994). More specifically, the Flower and Hayes (1980, 1981) model sees writing as a “non-linear, exploratory, and generative process” (15) and focuses on what writers do when they compose, in order to determine the potential difficulties a writer may experience during the composing process. According to this model, the “problem-solving activity” faced by the writer is divided into two major components: the rhetorical situation (audience, topic, assignment), and the writer's own goals (involving the reader, the writer's persona, the construction of meaning, and the production of the formal text). Grabe and Kaplan (1996) compared skilled and less-skilled writers, placing the emphasis on “students' strategic knowledge and the ability of students to transform information [...] to meet rhetorically constrained purposes” (116).

Building on this work, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) proposed a model that suggests reasons for differences in writing ability between skilled and less-skilled writers. They argue the need for at least two process models in order to account for the differences in processing complexity of skilled and novice writers. The basic difference between the two groups is revealed to reside in their respective models of writing: the “knowledge-telling model”, whose basic structure depends on the processes of retrieving content from



memory with regard to topical and genre cues, and the “knowledge-transforming model”, which involves more reflective problem-solving analysis and goal-setting. The latter model is important because it introduces the idea of multiple processing, which is revealed through writing tasks that vary in processing complexity. The authors discuss the notion of mental representation as a writing strategy. From their research with graduate students, they observe that the students “generated goals for their compositions and engaged in problem solving involving structure and gist as well as verbatim representations” (354). The knowledge-transforming or intentional writing model is different from knowledge telling in that it involves setting goals that are to be achieved through the composition process, followed by the purposeful achievement of those goals. While it was developed in the L1 context, this model helps explain writing teachers the difficulties their L2 students sometimes experience because of task complexity and lack of topic knowledge, stressing the need for students to participate in cognitively challenging writing tasks in order to develop their skills, as well as the importance of feedback and revision.

Bereiter and Scardamalia also argue that the ability to wrestle with and resolve both content and rhetorical problems calls upon a dialectical process for reflection. If students rarely practice the kinds of writing tasks that develop knowledge-transforming skills, they are not likely to be able to perform those skills easily.

Bereiter and Scardamalia’s idea of multiple processing models opens the door to a clearer understanding of the writing process. As Grabe (2003) reports, however, to date no complete model exists which predicts the relative difficulty for students of particular writing tasks or topics, or their likely progress given certain kinds of instruction.

In more recent studies that examine the goals students set for themselves, the strategies they use to develop their organizing of ideas and the meta-cognitive awareness they bring to both these acts, Flower and her colleagues (1990) analyse the academic task of reading-to-write in order to establish the interaction of context and cognition in

performing a particular writing task. One of the problems they note is the transition students are required to make when entering the academic discourse community (a peculiar, socially constructed convention in itself), where students need to learn how to operate successfully in an academic exchange that implies knowledge of the textual conventions, expectations, and formulaic expressions particular to the relevant discourse. According to the researchers, “conceptualising this transition as a social/cognitive act of entering a discourse emphasizes both the problem-solving effort of a student learning to negotiate a new situation and the role the situation will play in what is learned” (Flower *et al.*, 1990).

The basic model of writing has thus been elaborated to integrate cognitive with social factors, and the view that writing is typically a socially situated, communicative act was also incorporated into Flower's later (1994) socio-cognitive theory of writing. In the social cognitive curriculum, students are taught as apprentices in negotiating an academic community and, in the process, develop strategic knowledge. Writing skills are acquired and used through negotiated interaction with real audience expectations, such as in peer group responses. Instruction should, then, afford students the opportunity to participate in transactions with their own texts and the texts of others (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). By guiding students toward a conscious awareness of how an audience will interpret their work, learners then learn to write with a “readerly” sensitivity (Kern, 2000).

Despite its implications for classroom instruction, Flower's model, in particular, does not recognize cross-cultural differences and issues related to socio-cultural variation in the functions of the written language (Kern, 2000). Additionally, with native speakers, “writing ability is more closely linked to fluency in and familiarity with the conventions of expository discourse” (Kogen, 1986: 25). L2 writers, however, are in the process of acquiring these conventions and so they often need more instruction about the language itself. Limited knowledge of vocabulary, language structure, and content can inhibit a L2



writer's performance. In addition, the models developed in the field of L1 do not account for growing language proficiency, which is a vital element of L2 writing development.

Similarly, composing, especially in the revision stage, challenges L2 writers. In his research on how L2 writers revise their work, Silva (1993) observes that learners revise at a superficial level. They re-read and reflect less on their written text, revise less, and when they do, the revision is primarily focused on grammatical correction. On the other hand, L1 writing ability may also transfer to L2. As a result, students who are skilled writers in their native languages and have surpassed a certain L2 proficiency level can adequately transfer those skills. Those who have difficulty writing in their native language may not have a repertoire of strategies to help them in their L2 writing development (Sasaki and Hirose, 1999).

In sum, socio-cognitive theories of writing show us how social contexts for writing operate together with the cognitive efforts of the writer, just as they do when a person is acquiring a new language. However, the problem with applying L1 theories and subsequent models of instruction (such as the process approach) to L2 instruction is that L2 writing also involves the cognitively demanding task of generating meaningful text in a FL. As a result, L2 students generally need more teacher involvement and guidance, especially at the revision stage.

Overall, it seems that the work conducted in the L1 field influenced much of L2 writing research and practice. The unique context of L2 writing, however, required distinctive perspectives, models and practices.

In the following discussion, the approaches and models for L2 writing which have emerged since the middle of 1940s will be presented. The discussion is organized according to a longitudinal perspective, but attention will be given to the particular aspect of writing that each approach illuminates and which will help us understand the complex reality of writing. Moreover, while a number of perspectives, mainly originated in the L1

field, were formulated as a theory and were translated into appropriate methodology and successfully applied into the classroom practice, others have proven to be only complementary and overlapping orientations which have supported teachers' efforts to understand L2 writing and learning but have not been developed into full-blown models capable of replacing previous ones.

In comparison to the discussion above, the following discussion will be organized taking into consideration the different focus of pedagogies which emphasise the various aspects of writing. The analysis will first devote attention to ESL/EFL and later discuss the relative position of languages other than English, using IFL as a relevant example for each approach presented. A section on teaching methodology will be presented in relation to each relevant theory.

## **2.2 Models of L2 Writing Instruction**

Despite the considerable amount of work on models of how people write (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hayes, 1996; Zimmerman, 2000) developed for L1 writing, relatively few models of the role of instruction in L2 writing have been produced. A brief terminological and historical analysis may help explain the reasons for this. While during the last two centuries the linguistic sciences were dominated by the restrictive definition of writing as mere orthography, the actual use of the term *writing* refers to its actual complexity: orthography, written discourse, the act of writing, or even literature. The nature of writing itself, involving both an act and the result of that act, immediately sets up two possible perspectives on acquiring writing: learning the process of composing and learning the form and organization of the product. Another perspective on the problem, focussing on genre, voice, and audience (Swales, 1990; Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; Fairclough, 2001; Ivanic,



1998) is driven by the social dimension and purpose of writing, which here overlaps with reading skills, as the reader is required to decode the formal and social aspects of the text.

Historically, the lack of L2 writing models is due to the influence of previously dominant linguistic theories, both theoretical and applied: the European structuralist generative theory, beginning from de Saussure,<sup>11</sup> who neglected the written mode in favour of the spoken one,<sup>12</sup> and the theories of learning based on oral repetition. These perspectives suggest that literacy is parasitic on spoken language and that texts serve only to represent and encode speech. The subsequent development of several FLT (Foreign Language Teaching) methodologies, among which the Direct method and the Audio-lingual method are good early examples, regarded writing as a means of reinforcing what had already been learnt in the speaking phases exercises,<sup>13</sup> and focused on absolute correctness rather than communication.

A number of approaches and models for L2 writing have emerged since the middle of the 1940s, when ESL composition theory has its beginning. It was not until the 1960s, however, when Robert Kaplan carried out his study with a group of international students, that L2 research and practice acquired new momentum. Though at this point L2 theories and research began to appear and to take a different direction from L1 studies, ESL scholars such as Tony Silva (1990) and Ann Johns (1995) agree on the fact that L2 writing and research were influenced by some of the approaches that affected L1 writing. According to Johns (1995), while successive L1 approaches appeared to completely

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<sup>11</sup> According to Saussure (1916). "Writing itself is not part of the internal system of the language" and the "Spoken word alone" constitutes the object of linguistic theory (68-73). This view of writing was later reflected in Bloomfield's assertion that "The art of writing is not part of a language, but rather a comparatively modern invention for recording and broadcasting what is spoken".

<sup>12</sup> If these influences have worked to privilege spoken language as the primary or default language modality, the subsequent generative transformational theorists have not endorsed, nor disrupted, this stance.

<sup>13</sup> This kind of activity called "writing things down", can still be used as an aid to language learning, in particular at the beginner and lower elementary levels.

replace existing ones, new L2 approaches, did not emerge to replace each other; on the contrary, they only weakened, allowing new approaches to appear. Silva (1990) claims that this is the reason why L2 teachers and researchers still make use of the earlier approaches in their teaching of writing in ESL.

As a matter of fact, since the 1970s, the teaching of writing has reflected the multiplicity of perspectives developed in related research. Researchers outline different approaches, each with a different focus.<sup>14</sup>

The focus of the outlines proposed below will be on ESL writing because to date most of the research on L2 writing has been done in this area. The nature and effects of each orientation, though, have been applied also to languages other than English, including IFL, which is the focus of this study. For each approach, relevant examples of tasks applied to IFL will be proposed.

The various approaches will be addressed in order of their appearance on the L2 writing stage.

### **2.2.1 Focus on Structure / Controlled Composition Approach**

The basis of this approach is the marriage of structural linguistics and the behaviourist learning theories of FL teaching that were dominant in the 1960s. Also defined as “controlled composition”, it can be seen as part of the audiolingual approach to FL teaching in that it shares two of its central tenets: from structural linguistics it takes the idea that language is speech, and from behaviourist psychology the idea that learning is habit formation. The research in this tradition is dominated by linguistic analysis, in which

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<sup>14</sup> Raimes (1991), for example, outlines four approaches that dominated writing instruction at different times, involving a focus on form, on the writer, on content, and on the reader. Approaches focusing on more social issues, such as genre, and on critical approaches to writing pedagogy, were taken into account in a slightly later survey.



contrastive analysis and error analysis represent part of the early work. Formal features examined include lexical and syntactical phenomena; the number of words per t-unit<sup>15</sup> and clause structure used to measure fluency, accuracy, and complexity in L2 writers' texts. In this view, learning to write in a foreign language mainly involves the command of grammatical and lexical knowledge, and writing development is considered to be the result of imitating and manipulating models provided by the teacher, who can rigidly control students' writing performance through guided compositions, focusing students on achieving accuracy and avoiding errors, the latter presumed to be related to first language interference. Typical activities involve filling in gaps, completing sentences, transforming tenses or personal pronouns.

The conceptualisation of L2 writing in this way directs attention to writing as a product, in which accuracy and clear exposition are considered the main criteria of good performance. Practice with previously learned discrete units of language is privileged over concerns about meaning – the actual communicative content –, organization and style. Writing is regarded as a secondary concern and as an extension of grammar, a means of reinforcing oral language patterns through habit formation and testing learners' ability to produce well-formed sentences. Grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity, however, are only some of the features of writing improvement. Moreover, they may not even be the best measures of good writing, since fewer errors in an essay may simply reveal a reluctance to take risks, rather than indicate progress.

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<sup>15</sup> The term T-unit, coined by Hunt in 1965, refers to the “shortest grammatically allowable sentences” into which writing can be split. A T-unit, however, is not always a sentence, but a dominant clause and its dependent clauses, as Hunt said “one main clause with all subordinate clauses attached to it” (Hunt 1965:20). T-units are often used in the analysis of written and spoken discourse, for example in studies on errors in second language writing.

According to Silva (1990), the controlled composition approach had very strong influence on the teaching of L2 writing. The teaching of writing focused on language structures has been very widely used both in ESL/EFL context and in the teaching of languages other than English. It typically follows a four-stage process which includes *familiarization* – learners are taught certain grammar and vocabulary, usually through a text – *controlled writing* – learners manipulate fixed patterns – *guided writing* – learners imitate model texts – and *free writing* – learners use the patterns they have developed to write. In the familiarization and controlled writing stage students are concentrating mostly on spelling, grammar and punctuation.

For example, beginner students of IFL who are learning the months of the year might be asked to copy the Italian words for the months, taking special notice that in Italian the first letter of each month is not capitalized as it is in English. This phase of skill development provides the students with the opportunity to utilize a variety of grammar practice activities; this, in turn, enables the students to reinforce their growing knowledge of the target language's linguistic system. Such exercises include fill in the blank and multiple choice type questions, as well as cloze paragraphs which, of course “demand of the student understanding of the complete sentence and careful thought” (Rivers, Azevedo, and Heflin, 1988: 251).

An example of the fill in the blank exercise of the skill acquisition phase may emphasize the correct use of the adjective *molto*. In this activity students are given a passage describing a person and they must complete the blanks with the correct form of *molto*, distinguishing between the meaning of *molto* as an adjective and as an adverb:



*Patrizio è un ragazzo \_\_\_\_\_ simpatico. È generoso e divertente.  
Ha \_\_\_\_\_ amici italiani. Patrizia, sua sorella, ha un lavoro  
\_\_\_\_\_ interessante. Lei lavora in un ufficio di avvocati  
\_\_\_\_\_ rinomati. Ha un appartamento grande e bello; ma  
sfortunatamente è una persona \_\_\_\_\_ stressata.*

After completing the exercise the teacher may review the two meanings of the adjective and have students use the two, in context, both orally and in written situations in class.

Rivers (1987) explains that both these categories – adjective and adverb – focus on writing as a support skill, not as a creative activity. Yet responding to implicit criticism she shows that writing as a support skill is by no means unnecessary, as this skill and its related activities are intended to enhance the students' writing abilities and ultimately mould the learners into better writers. The exercise requires the production of fixed patterns so that the students can control the language system, focusing on achieving accuracy and avoiding errors.

Many techniques of the structural orientation are widely used nowadays in L2 writing classes at lower levels of language proficiency and for specific purposes, such as learning new vocabulary and scaffolding writing development.

In an intermediate Italian class, for example, the students learning to use the indicative mode's imperfect tense may be asked to transform verb forms given in the indicative mode's present tense to the imperfect tense. At this stage students may be able to construct accurate sentences and yet be unable to produce appropriate written texts, which are a response to a particular communicative setting and not only a combination of lexical and syntactic forms. A control over surface features is undoubtedly crucial when writing in L2, but training in explicitness and accuracy can not be the only goal of writing instruction. This assumption is confirmed by research trying to measure students' writing improvement

through their increased use of formal features (Hunt, 1983) which has found it difficult to verify how a focus restricted to grammar could lead to better writing.

### **2.2.2 Functional Orientation / Paragraph Pattern Approach**

Heavily influenced by the structural model described above, this orientation is based on the principle relating structures to meaning, and introduces the idea that particular language forms perform certain communicative functions. Methods developed to teach writing according to this orientation are based on the assumption that writers can fully represent their intended meanings following certain rules, the so-called functions, which are the means for achieving the ends most relevant to their needs. Particular functional units are fitted into given slots within paragraphs, and regarded as syntactic units composed of structural entities such as Introduction – Body – Conclusion, applying to particular organizational patterns (e.g. narration, description, and exposition). Given its emphasis on the importance of textual organization at the above-sentence level, Raimes (1983) has called this realization the “Paragraph Pattern Approach”.

The paragraph, together with its elements (e.g. topic sentences) and options for its development (e.g. comparison and contrast) was of primary interest. Another important concern was the extrapolation of paragraph principles to complete texts, which are made up of increasingly complex discourse structures – sentences, paragraphs, sections and so on – each embedded in the next largest form. Interference from L1 was believed to extend beyond the sentence to paragraphs and longer stretches of text. The notion that writers’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds will be reflected in their rhetoric, that is the notion of contrastive rhetoric, is typically seen as primarily a matter of textual structure.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This approach owes much to Kaplan’s (1966) notion of contrastive rhetoric. The focus of his work in this field was on characterizing how L1 “cultural thought patterns” are reflected in L2 writers’ texts, how some



This approach was particularly influential in the EAP context, where L2 students are being prepared for academic writing at college or university.

In the Italian context, focus on text functions was mainly adopted in the teaching of IFL. The following example, taken from an activity designed for IFL students, shows a basic level task in which students are requested to choose among alternative sentences within the context of a provided paragraph or text, in order to give directions to their homes using the target language. As a follow-up activity the students can be asked to write directions to other locations familiar to them. If the class is divided into groups of two to three students, the object then may be to have a student provide his/her partner the information necessary to go from point A to point B on a map. While the person taking the trip knows point A s/he is not provided with point B; instead s/he is given directions to a destination and a description of a place. For example, if Group A contains two students, Student 1 is provided with a site map of a section of the city of Rome. The objective is for Student 1 to provide Student 2 with directions from the *Stazione centrale Termini* to *Piazza della Repubblica* in Rome. Student 2 have to guess the final destination from the description of it, as well as writing down and following the directions provided by the partner on the map given to him/her. In order to complete this task, the students should have a working knowledge of directional vocabulary, for example:

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cultures put the responsibility for successful written communication on the writer and others on the reader, and how differences between “collectivist” and “individualist” tendencies manifest themselves in L2 writing.

- 1 *Sinistra* (left) and *Destra* (right)
- 2 *Nord* (north), *Sud* (south), *Est* (east) and *Ovest* (west)
- 3 *Diritto* (straight), *Tenersi a* (bear)
- 4 *Continuare* (continue) / *Procedere* (proceed) / *Prendere* (take)
- 5 *Circa* (about)
- 6 *Primo/a* (first), *Secondo/a* (second), *Terzo/a* (third)
- 7 *Strada* (street) / *Via* (road) / *Viale* (boulevard) / *Via* (avenue)
- 8 *All'angolo* (at the corner) / *Uno, due, tre isolato/i* (one, two, three... blocks)

The teacher may provide a few of the necessary words and expressions directly, have students add to the list, and glean additional information from readings completed either in class or as reading assignments. At a higher level, the task in the example given above may be contained in a unit of comprehension checks on a model text. Drawing attention to the language used to express the target function – asking for and receiving directions – the exercise aims to develop students' abilities to use relevant forms in their writing. The sequence of activities then requires them to apply the knowledge gleaned from this analysis to a parallel piece of original writing. Being essentially concerned with disembodied patterns, the above writing activities do not have any meaning or purpose for students who focus exclusively on form or function. Writing is seen as a matter of arranging sentences and paragraphs into particular patterns, so that learning to write requires developing skills in identifying, internalising and producing these patterns.

At their most complex, functional orientation exercises require students, already given a topic to write on, to list and group relevant facts on the basis of which to develop topic and support sentences, and, by imitating the patterns of a parallel text, to put together an outline into an essay. After having completed a lesson on Italian youth and culture, for example, the students may be asked to write a composition that compares and contrasts



Italian family characteristics, desires, interests and relations with those of British families, on the basis of a set of sentences provided by the teacher.

As we have already seen in the case of exclusive focus on form, a strong emphasis on function means that writing is detached from the practical purposes and personal experiences of the writer. Focusing on form and on structures reveals a simplistic view of writing, because it assumes that written communication never takes place in the presence of the writer and the reader, who, once re-integrated in the context, are crucial 'elements' that need to be taken into account in writing instruction.

### **2.2.3 Expressivist Orientation**

Aware of this complexity, other models of writing and writing teaching highlight the writer, rather than the linguistic form, as the point of departure. In contrast to the rigid practice of more form-oriented approaches, this type of approach focuses on creative expression, emphasising the power of the individual to construct his or her own view on a topic.

The main emphasis of this approach was "the nonlinear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (Zamel, 1997: 16). This approach was similar to the expressivist approach in the L1 field, whose proponents – Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Walker Gibson, William Coles, Ann Berthoff, and Donald Murray – were interested in "writing as a creative process – the discovery of the true self" (Johns, 1997: 25). According to Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), expressivists were nondirective and encouraged students to gain power by making use of their own words, meaning that they needed to use language in creative ways. James Berlin, in his article "Contemporary Composition. The Major Pedagogical

Theories”, states that expressivist theorists believed that writing is “a creative act in which the process, the discovery of the self, is as important as the product” (1997: 484).

The classroom therefore becomes a place where the teacher guides the instruction, by providing the students with a variety of writing strategies to help them get started, write drafts, revise and edit. Instead of offering models, or dwelling on formal errors, the approach further urges teachers to respond to the ideas that learners produce, giving students considerable opportunities for writing. Therefore writing instruction is nondirective and personal, and the role of teachers is to provide students with the space to produce their own meanings, without imposing views, or suggesting pre-set responses to topics.

In contrast to the rigid practice of a more form-oriented approach, a task reflecting the expressivist orientation urges writers to be creative and to take chances through free writing. The writing rubric asks students to read personal writing extracts, respond to them as readers, and then use them as a stimulus to write about their own experiences. By presenting topics of potential interest and encouraging writers to explore their beliefs, the writing tasks designed within this method assume that all writers have a similar innate creative potential and can learn to express themselves through writing. The cultural backgrounds of learners, the social consequences of writing, and the purposes of communication in the real world are thus neglected. From such an approach, however, it is difficult to extract any clear teaching principles or criteria for the evaluation of good writing. This is the reason why, despite its influence in L1 writing classrooms, expressivism has been cautiously applied in L2 contexts. L2 writing students from cultures that place a different value on self-expression, in particular, may be disadvantaged by such



methods, and teachers<sup>17</sup> who are not keen to write creatively may also experience difficulties.

#### **2.2.4 Process Orientation**

The belief that neither the controlled-composition, nor the paragraph pattern approach adequately stimulate thought or its expression, as well as the perception of their linearity and prescriptivism, represents the basis for recognizing basic cognitive processes as central to writing activities. Developed in reaction to traditional types of writing teaching, process writing is a teaching approach that originated in the L1 writing classroom but has had a major impact on all aspects of writing research and teaching in North America, and currently represents the dominant approach in L2 writing classrooms, where the teaching strategies developed to facilitate process goals have extended to most teaching contexts. The original basis for the process approach was research into the writing process itself, driven by the desire to know how writers went about their tasks, and in particular how good writers wrote, and how the writing processes of good writers differed from those of poor writers. Both the Flower and Hayes, and the Bereiter and Scardamalia writing process models (already discussed in detail in Section 2.1) have served as the theoretical basis of this chapter. By incorporating pre-writing activities such as collaborative brainstorming, choice of personally meaningful topics, or strategy instruction in the stages of composing, drafting, revising, and editing, producing multiple drafts and peer-group editing, the instruction takes into consideration what writers do as they write. The advent of the process approach prompted research on composing; such research focused on the writer

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<sup>17</sup> In his book *A Writer Teaches Writing* (2003) Murray provides an account of expressivist methods, but also suggests the importance of the teacher's own personal insights in the process.

and on the process strategies involved in writing, so that many variables<sup>18</sup> affecting L2 writers were identified and addressed in the literature.

Despite considerable research conducted into writing processes, there is still a substantial body of scholarship on L2 writers' composing processes (Krapels, 1990; Sasaki, 2000) looking at L2 writing process holistically, in order to obtain a comprehensive idea of how learners go about a writing task or how they learn to write. While researchers' understandings of the complex variables involved in writing processes can contribute to the teaching practice, it is extremely difficult to report unconscious writing processes, because process models are characterised by their small scale, and studies are often contradictory. Moreover, as Hyland (2000) has observed, an exclusive emphasis on psychological factors in writing is not likely to provide the whole picture, either in theoretical or pedagogical terms. We need to investigate outside the individual forces to guide the writer to define problems and find solutions. From a process perspective, writing is a complex, recursive and creative process and learning to write requires the development of an efficient and effective composing process. Attention to the writing process favours a workshop approach to instruction, fostering classroom interaction, and engaging students in analysing and commenting on a variety of texts, as well as providing ample time for and minimal interference in their writing, so as to allow them to work through their composing process.

In the following task, the teacher guides the students through the first stage of pre-writing of the writing process, avoiding an emphasis on form in order to facilitate the development of composing strategies. It is during this phase that students' topical ideas for writing are generated. There are many avenues that students may take to complete this step: some prefer to brainstorm while others find that discussing their ideas and sharing

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<sup>18</sup> For example, of particular interest are the extent of transfer of first language proficiency or writing ability to L2 writing, the relationship between general FL proficiency and L2 writing ability, but also the possible connections between L2 writing ability and first language writing experience and expertise, writing apprehension, gender, learning style, language and instructional background.



them with others helps narrow down their topics. Certain students may find their point of departure by listening to peers discuss their goals; while others generate ideas through the readings and research aspects of the course. One effective pre-writing activity is brainstorming vocabulary. For example, at the beginner level of Italian students may be asked to write a description of a favourite relative or of a favourite TV personality. As a whole class they may be asked to generate a list of words they might use in their description such as *bello, alto, snello, castani, azzurro, noioso, contento, spiritoso, simpatico*, etc. When the list is completed the teacher may ask three students to categorize the list into physical and character features, or they may tell learners to work individually, making a list and then sharing it with a partner, finding similarities in each other's list. The tutor then could ask the pairs of students for their shared vocabulary and generate a final list on the blackboard or overhead projector. Brainstorming may also be done with ideas, to help students choose a topic for writing if one has not been assigned. With an intermediate Italian class this type of pre-writing exercise may involve reading a selection in the target language and then modelling their writing on the selection read.

The pre-writing activities encourage brainstorming and outlining to generate ideas about content and structure; the writer is here engaged in the discovery and expression of meaning while the reader deals with the interpretation of the intended meaning. Unlike the previous teaching techniques, in this case the product, that is the written text, whose form is a function of its content and purpose, is a secondary concern.

Despite the great deal of attention that researchers and teachers have devoted to process writing, however, there is little evidence to show that process methods alone lead to better writing. Process writing is an approach that undoubtedly helps students in learning how to write, but at the expenses of a clear understanding of how texts are shaped by topic, audience, purpose, and cultural schemata (Hyland, 2002).

## 2.2.5 Content Orientation

Content-oriented perspectives rely heavily on reading and exploit the close relationship between writing and reading in L2 literacy development. As suggested by research, L2 writing skills cannot be acquired successfully by practice in writing alone, but also need to be supported with extensive reading (Krashen, 1993).

The “Reading Hypothesis” holds that reading provides writers with knowledge of the conventional features of written text: the grammar, vocabulary, discourse style, rhetorical and structural knowledge writers develop and use. This hypothesis is consistent with general theory as well as with the research in both L1 and L2 writing development. It is in fact a corollary of the more general Comprehension Hypothesis, according to which we acquire language in only one way: when we understand messages. This finding is the result of FL correlational studies (EFL studies include Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Y-O Lee, Krashen, and Gribbons, 1996; S-Y Lee and Krashen, 1996), studies of free reading in school (e.g. Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Elley, 1991; Mason and Krashen, 1997), as well as case histories (Krashen, 1993, 2003), showing that those who read more acquire more of the written language.<sup>19</sup> Therefore what students read, and particularly the specific genre to which they are exposed, are important elements in the acquisition of literacy.

“Content-based” writing instruction seeks to be motivating by focusing on contexts and content relevant and significant to learners. Typically it involves a range of themes and topics of interest, which establish a coherence and purpose for the course, and about which students will have some personal knowledge and will be able to write meaningfully. As a

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<sup>19</sup> It is important, however, to determine whether all aspects of the written language are impacted by reading. Krashen reported that some of the most impressive studies showing the impact of reading on writing in English as a first language are studies of those with a modest amount of formal education who became outstanding writers, and who attribute their success to massive reading (Krashen, 2003).



result, “Content-based” perspectives could be applied to courses focusing on the language, composing skills and specific text conventions associated with a particular domain or subject matter, often organised around social issues (e.g. pollution, stress, juvenile crime, etc.). Such courses may place considerable emphasis on preparing students to engage in their target academic or professional communities, but may be tailored to students at different proficiency levels by varying the amount of information provided. While at lower levels, much of the content can be supplied to reduce students’ difficulties in generating and organising material, at more advanced levels students are often required to collaborate in collecting and sharing information. Such courses rarely focus exclusively on content and represent interesting ways in which teachers can integrate and combine different conceptualisations of writing.

The emergence of this approach comes as a response to the needs of ESL learners enrolled at American universities, who have to learn how to write academic papers. This type of instruction aims to help students work successfully within the academic context and its emphasis is placed on the production of texts that will be acceptable at an English-medium higher education institution. The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) approach proposes that students need to be introduced specifically to the writing of texts that represent what they will encounter in university settings, preparing them to meet the expectations of the academic community, so that learning to write is therefore part of becoming accepted into the academic community. The instructional methodology aims at recreating the conditions under which actual university writing takes place and involves examining and analysing academic discourse genres and writing task specifications; selecting and successively studying materials appropriate for a given task; evaluating, screening, and organizing information from these sources; and presenting these data in a form acceptable to the academy.

## 2.2.6 Genre Orientation

Teachers can draw on structural, functional, or process methods to help students in learning how to write, but can not teach how to use language patterns in order to produce coherent and purposeful prose. In order for the readers to recognize the purpose of the message, writers must follow certain social conventions, called genres, for organizing text. The belief that we do not just write, but we write to achieve some specific purpose is central to genre-orientated approach, whose theoretical basis is embedded in the systemic-functional model of linguistics as developed by Michael Halliday.<sup>20</sup> This theory addresses the relationship between language and its social function, holding that language is a system from which users make choices to express meanings. Halliday argues that since texts are related to social contexts and to other texts, when a set of texts share the same purpose, they will often share the same structure, and thus they belong to the same genre.

Martin and Rothery (1989) have proceeded to develop a model of genre analysis based on Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics. According to their view, the phenomenon of genre is to be considered under two aspects. Genres are social, purposeful and staged processes, entailing the social interaction and meaningful participation of its participants, and consisting of different stages which lead to the achievement of a goal. From a linguistic perspective, genres are abstract representations of discourses defined in terms of their structure and goal. The model developed by Martin et al. is based on structure and goal as the defining features of genre. It is also based on the belief in the explicit teaching of genres, putting emphasis on content, structure and sequence within text.

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<sup>20</sup> Halliday, *et al.*, 1964, Halliday and Hasan, 1976, Halliday 1985. See also Section 1.1, point c) referring to the exposition of the Hallidayan model of writing.



In the classroom, teachers interested in genre focus on texts and, by setting out the stages of valued generic samples, they can provide students with an explicit grammar of linguistic choices which will help them to produce well-formed texts, appropriate to their target readers. While the focus of this approach is on the text, this is not the narrow focus of a disembodied grammar. On the contrary, the use of linguistic patterns implies a range of social choices operating in a particular context. In this respect, genre orientation is particularly innovative because it incorporates discourse and contextual aspects of language use, otherwise neglected when attending to structures, functions, or processes.

The work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978) and its interpretation by Bruner are also at the core of genre orientation, stressing the view that learning occurs best when learners engage in tasks that are within their Zone of Proximal Development, which is the area between what they can do independently and what they can do with assistance. The cyclic process of contextualizing-modelling-negotiating-constructing is used to achieve learning development. At the beginning of this learning cycle, where direct instruction is crucial, the teacher has a central role, as the learners gradually assimilate the task demands and the procedures for understanding and reproducing the typical rhetorical patterns they need in order to construct samples of a genre effectively. At later stages, learners require more autonomy. Explicit awareness of language,<sup>21</sup> rather than experiment and exploration, is also a solid tenet of genre pedagogy; in fact the term “genre” indicates both what students actively do with language and how they come to understand the ways it works. Thanks to the development of a linguistic metalanguage, students can autonomously describe and control the structure and grammatical features of the texts they write.

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<sup>21</sup> In genre-oriented models grammar is also important, but it is presented as a way of giving learners the language they need to construct central genres and to reflect on how language is used to accomplish this goal (Hyland, 2000).

In common with all pedagogies, a genre-based approach may carry the risk of neglecting important steps in conceptualising the language, so that genre models are presented as rigid templates and forms as linguistic abstractions.

### **3. Conclusions**

Though theories of writing developed differently in the areas of L1 and L2, we find that both fields have, through the years, shared a good number of similarities, especially when changes have occurred in order to help students to be successful in academic settings (Leki, 1995). As we reflect on historical accounts of writing theories, we find that, today, both fields are interested in helping students become writers who are able to cope with the expectations of the academy. Many scholars have tried to find the differences that make of L1 and ESL writing two separate fields; however, it is evident that the two areas overlap as they develop theories whose main goal is to provide the writers with strategies that are transferable from academia to the workplace.

Just as early studies in L1 influenced the teaching of writing in L2, research in L1 writing was affected by studies that were carried out in the field of L2. Tim Caudery, in his 1995 article “What the Process Approach Means to Practicing Teachers of L2 Writing Skills”, describes how two decades ago, as researchers and writing teachers began to explore the writing process, they became more interested in the processes used by L2 writers and found that, depending on the writer’s level of fluency in the target language, writing processes could also vary. These new discoveries emerging from the field of FL learning allowed L2 writing teachers to concentrate on how students composed.

Additionally, although there are important similarities between L1 and L2 writing, teachers’ intuitions and empirical studies have suggested that the processes of L2 writing are in many ways distinct from those of L1 writing. At the current stage in the



development of L2 writing studies, a number of emerging issues transcend the approaches described above. These include, among others, L2 writing programme related issues (such as programme administration, needs analysis and placement); contextual issues (including the academic discourse community and a number of specific programme or course types, as well as instructional contexts in academia or in the private sector); and disciplinary issues (for example, the nature of L2 writing as a discipline or area of research) (Santos, 1992, 2000; Severino, 1993).

Over the past decades, teachers, researchers and writers such as Elbow, Emig, Rico, Macrorie, Murray, Smith, and Stanford have developed new techniques and strategies in the teaching of writing, giving birth to new developments which do not constitute a revolution but nevertheless represents significant changes. In this situation, L2 writing professionals seem to be seizing the opportunity to escape the limits of a particular tradition, aware of the fact that there is no particular instructional approach or procedure that will work with all students, objectives, teaching styles, and instructional contexts.

The present research is integral to this rapidly evolving area of study and, while this section has described, reflected upon and re-examined the basic assumptions in the literature about the nature of L2 writing research and instruction, the following chapters will attempt to use critically the knowledge made available by theoretical work and the results of linguistic inquiry in order to draw innovative implications for the practice of L2 writing instruction.

In recent years, one of the major concerns of educators in the field of writing has been the impact that technology may have on the writing process. As we will see in the next chapter, the integration of specific computer technologies within the educational context in learning processes has allowed students not only to compose texts, but also to become active participants in the process of online collaborative writing, being encouraged to become dynamically involved in activities such as peer review and collaborative

learning. In particular the use of computer technologies has given rise to growing interest for research in learning and instructional environments, which is an important element of the current study, together with the participants in the learning process – students and language tutors.



## CHAPTER II

### STUDIES AND CLAIMS ABOUT IT AND WRITING SKILLS

This chapter presents a review of relevant learning theories and empirical research literature associated with educational technologies. More precisely, the use of IT in language teaching will be situated within the history of approaches to second language education as well as the particular history of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). A review of current research, including external sources of evaluative information, will also be undertaken with a view to identifying gaps in existing knowledge. These will constitute fruitful ground of inquiry for the present research.

Attention will be devoted, in particular, to Piagetian and Vygotskian perspectives on the development and the importance of social interaction for learning. These perspectives support the interpretation of learning as a social or collaborative process. According to them (Vygotsky: 1986; Piaget 1926), learners working in small groups can learn more from providing help to others than from receiving help. In the light of these educational theories, the chapter will take a critical and comparative look at computer technologies currently available for writing, paying particular attention to how these technologies can be used both in online and traditional mode. As we have seen in the first chapter, the teaching of writing at all levels in education is one field of application of writing research, and its relationship with cognitive, academic, and social development is a key sub-field: genre theory, cognitive perspective, and socio-cultural learning theory represent valid perspectives through which educational writing processes can be analysed. Currently there is also considerable interest in the technological application area of writing research: the study of electronic communication and its role in educational development is a new but fast-developing field. Many writing tools and software systems are being designed and developed to support writing, and there appear to be a ready market for them.

This development, unfortunately, has so far proceeded, for the most part, without a solid theoretical basis. In order to increase student language proficiency, many teachers have embraced technological applications without access to well-designed instructional models. Until now, many Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and CALL activities were created with the sole rationale that computers are useful and motivating for learners, yet the activities in question lacked a solid research base. Recently, however, researchers have started to claim that in order for the field to progress, it is necessary to carefully investigate and take into consideration SLA principles, making technology-supported language teaching more effective (Chapelle, 1998; Doughty, 1987; Levy, 1999). A central issue, in particular, is how to use technologies appropriately and successfully in supporting the acquisition of L2 writing skills, since, as Hyland (2000) points out, the current crucial question is not anymore *whether* to use technologies, but *how* to use them.

## **1. Definition and Role of Technology in FL Teaching and Learning**

Although inclusive of computers, technology in the FL classroom is not exclusively related to them. While the use of television, radio, overhead and slide projectors has since long time gained its rightful place as valuable and necessary tool for language learning, computer technologies seem to be slower in finding their place in the FL learning context. This is possibly linked to the complex, diverse and dynamic nature of this particular technology. Since computer-related technology is in a constant state of evolution, some teachers may feel somewhat under equipped to exploit it in an effective and meaningful way. Besides, while some see the integration of new technology-based pedagogy in the classroom as a means of enlivening instruction, facilitating collaboration and interaction



(Hyland, 2000), others still regard this expansion as a threat to the human interactions on which teaching is traditionally based.<sup>1</sup>

The common aim of many educators employing technology in their teaching is to address subject matter or skill area content, and not to teach learners how to use technology. Thus in the educational context, where computer technologies are particularly widespread, they are generally viewed solely as instruments for the achievement of educational ends (Smith, Alvarez-Torres, Zhao, 2003). From this perspective, which seems to be *instrumentalist* in nature (Feenberg, 1991), there is often a tendency to treat technologies as pedagogically passive and neutral (Smith, 2003), as being completely subject to the user, and as containing neither a pedagogical philosophy nor any content bias (Means, 1994).

Researchers in the field do not agree with the definition of computers as “passive”, arguing that the pedagogical environment can be modified by the presence of a computer in a classroom, where it interacts actively with people, serving as dynamic social actors. Nor do experts agree with the attribute of “neutral”, clarifying that technologies are inherently biased as they are built to accomplish specific goals (Bromley, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to this *instrumentalist* perspective, the more *substantive* view suggests that in some cases both developers and users are destined toward certain ends merely by choosing to handle particular technologies (Smith, 2003). Although both instrumentalist and substantive perspectives are appealing, other current researchers define technologies as “neither completely neutral nor omnipotent” (Smith, 2003; Johnson-Eilola, 1998), and we

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, distance education was regarded as the “poor and often unwelcome stepchild within the academic community” (Merisotis, and Phipps, 1999: 4). It was considered as lower quality education, or a poor replica of campus education (Allen, and Seaman, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> It has been observed that, while not every technology supports every sort of activity, equally, tailor-made technological tools often convey a certain teaching approach, which may actively shape what the teacher and learner can do with it (Johnson-Eilola, 1998).

can say that the negative or positive potential of a particular technology can be defined only on the basis of its contextualized use.

Evidence from research studies suggests that pedagogical practice and, more importantly, pedagogical conceptions are not necessarily changed by the use of approaches based on technology, since it is the tutor's pedagogical conception – and not the technology – that appears to be the principal variable affecting the nature and quality of teaching. Therefore, the quality of student learning, where that learning is supported by the use of technology (for example online technologies), depends on the pedagogical assumptions and conceptions underlying their use. The principles likely to produce the conditions for good learning experiences are much the same in the real classroom as in the virtual environment. More specifically, Mydlarski (1985) and Paramskas (1993) see the potential for the use of computer technologies in a communicative language learning setting and describe the principles of the communicative approach as lending themselves to computer use. Forrest (1993) also agrees with this view. According to him, computer technologies can be appropriately integrated in the communicative classroom, on the grounds that they serve as a supplement to enrich rather than a substitute for classroom learning. Leblanc and Guberman (1988) mention the ways in which certain types of software can provide opportunities for reinforcement and review, simulations of real life experience, and possibly self-correction. Most educators keen on this particular area of FL learning agree that the computer does not constitute a new approach to FL teaching in itself, but is rather a tool to assist and possibly enhance the FL learning process (Shrum, and Glisan, 1994).

Experience of the medium is also crucial, however, in order to get a critical appreciation of what computer technologies offer. An ongoing professional development, capable of scaffolding instructional strategies, combined with technology literacy training



would enable language teachers to create and facilitate FL lessons which would be much richer in depth and scope while maintaining the same standard based syllabus.

In order to define a reasonable and practical approach to the integration of technology in FL classrooms, several researchers have already stressed the need for teacher training in this area, and particularly in recent developments relating to online learning. Among these researchers, Alexander and Bound (2001) argue that much of the potential for online learning is being lost because related pedagogy has been largely transferred from traditional teaching in an unreflective way. According to them, a more productive approach is to regard online learning as an example of learning from experience, using a new medium and access to new resources which make some activities possible and constrain others without changing the fundamental process of human learning.

A review of literature on online FL learning and teaching reveals scant attention, however, to the complexity of learning, since there is little evidence of substantial references to or strong familiarity with pedagogical theories. This impression is confirmed by Agostinopoulos (2000), who claims that without a solid research base we run the risk of misjudging the role of the technology itself.

## **1.1 Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives**

Many researchers, educators and practitioners agree that much of the early use of the Internet in teaching has concentrated on automating existing practices “in a way that appears up-to-date but which is essentially a more time-consuming and expensive way of reproducing existing, and often ineffective, practices” (Alexander and Boud, 2001).

Nowadays the approach to instructional technology is largely constructivist and collaborative, the emphasis being placed on online activities and peer learning, rather than on solitary reading, in line with a constructionist belief according to which learning is

primarily developed through activity (Glaser, 1990) and does not occur in isolation but can be sustained by the emotional and personal support we gain from others. (Hyland, 2003)

The following sections describe the development and prevalence of various technology applications in language learning. The theoretical and methodological perspectives to CALL, which refer to the specific use of computer in language learning, will also be reviewed.

### **1.1.1 The Structural Perspective and the Structural Approach to CALL**

The main theoretical perspectives that reflect the dramatic changes in the recent history of language teaching have largely influenced how computer technology has been used in this field. It seems that shifts in perspectives within the area of language teaching and learning have paralleled developments in technology (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). Roughly, they also correspond to the three metaphors of computer-based educational activities proposed by Charles Crook (1994): a tutorial metaphor, in which the computer is seen as a tutor; a construction metaphor, where the computer is seen as the pupil; and a toolbox metaphor, in which the computer is regarded as a tool.

The following pages will briefly trace the development of the structural, cognitive, and socio-cognitive perspectives on technology and FLT, as well as their subsequent influence in the teaching of writing, in order to understand not only the changing nature of computer use in language teaching, but also and more specifically the role of network-based language teaching today.

The work of American structural linguists influenced various structural methods of language instruction developed from the 1920s to the 1950s. Strongly influenced by the work of behavioural psychologist such as John Watson and B.F. Skinner, structural methodologists conceived language learning as habit formation. The main aim of the



process was the production of automatic, correct responses to linguistic stimuli through practice, rather than the acquisition of abstract knowledge. The widespread audiolingual and grammar-translation methods shared the principal assumptions that language teaching syllabi should be organized by linguistic categories and that the sentence was the primary unit of analysis and practice. The emphasis and the assumptions of the structural perspectives were reflected in the approaches to the teaching of the four macroskills, whose emphasis was not on cognitive or social processes, but rather on the finished linguistic product. As a result, L2 writing instruction focused on learners' production of formally correct sentences and paragraphs; at a more advanced level, contrastive analysis between the native and the target language was conducted.

The earliest CALL programs were also consistent with the structuralist approach, and for this reason they have been commonly defined "structural approaches to CALL" (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). These programs, consisting of grammar and vocabulary tutorials, drill and practice programs, as well as language testing instruments, were originally developed in the 1960s and 1970s and were designed to follow the computer-as-tutor model, providing immediate positive or negative feedback to learners on the formal accuracy of their responses. Despite the fact that these activities merely perpetuated existing instructional practices in an online form, the earliest CALL programs were seen as beneficial and essential to learning.

### **1.1.2 The Cognitive/Constructivist Perspective and the Cognitive Approach to CALL**

The development of technically more sophisticated programs, as well as the rejection of purely behaviouristic approaches to language learning at both theoretical and behavioural levels, propelled CALL into the second generation, which tended to shift attention to the

learner. The latter is now seen as an active participant in the language learning process, which is understood, in turn, as an active process of generating and transforming knowledge, rather than as a matter of conditioned responses.

The generative-transformational grammar proposed by Chomsky (1957; 1965) contributed to this gradual shift in goals. On the ground that a speaker of a language is guided by innate cognitive structures to produce and understand an infinite number of well-formed utterances, accurate language habits left the place to fostering the learners' mental construction of a second language system. At first this led to a renewed focus on grammar and put great emphasis on providing comprehensible input,<sup>3</sup> giving individuals the opportunity to mentally construct the grammar of the language from extensive natural data (Krashen, 1982). Under the influence of cognitive approaches and following the developments in first language writing research, literacy started to be seen as an individual psycholinguistic process. Writing instruction focused on collaborative tasks organized in staged processes – brainstorming, drafting, revising – fostering, among other things, the development of a cognitive and problem-solving individual approach to writing.

The generation of CALL programs linked to these trends offered learners good opportunities for problem-solving and hypothesis testing, allowing them to utilize their existing knowledge in order to develop new understandings. The idea that computers are machines to be controlled by learners is reflected in the computer-as-pupil metaphor and is linked to the work of Papert (1980) and his colleagues at the MIT Media Laboratory. In their view, while computers provide tools and resources, it is the learner's responsibility to interact with them in a simulated environment.<sup>4</sup> A recent application in this tradition is the

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<sup>3</sup> Since Krashen felt that learners' speech was largely irrelevant to language learning, in his view the purpose of providing comprehensible input was not to foster authentic social interaction.

<sup>4</sup> The views of Papert and his colleagues extended a tradition of thought popularised by John Dewey and Alfred Whitehead according to which learning occurs through creative action.



Athena Language Learning Project<sup>5</sup> developed at the MIT Laboratory for Advanced Technology in the Humanities. Through this software, the learner is put in an active position. However, Athena provides only an effective illusion of communicative interaction, because the learner acts within a closed system and therefore does not engage in genuine negotiation of meaning.

In conclusion, it seems that despite significant advances over earlier tutorial and drill programs, and the apparent advantages of multimedia CALL, genuine interactivity has not been reached yet.

### **1.1.3 The Socio-cognitive Perspective and the Socio-cognitive Approach to CALL**

By the early 1990s, critics pointed out that CALL was still failing to live up to its full potential (Kenning and Kenning, 1990; Pusack and Otto, 1990; Ruschoff, 1993), compromising the collaborative nature of learning. The shift towards socio-cognitive approaches to CALL, moving from learners' interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer, takes its cue from both theoretical and technological developments. Theoretically, learning is now viewed also in terms of the social structure of learners' discourse and activity, and not exclusively in terms of changes in individuals' cognitive structures (Crook, 1994). If we accept that communicative processes are as important as the final linguistic product, the broader emphasis is on meaningful interaction

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<sup>5</sup> In January 1985 the MIT Foreign Languages and Literatures Section embarked on a five-year project supported by a grant from the Annenberg/CPB Project aiming to use the resources of Project Athena to develop materials for teaching a four-course sequence in each of the five languages taught at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT): French, Spanish, Russian, German, and English as a Second Language. The materials are meant to use artificial intelligence in natural language processing and to include interactive video and interactive audio components. They are intended to be adaptable through authoring systems for use by other teachers and in learning other languages.

in authentic discourse communities, and language instruction is meant to help learners enter into the kinds of authentic social discourse situations and communities that they would later encounter outside the classroom. The language teaching profession is dominated by the concept of communicative competence, a term coined by Hymes (1972) in response to the mentalist characterization of linguistic competence. In the same years, Halliday (1975) posited three principal functions of language use – ideational, interpersonal, and textual –, and brought educators' attention to the fact that language teaching had only dealt with one of these: the ideational function. Halliday focused on the social appropriateness of language use, and insisted that syntactical and grammatical elements of language were best understood as forms used in particular conventional ways and in speech communities, rather than as de-contextualized and autonomous structures. The introduction of these concepts in teaching and the new awareness of the principal functions of language use, suggested that, beside linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence also need to be taught (Canale and Swain, 1980).

In this less structurally-driven educational context, literacy was increasingly seen as a key to developing socio-cultural and intercultural competence, rather than language knowledge alone. Writing started to be regarded as a process integrated in particular socio-cultural context, focusing not only on the development of individual strategies, but also on learning appropriate ways of communication. From a technological point of view, the development of computer networking allows the computer to be used as a vehicle for interactive communication, facilitating access to other people as well as to information and data. In the language classroom, computer networking allows the technological development of CMC and globally linked hypertext.



## **2. Definition and Role of Technology in L2 Writing Development**

As Lankshear and Snyder (2000) point out, writing, in the sense of making language visible, always involves the application of technology of some kind. The use of a pencil, a typewriter, or a printing press represented an innovation requiring new skills and understanding applied in innovative ways and inside new communicative practices. This is also the case, for example, of the different skills required and opportunities offered by the composition of an e-mail, compared to writing with pen and paper. Traditional writing materials and methodologies have been affected by the digital evolution of writing, which has provided alternative approaches: electronic texts, for example, changed writing habits because they facilitated the composition process, allowing us to create and manipulate texts much more easily.

Many researchers have pointed out the salient changes that technology has brought to writing, including, for example, changes to the visual aspect of composing a text, such as the possibility of choosing a variety of fonts and formats (Balestri, 1988; Halio, 1990; Kaplan and Moulthrop, 1990; Snyder, 1994; Tuman, 1992). Kress (1998) argues that we need to rethink language as a multimodal phenomenon. In the context of writing with the support of the computer, the meaningful interaction between visual design and verbal expression, for instance, becomes much more apparent.

## **2.1 Current Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives**

### **2.1.1 Writing as Communicative and Interactive Modality**

As we have seen in Chapter I, current perspectives on teaching and learning writing emphasize interaction and collaborative knowledge building. In second language studies, however, there is not yet enough research concerning the way in which learners incorporate literacy collaboratively and interactively in classroom language learning. Researchers in the field are increasingly stressing that besides research on audio, special and/or behavioural modalities, careful attention must be given also to textual and visual modalities in classroom communicative processes (e.g. Silva, Hyland). As already mentioned, the formulation of the notion of communicative competence by linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes has been influential in foreign language research and teaching (Weber, 1991; 1996), forming the basis for notions of second language communicative competence. Though Hymes does not exclude written text, communication patterns have been explored through empirical methodologies developed with close analysis of face-to-face interaction in mind. This work has been highly influential in both first and FL classroom research. Heath (1983), for example, developed the notion of 'literacy events', emphasising the face-to-face interactional practices that surround text. This kind of work, however, has not explicitly endorsed the role of literacy in socio-culturally oriented studies of foreign language communication and learning, so the tendency is to conceptualise interaction as isomorphic with spoken interaction. Consequently, the importance given to face-to-face interactional practices has contributed to the neglected role of literacy as a communicative and interactive modality, so that classroom communication is seen as a reciprocal process between teachers and learners mainly constructed through face-to-face interaction. However, interaction is not exclusively synonymous with face-to-face spoken



modality, and can also be created by writing, in different moments, forms, and social contexts. As a matter of fact, like spoken input and output, written input and output are intrinsically dialogic, since texts are always implicitly written for an imagined or real readership.

Unlike toddlers, classroom-based FL learners are literate from the start and exploit literacy in the initial stages of learning, that is to say from the first moment they encounter the foreign language. In the case of IFL courses in which the language is studied *ab initio*, for instance, language teachers can exploit literacy from the initial stages of learning Italian. Writing skills can be considered as an efficient means of classroom communication and interaction, so that writing can be integrated into the overall communicative life of the classroom, including not only expanded composition, but also instrumental uses of literacy such as collaborative completion of worksheets and texts, and written responses to a given text. The definition of what constitutes writing is thus enlarged, including all of the written forms surrounding the creation of texts, and the integration of textual interactions into overall classroom communication patterns. Additionally, the creation of a textual community<sup>6</sup> where language teachers and learners interact can be seen to constitute the social condition of written communication forms in class.

### **2.1.2 Technology as a Tool for Communication and Interaction**

Developments in the field of instructional technology parallel the rise of the perspectives on writing illustrated above. A good example is provided by technologies enabling

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<sup>6</sup> In his book *Communities of Practice*, Wenger (1999: 45) argues that issues of education should be addressed first and foremost in terms of identities and modes of belonging, and only secondarily in terms of skills and information. Following this view, pedagogy for online learning is not to be considered merely in terms of techniques for supporting the construction of knowledge but, more generally, in terms of effects on the formation of identities.

educators to present interactive learning experiences to learners studying at a distance (Rourke, 2000). The pedagogical purpose and rationale of these systems is best understood under a constructivist perspective. There is in fact such a strong link between the effective use of modern technology and the theory of constructivism,<sup>7</sup> that there is currently a fundamental shift away from didactic techniques and towards a unifying constructivist approach, on the ground that constructivism as a theory, focusing on knowledge construction, is juxtaposed to behavioural theory, focusing on knowledge reproduction. Mann (1994) claims that the use of new technologies in educational settings has caused the constructivist theory of learning to receive new attention.

Constructivist, socio-cognitive and socio-cultural theories of learning provide a theoretical underpinning for familiar pedagogic practices such as collaborative projects and group work. The work of Piaget (1926) and Vygotsky (1978), in particular, emphasizes the role of the social context in the construction of knowledge and the complementarities of the active child and the social environment in the co-construction of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> According to constructivists, knowledge is “constructed”, that is created by individuals by attempting to bring meaning and coherence to new information and to integrate their knowledge with their prior experience. Empirical support to this notion has been provided

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<sup>7</sup> The earliest origins of constructivism date back from the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1710), who believed that we can know only those cognitive structures we have put together by ourselves, that is to say we can only know something when we can explain it to ourselves. Through the influence of Piaget and Wittrock, cognitive psychologists have refocused attention on the learners’ cognitive mechanisms, with the aim of understanding how prior knowledge, learners’ beliefs and memory influence how learners integrate experiences into refined or new schema.

<sup>8</sup> Although Piaget and Vygotsky both acknowledged the role of the social environment in cognitive development, they differed in how they assumed the social environment to influence cognitive development. Piaget believed that discussions between peers is more valuable than discussion between an adult and a child, because the interactions with an adult are inherently unequal and asymmetrical, on the ground that they disrupt the condition of reciprocity needed to achieve cognitive equilibrium (Tudge and Rogoff, 1989). Vygotsky, on the other hand, emphasized the impact of interactions with a more skilled partner, which are important because they provide the means for children to acquire the intellectual tools of their society.



by research in face-to-face settings (Arbes and Kitchener, 1974; Azmata and Montgomery, 1993; Berkowitz and Gibbs, 1983; Gall and Gall, 1990). The constructivist approach to learning stresses the process of learning and the conceptual changes occurring in the learner's schema (Osborne and Freyberg, 1985); its fundamental idea is that the learner is the constructor of knowledge, while the teacher is the facilitator who stimulates challenges and guides learners through the learning process, respecting the learners' views and interests. The approach has been very widely used in schools in the United States, but it has had limited use in language minority contexts. The work of both Piaget and Vygotsky also influenced the cognitive elaboration approach, which emphasizes the cognitive processing performed by interactive individuals, determining the circumstances in which social interaction benefits learning. According to this view, interaction with others leads to the active processing of information by the individual, modifying the individual's cognitive structures. Elaboration<sup>9</sup>, in particular, refers to the detailed explanations occurring when peers provide examples of a topic, explain a concept, or supply specific argumentation. Verbalization can lead to elaborate cognitive processing and thereby reflection, awareness, reorganization, differentiation, fine-tuning, and the expansion of knowledge (Van Boxtel, 2000).

Collaborative learning has been shown in numerous fields as well as in laboratory studies to enhance both learners' achievement and their social development (Cohen, 1994; Dillenbourg, 1999; Johnson and Johnson, 1994; Slavin, 1996). In recent years the question of how collaborative learning enhances peer interaction and group work has resulted in a

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<sup>9</sup> Empirical studies (Webb and Farivar, 1994, 1999; King, 1994, 1999) support the view that so-called 'elaborative-talk' contributes to the use of more elaborate conceptions in subsequent situations. Elaborated help encourages the explainer to clarify and reorganize existing material, in order to achieve a better understanding. The benefits of elaboration can occur in a variety of contexts, for example, giving help to another student or during the resolution of discrepancies (King, 1994; Webb and Farivar, 1994).

new area of research referred to as Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) (Slavin, 1996).

Synchronous and asynchronous communication offers a considerable potential for language socialization, language learning, and writing development.<sup>10</sup> Vygotskian concepts such as “Scaffolding”, “Appropriation”, and the “Zone of Proximal Development” are central to the analysis of both teacher-student and student-student interaction in a dynamic and authentic context for dialogue and feedback, which has a great potential for the teaching of writing (e.g. Brown, 2000; Hardwick, 2000, and Blair, 2003/2004). The incorporation and use of computer technologies in FL, especially if exploited for the development of writing skills, however, seems to be a much more complex issue than it first appeared (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). While agreeing with other researchers that CMC has the potential to lead to both deeper learning (Bonk and King, 1988) and more equal participation, (Faigley, 1992; Shallert and Hailey Reed, 2003-2004), recent studies reveal that online conversations are far more complex and learners’ experiences are much less predictable than expected. This may be linked to the fact that, despite the fact that computer technologies have been used for educational purposes for over ten years, there is still a paucity of theories and tools for conducting systematic research projects in the field. This is also the main reason why the majority of current studies are exploratory in nature. For example, Rourke and Anderson (2000) conducted an exploratory study examining the relationship between computer-mediated forms of social communication and learners’ perception of the social climate of computer conferences. The results, which reveal an overall correlation in the weak to moderate range, further the understanding of this important component of computer mediated discussion, but cannot offer firm conclusions. Garrison *et al.* (2000) identified several

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<sup>10</sup> As Christie (1989) points out, we should bear in mind that this process will involve forms of literacy which may differ significantly from traditional forms of educational literacy.



issues that may influence the learners' perceptions of the social interaction among distance learners. Additionally, learning strategies developed by authors such as Slavin (1996) and Johnson and Johnson (1994) have been found to have an ability to influence the social environment of computer conferences. The nature of the relationship between social communication and learning is still not entirely clear, although the picture emerging from several recent studies (Bullen, 1999; Fabro and Garrison, 1998; Hara *et al.*, 2000; Kanuka and Anderson, 1998) is that the presence of a social dimension may not be a sufficient condition for the occurrence of learning, because of a paucity of critical discourse in the transcripts of computer conferences. A recent study by Rourke and Anderson (2002) investigated an online course in which groups of four learners conducted online discussions, with the purpose of exploring the effectiveness of peer teams as online discussion leaders. Learners were examined for their ability to bring instructional design, discourse facilitation, and direct instruction to the discussions, and they were shown to prefer the peer teams to the instructor as discussion leaders. Participants also reported that the discussions were helpful in achieving higher order learning objectives.

The use of networked computers is thus enabling new forms of communication – a process which is becoming imperative in the present information technology society. In these alternative spaces for social and, consequently, discourse participation, writers have more opportunities for freeing writing from the constraints of the traditional classroom, and have the opportunity to argue, negotiate, agree, and jointly draft and redraft texts electronically.

According to the socio-cognitive framework, the goal of language instruction is to help learners to enter new and authentic discourse communities, which are increasingly located online. It is therefore of particular pedagogical value to integrate online activities with more traditional ones. Moreover, according to most researchers in the field, it is extremely important that language learners are exposed to these new forms of

communication not only in English, in which much international online communication is still conducted, but also in other languages, as cyberspace is increasingly becoming multilingual (Hyland, 2003).

## **2.2 Studies and Claims Relating to the Interface of L2 Writing with Technology**

A considerable body of L2 writing research has accumulated in the past two decades, and an increasing number of researchers have begun in the last ten years or so to explore IT-enhanced writing instruction with L2 writing populations. At present, however, technologies are just beginning to be incorporated into L2 writing classrooms on a broad scale, and there is little consensus, (frequently even little discussion) of either their potential or their actual value.

One stance expressed by CALL theorists Egbert, Chao, and Handson-Smith echoes the “no real change” position found in some literary circles and implied in the absence of technological media in developing writing theory: “A theory of CALL is a theory of SLA; the fact that the technology changes does not mean that the principles of language development do” (1999: 1, 2). Also suggestive of this stance is the absence of the topic of IT in discussions of the future of L2 writing (Santos *et al.*, 2000), or indeed the dearth of research articles addressing IT and writing in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*. In other forums, such as *Computers and Composition* and other journals originating outside Applied Linguistics, the topic of IT in L2 writing has been salient for some time. These positions, held at the core of L2 writing as a discipline, fail to acknowledge both findings in L1 research and growing evidence from L2 writing studies, indicating that IT in fact does appear to interact with participants and to influence the classroom environment in ways that can affect dimensions of L2 writing and writing instruction.



At the other extreme, claims for the potential of IT to revolutionize writing and writing instruction continue to abound, many of them borrowed from L1 contexts. In regard to curriculum and classroom practice, Peyton (1999) states that “in this [IT-enhanced] environment, traditional notions of what writing and learning involve and traditional patterns of teacher-dominated talk are not appropriate, possible, or even desirable” (25).

Several researchers, for example, claim that the Internet has special potential for combating the “cultural isolation” that EFL students have to deal with (Kern and Warschauer, 2000; Liaw and Johnson, 2000; Schultz, 2000) and provide more opportunities for target language input and authentic communication (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). In relation to teachers, Luke further adds that “Internet access by its nature alters pedagogy, changing the teacher’s role from authority/centre/talking head to coach/collaborator” (Luke, 2000); while Chao (1999) also claims that, with computers, teachers have more tools than ever to promote integration, learner autonomy, guidance rather than grading, critical thinking, and process as well as product. As far as students are concerned, researchers have claimed that writing using IT is motivating (Chao, 2000; Phinney, 1991; Warschauer, 1999), and that synchronous discussion forums elicit more student-to-student interaction and more participation from shy students. As for texts and writing tasks, some researchers boldly assert that online writing is qualitatively different from pen-and-paper writing (Kramsh *et al.*, 2000). A third group of researchers have raised concerns about the negative effects of introducing IT into L2 writing classrooms. Hawisher and Selfe (1999), for instance, in critiquing the “global village” myth of the Internet, expand upon Grabill’s (1998) concerns about access and the “technopoor”.

There are, therefore, conflicting views in L2 writing literature about the current and future role of IT in writing and writing instruction. Meanwhile, research exploring some of the issues that these claims raise has begun to appear. Studies have started to consider

themes including the roles of the teacher (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Warden, 2000; Warschauer, 1998, 1999), learners (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Lam, 2000; Liaw, 1998; Liou, Wang, and Yuli, 1992; Warschauer, 1998, 1999), instructional activities (Braine, 2001; Huang, 1998; Warden, 2000; Warschauer, 1998, 1999), and writing outcomes (Braine, 2001; Warden, 2000) in computer-enhanced and traditional environments. Researchers are also examining specific factors such as availability of and familiarity with the relevant technology (Braine, 2001; Huang, 1998; Liaw, 1998; Phinney, 1991; Taylor, Jamieson, and Eignor, 2000), features of the software (Warden, 2000), students' attitude (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Phinney, 1991) and beliefs about technology (Warschauer, 1998, 1999), writing processes (Chi, 1999; Warden, 2000), discourse conventions (Braine, 2001), context of audience (Chi, 1999; Liaw and Johnson, 2000; Warschauer, 1998, 1999). Issues of particular importance in L2 writing contexts concern the amount of target-language practice involved (Kamhi-Stein, 2000), the role of the first language (Liaw, 1998), and that of culturally-related literacy practices (Sugimoto and Levin, 2000). These studies, however, present at best a fragmented picture of the role of IT in writing, perhaps even more so given the extraordinary diversity of the environments and populations they examine. These multiplying interests, converging with the continuing integration of CALL in FL classrooms in the past decade or so, have led to repeated calls for research into the embedded role of IT into L2 writing acquisition and instruction (Chapelle, 2000; Kern and Warschauer, 2000).

### **2.2.1 Current Research on L2 Writing and Computer Networking Technologies**

Research into the effectiveness of the use of computers in L2 writing instruction has gone through several trends, which mirror the development and prevalence of various computer



applications. The first research efforts focused on the effectiveness of feedback for grammatical exercises, as these were considered essential for the development of L2 writing proficiency. Rapidly developing computer capabilities led to a further shift: focusing on the possible benefits to writing competency of using the computer for e-mail messages. Finally, the most recent trend in computer-assisted writing research concentrates on the advantages and disadvantages of computer conferencing, or computer-mediated communication (CMC), in the FL classroom.

According to Kern and Warschauer (2000), to date there has been relatively little published research that explores the relationship between the use of computer networks and language learning. In the area of second language research, publications focus on language socialization, intercultural learning, and social or political aspects of synchronous and asynchronous electronic environments. In addition, while there is increased and systematic research interest concerning English (Herring, 2001), there has been limited interest on these matters from the perspective of less widely spoken languages. More precisely, despite the high level of investment in new online learning programmes by corporations as well as educational institutions in the UK, there is little systematic research into computer networks' overall effectiveness as a learning medium. This is also linked to the fact that Web-based online learning is too recent a medium to have been the subject of a systematic research programme or to test its overall educational effectiveness. Current research relies on many small-scale evaluations or case studies of individual initiatives. Coomey and Stephenson (2000) propose a systematic review of such reports published in the period 1998-2000. Aware of the fact that many interesting developments were too recent to appear in research reports, they distributed the articles across the theme "overviews of current practice and research"; "conceptual propositions", and "individual research reports". Despite the limitations – for example, the samples often contained less than 15 learners and the quality of programmes was at times unknown – four major

features were widely identified as essential to good practice: *dialogue*, appearing in many forms in online courses; *involvement*, including responses to structured tasks; active *engagement* with material; and *need* for support and control of learners on key learning activities.

Many articles have been written witnessing the ability of Word Processors, Local Area Networks, Hypertexts, and the Internet to support literacy education and especially to assist FL learners (Hawisher and Selfe, 1999). However, research evidence shows that improvement in writing outcomes has been slight (Lankshear, 2000). According to Pennington (2003), there is little doubt that computer-based writing can affect the writing process and the writing product; however, the extent of the effect is uncertain. Educators' experiences in higher education confirm research findings, revealing that technologies do not, by themselves, generate dramatic changes in how courses are delivered and taught (Hyland, 2003).

The apparently simple question "Does the use of networked-based language teaching lead to better language learning?" turns out not to be so simple, on the ground that computers, like other technological tools used in teaching, do not in themselves bring about improvement in learning (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). Haas (1996), for instance, argues that the computer is neither a transparent medium that has no effect on writing, nor a deterministic one that dramatically alters the process view.

The impact of computer technologies on the classroom is not only shaped by the capabilities of specific tools, but, first of all, by the interest and capabilities of learners and instructors. In addition, according to Strommen and Lincoln (1992), in a technology-rich environment we must remember that the educational focus is on learning and instructional goals rather than on the technology itself, because technologies are merely vehicles or tools for delivering instruction. Thus, a technique is pedagogically effective if the



communication tool is based on an instructional design and guided through a specific procedure by a trained facilitator.

Kitchener and Arbes caution designers about the inadequacy of having learners discuss course content without the benefit of the guidance of a trained facilitator. Garrison *et al.* (2000) arrived at similar conclusions after observing online discussions that contained little evidence of higher levels of cognitive activity. According to their diagnosis, often the goals of lessons do not lend themselves to advanced inquiry, and there are deficiencies in guiding discourse toward higher cognitive activities.

While many researches may appear to be keen on finding out users' – learners' and teachers' – perceptions of the relatively new experience of online teaching and learning (e.g. Angulo and Bruce, 1999; Daugherty and Funke, 1998; Goh and Tobin, 1999; Zafeiriou *et al.*, 2001), delving into what sort of effect can be brought about in education by Internet-based applications, through a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to student and teacher development, seems to represent an extremely complex goal. If it is true that research on computer technologies indicates that there is little direct impact on learning, it is also true that the early literature and educators' experiences suggests that social and communicative technologies may play a significant role in changing the dynamics of the teaching of L2 writing. Particularly because of their flexibility and simplicity, these innovative technologies are easy to integrate with more traditional FL activities, and can afford learners a degree of freedom, creativity, and self-management not easily achieved with traditional techniques.

The focus of published studies, however, remains mainly on the quantifiable and easily measured aspects of online communication. Informed by a product-oriented, structuralist approach to research on the use of networked computers in L2 writing, a number of studies have quantitatively compared the amount of participation in face-to-face and computer-assisted discussion (e.g. Kern, 1995; Sullivan and Pratt, 1996; Warschauer,

1996), while other studies have attempted to quantify the language functions used in online communication (Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1996), and yet others have quantitatively examined the linguistic features of online discussion (Marden and Absalom, 2002; Warschauer, 1996).

The contexts in which network-based teaching and learning occur have not been studied in sufficient depth, and studies examining in detail the development of discourse and discourse communities in online environments are still rare, especially in the field of L2 writing. While a number of educators have attempted to look at this phenomenon, much of the published work to date has consisted of informal reports by teachers concerning what they have observed in the classroom (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). Mark Warschauer (1999) tried to overcome this shortcoming by presenting the results of an ethnographic study of four computer-intensive language and writing classes in Hawaii, showing that the particular implementation of network-based teaching is highly dependent on socio-cultural context, including the attitudes and beliefs of the teacher, and illustrating the significance of new conceptions of literacy when considering network-base teaching. Other research on CMC has focused on categorizing individual learners' comments, yet these are rarely analysed qualitatively, i.e. looking at the ways in which learners actually negotiate meaning with each other.

Jill Pellettieri (2000) examined task-based real time interaction between adult learners of Spanish, using a framework developed by Gass and Varonis (1994). By analysing learners' modifications in response to negotiation signals and corrective feedback, she provides evidence that computer-mediated interaction constitutes a useful mechanism for helping learners to achieve higher levels of metalinguistic awareness. Using a framework derived from writing research, and aiming to investigate the nature and degree of language learners' imitation and accommodation of writing styles, Boyd Davis and Ralf Thiede (2000) examined the interaction among L2 and L1 writers in



asynchronous computer conferences. They found that L2 learners modified their styles in response to L1 interlocutors.

Further research is needed to explore which features of actual written literacy can be incorporated into technology-led learning and how writers perform on relevant tasks. This kind of research would also contribute to the perception of literacy as an important mode of language acquisition, and to the development of a general theory of L2 writing in which the application of a model of collaboration between human being and technology serves to underline the importance of the social context of writers' collaboration. With the growing use of computers in L2 writing classrooms, there is a strong need for further research in the areas reviewed in this section: computerized feedback, Word processing, the use of e-mail and of computer-mediated communication. The studies cited in this review represent steps in the right direction, but they certainly do not present us with definitive answers concerning the connection between computer use and L2 writing proficiency. Questions raised in individual studies need to be followed up in subsequent ones and/or replicated in a variety of instructional settings, while both teachers and researchers need to update their knowledge continually.

## **2.3 Main Applications of Computer Technologies in L2 Writing Instruction**

Nowadays, the implementation of technological tools within learning contexts reflects dominant socio-cognitive approaches, shifting agency to learners by requiring them to use computers in order to solve problems, navigate through simulated environments, and interact collaboratively (Kern and Warschauer, 2000). Current applications of computer technologies are thus substantially different from the early days, when computers were introduced into classrooms and adapted to fit in with traditional activities and grammar

exercises, thus failing to promote more critical and collaborative learning practices. As already mentioned, in the case of writing, online resources were initially used merely to reinforce traditional literacy activities and grammar exercises. The computers' role in writing instruction has by now been extended through the use of networked computers, including synchronous writing, where learners communicate in real time via discussion software on Local Area Networks or Internet Chat Sites with all participants at their computers at the same time; and asynchronous writing, where learners communicate in a delayed way, such as via e-mail.

This section will first review the impact that Word processing and online modalities of computer use have had on writing, and then take a critical and comparative look at CMC technologies currently available for writing, both in the asynchronous mode (LAN conferencing software, Internet Conferencing software/Chat rooms) and in synchronous environments (Weblogs, Email, Internet applications for writing).

Following the example of a number of other studies (Murphy, 2000, Sandholz, Ringtaff and Dywer, 1997; Warschauer and Meskill, 2000), and in line with our examination of theoretical perspectives and their impact on computer-enhanced education, the analysis will also take into consideration how innovative uses of computer technologies can become more reflective if language teachers adopt constructivist/socio-constructivist approaches to pedagogy.

### **2.3.1 Writing with the Support of Word Processing**

A background of over 30 years of theorising about literacy in the digital age (Balestri, 1988; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Landow, 1994; Lanham, 1989; Kress, 1995, 1996; The New London Group, 1996; Reinking *et al.*, 1998; Snyder, 1994; Tuman, 1992) suggests



that keyboard-based technology can play a unique role in supporting emergent writing literacy activities.

According to the majority of educators and researchers in the field, in comparison to all other uses of computers in L2 writing instruction, the impact of Word processing on writing has been dramatic (e.g. Ferris and Hedgecock, 1998). The main innovative pedagogical feature of this technology lies in its flexibility, allowing writers to be liberated from linear constraints, and leading researchers and educators to expect that learners will be encouraged to write more accurately when using word processors than with the other methods.

Research, however, has produced mixed results and obtained inconsistent findings on the effective role and impact of word processors on writing. While some studies confirm the improvement of learners' writing attitudes and products (e.g. Snyder, 1993), others have found little difference between hand-writers and computer-writers, or even reported that the medium restricts learners' composing and revising activities (e.g. Gerrard, 1989).

Nowadays, research on the effect of word processors on writing has become largely irrelevant, since writing is increasingly produced on computers by necessity. This fact leads to the reflection that no inherent advantage can be directly attributed to the machine itself; regarded as only a "transitional tool" (Hyland, 2000) since it prepares texts that will eventually be transformed into paper form.

In today's classroom, however, Word Processors can still be used to improve writing, provided that learners are supported by proper instruction, allowing them to be comfortable with the software and to exploit fully its potential. Even when integrated within a writing course, Word processors could be valuable teaching tools if combined with other activities. The ease and speed of distributing electronic files of texts for revision and feedback, as well as the presence of the computer screen, may foster collaboration in

class, providing common access to a text by a small group working together. The interaction with other learners, however, is still minimal in this scenario, since when using Word processors learners tend to work in relative isolation.

### **2.3.2 Writing Online**

Both collaboration and interaction are most fully achieved with computers through online learning, taking advantage of the connectivity that the technology now offers. Networked computers achieve a powerful extension of the computer's role in writing instruction either through synchronous writing, where learners communicate in real time via discussion software on Local Area Networks or Internet chat sites with all participants, or through asynchronous writing, where learners communicate in a delayed mode. Linking computers together in the attempt to build on the advantages of individual machines through learner collaboration reflects both educational theory (Vygotsky, 1962) and applied research (e.g. Gere, 1987), all of which, as we have seen, suggest that collaboration improves learning. For example, researchers have noticed that learners value and benefit from peer support during the composition stage (Hyland, 2000; Stoddard and MacArthur, 1993).

There is very little literature, to date, on the topic of effective L2 writing teaching online. Recent studies have focused on the learning patterns of online learners and, more specifically, on the effects of online courses on learning styles. White, Roberts and Branna (2003) focused on course design in online education, and insisted on the importance of re-conceptualizing writing courses with an interactive learning pedagogy in mind, because transferring a traditional classroom-based course to an online format is doomed to failure. Archer, Garrison, Anderson and Rourke (2001) have also conducted research showing that “the creation of adequate levels of cognitive, social and teaching presence are associated with high levels of deep and meaningful learning” (61). Their findings were situated in a



conceptual model called “Community of inquiry”, which features three major elements: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence, overlapping to form the educational experience of the learner. This model provided the framework for other relevant studies (e.g. Vaughan and Garrison, 2004; Kanuka and Garrison, 2004) as well as directions for further research. Bill Pelz (2003), for instance, claimed that Social Presence, Cognitive Presence, or Teaching Presence can foster the building of community in online courses. He created rubrics for guiding learners’ discussion, so that only discussion postings that fall into one of the three categories receive points toward grades, and only learners including all three kinds of presence in their questions and responses will be given the higher grades, thus influencing student and faculty satisfaction levels.

### *CMC Technologies*

In primitive form, CMC has existed since the 1960s, but its use has become widespread only since the late 1980s (Herring, 1996; Murray, 1995). Through the use of tools such as e-mail, Internet Relay Chat or Multi-user Object Oriented (MOOs),<sup>11</sup> CMC allows language learners who benefit from networked access to communicate with other learners or speakers of the target language in either asynchronous or synchronous modes, both in one-to-one and one-to-many communication. Teachers or students can thus share a message with a small group, the whole class, or a discussion list involving a high number of participants. CMC technologies are becoming increasingly available to educational

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<sup>11</sup> MOOs is a text-based online virtual reality system to which multiple users (players) are connected at the same time. The term MOO is used in two distinct, but related, senses. One is to refer to those programs descended from the original MOO server, and the other is to refer to any Multi User Dimension (MUD) that uses object-oriented techniques to organize its database of objects, particularly if it does so in a similar fashion to the original MOO or its derivatives.

institutions around the world, as technological developments have greatly reduced the cost and complexity of computers and telecommunications (Grunberg and Armellini, 2004).

Several researchers have recently stressed the positive educational effects of computer-mediated communication (CMC). According to Cooper and Selfe (1990), CMC can facilitate communication and promote egalitarian class structures, while according to others it helps to enhance student motivation (Warschauer, 1996), to improve writing skills (Cohen and Riel, 1989; Cononelos and Oliva, 1993; Warschauer 1996), and to develop the writing/thinking connection (Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts, 1996).

However, theoretical analyses, the findings of exploratory studies, as well as empirical evidence confirm that CMC technologies are often undistinguished in research and practice, and often considered passive and neutral – while all technology is, as we have seen, active and biased. Many studies exploring learner interaction in CMC environments and CALL implicitly treat CMC technology as one-dimensional in nature. Researchers frequently fail to distinguish between CMC sub-technologies, for instance, conflating results from synchronous and asynchronous modes. Due to recent dramatic developments in networked communication, an increasing number of features present in the interface and infrastructure of CMC require a more careful and focused examination of sub-technologies, in order to explore their effects on users' interactions and perceptions. It is therefore necessary to first account for different individual features in order to study the interactivity of the CMC environment in question as a whole. A careful and focused examination of the various CMC sub-technologies, inclusive of an exploration of each sub-technology's effects on learners' interaction, would draw researchers' attention to the dynamic nature of CMC (particularly in the case of synchronous modes) in the context of networked FL classrooms. Additionally, in the case of FL users, researchers need to categorize, isolate and evaluate the relative effects of CMC interface features on learners' interaction, in order to better understand the effects of interactive computer technology.



Studies comparing these aspects of CMC with face-to-face communication have now started to appear. Few studies, however, have explicitly compared peer learning in face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication (CMC) situations. Among these few, Van der Meijden and Veenman (2003) analysed the effects of the use of cooperative FTF groups versus CMC groups on the interactive behaviour and task performance of students.

A number of scholars are studying aspects of the use of CMC in the educational environment, in order to shed light on different learning experiences. The study conducted by Katrina Meyer (2002) compares the experiences of learners in face-to-face discussions with threaded discussions, evaluating evidence of higher-order thinking in each case. The main aim of this research is to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of traditional classroom activities (in class discussion) versus transferring those activities online (online threaded discussions). The framework of the research and its results provide some support for the assertion that higher-order thinking can occur in online discussions. Themes analysed by Meyer included “expansion of time”, “experience of time”, “quality of the discussion”, “needs of the learners”, and “faculty expertise”. While there are advantages to holding discussions in either setting, learners frequently noted that using threaded discussions increased the amount of time they spent on class objectives and that they appreciated the extra time for reflection on course issues.

Some authors have argued that the performance in CMC groups is superior to the performance of face-to-face groups due to a “less personal and socio-emotional form of interaction and a more task-oriented form of communication” (Jonassen and Kwon, 2001: 154. See also Light and Light, 1999; Bordia, 1997). In addition, in online environments, learners may feel more confident about contributing (Brown, 2000; Blair, 2003-2004), may establish stronger relationships with other learners (Brown, 2000; Hardwick, 2000; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Blair, 2003, 2004), and, as a result, may develop their understanding of tasks collaboratively and collectively. Thus, these technologies offer opportunities for

treating teaching and learning as truly social activities, where knowledge is built through interaction and dialogue (Brown, 2000; Hardwick, 2000; Rice, 2003).

### **a) Synchronous Writing Environments**

#### **- LAN Conferencing Software**

The use of a Local Area Network in writing classes may provide the opportunity for synchronous writing discussions: exchanges, online teacher feedback, and peer conferencing on texts. A LAN consists of a number of computers linked through a server creating an interactive communication context. Swaffer *et al.* (1988) observe that networks potentially have advantages for teaching writing going well beyond those of Word processing, especially if compared to non-networked contexts. Learners have relative autonomy to interact for a genuine purpose in peer groups, i.e. between learners, or between learners and teachers. Such communication contexts normally require specialized writing software whose programs typically display two windows: a bottom portion, which is devoted to the student's writing space, and a top window, which is a shared read-only space where posted messages appear sequentially in a continuous flow, preceded by the poster's log-in name. According to many educators, while LAN discussions may encourage learners' interaction, they may also get too lively, so that messages fly past at such rapid rate that weaker learners may find the sequence of contributions difficult to follow. Once again, teacher support is crucial in making LAN conference experiences more effective.

#### **- Internet Conferencing Software/Chat Rooms**

The access to specialist software is generally restricted to sites with the program in question already installed. A chat site such as a MOO or a group site may represent an



adequate alternative, because while opening up the possibility of long-distance exchanges as well as facilitating writing for unknown audiences, they are free. With MOO, users can navigate and interact with other online participants in a virtual space.

Research indicates that online discussions typically result in a trivialized (sharing, comparing, and agreeing) group conversation (Klemm and Snell, 1996). In order to achieve effective teaching and learning, activities should therefore expand beyond the simple discussions based on sharing and comparing of opinions online. According to Kanuka and Garrison (2004) learners must be provided with opportunities to apply what they have learned, rather than only discussing it. Besides displaying knowledge and skills in the use of Internet communication media as a learning and teaching platform, educators using such platforms should possess knowledge and skills in the use of educational methods and learning strategies. In addition, although these tools present exceptional advantages for collaborative writing and for exchanging ideas on writing projects, there is, as yet, no conclusive evidence that networked communication leads to an improvement in writing as a product.

### ***b) Asynchronous Writing Environments***

Forms of asynchronous communication achieved using networked computers include email, news groups, and conferencing software. Given the non-synchronicity of these types of communication, texts, rather than being co-constructed by participants, can be composed and edited individually, at a more leisurely, pace prior to transmission. This assures that responses are more thoughtful, as well as more carefully edited according to the conventions of written communication. In addition, the participation of less proficient learners to any discussion is also encouraged, since the technology does not tend to induce anxiety or even panic.

In the writing class, email is a useful tool to encourage learners to focus on fluency and meaning while writing for a real purpose and audience. In particular, email is an effective medium for the development of question-answer sessions, since it allows learners the flexibility to respond to parts of an email and to delete unnecessary sections. This tool also offers efficient support for the creation of discussion groups, where learners can simultaneously send an email message to all their classmates, discussing ideas, exchanging vocabulary lists or passing on details of useful websites.

Discussion lists or mailing lists are another form of asynchronous communication widely used in L2 writing. Opinions, questions, announcements, and other information of interest sent by subscribers via mail to the list, are distributed to all other members. The lists, generally organized by themes, are an excellent way of communicating in order to exchange information, get advice, or share interests with others, since subscribers can refer selectively to specific topics.

To date, however, there have been few empirical studies on the use of asynchronous, text-based Internet communication technologies and their appropriateness and/or effectiveness in facilitating higher order thinking in written essays. Much remains to be understood about implementing online activities that facilitate the development of a meaningful and worthwhile educational experience while developing writing skills (Kanuka and Garrison, 2004).

#### *- Email*

Email is currently the most popular use for the Internet (Nie and Erbring, 2000). Like most forms of written language, e-mail is considered to be asynchronous because a message is not composed in the same time frame in which it is received. Using e-mail in interpersonal communication can have important implications in L2 writing classes. Several studies have found that email has become an important component of language teaching, where it is



mostly used to facilitate interaction among learners as well as between learner and teacher. This is due to the fact that email can provide a variety of opportunities for interpersonal interactions that may not be possible in the traditional FL classroom. Email offers language learners the opportunity to communicate quickly and inexpensively with other learners or native speakers in the target language (Warschauer and Healy, 1998), breaking down the limitations in time and space that exist in traditional classrooms. It also avoids, to a great extent, the traditional barriers between teachers and learners (Hawisher and Moran, 1993), avoiding the pressure of immediate, direct scrutiny. In his study of various forms of computer-mediated discourse, Crystal (1999) argues that email gives FL learners the opportunity to interact and negotiate meaning with an authentic audience using a variety of language forms. In line with Baron (1998), Bloch (2002) argues that email can be used as an important tool for building, creating and sustaining relationships that may be different from those occurring in face-to-face contexts; the results of his study show that learners were able to employ a wide variety of rhetorical strategies to interact with their instructor outside the traditional classroom setting. Li (2000) and Warschauer (1996) found that in FL courses the primary focus for using email has been on developing fluency and/or on facilitating personal reflection (Warschauer, 1999).

In addition, as Warschauer (1999) suggests, e-mail allows learners an alternative to face-to-face communication, for example by reducing the pressure on learners to produce a constant flow of language in a face-to-face context. According to the researcher, email can be an alternative to the kinds of social interactions that in the past had only been possible in face-to-face contexts, not substituting them integrally, but extending the space where these interactions can take place.

However, using email as form of social interaction and communication can be problematic, as it necessitates a new understanding of the differences between formal and informal writing. Baron (1998), in particular, observed that her learners were too informal

in their email messages, possibly as a result of the current trend in composition teaching to value meaning over form. Some have also argued that the language of email can be either written or oral, being created by a mixture of established languages (Pais Marden and Absalom, 2002).

### *- Internet Resources for Writing*

Globally linked hypertext and hypermedia also serve the new teaching/learning paradigms, and have tremendous potential for creating and providing access to multi-user, interactive multimedia environments (Chun and Plass, 1996). One of the unexpected consequences of the Internet is the fact that the written word has begun to establish itself as the primary means of interpersonal communication (Bloch, 2002). Besides facilitating the modes of computer-mediated communication previously discussed, the vast source of information provided by the Internet enables both teachers and learners to easily identify, access, and read online texts. This, in turn, is changing many aspects of writing teaching.

In this respect, Internet may represent: *a)* a source of content, since the vast stock of statistics and information available on the Web allows both learners to carry out independent researches and teachers to set guided information-gap tasks, which require learners to search for specific information; *b)* a source of language data, i.e. of authentic writing (for instance online editions of newspapers, magazines, and academic papers), helping learners to understand features of written language; *c)* a publishing outlet, allowing learners to publish their own work, giving them the satisfaction of displaying their writing to a big audience and encouraging accuracy and care in presenting their text. Learners and teachers can create a site, displayed either to all users or, at times, to a restricted audience linked by a local area network, and providing online response forms for classmates or keypals to comment on their peers' work. Thanks to the features of hypertext, writers are able to provide readers with different pathways through a text or series of texts, to be



selected according to individual interests and choices. Hypertext can also support active connections to different parts of the current text and beyond it, leading to digitised graphics, video, sound, animation, and other types of texts.

### *- Weblogs*

Created as social, communicative tools, Weblogs have an enormous potential to become social, student-owned learning spaces (Oravec, 2003). As with all other technological applications, however, Weblogs depend on the users in order to realize their potential. One of the advantages of Weblogs, for learners and instructors alike, lies in the fact that the technological knowledge needed to use them is relatively simple and limited. Simplicity and flexibility also mean that learners can easily exercise their creativity within the framework established by the tutor.

Since Weblogs are used for many different types of writing, they are particularly useful to support activities grounded on the idea that writing is not just a means for expression, but also a tool for learning (Fouberg, 2000). In particular, learners can use Weblogs to build a collaborative learning community (Godwin-Jones, 2003), either commenting on each others' blogs, or collectively contributing to a shared space. According to current research (Brown, 2000; Hardwick, 2000; Blair, 2003, 2004), this social use of computer-mediated communication encourages participation.

### 3. Conclusions

The literature reviewed in this chapter established baseline information on the use of IT in language teaching, especially within the FL university context and for the development of writing skills. As we have seen, especially in the last paragraphs of the chapter, some tools are no longer neutral or passive, but allow learners to engage in new and authentic discourse communities.

Writing theorists in applied linguistics, however, have yet to factor the potentially influential element of technological media into their models. Thus what is needed, at least in part, is to expand theoretical models of writing to include a technological dimension, so that the features of various specific technologies – including, for example, paper, pen, pencil, printing press, screen, keyboard, various software, and their features and limitations – can be factored into writing theories. I would speculate that this element has not been previously considered because the evolution of interactions of writing technologies with other dimensions of writing has, until recently, occurred at such a slow pace<sup>12</sup> as to make the role of technologies themselves seem transparent. Only with the oft-cited rapidity of IT evolution have theorists begun to become aware of the potential role that writing technologies of all sorts may play in evolving literacy practices.

In order to account for these aspects of writing in conjunction with more familiar elements, I propose that a comprehensive theoretical model would need to include two primary dimensions: *a)* Characteristics of writing technologies and physical environment; *b)* Participant internal elements including affective factors and cognitive processes, skills, and knowledge (for example, beliefs about and values concerning writing; writing processes such as pre-writing and revising; information management skills such as synthesis and analysis; or linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary and structure).

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<sup>12</sup> See Olson (1994), who posits effects evolving over centuries.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **COMPUTER TECHNOLOGIES AND L2 WRITING INSTRUCTION**

The previous chapters have shed light on the two broad domains of this study: L2 writing and IT. This study's originality, however, lies in its focus on the interaction between these two broad fields. Following the baseline information on L2 writing and IT established, respectively, in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, this third section will focus on the studies conducted on the role of IT in the teaching and learning of L2 writing. More specifically, we will be analysing the notion of "classroom environment", the location where teacher beliefs and students' perceptions as well as expectations emerge, and we will be looking at the interest generated among researchers and practitioners by the role of specific computer applications to writing in L2, such as software available for writing with the computer, CALL software for the development of macroskills, and computer networking.

The applied part of the present study will take into account, as already outlined in the Introduction, computer-based applications available to IFL students examined in the specific learning and instructional context of the study: the Department of Italian of the University of Warwick. The reason of our focus on this specific type of IT applications is linked to the belief that computer-based technologies, more than any other IT applications, offer extensive possibilities for enhancing the teaching and learning of writing, and that teachers and researchers hold high expectations on their effectiveness.

Researchers and practitioners have attempted to justify computer-based activities in writing instruction. However, as we will see, it remains questionable whether the expectations regarding computer-based activities have been established through systematic research across a suitable range of situations.

This final review chapter substantiates a need for further research, and will help us establish a rationale for conducting the applied part of the present study. The aim of study

is not only to refine our understanding of IT and L2 writing practices and instruction, but also to contribute to the theoretical investigation of an effective theoretical model of writing that can accommodate IT within its framework.

## **1. The Role of Computer Technologies in Writing Instruction**

As Anne Boyle (2000) explains, the use of computers allows students not only to compose but to become active participants in the writing process. In an online learning setting, for example, students are encouraged to become dynamically involved in collaborative activities – such as peer review or editing and group research and discussions – empowering students to participate in a community that holds the same interests as they do.

Among others, scholars such as Moore (1988), Ong (1991), Andersson, Lindgren and Sullivan (1994), Li (2000), and Belisle (2002) suggest that composing on the computer screen helps students become more conscious of the process taking place while they write. As studies have become more abundant, scholars have also investigated other areas connected to the learning that takes place in computer-based instruction. Research (Pennington, 1996, and Beauvois, 1998) shows that writing on the computer has a number of advantages, because it allows students to be more confident about the writing activity itself. Without the need to retype the entire document if a mistake is found, they are able to revise their work more efficiently; and, when looking directly at the paper they have produced on the screen, students are empowered by acknowledging that they are in direct



control of the writing process, which results in much greater engagement and involvement in the assignment.<sup>1</sup>

The role of computer-based activities – Word processing, CALL software, and the World Wide Web – in writing instruction methods and techniques is an issue that has attracted the attention of several researchers. As Boyle points out, during the first decade after the integration of computers into instruction, only a limited number of researchers attempted to examine specifically the role computers played in the teaching process. It was during the 1980s that researchers such as Duling (1985), Daiute (1985), Hawisher (1989), Joyce (1989), Moore (1988), Haas and Hayes (1986), among others, reported results on how computers benefited the formal instruction of writing skills.

More recent studies report that computers are beneficial for the teaching of composition. Peshe Kuriloff (1996) suggests that teachers should use technology to teach how to write better, providing a useful tool in developing and enhancing students' writing skills for the different stages of the writing process. This view is endorsed by Moeller (2007), who based his position on the review of a number of studies. He explained that, as students become more engaged in the production of texts, they become more aware of the recursive components of the composing process and develop a better idea of their audience.

Pennington (1993) also lists a series of advantages that have been found by research on teaching composition with computers. In the composing process, students are better able to apply their knowledge of issues such as organization, audience awareness, use of evidence, development of ideas, and to transfer previous knowledge to new situations requiring different rhetorical decisions. Finally, investigating the collaborative potential of computers, authors (among others, Hyland, 2003) state that they may provide a useful tool for peer editing, group discussions, and working on peer learning activities which can

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter I.

introduce students to similar situations they will encounter in the real world and also deepen their involvement in the assignment.

Despite the successes reported by the above researchers, others have obtained less optimistic results, questioning the benefits of computer technologies in the writing classroom. Among these scholars, Colier and Werier (1995) state that the research done on the effects of computer-based activities on students' writings has been either "contradictory or inconclusive" and that there are no definite findings that could allow the field of writing to have a clear view about the benefits of the use of computer technologies in writing instruction.

In relation to the claim that computer-based activities facilitate revision, for instance, Joram *et al.* (1992) argue that the research aiming to examine such a claim is not yet conclusive, and that further work is needed to be able to state that computers facilitate revision in all situations. More recently, Susser (1998), Slattery and Kowalski (1998), also question the benefits of technology in the writing classroom, stating that teachers and researchers should not ignore the needs and learning styles of the different students, who can make incorrect use of the assisting features that come with the computers.<sup>2</sup>

Since L1 research and classroom practice have in many situations functioned as a model for the L2 field, it is not surprising that the results of the research on the use of computer-based technologies in the teaching of L2 writing are also very similar. As we have seen in the literature review devoted to instructional technology,<sup>3</sup> L2 pedagogy first introduced computers as a medium to learn grammar and vocabulary, especially during the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, instead of revising more consciously, students may dedicate their time to the correction of surface errors. In his book *Computers in the Writing Classroom* (2002), Moeller, while advocating the use of computers in the teaching of writing, states that beginner writers need to be treated differently since they do not compose for pleasure, but to complete their assignment, concentrating more on the completion of the task and forgetting to work on revisions.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter III.



time when it was believed that the best method in order to learn a foreign language was through repetition and drills.

More recently, and precisely in the 1990s, following L1 trends<sup>4</sup> (Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith, 1999), IT has begun to gain toeholds in L2 writing instruction. After an initial pessimistic period about the potential of computer-based activities in SLA,<sup>5</sup> L2 researchers (Ortega, 2003; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005; Rose, 2004; Hawisher, Leblanc, Moran and Selfe, 1996; Tuman, 1992; Kells, 1999) developed greater interest for the way in which computers affect writing in L2. According to Kern and Warschauer (2000), the roles of IT, and in particular of computer networking, must be examined because they offer hitherto unknown venues of “human-to-human communication” (1). Shultz (2000) further highlights the combination of aspects of computer networking with the process approach, particularly in L2 writing environments, as an opportunity to maximize “verbal communication in small groups on an authentic task” (121), which is a goal often difficult to achieve in FL instruction. Social and collaborative views of technology are positively reflected in the way computer networking is used in the L2 classroom, where electronic mail, bulletin boards, or discussion lists on worldwide networks such as the Internet have been made available. The use of linked computers, whether in the traditional or IT-enhanced classroom, has introduced the possibility of real life experience in L2 writing, helping teachers and students to integrate technology in the classroom in social and collaborative manners.

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<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the increasing need for “technological literacies”, not only in the field of education, but also in business and industry, has led to the increasing presence of information technologies in first language composition programs in an effort to meet the perceived need of preparing students to meet the demands of future employment.

<sup>5</sup> According to Michael Bush (1997), just as in L1 composition, the reaction towards computer use in SLA in the late seventies and early eighties was very pessimistic; instructors did not believe computers would gain a broad acceptance in education, since they thought computers were only the fashion of the moment, and were not going to become important educational tools.

As IT continues to be integrated into L2 writing instruction, questions about the actual and potential roles of computers in writing practices persist and multiply, especially with regard to the potential of computer-based technologies for the development of L2 writing skills.

With the rapid integration of technology into language classrooms, the information age provided a host of new literacy opportunities (Warschauer, 2002). To permit a more expansive definition of literacy in this information age, some visionaries are already reframing our traditional idea of literacy into a subcategory of what they call “literacies” (Papert, 1980). The process of becoming literate today involves more than learning how to use language effectively. To be literate, students need to know how to gather, analyse, and use information resources to solve problems and converse with others through technology. In other words, as technology becomes increasingly integrated into our lives, our literacy concept is naturally expanding to include electronic media. As communication technology rapidly becomes a primary carrier of information and provides various ways of expression, text literacy, although necessary and valuable, is no longer sufficient for learners (Kasper, 2000). Consequently, many researchers (Birkerts, 1994; Luke and Elkins, 1998; Kasper, 2000) claim that the goals of literacy must change to accommodate new information and communication technologies. With the claim of new “literacies”, researchers have started to look at limitations and new directions of research on SLA and CALL. To date, the majority of research studies in the fields of SLA and CALL have focused on the benefits and/or possibilities of utilizing specific computer applications in language instruction. For example, the evaluation of technology used in language instruction often has looked at a program’s characteristics – such as graphics, sounds, or special effects – rather than examining the pedagogy, methodology and structures that create the foundation for effective use of the technology. More recently, research has focused primarily on students’ or teachers’ preferences with regards to technology, rather than on the effectiveness of



their use in language learning environments. In other words, rather than conducting rigorous research on the effectiveness of CALL classroom activities in order to understand students' and teachers' experiences in computer-rich environments, many investigations focused on the technology itself or reported only anecdotally on its use (Lui, Moore, Graham, and Lee, 2002).

Due to inattention regarding the central role of learning opportunities and their influence on student learning, the *technocentric* approach to the evaluation of the effectiveness of CALL has proven unsatisfactory (Doughty, 1987). As we have mentioned in Chapter II, much of the existing CALL literature (Chapelle, 1997, 1998; Doughty, 1991; Salaberry 1996, 2000; Salomon 1991; Warschauer, 1995, 2000a, 2002) highlights the limitations of current CALL research and stresses the importance of examining language instructional environments rather than technology itself. To clarify the effectiveness of technology, it is necessary to evaluate, on the basis of empirical observations, specific learning and instructional environments, including in the analysis the multiple factors which characterize them. There is still little research, however, that discusses learning and instructional environments and includes all relevant factors. Various studies have focused on the holistic quality of texts written using computer and others have conducted comparative analyses between traditional and IT-enhanced activities or environments. The main aim of the above studies has been to investigate whether the integration of IT in a given learning and instructional context improves writing skills more than traditional instruction guided by the teacher in a traditional classroom. An investigation conducted in this form, however, is clearly limited in its ability to illuminate the full range of interaction of IT with other aspects of the learning process, such as the participants, the learning and instructional environments, and the theoretical principles at the core of the learning and teaching of L2 writing. As Nydhal (1991), Synder (1998), and Chapelle (2000) have pointed out, the question, if posed in this form, is too simplistic, since it does not specify

the factors and situations related to it: the varieties of IT programs and their features, the target population and their relative level of ability, the characteristics of the learning and instructional environment, the physical configurations of traditional and IT-enhanced classrooms. Researches guided by the question as it stands, assume that the use of IT is not related to any other variables in the context. In contrast, a wide variety of factors that may potentially impact learning: classroom features and class structure – syllabus, types of writing and writing tasks – participants' behaviours and current writing practices and competencies, institutional policy, expectations/goals/values, interpretations and understandings of participants. Among these factors, the complexity and potential impact of learning contexts should be taken into careful account. Contexts, however, are anything but standard. They are uniquely defined by the complex interactions of characteristics of the institutional setting (e.g., how writing is treated by the institution as a whole...), the instructional setting (e.g. the type of program followed, where a module fits in the overall course of study, or the degree of support for particular pedagogical approaches), the classroom setting (e.g. the teacher's methodological approach, the teacher (e.g. the teacher's experience, pedagogical beliefs, attitudes toward different students) and the students (e.g. proficiency, course expectations, attitudes toward the teacher). (Goldstein, 2001: 79-80)

More specifically, as Salomon (1997) points out, effective research on technology should encompass each and every aspect of the classroom and involve a reflection on social climates. In addition, Sheigold (1987) emphasizes that the focus of research on the role of technology in the classroom should be placed firmly on two highly interrelated entities: the participants and the learning/instructional environment. In line with both Salomon and Sheigold, the present study regards as crucial the consideration of the interaction between IT and the learning and instructional environments as well as participants' beliefs and views that surround the language classroom environment. We will



also take into consideration a series of factors shaping classroom dynamics, such as writing tasks, physical configurations of IT-enhanced classrooms, participants' different approaches to and experiences of the teaching and learning of writing.

The role that IT plays in L2 writing, however, may depend on several factors which develop and operate in different situations (Nydahl, 1991; Silva, 1997). Research investigating these specific factors within different learning contexts should therefore be detailed and situated, and should aim to obtain relevant findings applicable to teaching environments presenting different characteristics. In addition, according to recent research (DePourbaix, 2000; Gee, 2000; McGroarty, 1998; Warschauer, 1999), IT must be examined not only in the specific contexts in which it is used, but also employing a range of diverse research methods. The research agenda needs to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative analysis to capture the dynamics of complex settings. As Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999) state, for example, the "CALL environment does not fit neatly into either of these two [qualitative and quantitative] compartments and should be viewed through a lens that either combines these two paradigms or considers the classroom as the interacting system that it is" (11).

The review of the above studies suggests, then, that the requirements of contextualized, naturalistic L2 writing research going beyond the individual case study are best suited to longer formats such as dissertations and books like Moody's (2001) and Warschauer's (1999), because only in such venues is full exploration of multiple factors and participants possible. With the help of qualitative research, Moody compared classroom discourse in traditional and lab environments, by focusing on roles of participants, communication patterns, functions of L1, participants' beliefs about language and language learning, and roles of computers.<sup>6</sup> In 1999, Warschauer conducted a

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<sup>6</sup> Moody's recursive analysis lasted a semester and made use of class observations, transcribed audiotapes of classes/small groups; interviews with participants; photographs and plans of classrooms; classroom

longitudinal study of L2 writing in four classes. Using qualitative methods, he looked at class atmosphere, uses of technology topics and content, and students' impressions, and he focused on how teacher's objectives of apprenticeship learning played out in academic discourse communities (online dialogue journals, email exchanges, Webpage assignment).<sup>7</sup> Studies like those by Moody and Warschauer make it clear that there is a place for intensive, detailed examination of the acquisition of L2 writing in IT-enhanced environments, in order to lay a foundation for unravelling the factors to be later explored in detail in smaller, more focused follow-up studies, and, conversely, to provide a context for interpreting the results of smaller studies. These two researchers provide examples of how descriptive studies can help academic researchers to develop theoretical models and also to isolate potentially meaningful factors which will need to be studied more closely in relative isolation.

In this study, the classroom environment is the main focus of attention because it is regarded, in all its varieties, as particularly important in understanding the complexity of the instructional and learning processes. On the one hand, IFL tutors will bring with them to the classroom their experiences, beliefs, and current teaching practices underlying their frameworks of values. On the other, IFL students will respond with different perceptions, attitudes and learning behaviours related to writing and IT.

In order to understand IFL tutors' experiences guiding daily instructional decisions, and the way students may perceive them, a more detailed review of the classroom environment and the concept of teacher beliefs is necessary at this point. At the end of this

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documents: students' texts; students' placement data; institutional and program data; field notes; analytic memos, and graphic organizers.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to class observations, field notes and audiotapes of class sessions, Warschauer used copies of participants' emails for class; email communications with participants; transcripts of online discussions; students' papers; student and teacher interviews; as well as informal talks.



literature review, we will try to relate the rationale of the current study to the previous studies conducted in the field.

Throughout the following sections, we will examine research mostly from the FL education domain; however, in cases where little subject-specific research exists, literature from more general studies will also be included.

## **1.1 The Classroom Environment**

Although classrooms are the primary learning environments and students actually spend most of their instruction time within the classroom (Stockard and Mayberry, 1992), to date there are few studies of classroom environments. Most general studies in the area of classroom environments were conducted in the 1970's and 1980's; however, many of them are still applicable to current environments. Particularly relevant for this study are the findings of those studies of the classroom environment focusing on students' and teachers' perceptions (Fisher and Fraser, 1981; Walberg, and Haertel, 1981; Moos, 1979). For instance, Moos (1979) studied the relationship between classroom environment and student satisfaction with the teacher. Using a sample of 241 classes, Moos found that classroom environment variables explained half the predictable variance in student satisfaction with the teacher. Walberg and Haertel's meta-analysis (1981) of students' perceptions of classrooms, involving 823 classes in eight subject areas, stressed the importance of a flexible, accommodating classroom. Fisher and Fraser's (1981) study of differences between students' and teachers' perceptions of classroom environments, on the other hand, showed that teachers tended to perceive the classroom environment more favourably than did students in the same classroom.

More recently, there has been a gradual shift in thinking in educational literature, taking much of the focus away from teaching and redirecting it towards learning. Along

with this shift in thinking, renewed interest has recently emerged in the notion of classroom environments. Seminal studies (e.g. Fraser and Walberg, 1991; Wilson, 1996) claim that learning can be fully understood only when it is examined within the context in which it occurs.

Many other studies (e.g. Ames, 1992; Froyen, 1993; Putnam and Burke, 1992) have found that classroom environments are crucial in influencing students' attitudes toward instruction and toward learning and that the classroom environment can mediate between macro-level influences, such as that of the university as a whole, and student achievement. For example, Moll (1994) found that the psycho-social nature of the classroom environment can make a difference in how the students learn and achieve their goals. Fraser (1987) adds that "classroom environment variables are potent predictors of learning" (149). He claims that as one aspect of the learning process, "constructive educational climates may be viewed as both means to valuable ends and as worthy ends in their own right" (182). Similarly, Walsh (1989) investigates the relationship of the environment with learners' achievement. He concludes that the match between individual preferences and "preferred" environments can lead to greater student achievement.

The studies reviewed tend to concentrate on the learning outcomes achieved. While taking into account these studies, the present research differentiates itself from them, by focusing on the processes taking place in the classroom, and by giving voice directly to the participants operating in it. One way to do this is by focusing on the teacher's role, decisions and actions in the classroom arena, aspects which will be explored through an examination of tutors' beliefs and frameworks of values. The importance of teachers' roles in classroom environments have been emphasized in many scholarly works (Arends, 1994; Baron, Tom, and Cooper, 1985; Brophy, 1985; Froyen, 1993; Hinako, 2002; Putnam and Burke, 1992). For example, in his study of the relationship between teachers' roles and student learning, Arends (1994) defines an ideal learning environment as one where



students have positive attitudes toward themselves and their classroom group, and where they display a high degree of achievement motivation and involvement in academic tasks. According to Brophy (1985), the students' motivation to learn is an acquired competence developed through general experience, but stimulated most directly through modelling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction by teachers.

As we have seen, however, while teachers' roles in classroom environments have been emphasized in many scholarly works (Arends, 1994; Baron, Tom and Cooper, 1985; Brophy, 1985; Froyen, 1993; Hinako, 2002; Putnam and Burke, 1992), what has not been adequately emphasized is the fact that teachers' decisions and actions in the classroom environment are influenced by their own beliefs, dispositions (Putnam and Burke, 1992), and attitudes (Good and Brophy, 2000). Some research studies (e.g. Baron *et al.*, 1985; Bauer and Sapona, 1991; Mehan, 1985) claim that the teacher's role in classroom discourse may signal to students whether the teacher thinks that they are capable of learning and whether they are succeeding in meeting the teacher's expectations. For example, when students perceive teachers as supporting their learning through what they say, the students are less likely to adopt defensive measures such as avoidance strategies (Baron *et al.*, 1985; Bauer and Sapona, 1991). Conversely, when students perceive teacher discourse as non-supportive – i.e. as suggesting that they cannot or will not meet expectations – they adopt avoidance strategies and increase the dropout rate (Mehan, 1985). Thus, many studies acknowledge the importance of including teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning – their views on the learning process, of its goals, of IT and other media – as well as an understanding of teachers' roles when studying classroom-learning environments.

Although there is general agreement among researchers that a dramatic shift in the teacher's role is essential for a successful conversion to more effective learning

environments, few have attempted to measure the degree to which teacher's goals or attitudes influence the dynamics of a classroom.

In addition, since instructional technology has become an active component of classroom environments, and especially of FL classrooms, it is urgent to investigate the factors that might determine its fate as a form of curriculum innovation. One of these factors is the way in which FL teachers perceive and use instructional technology. Even though there has been considerable research in the area of tutors' beliefs and perceptions of the use of instructional technology in elementary (Stuve, 1997), middle (Kerr, 1991; Chin and Hortin, 1993; Denoyianni and Selwood, 1998; Myhre's, 1998; Weisenmayer and Koul, 1998; Levin, Stuve, and Jacobson, 1999; Hinostroza and Mellar, 2000) and high school classes (Moore, Morales, and Carel, 1993), the area of FL higher education classrooms remains mostly unexplored. In addition, most of the existing studies have been based on the sole use of quantitative research instruments, such as questionnaires. While describing a situation, these instruments leave many of its aspects unexplained, since they document FL teachers' choices, but do not allow for the analysis of the reasons behind those choices. Therefore, in these studies, FL teachers' voices are only partially taken into consideration.

In order to avoid such pitfalls, in the current study the investigation of IFL tutors' interpretive and theoretical frameworks will receive crucial attention, along with the examination of factors that could be related to those frameworks. These include both internal factors, such as past experience and training, and external ones, such as the physical configuration of the classroom, the availability and accessibility of technology, the perceptions and behaviours of students, and the way in which these might contribute to or hinder the implementation of instructional technology in use. By focusing, in particular, on the specific classrooms where IT is actively used to teach IFL, the study seeks to determine whether the technology in question, mainly related to computer-based activities, constitutes a true curricular innovation.



Before reviewing the literature specifically related to the concept of teacher beliefs, it is useful to remind ourselves of the new trends and current research on SLA and CALL, in order to understand what characteristics a “curricular innovation” should present, in accordance to the new trends and current research in the field. Policy leaders, technology initiatives and university administrators are currently encouraging teachers to learn to use, incorporate, and appropriately exploit technology in Higher Education, and more specifically in the FL field within university education.<sup>8</sup> This pressure is understandable because teachers promote or inhibit successful implementation of technology in education (Cooperman, 1998), often deciding who uses technology, where it should be used, how frequently and for what ends. Teachers are such a significant part of the educational process of change that support from them is needed in order for technology to become an integral part of instruction. In order to reach this objective, however, more information is needed as to how and why teachers are using technology in the learning and instructional environment. In determining, specifically, why and how different IT applications, and more specifically computer activities, are used in IFL writing pedagogy, this study takes into account tutors’ experiences, beliefs and views underlying frameworks of values which relate to pedagogy and technology. As we have seen, the question to focus on seems no longer to be *whether* technology is used in FL teaching, but *how* and *why* it is integrated into the established curricular path. The existing body of research needs more contributions which investigate how and why FL tutors integrate technology in FL education and how the process of integration affects the way they may utilize technology with their students.

With this purpose in mind, the next section will clarify the concept of teacher beliefs, by outlining the focus of relevant research on this topic, seen in a longitudinal/historical perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the good practice guides are included in footnote number 1 in this chapter.

## 1.2 The Concept of Teacher Beliefs

In the 1970s, research on teacher beliefs shifted focus from observable effects to the unobservable dimension of teacher cognition. Since then, the field has widely acknowledged that “The thinking, planning and decision making of teachers constitute a large part of the psychological context of teaching [...] Teacher behaviour is substantially influenced and even determined by teachers’ thought processes” (Clark and Peterson, 1986: 255). This dimension of teaching is defined as what teachers know, believe, and think (Borg, 2003).<sup>9</sup> Since all teachers hold beliefs about learning, teaching and how to best suit their learners’ needs, within this notion of teacher cognition researchers are attempting to understand how, why, where and for what purpose teachers make instructional decisions. These beliefs are reflected in the learning and instructional environment and “drive everyday classroom practice within local contexts” (Richardson and Placier, 2001: 915).

The unobservable dimension of beliefs requires that teachers report them explicitly, and this characteristic makes beliefs a messy construct. Self-reported beliefs, in fact, may not always conform to the respondent’s reality. While Pajares summarizes this difficulty by stating that beliefs “must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do” (1992: 314), we recognize that beliefs are just inferred and, ultimately, might not reflect true recognition. Despite these concerns, however, researchers are now calling for beliefs to

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<sup>9</sup> The debate about the difference and relationship between “knowledge” and “belief” is central to a variety of scholarly traditions. For the purposes of the current study, however, the distinction drawn by Pajares (1992) in his seminal work *Teachers’ Beliefs and Educational Research: Cleaning up a Messy Construct* will be used. According to the author, a “belief” can be defined as being based on judgement and evaluation, in contrast to “knowledge”, which is “based on objective fact” (313). Undoubtedly cases occur where the distinction between “knowledge” and “belief” becomes uncertain. This study, however, taps into tutors’ feelings about “teaching with technology”, a subject about which tutors will make evaluations and judgements. As such, their statements about the use of technology fall within the definition of “beliefs”.



become an important focus of educational inquiry. (Borg, 2003b; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996)

In the early 1990s, teachers' thought processes had become widely accepted as a core element in understanding teacher decisions, and in the last few years they have become even more prominent in the literature, as research suggests that beliefs affect classroom actions (Borg, 2003b; Gebel, 2000; Gebel and Schrier, 2002; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996; Richardson and Placier, 2001).<sup>10</sup> Richardson (1996) explains this relationship saying that "in most current conceptions, the perceived relationship between beliefs and actions is interactive. Beliefs are thought to drive actions; however, experiences and reflection on action may lead to changes in and/or additions to beliefs" (123).

Therefore, while the examination of beliefs seems an important step to undertake in order to understand instructional practices and processes, (Richardson, 1996), research on beliefs is often viewed as an ambiguous and complex endeavour and much remains to be accomplished in the field. In particular, research on FL teachers' beliefs about technology seems to be almost entirely lacking. In a meta-analysis of teacher cognition, Borg (2003b) mentions that to date we only have one study on FL teacher beliefs and technology. The study, conducted by Lam (2000), although limited to a small sample (N=10) of Spanish graduate assistants, contends that teachers opt to use or not to use technology out of personal conviction, instead of acting through fear of innovation or other factors, arguing that when teachers chose not to incorporate technology this is because they do not see its pedagogical benefit. According to Lam's findings, the perception of the pedagogical potential of technology, and more specifically of technology in language learning, is one belief that may have an impact on use. Some speculate that this is due to the fact that

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<sup>10</sup> In these studies, the findings emphasize the significance of teachers' attitudes towards technology, as well as their previous teaching experience and training, as the most important variables influencing technology use in the classroom. Furthermore, the results report teachers' positive attitudes toward instructional technology. Finally, the findings point out the importance of administrative support as a positive variable.

technology has yet to prove its pedagogical potential in the instructional environment (Garrett, 1991; Salaberry, 2001); others report that CALL does not meet the instructional needs of teachers (Raschio and Raymond, 2003). In most cases, regardless of the ultimate reason, the decision not to use technology is driven by learning concerns related to the pedagogical benefit of technology and not to fear of using technology or resistance *per se*.

Clearly, teachers have beliefs about the pedagogical benefit of using computer technology, which can be said to be a significant deciding factor in its use. Garrett (1991), for example, states that “reading comprehension is the skill for which the computer is most obviously suited” (83). Garrett’s comments demonstrate her personal belief that computers can aid the development of reading strategies, which in turn reveals why computer-based activities may be used in the classroom.

In the specific context of FL learning, FL teachers may subscribe to the notion that for obtaining pedagogical benefit from technology, “how you use [it] is more important than if you use it at all” (Thornburg, 2000: 1).

In order to give a fuller account of the learning process, after focusing on the tutors, the present study will take into account also IFL students’ perceptions, views and expectations. A brief outline of the literature on the relevant issues related to students will complete the examination of the three main aspects of the study: environment, tutors, and students.

### **1.3 The Importance of Students’ Perceptions**

The students’ perception of control has been examined in studies devoted to writing instruction. Recent research focusing on student meta-cognitive knowledge in relation to the writing process (Englert, Raphael, Fear and Anderson, 1988) has found that students with meta-cognitive deficits were dependent upon external cues to make decisions about



writing. These students were more externally reliant on the teacher to tell them what to do, and how and when to carry out different tasks during writing instruction. In contrast, students with meta-cognitive control can be defined as dependent upon internal cues when they make decisions about strategies for planning, organizing and drafting for an audience chosen by the students themselves.

In light of these findings, the applied part of the present study will explore IFL writing experience taking into account both the L1 and L2 educational background of students as two main components of analysis. Characteristics of student perceptions and views about writing will parallel or contrast tutors' conceptions about writing. Tutors' conceptions and students' views will then be connected and compared, and the examination of both tutor and student frameworks of values will lead to the identification of areas of agreement and disagreement between students and tutors within the given learning and instructional environment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The investigation of whether and how both tutors and students change their beliefs and attitudes concerning technology, in contrast, is a complex and often contentious discussion and this study will only offer some initial observations on the question of attitude change.

## 2. Conclusions

In light of the literature review conducted in Chapters II and III we can now revise the notion of technology. In particular, in the educational field, technology can be understood as a broad form of social organization, rather than just as the restricted use of a machine, tool or vehicle. Viewed in this way, network-based language teaching, for example, becomes a tool allowing learners to engage in new discourse communities, thanks to their ability to communicate via computer networks and to construct online texts and multimedia documents.

Yet as we have tried to illustrate, despite the increased prevalence of information technologies in writing practices and instruction, the theoretical and empirical basis needed to frame the use of IT in writing pedagogy is still not fully defined. Theories of writing do not appear to consider the technological medium as an influential factor in writing skills development and thus generally do not incorporate this variable. Researchers' intuition and practitioners' experience, on the other hand, suggest that IT may substantially alter learning processes associated with writing, especially composing, and publishing. Second language researchers of CALL and specifically of IT in writing instruction have made a number of claims, as we have seen, but these claims are also typically still based on inconclusive findings (Ferries and Hedgcock, 1998; Knobel, Lankshear, Honan, and Crawford, 1998). In essence, a research agenda for the systematic study of the roles of IT in writing instruction and practice has yet to be fully developed and implemented (Abbott, 1997; Snyder, 1997).

This, in turn, is hindering the incorporation of relevant findings into wider reconceptualizations of the role of writing technologies in theoretical models of writing, as well as impeding teachers' and students' efforts to determine how best to apply IT in relation to writing in their own teaching and learning practices.



In order to build a model of writing which recognizes the mutable role of technological media, then, writing research, and in particular L2 writing research, must begin to investigate how IT and other writing technologies are integrated into writing practices and instruction across multiple contexts in situated literacy practices. In addition, the complexity of the picture of L2 writing practice and instruction involving IT emerging from even such a short review as the present one shows that ethnographic and longitudinal methodologies may be particularly useful at this stage for reaching an understanding of what the critical factors are in the interface between IT and writing across populations and contexts. This kind of research often demands extensive, and extended, researcher stamina (Athanasios and Heath, 1995) and/or institutional support, and thus has not been as prevalent as other types of study – yet this is a growing area attracting researchers, and audiences, from multiple disciplines.

Studies focussing on the writing quality of final essays produced using IT, and comparative studies of traditional and IT-enhanced activities or environments are clearly limited in their ability to illuminate the full range of interaction between IT and the role of both participants and learning environments in the learning and teaching of L2 writing. Instead, in order for researchers to begin to unravel the role that IT – in its many shapes and contexts of use – may effectively play in L2 writing, and for teachers to apply relevant findings to their own teaching environments, we need detailed, multi-method, situated research, capable of uncovering the factors which operate in and affect different situations (Nydahl, 1991; Silva, 1997). As Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999) state, “the CALL environment does not fit neatly into either of the two [qualitative and quantitative] compartments and should be viewed through a lens that either combines these two paradigms or considers the classroom as the interactive system that it is” (11). Both these and other researchers (DePourbaix, 2000; Gee, 2000; McGroarty, 1998; Warschauer, 1999) indicate that technologies must be examined in the specific contexts in which they are

used, employing diverse research methods which can capture the dynamics of complex naturalistic settings.

By being qualitatively oriented, multi-method, and executed in a situated context with substantially distinctive characteristics, the present study attempts to respond to these demands to fit precisely into this latter model. In the next chapter we will trace a detailed description of the research methodology applied in the study and in Chapter VI we will see, in particular, how several features specific to the instructional context of this study make the research undertaken especially fruitful in expanding theoretical and praxis-oriented understandings of the interface between L2 writing and IT.



**CHAPTER IV**  
**THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**  
**AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

## **1. Framework of the Study**

The literature review conducted in the previous chapters of this study reveals that a broad choice of technologies, in particular computer technologies, have become a critical aspect of writing development and must be examined both in depth and in context. As we have mentioned, as opposed to the case of the EFL segment of L2 writing instruction and L1 learners, little research has focused on learners of languages other than English, and nearly none on IFL learners.

The investigation at the centre of the applied part of the present project focuses on the learning of and instruction in IFL writing, with close attention devoted to the integration of specific types of computer-based technology (Word processors, Internet, and language-specific software packages) in current university IFL modules, as they are taught in both traditional and IT-enhanced classrooms in a British University context. In addition, the study aims to contribute to a definition of writing which recognizes the presence and the mutable role of the integration of technology. The ultimate aim is to contribute to the construction of a theory that accounts for the factors involved in writing, and also to develop practical and justified recommendations for language teachers regarding the use of IT in IFL writing. With these goals in mind, in the following pages we will examine critically a series of assumptions raised in much of the discussion produced to date about

incorporating IT into L2 and, more specifically, into IFL, writing practices. This, in turn, will lead us to establish a series of questions guiding the research.<sup>1</sup>

First, however, we will attempt to create a coherent picture which interprets the interaction of factors in the specific, situated environment under examination, through an in-depth analysis of its specificities.

As established in the introduction to the study and reiterated in the final section of Chapter III, the framework used in this study includes two main domains of inquiry: 1) the participant domain and 2) the learning and instructional domain.<sup>2</sup> In response to the need for contextualized investigation, the case study-based, interpretive approach seems the most appropriate procedure to follow. As already briefly mentioned in the introduction, both quantitative and qualitative research instruments, such as questionnaires, whole-class observations, class documents, tutor interviews and student focus groups, are employed to provide a detailed description of the participants operating in this specific learning and instructional environment. This is in keeping with recent claims about the use of IT in writing practices and instruction, as emerged from the literature review.

The analysis of the participant domain focuses on the backgrounds, experiences, beliefs and current practices of selected IFL tutors (N=7) and students (N=29) in the Italian department of the University of Warwick (UK). These were explored through questionnaires and interviews administered in the classrooms where three IFL modules with either a component (module *IT 101: Italian Language for Beginners*) or a prevailing

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<sup>1</sup> As a number of studies make clear, there is a need for intensive, focused examination of factors to be explored in detail. As mentioned in the review of literature on instructional technology (Section 2.3.2 in Chapter II), studies conducted by Moody (2001) and Warschauer (1999) provide examples of how descriptive longitudinal research can help scholars to develop theory and extract potentially meaningful factors to be studied more closely in relative isolation.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted here that the separation made throughout this study among the two domains – the environment and the participants – is to some extent artificial, a useful framework for entering the data but one which ultimately foregrounds connections across domains rather than distinctions within and among them.



component of writing instruction (module *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* and module *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III*) were taught. Therefore, within the broader context of the university, the main learning and instructional environment of this study focuses on, but is not limited to, the classrooms in which the participants operate. Part of the learning and instructional environment were also instructional tools such as computer software and software packages, instructional websites, teaching material selected for classroom activities (i.e. handouts), textbooks, and other supplemental items.

The primary focus of the study is an exploratory and descriptive investigation of the participants and the learning and instructional environment in which they operate. In characterizing the particular, this study intends to transmit the voices and experiences of the participants of the study.

Besides describing and interpreting the particulars of the two domains of the inquiry (participants and learning/instructional environment), links are sought among factors across the two; such links take place mainly in the classroom arena.

The results of this study will be examined against existing interpretations of results in the research literature. With this purpose in mind, the main research question for the present study will be formulated as a means of entering into dialogue with other studies in the field, reviewed in the initial chapters of this study (Chapters I, II, and III), and will attempt to cover gaps in the literature. Before looking at the main research question, sub-questions and expanded sub-questions guiding the study, and in order to understand their rationale, let us remind ourselves of some of the gaps already noted regarding the integration of IT in L2 writing practices and instruction. We will then be able to address such gaps in the research literature, as well as to discuss the assumptions underlying them.

As discussed in Chapter II and in Chapter III, a number of recurring problems affect current research on instructional technologies applied to language learning. Most empirical studies focus narrowly on the effectiveness of the technological medium itself,

particularly in comparison with conventional teaching tools. Educational technology applications are seen as a treatment applied to the learner, and the intent of many studies is to measure their effects on learning. Overall, three major trends in instructional technology research applied to language teaching were noted among past studies: *a)* the investigation was conducted by setting up a comparison with traditional methods; *b)* the researchers attempted to look exclusively at instructional strategies used with the technological application under examination; and *c)* the examination regarded the learners' attitude towards and interaction with the technological applications under examination. These major trends were mirrored in the selection of studies focusing on the teaching and learning of L2 writing skills reviewed in both chapters. In these studies researchers and practitioners share the common interest in finding out more about the impact of technology on the acquisition and/or development of writing skills in a second language. The nature of these studies, however, made it difficult to understand opportunities offered to students and teachers alike by technology-enhanced language learning environments. By focusing on the features of the innovative learning product and/or the student achievement through it, these studies did not explore – or only partially explored – the learning and instructional environment and its participants in order to understand experiences guiding their learning and teaching processes. Therefore, the studies in question have very little to say about the way in which participants, and especially teachers, perceive the use of technology in the learning and instructional environments, and more precisely in the classroom.

We still need broad empirical research examining how the participants – teachers and students – may influence access to and adoption of technology when integrated into a specific learning and instructional environment. Ideally, such influences need to be observed in their classrooms. In response to this need, the present research takes into account existing studies, but, as opposed to them, concentrates on the processes taking place in the learning and instructional environment.



In order to draw a comprehensive picture which includes some idea of what kind of values, understandings, and forms of experience students and language tutors bring with them to the classroom in relation to IFL writing and IT from prior exposure in different contexts, this study takes into account a set of related factors, rather than measuring a specific set of outcomes by focusing narrowly on the effectiveness of technology for the development of discrete skills (particularly in comparison with conventional teaching tools), as most empirical studies have done so far.

With this purpose in mind, this study regards as crucial the beliefs of IFL tutors and the perceptions and attitudes of IFL students about L2 writing and technology, as well as the instructional environment in which they are integrated, an element which was not considered as such in prior studies. The examination will be therefore conducted starting from the learning and instructional environments – involving mainly, but not only, the teaching classrooms – in which the participants spend most of their instruction time (Stockard and Mayberry, 1992) and where they can be given voice through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis.

In Chapter III we reviewed significant research (Richardson and Placier, 2001: 915) claiming that teachers' beliefs drive daily classroom instruction. Among the participants, teachers seem the most critical decision makers also regarding the adoption and use of technology in language learning. Therefore, applied studies that discuss in detail teachers' views regarding the most specific application of technology into the writing classroom are needed in order to help researchers and designers to provide L2 learners with instruction that will help them meet curriculum expectations. Moreover, further studies could give teachers accounts of real scenarios that could help them in teaching their own classes. In response to these urgent needs, this study will give priority to conducting the investigation of experiences, beliefs and practices among IFL tutors, in order to obtain valuable insights into their instructional decisions concerning the integration of technology into their daily

practice. After this prior exploration, the student domain – the learners’ perceptions and attitudes – will be considered. Only then, can we address questions concerning how the use of technology affects the learning of writing and the instructional environments in which it takes place, as well as the changes, if any, experienced in language teaching with the intervention of IT.

A complete description of the two dimensions of the study will help us to map the details of the research framework. For this purpose, the next section will provide a description of the participants and the environment at the time of the data collection (between October 2005 and November 2006). It should be noted, therefore, that the data may reference participants not currently covering the position described in the study and resources which were present when the research was conducted.

## **2. Description of Learning Environment and Participants**

The study took place at the University of Warwick, an institution founded in the mid-1960s. The university, which at 01/10/2005 counted 15,969 students (including 11,315 undergraduates and 7,047 postgraduates), has come into increasing prominence over the last couple of decades and is now ranked among the top ten British Universities in the national league tables.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> League tables of British universities which rank the performances of universities in the United Kingdom on a number of criteria, have been published every year by *The Times* newspaper and several other newspapers since the early 1990s. The factors used to assess universities include quality of teaching and research (which are assessed by external inspectors), entry standards and dropout rates. These league tables have become increasingly popular over the last few years and other papers such as *The Guardian* now publish their own tables annually. These tables are often used by students when deciding to which universities to apply. Some league tables are more specific, ranking universities on their strength in individual subjects, and not just overall teaching and research across a range of subjects. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge have typically headed the lists, and it is difficult to form a list of other high-achieving universities due to the different methodology used between league tables. However, a list of universities that have been in the



The academic reputation of the Department of Italian was also recognized by being awarded a 5A in the most recent Research Assessment Exercise (2001) and a high score (21 out of 24) in the last Teaching Quality Assessment (1995-1996). At the time of the investigation, the Department offered a range of degree programmes in Italian and comprised six academic staff (one shared with the Department of Classics), two full-time language tutors, three postgraduate bursary teaching assistants, an Italian Government-nominated *lettrice di ruolo*, as well as language tutors employed on a part-time basis, and a Departmental Secretary.

The University of Warwick also has a Language Centre, which is designated as a central service unit of the university. Besides providing opportunities for learning foreign languages other than English through the Leisure Language Programme, open to both members of the general public and Warwick staff or students, the Language Centre offers a well-equipped environment at the disposal of specialist language students and of some of the students taking one of four yearly modules for academic credit towards their degree in Italian.<sup>4</sup> When this research was conducted, the Language Centre resources and facilities included four language laboratories and a multi-media private study open access area available to students from Monday to Friday. The library area of the Language Centre was specially designed for language studies and incorporated a computer network with a file server capable of delivering CD-ROM titles, as well as video and audio files, to this area as well as to selected teaching rooms. Each of these computers allowed up to six users to listen to one program, communicate with each other and, if appropriate, record their voices. The computers could send files to the local laser printer and also had the capability

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overall Top 10 in all three big rankings (*The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*) since the inception of these tables is: 1) University of Oxford; 2) University of Cambridge; 3) Imperial College London; 4) London School of Economics; 5) University College London; and 6) University of Warwick.

<sup>4</sup> The other FL departments, German and French, do not use the facilities of the Language Centre for teaching. However, the students can use the self-access area.

of showing live TV and video on the monitors. Beside these 13 multi-media computers, nine further workstations offered access to television, video play and recording, and audio cassette playback facilities. There was also a cable TV network which carried 12 foreign language channels from satellite as well as four of the British stations, and a well stocked tape library with audio-visual study courses in 22 languages, at various levels, as well as a collection of miscellaneous recordings in several languages, which included literary, historical, political and cultural material.

At the time of the investigation, the IT Centre<sup>5</sup> of the university had several IT-enhanced rooms available for student guided training as well as in self access mode. Classroom three, referred to below, was located in the ground floor of the IT Centre main building, on the central campus and near the department of Italian. The university also supplies computer labs for general student use; these are regularly maintained, up-to-date and fairly accessible to students. They consist of labs open on working days and/or evening hours. In addition, dormitory rooms and the central campus are lined with recreational areas and Internet points with access to high speed broadband to surf the Internet, chat, and email. At the time of this investigation, there was increasing access to wireless Internet across the University and, off-campus, many students also choose to install broadband networks in their homes. All Warwick students have an email account and use the university's Webmail system regularly from their own computer.

Finally, the university's main library website devotes a section to guided hyperlinks, helping students find a range of relevant information for Italian Studies. These include "Cross-Searching for Italian Information"; "Key Electronic Resources for Italian";

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<sup>5</sup> There are many work areas around the campus available throughout the day. The Student Computer Centre, containing the largest area with some 160 PCs, is open 24 hours a day. The computers are all connected to the University network and the Internet, and provide access to central printers, to the library online catalogue, and to a wide range of software applications, including essentials such as Microsoft Office and e-mail as well as many specialist teaching applications.



and “Print Collections for Italian”. The Italian library section comprises good collections in literature, language, history, history of art, film and theatre.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.1 Specific Learning and Instructional Environment

The learning and instructional environment in which the study took place consists of two primary location types: traditional classrooms and IT-enhanced classrooms. The environment was also characterized by the availability of instructional tools such as computer-based kits (“Text Analysis”), CALL software packages (“GramEx”, “Luisa”), instructional websites (i.e. [www.dueparole.it](http://www.dueparole.it), used in the *IT 401* module), other teaching material selected for classroom activities (i.e. handouts), textbooks, and other supplemental items. All these elements, considered within the organizational context of the University, shaped the experiences of the participants, that is to say of both language tutors and students.

The whole University of Warwick is actively engaged in the implementation of IT in education, seeking to integrate “Technology Mediated Learning” (TML)<sup>7</sup> in its long

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<sup>6</sup> One of the library’s main Italian strengths is in the late medieval and Renaissance period, including major literary authors such as Dante, Petrarca, Ariosto. A selection of Italian-language publications is available on the third floor for reference use only; these include for instance *Italian Studies* (Society for Italian Studies in London); *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (Routledge); *Italian Culture* (American Association for Italian Studies). There are also electronic resources such as *Italica*, *Bulletin of the American Association of Teachers of Italian*.

<sup>7</sup> Technology-Mediated Learning is an “umbrella” term, incorporating different approaches to using computers in learning and teaching: CALL, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), generic computer-based production and presentation tools, and computer-supported research tools. Increasingly, these tools are incorporated (in different combinations) into “Managed Learning Environments” (MLEs), in which educators can define an environment where learners can access resources, other learners and tutors, research and assessment tools. While it is not the intention here to discuss the efficacy or otherwise of MLEs, it is important to note that they, rather than a single application, often make up the unifying core of courses employing TML. While much work in the field of TML takes SLA research as its starting point (e.g. Chappelle 1997, 1999; Salaberry 1999) some researchers have also turned their attention to other areas,

term plans. In the specific field of FL teaching, the main objective is the improvement of the quality of instruction and the increase of the proficiency of FL learners in reading, writing, speaking and listening; the objective is pursued, among other things, by providing access to state-of-the-art instructional software that incorporates authentic material.

According to the guiding principles of the Warwick e-learning strategy,<sup>8</sup> e-learning resources should be an amenity for staff and students, but not imposed upon them. Moreover, e-learning should always be driven by pedagogical considerations, and not by the demands of the technologies themselves. The E-lab, a division of IT services, is responsible for co-ordinating the delivery of the university's e-strategy, as well as researching and developing new technologies, especially in the areas of web services and e-learning.

While the e-strategy, with specific reference to FL, does not explicitly encourage communication among participants, virtual communities play a large part in life at Warwick and academic departments are encouraging online forum discussion to supplement seminar time. At the heart of the virtual community is the Warwick Blog system,<sup>9</sup> a virtual space for personal online publishing to which all members of the

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including: studies of the types of TML research occurring (Levy 2000, 2002; Harrington and Levy 2001), conversation and discourse analysis (Warschauer 1998; Negretti 1999), students' experience of web-based learning (Felix, 2001) and the development of online (language) learning communities (Hudson and Bruckman, 2002). The experience of Higher Education teachers around the world appears to be that whilst TML is not, at least initially, a more cost-effective solution than the provision of face-to-face courses using traditional media, when used appropriately it can enhance both the learning experience and learner motivation. While allowing rapid updating of content – perhaps particularly useful for subjects such as languages and area studies which may require access to up-to-date, authentic source materials – TML also offers contact with authentic resources, texts and target language speakers in a way that was previously impossible without living in the target culture.

Having been engaged for a long time with the implementation of IT in education, the University of Warwick is currently seeking to integrate long term “Technology Mediated Learning” also in the FL departments.

<sup>8</sup> A full description of the University of Warwick e-learning strategy is currently available online <<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/elearning/trends/university/>> (Accessed 27/2/08).

<sup>9</sup> When this research started, the Warwick Blog system was still under development and only a limited



University can have free access, via an individualised blog space.

Warwick Forums,<sup>10</sup> a further facility available to staff and students, is a discussion group system. It also forms part of the university's Web Architecture, providing a structured tool for collaboration over a period of hours, days or weeks (that is, non-real-time or asynchronous collaboration, as distinct from a chat-room, where everyone participates simultaneously). The facility is used by both Academic and Service departments and provides support for private or public discussion groups which can be on any topic of interest to members of the University of Warwick or its guests.

In the Italian department, as in the other foreign language departments of the University, the use of IT to personalise learning (which implies the presence of learning platforms that support personalised features) is still at an early stage, but the department's facilities are extensive and up-to-date, and some members of staff are engaged in the process of creating or renovating web sites specifically devoted to individual modules. The virtual environment adopted by the University to create and update the educational websites is *SiteBuilder*.<sup>11</sup> In addition, some university staff adopted *Nicenet*, a

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number of students, member of staff and academics owned a blog space. Currently, over 4,500 staff and students already have a blog, and that number rises daily. Warwick Blogs are easy to create and maintain and they have many benefits, aside from advancing your IT and writing skills. Students are encouraged to use this service to voice and explore ideas, by reading and writing about anything and everything. There is also space to upload photographs and images, but the key to this project is interaction, since readers can comment on entries, making the space conversational. For the 4,500 blogs there have been over 186,508 comments. Comments build on ideas, and have been known to help in a number of ways, from developing thesis proposals to advising travellers of the best unknown destinations. Information available online <<http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk>> (Accessed 27/8/07).

<sup>10</sup> Though most of the main features were complete, at the time of this research, this discussion group system was also still under development. Currently the Warwick Forum system is being continuously developed in order to better meet the needs of communities within the University.

<sup>11</sup> *Sitebuilder* is a browser-based application adopted by the University of Warwick for creating and editing web sites. It is built on the principle of the step-by-step wizard. This wizard-like interface is the easiest way for customers to create, modify and update their own web sites, eliminating the need for technical HTML knowledge. Of particular relevance in this context is the online enhancement of undergraduate module *IT 112*



sophisticated communication tool providing an online Internet Classroom Assistant. The features include online class scheduling, plus links and document sharing that can be used to set up asynchronous discussion boards for a class. For example, *Nicenet* overcomes some of the problems encountered when regular e-mail is used to support such exchanges and it is freely available to all, both on and off campus.

The study took into consideration the policies that guide the use of technology at the University of Warwick and the organization of the language program in selected modules offered by the Italian Department. Three IFL modules with either a component (*IT 101: Italian Language for Beginners*) or a prevailing component of writing instruction (*IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III*) were taken into consideration. The Italian department teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In the academic year 2005-2006, when the investigation was conducted, the number of students enrolled on degrees administered by Italian was 123, a total of 30 students in the department were taking Italian as a main component of their degree ("Italian with" option) and eight students were taking Italian Single Honours.<sup>12</sup> The department offers different degree courses that combine Italian and one other subject (French, German, European Literature, English Literature, Theatre Studies, Film Studies,

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*Cross Cultural Approaches to Italy*. At the time of data collection, the module website was still in development and the language tutor was planning to include custom designed online activities to support key concepts, using all the e-learning techniques available at Warwick - Warwick Blogs, Forums, MP3 recorder, podcasting, and interactive exercises - on the *SiteBuilder* virtual environment.

<sup>12</sup> "Single Honours" refers to students who do a degree in Italian Studies, without combining it with another subject. In terms of language, they follow exactly the same route as "Italian *and* degrees" (in which Italian language, culture, and literature modules form approximately one half of the degree programme with the other half being made up of modules in the other subject combination) or "Italian *with* degrees" (in which modules on Italian language, culture, and literature account for approximately three-quarters of the components studied with a further quarter of the degree programme being made up of modules in the other subject). The number refers to students in years 1 and 2, since the degree in Italian: Single Honours started in 2004-2005 and the academic year in which this study was conducted was only the second year it had been running.



International Studies, Classics). In these programmes Italian counts for a different percentage of the degree, according to the components studied and their relative combination. All degrees present a large component of Italian and last for four years with one “Year Abroad”.<sup>13</sup>

During the period covered by the study, the compulsory language modules for first year undergraduates run by the Department of Italian were divided into three main levels of instruction, since in year one students were streamed into beginner, intermediate, and advanced level. After the period of residence in Italy all students were brought together for the third year and the final year language modules.

All classes met for at least three hours a week for three consecutive terms (Autumn, Spring, Summer) beginning in October and ending in May, with a half-term break of about one week in the first two terms and vacation periods at Christmas and Easter.<sup>14</sup>

For the purpose of the present study, we will consider only three compulsory IFL modules that were offered within the undergraduate degree programmes. The reason of this choice is linked to the fact that the three modules selected present a significant component of writing instruction and therefore seem particularly relevant for this investigation, whose main focus is on the intersection between L2 writing and technology. It is important to point out, however, that there are strong writing elements also in modules *IT 107* and *IT 108*, which are the first year Advanced and Intermediate Italian language options. However, for the purposes of this study, we chose only one module per year and, in the case of year one, we opted for the module followed by the majority of students.

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<sup>13</sup> During the “Year Abroad”, students usually spend an academic year (in most cases their second year of study), attending an Italian University. They are required to follow courses on a wide range of subjects provided by the Italian institution, while keeping in close contact with their tutors in Italian at Warwick, who monitor their academic progress.

<sup>14</sup> Final year courses, including language modules, however, are not taught in term three.

The data collection<sup>15</sup> phase of the study was completed between October 2005 and November 2006. The investigation was mainly multi-method, but qualitatively oriented and executed in context. It was based on data concerning the three IFL modules selected for the case study. A more detailed description of the modules is provided in the sections below:

- The module *IT 101: Modern Italian Language for Beginners* is a foundation course in Italian language, which includes both elements of language awareness and notions relating to contemporary Italian society. The main aim of this module is the basic command of Italian in the four communicative skills (oral comprehension, speaking, reading, writing) and of elementary notions of grammar, together with relevant information on life in Italy today. The groups met for four classes per week, for a total of four hours of face-to-face instruction.

- The module *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* is taught through three hours of tuition each week. The course is divided into writing, translation,<sup>16</sup> and oral work.<sup>17</sup> The students are required to take one hour of tuition for each skill once a week for 22 weeks: nine weeks in terms one and two and four weeks in term three (including revision classes). The writing section of the module is specifically designed for the development of writing skills and aims to familiarise students with written registers of contemporary Italian language. According to the description in the undergraduate handbook of the department, this module lays emphasis on the basics of Italian composition, focusing on the particular problems

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<sup>15</sup> The research design as well as methods and instruments used to obtain the quantitative and qualitative data on both participants and the learning and instructional context will be fully described in Chapter V.

<sup>16</sup> This class aims to foster language awareness through translation from English into Italian and Italian into English. Translation activities focus on a range of registers, e.g. contemporary fiction, journalism, critical writing.

<sup>17</sup> In this section students engaged in conversation and learn how to organize and deliver an oral presentation.



encountered by non-native speakers of Italian: basic Italian grammar, as well as techniques for analyzing, summarizing, outlining, documenting, synthesizing information, as well as for revising texts.

- The module *IT 401 Modern Italian Language III* is the continuation of the *IT 301* course. In parallel with third year (*IT 301*) students, fourth year (*IT 401*) students are required to take one hour of tuition for each skill (oral expression, writing, translation) once a week for 20 weeks. The *IT 401* module aims to refine writing, oral and translation skills developed during the previous year, paying particular attention to concepts of register and style. The writing section is also a continuation of the third year writing skills course and its main aim is to consolidate complex grammatical structures, to make students aware of the different registers used in written Italian, to polish students' use of language in written texts and to broaden students' vocabulary. According to the course description, the primary goal of this section of the module is to help students become more comfortable with and proficient in essay writing in Italian. Students are introduced to essay writing with a focus on organizational components of the essay, including coherence, unity, development and organization. They are also given instruction and assigned practice work in various expository forms and strategies, including definition, classification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect. During the course of the year students become familiar with a wide range of text types, including academic essays, summaries, reports, newspapers articles and reviews.<sup>18</sup>

Before investigating and discussing how language tutors used technology in the modules described above, the specific technologies accessible to students and tutors in each module will be outlined. Since the focus of this study is on computers, I will concentrate on levels of access to IT within the various classrooms (availability and

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<sup>18</sup> This information is derived from published module syllabi (See Appendix IX: Classroom Documents).

accessibility vary from room to room). The two groups of *IT 101 Modern Italian Language for Beginners* met in a media-rich classroom (*Lab 1*) located in the Language Centre of the University only once a week. In this room there were a total of 23 computer stations. The translation sections of the modules *IT 301 Modern Italian Language II* and *IT 401 Modern Italian Language III* met in a classroom with a computer presentation station (computer in a cabinet with a monitor on top) as well as a large projection screen and a whiteboard, while the writing and oral sections had no computer in the assigned rooms. However, these classes could use a television and also a cassette/CD player, as well as an overhead projector (OHP). Through advance booking, the language tutors could also take their classes to one of the computer labs in the University IT Centre.

Many of the types of instructional technology available to language tutors for the above modules rely on computer technologies: primarily software including Netscape or Microsoft Explorer and Microsoft Word. These programmes provide many opportunities for collaborative work as well as access to sources of cultural information (Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Maillet, 2001; Lafford and Lafford, 1997; Osuna and Meskill, 1998; Singhal, 1997; Stepp-Greany, 2002) for language tutors and students alike, including synchronous computer mediated communication (Beauvois, 1998; Blake, 2000; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1995), asynchronous computer mediated communication (Singhal, 1997; Weasenworth, 2002). In addition to the built-in resources, language students are encouraged to use two CALL software packages (“GramEx” and “Luisa”) which allow multimodal practice with feedback, as well as individualization in a large class; the packages also provide an element of fun, as well as variety in the resources available and learning styles used.<sup>19</sup>

Classroom materials include syllabi, in-class worksheets and homework (including

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<sup>19</sup> Details of software used in the language classes taken into consideration for this study will be given in Chapter VI, devoted to the learning and instructional environment.



peer review sessions), handouts, online and paper assignment instructions, and textbooks. A core textbook was used for each class, except for the module *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III*, in which handouts prepared by the language tutors were regularly distributed. Also in the other two modules selected, tutors occasionally supplemented the classes with handouts, frequently in the form of photocopies of reading texts or exercises taken from other sources; sometimes they also used websites with readings or useful functions such as search facilities.

At the time of the investigation, the primary text for *IT 101: Modern Italian Language for Beginners* was *Progetto Italiano*, Volume 1,<sup>20</sup>. For the *Essay Writing* section of *IT 301: Italian Language III*, the textbook was *Crescendo*.<sup>21</sup>

A comprehensive grammar book was recommended to all learners since their first year of study, as a useful reference tool throughout their university course. The books suggested were: *Modern Italian Grammar. A Practical Guide*,<sup>22</sup> and *A Reference Grammar of Modern Italian*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Marin T., Magnelli S. (2000). *Progetto Italiano*, Volume 1. Roma: Edilingua.

<sup>21</sup> Italiano, F., and Marchegiani, I. (2003). *Crescendo*. Boston: Thomson Heinle

<sup>22</sup> Proudfoot, A., and Cardo, F. (1997). *Modern Italian Grammar. A Practical Guide*, London: Routledge.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, M., and Robustelli, C. (2000). *A Reference Grammar of Modern Italian*. London: Arnold.

## 2.2 Participants

### 2.2.1 The Students

Participants in the study included in total 29 university students taking the modules *IT 101: Modern Italian Language for Beginners* (N = 11 out of a total of 23), *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* (N = 12 out of a total of 24) and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III* (N = 6 out of a total of 15).<sup>24</sup> A point that should be noted regarding these participants is that they represent a growing group of IFL students who are becoming acquainted with IT before adulthood, both within and beyond educational settings.

### 2.2.2 The Language Tutors

The Italian language classes delivered in the Italian Department of the University of Warwick are taught by native or near native language tutors. The teaching staff involved in the study included two full-time native Italian language tutors (FTTs), who were also part-time PhD students in the Department's graduate program; three near native part-time foreign language assistants (FLAs) and postgraduate students; an Italian Government-nominated *lettrice di ruolo*; and one native associate professor. At the time of the study the language program was supervised by a faculty member who was responsible for the coordination of the teaching staff as well as the management of any problems that might arise in the classroom. Two of the language tutors were chosen for the specific investigation of beliefs concerning writing and writing instruction practices because, as the

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<sup>24</sup> Due to the large number of students, both *IT101 module Italian Language for Beginners* and *IT 301 module Modern Italian Language II* included two groups of students. The groups had been formed according to the initial of their last names, and they were meeting in different days of the week. For the sake of this study, we considered only group A for both classes.



main tutors of *Essay Writing* sections of modules under examination, they were more likely to have focused on the conceptions about teaching writing that are suggested by current writing literature. Three of the language tutors were British, and the remaining four were Italian. The language tutors ranged in age from mid-twenties to late forties. They had from 0 to 15 years of teaching experience. Only two of them had spent most or all of their teaching careers in their current institution, and three language tutors had taught in several university departments but had been in their current position only for one year. Three had at least five years of teaching experience, while another two were almost inexperienced and one was completely inexperienced (Table 2 provides a summary of participants' biographical data).

<i>Participants' code letter</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Experience</i>
A	40 – 50	F	Italian	Italian Degree ( <i>Laurea</i> )	Experienced (2 years in the British settings)
B	40 – 50	F	Italian	Italian Degree ( <i>Laurea</i> ) Italian PhD ( <i>Dottorato</i> )	12 years
C	40 – 50	M	Italian	Italian Degree ( <i>Laurea</i> ) British MA British PhD	15 years
D	30 – 40	F	Italian	Italian Degree ( <i>Laurea</i> ) British MA	5 years
E	20 – 30	F	British	British BA British MA	3 years
F	20 – 30	F	British	British BA British MA	1 year
G	20 – 30	F	British	British BA	Inexperienced

Table 2: Participants' Biographical Data



The seven language tutors selected for the present study taught both general language classes and more specific *Essay Writing* classes in the Department of Italian of the University of Warwick during the 2005-2006 academic year.

Some (A, B, C and D) were trained and experienced language tutors, and their needs were primarily to adjust to the learning mentality and level of competence of British students. Others (E, F, G) were often themselves still students at postgraduate level, with little teaching experience and in need of training. Assistants or full and part-time tutors employed on longer-term contracts, however, tended to have considerable classroom experience, but little or no formal training in the use of IT.

In the process of integrating IT in everyday language instruction, a key element was therefore the need to develop adequate skills, and also to raise enthusiasm among tutors for e-learning and its potential. Although three experienced language tutors had used CD/tape recorders/players and VCRs in their classrooms, only one of them had applied computer writing technologies in her classroom. None of them was an experienced technology user, but all of them made regular use of email and the Internet for web-based research.

During the period of the investigation, none of the language tutors was receiving training specifically related to instructional technology. Some of them, however, seemed willing to rethink their teaching and to make an effort to envision possible uses of technology in the foreign language classroom.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> In order to create this “vision” of technology, numerous articles are published every year and presented at conferences whose main aim is to facilitate the use of technologies. These articles, however, mostly fail to consider the degree to which they actually support teachers, who state that such guidelines are often “insufficient” or “inflexible” (Egbert *et al.*, 2002). According to the teachers, these types of aids simplify the amount of complexity involved in using technology and create more concerns instead of alleviating apprehension.

The syllabus and all classroom activities were provided by each language tutor, in line and in accordance with the specific goals established by the curricular path for IFL language development within the department.

The duties of foreign language assistants (FLAs), full-time and part-time tutors (FTTs, PTTs) and postgraduate teaching assistants (PGTAs) with respect to the integration of IT into language instruction focused first of all on the organization of general training sessions in the students' first year of study. Training was also provided for the appropriate use of relevant IT and CD-ROM material (such as the software packages "GramEx", "Luisa" and the website "Text Analysis").

### **2.2.3 The Researcher**

As a doctoral student involved in an applied linguistics project relating to Italian language pedagogy, and as an individual not directly engaged in teaching and learning in the classrooms under observation, my perspective was considerably different from that of the other participants in the study. Much of the time, my position was that of an outsider. I shared with tutors some status and experience as a foreign language and writing teacher who used IT in her classes. Yet I was not the language tutor in charge of the modules, and the students were sometimes unsure as to how to treat me. While I made every effort not to disrupt the classroom routine, I inevitably trespassed somewhat when making my requests for student participation in various data collections, and, on some occasions, I was asked by language tutors or students for input into the immediate activity (for example, my opinion as resident native Italian speaker was sought on a number of occasions).

As a participant who was both a teacher and a student during the years surrounding the data collection, I was able to draw on both perspectives when interpreting the data.



Overall, however, during the data collection period I primarily operated as an observer, with only occasional forays into a participant role. During the final stages of the analysis, I found myself reflecting on my own knowledge and experience of both teaching and learning. Initially I found myself identifying primarily with the language tutors, a perspective which brought with it certain resistances. Once I recognized this bias, I endeavoured to assume other, diverse viewpoints emerging from among the student participants, as a means of breaking the cycle of assumptions. As a result, I experienced some conflicting views as I tried to interpret the picture resulting from this fractured vision.

This experience embodied for me, in ways I could not have anticipated, the concept of “multiple subjectivities” I had encountered in qualitative research methodology literature (Sullivan and Pratt, 1996). Identifying with multiple perspectives on the same events enabled me to triangulate across the data, not just at the cognitive and conceptual levels, as I had expected, but also in an unexpected, intuitive sense. Given this complex position, I cannot characterize the interpretations I have arrived at here as purely “objective”. Instead, I acknowledge that my report reflects a complex interweaving of many individuals’ experiences as filtered through my attempts to inhabit their diverse viewpoints.

An initial impetus for the present study came from a personal interest in the kind of learning and instructional environment described above, particularly in relation to the integration of IT into it. As I delved into data provided by existing research, my initial intuitions regarding the importance of technology in FL teaching and learning were validated, though not necessarily in ways I had anticipated. As I expanded my analysis beyond the participants themselves, to the environment domain, I pursued the question of what are the characteristics of this learning and instructional environment, and how they may shape participants’ experiences in this same environment. In pursuing this

investigation, I was especially motivated to examine other claims concerning the role of participants (both language tutors and students). As I observed the learning and instructional environment, I interacted with the participants and in particular with the language tutors, who play such a significant part of the educational process of change.

### **3. The Context of Analysis and the Research Questions**

On the basis of the framework of the study and the descriptions of its two main domains, we can now define the context for analysis, which includes:

1) The learning and instructional environment, which includes class structure, writing tasks, the current or potential role of IT, institutional expectations and goals related to the use of IT in instruction;

2) The participants, among whom special attention will be paid to language tutors and students, and to their respective past and present teaching and learning experience, as well as to language tutors' beliefs and expectations,<sup>26</sup> values and knowledge, including internal elements such as socio-cognitive instructional and learning processes.

A model considering these dimensions and incorporating both the technological medium and the participants within the instructional and learning environment in its conceptualization of writing, would incorporate the L2 writing, as well as acknowledge that writing technologies play a part in writing theories. By integrating the technological

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter VII for further, in depth discussion of these aspects.



medium among its elements, such a model must also acknowledge that technologies can no longer be seen as neutral.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, such a model would take into account and recognize that several different factors may interact with one another in the situated, specific context where writing skills development and the uses of IT intersect.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.1 Summary of Research Questions

In response to the many issues raised in recent research and enumerated above, this study explores, as we have seen, the instructional beliefs and learning perceptions of participants, and investigates their current teaching and learning and practices in relation to IFL language classes held in the Italian Department of the University of Warwick. Additionally, it investigates the learning and instructional environment in which they are situated, focusing on those language modules with a component (*IT101: Italian Language for Beginners*) and/or a prevailing component of writing instruction (*IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III*). The main goal of this research is to discover whether and how the findings reached by other studies devoted to L2 writing and technology are reflected in the experiences of participants in the present project and in their surroundings, both within the classroom and beyond it.

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<sup>27</sup> In their book *The Media Equation*, a summary of 35 studies replicated from other published research in the social sciences, Reeves and Nash claim that people tend to interact with media, including computers and related technologies, in ways that are “fundamentally social and natural” (1996: 5). The neutral or otherwise nature of technology was discussed in the literature review devoted to instructional technologies (Chapter III, Section 1).

<sup>28</sup> We discussed this issue in Chapter II. For example, current research and theory suggest that online media allow and encourage the incorporation of new genres with existing ones into literacy practices. Hypertext, and its integration of graphics, audio, and video elements alongside text (Dillon, 1996; Handa, 2001; Kress, 1998; Rouet and Levonen, 1996); the co-construction of collaborative texts made possible through networking (M. C. Tuman, 1996); and the changes in communication patterns seen in email, chat/discussion forums, may all potentially challenge existing discourse conventions and blur current distinctions between oral and written registers.

The main research questions can be schematically formulated as follows:

**Research Question (RQ):**

How do claims in the literature regarding the role of the use of IT in L2 writing instruction play out in the specific IFL context under examination?

Of the several claims made by scholars, the ones critically examined in this study include:

1. “Physical configurations of IT labs may affect interactions in ways that may impede learning.” (Moody, 2001)
2. “Internet access by its nature alters pedagogy, changing the teacher’s role from authority/centre/‘talking head’ to coach/collaborator.” (Luke, 2000)
3. “IT can radically transform power relations or notions of agency [between teachers and students].” (Kramsch; A’Ness; Lam, 2000)
4. “[...] Computers demand a different approach to writing, learning, and teaching, such that traditional notions of what writing and learning involve and traditional patterns of teacher-dominated talk are not appropriate, possible, or even desirable.” (Peyton, 1999)
5. “Writing using IT is motivating to students.” (Chiao, 2000; Phinney, 1991)



I expanded and rephrased the main research question, taking care to remain open to its underlying themes, such as: the role played by the language tutors in delivering writing instruction in IT-enhanced and not-enhanced classrooms; the role played by the students in the learning process; and the consideration of technology as a form of true curricular innovation in this specific learning and instructional environment.

The following two sub-questions provide a comprehensive conceptual framework for mapping the educational context of the project, organizing data, as outlined above, into two primary domains: the participants – students and language tutors – and the learning and instructional environment. The organization of data according to this framework will hopefully help us to identify salient themes that may ultimately bridge the two domains, revealing a possible interaction among situated factors. As a matter of fact, participants are expected to approach the classes with different expectations from one another, learning and teaching Italian, using IT, and learning and teaching how to write, based on their framework of values, which in turn are formed on the basis of their prior experience and knowledge.

The first sub-question concerns the first domain – the learning and instructional environment – and guides the analysis of the context, more in particular of classroom activity. The importance of mapping learning environments in detail is stressed in at least two other studies: both Moody's (2001) and Warschauer's (1999) projects demonstrate it, including in their analysis such aspects as physical layout, types of software used for computer-based activities, other classroom materials, behaviours and roles of participants.<sup>29</sup>

Such considerations are essential in developing an interpretation of what happens in IT-enhanced and non-IT-enhanced learning and instructional environments. I further elected to include additional factors in my research, relating to the structure of the classes

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<sup>29</sup> See Chapter III, Section 1 for a more detailed description of Moody's and Warschauer's studies.

and, more, particularly to tasks and activities performed, as proposed by McGoarty (1998); these additional elements contribute to a fuller understanding of the cognitive demands and social interactions<sup>30</sup> the students encounter in their day-to-day experiences. The sub-question can therefore be formulated as follows:

**Sub-question a)**

What are the characteristics of the learning and instructional environment, and how do these characteristics shape participants' experiences and practice in this environment?

The second sub-question looks at what and how the language tutors and the students contribute to the overall educational context, allowing us to glimpse at their understandings, particularly in relation to the development of writing skills. With this purpose in mind, I ask:

**Sub-question b)**

Who are the participants? What experiences, expectations and beliefs constitute their frameworks of values, as well as what understandings do they bring to, use in, and take from this learning and instructional environment?

Despite the differing nature of the studies discussed in Chapter II and III, all of them seem to characterize technology implementation as a pedagogical and institutional challenge, in which language tutors and students play an essential role. Much of the literature review on technology integration focused on higher education settings; however,

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<sup>30</sup> Cognitive demands and social interaction issues will be investigated in the chapter devoted to the investigation of students' perceptions and learning practices.



little was found, that described what one would see and hear if he or she were to observe an IFL university classroom in which elements of technology were integrated into the learning process. This type of description leads to a series of expanded sub-questions which will serve here as a guide for answering the sub-question *b*). The three expanded sub-questions below guide the investigation eliciting information about the participants' beliefs, experiences, and practices:

**Expanded sub-question bi)**

- Why do participants in this specific IFL learning context use technology?
- What beliefs do they have about the role of technology in the FL language instruction and learning process? More specifically, what do IFL tutors report they expect about computer technology, and in particular about the integration of computer technologies in the L2 writing instruction? And what do IFL students report they expect about the pedagogical benefit of learning a FL and, more specifically, L2 writing with the support of technology and computer technology?

**Expanded sub-question bii)**

- What technology background and training do the language tutors and students have?

**Expanded sub-question biii)**

- How do these language tutors and students use technology?
- How are they using the specific computer technologies in administrative contexts?<sup>31</sup>
- How are they using the specific computer technologies pedagogically?<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Administrative use is the use of technology for managerial, preparatory, or organizational work in relation to teaching.

<sup>32</sup> Pedagogical use is the use of technology with students in the classroom in the form of either teaching with technology or assigning student technology projects.

The expanded sub-questions in this domain intend to elicit information about the participants' experience before the start of the data collection period (October 2005) and at the end of it (November 2006).

While other studies have occasionally considered participants' prior levels of experience with respect to IT, many appear not to have examined participants' experiences with L2 writing. Expanded sub-question *i* of sub-question *b*) is therefore critical to understanding what the participants themselves perceive they took from the experience of teaching or studying IFL writing using IT. Expanded sub-questions *ii* and *iii*, on the other hand, provide access to information which would be difficult to collect by direct observation only, and which is needed to inform the researcher's interpretation of the role of exposure to and use of Italian, writing, and IT, both within and beyond the classroom. Furthermore, focusing on the participants is an exploratory move aiming to develop an initial understanding of whether and how foreign language tutors use technology as an instructional tool, of why they use it, and of the role they assign to it in the larger context of their overall instructional plan.

The third sub-question below will take into primary consideration both the learning/instructional environment and the participants, and make a specific claim:

**Sub-question c)**

Within this specific environment, and considering the roles – implementers, adopters, suppliers, resisters – IFL tutors' played in the implementation of technology in those observed classrooms where instructional technology had been identified as a component of instruction, can instructional technology be considered as a true form of curricular innovation?



Final thoughts regarding the implications of the present study in implementing instructional technology will be guided by the last expanded sub-question:

**Expanded sub-question ci)**

Based on the varying degrees to which language tutors made use of technology, what can we learn about integrating innovation into the modules and classrooms they were teaching?

Sub-question *c)* will guide the investigation that focuses on the language tutors (Chapter VII), pointing to the essential role that language tutors play in the implementation process of an instructional technology; and the expanded sub-question *ci)*, in particular, will lead to reflections regarding the implications of the present study for future perspectives, by providing important information on the fate of technology as a true form of curricular innovation.

The expanded sub-questions, however, do not serve as discrete items answered individually and separately in the study's findings, but they should rather be viewed as guiding the research through the elaboration of its conceptual framework. They are designed to provide a broad foundation for the comparison of the findings of this study with both prior and future studies, conducted in both similar and substantially different contexts. In interpreting the study's findings, we will then return to the main research question, "How do claims in the literature regarding the role of the use of IT in L2 writing instruction play out in this specific IFL context?", as a means of re-entering the dialogue with other studies in the field.

In the next chapter we will try to answer sub-question *a)*. We will first describe the characteristics of the learning and instructional environment more in detail, and we will

explore how these characteristics shape participants' experiences and practice in this environment.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the methodology used for the design of the applied section of the research. An interpretive case study approach seemed the most appropriate procedure to follow for the purpose of the applied part of this study: reconstructing the experience of seven tutors and 29 students teaching and learning IFL writing skills in traditional and IT-enhanced classrooms between October 2005 and November 2006. A case study involves the “exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case [...] over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. This system is bounded by time and place, and it is the case being studied – an activity” (Creswell, 1998: 61). In addition, the case-study “is preferred in examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviour cannot be manipulated” (Yin, 1984, as cited in Merriam, 1988: 8). This is another important reason determining the suitability of a case study approach for the current project, which follows the participants’ experience as it is taking place, without changing their behaviour and allowing the researcher to capture the bounded nature of the participants’ experience. In addition, “the case study’s unique [...] ability to deal with a full variety of evidence” (Yin, 1984, cited in Merriam, 1998: 8), allowed me to adopt both first- and second- order perspectives, which Marton (1981) defines as follow:

In the first, [...] we orient ourselves towards the world and make statements about it. In the second perspective, we orient ourselves towards people’s ideas about the world (or their experiences of it). Let us call the former a first-order and the latter a second-order perspective. (171)

The inclusion of both perspectives is of major importance because it allows us to focus on “understanding of [participants’] practice [as well as on] their behaviour and activities in the classroom” (Freeman, 1996: 222), and, thus, to offer a more in-depth description and interpretation of the experiences underlying the participants’ frameworks of values.

In the present study, a careful initial mapping of the educational context and a preliminary overview of the classroom dynamics between the participants – tutors and students – enables the interpretation of the participants’ experiences, current practices, and expectations underlying their frameworks of values on IFL writing and technology.

Recent research (DePourbaix, 2000; Gee, 2000; McGroarty, 1998; Warschauer, 1999) indicates that IT must be examined not only in the specific contexts in which it is used, but also employing diverse research methods, which can capture the dynamics of naturalistic settings, such as changing processes and practices in participants’ learning and teaching. This chapter will describe the multi-method approach used to collect and analyse data in this study. In the first section, we will describe the methods and techniques used to obtain the quantitative and qualitative data related to the learning and instructional context and the participants – IFL tutors and students. Broadly speaking, the initial quantitative data were collected through five questionnaires administered to the participants at the beginning of the investigation period, and further qualitative data were collected through subsequent tutor interviews and student focus-groups, whose main questions followed the structure of the previously administered questionnaires. Further qualitative data emerged from field notes and rubrics completed during classroom observations. In the second part of the chapter, we will explain measures of participants’ perceptions, views and beliefs adopted for the study, and we will discuss the data recording procedures used to answer the main research question, as well as each of the sub-questions and expanded sub-questions outlined in Chapter IV.



# 1. Research Design

The wider purpose of this study was, as we have seen, to examine how some of the claims in the literature regarding the role of IT – mainly, but not limited to, computer-based activities – in L2 writing instruction play out in a specific context: three IFL language modules – *IT101: Italian Language for Beginners*; *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III* – with a component or a prevailing component of writing instruction at beginner, intermediate and advanced level, taught to students at a British University, specifically in the Italian department of the University of Warwick between October 2005 and November 2006.

Through the investigation conducted, we could develop an initial understanding of how participants – IFL tutors and students – use technology as an instructional and learning tool, why they use it, and the role they assign to it in the larger context of their overall instructional and learning plan, as well as specifically with the view of developing writing skills. This is primarily achieved by exploring the participants' experiences, current practices, perceptions, views and beliefs towards, as well as expectations and hopes for both IFL writing and instructional technology. The investigation included also direct observations of IFL writing classrooms, so that writing instruction methods and techniques used by IFL tutors, as well as student learning strategies received particular attention.

The inclusion of both students' and tutors' perspectives is of major importance because it allowed the researcher to uncover significant issues on language tutors' understanding of their practice as well as on students' attitudes in the classroom.

Since tutors can be considered as the most critical decision makers with respect to the adoption and use of technology in education (Hativa, 1995: 359), IFL tutors' views and beliefs are regarded in this study as a crucial area to explore. Their investigation will therefore be conducted prior to the one related to the other participants, the students.

The primary investigation of the intersection of instructional technology issues and IFL tutors' beliefs is aimed to obtain valuable insights into the instructional decision to integrate technology in the daily teaching practice. The aim of the investigation is also to inform general understandings of tutor computer use, including when and for what purposes tutors use technology in their current teaching practice.

The procedures used to elicit data on tutors' uses of and beliefs about FL pedagogy and instructional technology in the learning and instructional environment under examination aim to sustain an interpretive framework based on the tutors' voices, collected with and guided by specific research techniques.

In order to analyse the reasons behind tutors' answers, I first described beliefs, perceptions and current practices. Then I took into account the connection that exists between them and outside factors (institutional, organizational, logistical, pedagogical...), and the way in which these elements might contribute to or hinder the successful implementation of instructional technology in the tutors' present or future daily practice.

The relationships between the nature of the tutors' beliefs about language instruction and the use of technology are explored through the investigation of the specific learning and instructional context in which the tutors operate. Thus, prior to the investigation of IFL tutors (Chapter VII), I explored in detail the learning and instructional environment (Chapter VI). A mapping of this environment was also conducted in Chapter IV, but in Chapter VI we will focus on the dynamics taking place in the traditional and IT-enhanced IFL classroom. During this contextualised investigation, along with the description of relevant aspects of the environment such as the physical layout of the classroom, types of software, materials and activities used, both participants' behaviours and their roles with respect to IFL writing and technology will be explored.

As mentioned above, however, tutors' voices are not the only ones to be heard in this study. Another important element to be considered are the students' experiences of



language learning, and, more specifically, of the complex skill of writing, both in their native language and in Italian. In order to go beyond tutors' interpretive frameworks, and start to build the connection between these and students' perceptions, we need to explore also the views and expectations regarding their writing difficulties and the factors related to these perceived difficulties. The analysis aimed to provide an understanding of the writing problems English students of IFL encountered when composing in Italian, and to offer some insights into the factors behind these problems. This was achieved by approaching the participants' experiences of writing through three phases. The first phase covered their experiences with respect to writing in English, starting from the early stages of their education; the second phase provided information about the participants' experiences of writing in an IFL context; and the third phase covered the participants' experiences with English and Italian writing when using computer technologies.

By engaging the participants in dialogue and reflection in their daily teaching and learning context, the study assumed a descriptive mode, since it was concerned with the processes and experiences both participants went through, the difficulties they faced, as well as, when identifiable, the factors contributing to these difficulties. I therefore took into consideration the details of their overall teaching and learning experience that the participants talked about in the questionnaires, interviews, and focus-groups.. I was not concerned, on the other hand, with measuring achievement *per se*.

The research design is mainly qualitative, since it involves content analysis and the interpretation of natural data, including interview and focus-group transcripts as well as observation field notes. However, an element of quantitative research was also used in the form of questionnaires, which have been recommended for collecting information about beliefs (Borg, 2003; Richardson, 1996). In the present research, questionnaires were administered prior to the other techniques, with a view to gather large amounts of initial data (Dörnyei, 2003).

## 2. Research Methods

The collection of data required the researcher to spend considerable time in the study context. Therefore I preferred to use a qualitative research approach<sup>1</sup> which enabled me to immerse myself in the classroom, and engage in a detailed process of dialogue and reflection with the participants. This was essential in order to produce an authentic representation of the participants' voices. Since the beliefs and perceptions related to personal experiences differ from one individual to another, throughout the following chapters of the study the participants' words will often be expressed through direct quotations. The importance of this point is clearly underlined by Maxwell (1996), according to whom "the strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers" (17). I therefore listened to the participants' words and relied on them as my primary data. As Doyle (1996) says, negotiation between the researcher and the participants leads both of them to reach "a new level of awareness" (64) of the issues displayed in the study.

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<sup>1</sup> In this research, more precisely, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques allows for the integration of the complementary strengths of the two research paradigms in answering a complex set of questions (Casanave, 1994; Kasper, 2000; Sullivan and Pratt, 1996). Quantitative analysis using experimental or quasi-experimental designs allows for replicable results, generalizability across populations and, optimally, clearly interpretable findings, which are useful for answering the questions "yes/no", "what" and "how". Qualitative analyses permit a deeper, closer examination of phenomena than is typically possible with quantitative approaches, one which is, perhaps, more open to the unexpected. Where experimentally-driven quantitative approaches seek to exclude "intervening" factors, viewing them as sources of error, qualitative approaches are designed to invite closer attention to such factors, perceiving them as integral parts of the specific context necessary to interpret findings more fully. "Qualitative approaches, then, tend to focus on the "why" and are more appropriate to questions centring on the interpretation of naturalistic systems in the search for meaning. Rather than generalizability, they typically approach other work via levels of comparability" (Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999).



The four research techniques used – questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus-groups, and observations – helped the development of a “fuller understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998: 10), engaging the participants in a series of continual discussions about their experiences, about how they interact with the learning and instructional environment, and about how this may affect their journey as, respectively, IFL tutors and learners.

When selecting and crafting the appropriate research techniques and instruments, the importance of reliability and validity was considered as a central issue in order to ensure internal validity, and to provide both rigor and trustworthiness<sup>2</sup> to the study. “Validity” refers to the fact that the instrument should reflect the underlying construct that is being measured. This is accomplished here by providing evidence of content validity, face validity, and construct validity.

Content validity, in particular, refers to the degree to which the content of the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus-groups matches the theoretical background (Brown, 2001), specifically SLA principles, as well as L2 and instructional technology research. For this study, content validity was initially considered through careful planning of the questions for each research instrument. The questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, for example, were constructed after a review of existing surveys, questionnaires (Levy, 1999) and interview guides, as well as arguments found in the literature. Face validity was also considered in order to ensure that the instruments appeared to be valid and professional to the participants. Before creating each set of questions, in particular those related to instructional technology, a review of the format of existing research tools, such as the *Teaching, Learning and Computing Survey* (Becker *et al.*, 1999) and the *CALL survey* (Levy, 1997), was conducted.

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<sup>2</sup> During the checking process each participant reviewed his/her interview transcripts.

## 2.1. Overview of Participants and Research Techniques

Participation in the study involved the following phases, in which each group of participant listed below actively participated:

- The seven IFL tutors responded to an initial questionnaire and took part in the semi-structured interviews. Three out of seven were also observed in their classrooms.
- The 29 university students selected among those taking module *IT 101: Modern Italian Language for Beginners* (N= 11), the *Essay Writing section* of module *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* (N=12) and the *Essay Writing section* of module *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III* (N= 6) were all requested to respond to the initial questionnaires, and were observed in the classroom. Only 18 volunteers (six for each module), however, participated in the focus-groups.

<i>Participant Data</i>		
<b>Item</b>	<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>% of total</b>
Tutors and students	36	100%
Semi-structured Interviews 1 - Tutors -	7	100%
Semi-structured Interviews 2 - Tutors -	7	100%
Focus-group 1 ( <i>IT 101</i> )	6	100%
Focus-group 2 ( <i>IT 301</i> )	5	83%
Focus-group 3 ( <i>IT 401</i> )	6	100%

Table 3: Overview of Data Collected



In the section below we will see in detail the research techniques used to collect the above data and the related documents supporting their analysis:

- two preliminary questionnaires administered among IFL tutors: a questionnaire regarding writing instructional strategies (*Tutor Questionnaire on Writing Instructional Strategies*, see Appendix I) and one questionnaire regarding computer technology experience (*Tutor Questionnaire on Computer Technology Experience*, see Appendix II);
- three preliminary questionnaires administered among IFL students: a questionnaire regarding students' writing strategies (*Student Questionnaire on Writing Strategies*, see Appendix III), a questionnaire on their writing habits and practices (*Student Questionnaire on Writing Habits, Practices*, see Appendix IV), and a questionnaire on students' computer technology use (*Student Questionnaire on Computer Technology Use*, see Appendix V)
- two semi-structured interviews (*Interview 1*, conducted in November 2005 and *Interview 2*, in November 2006) with seven IFL tutors conducted after the questionnaires and between the classroom observations (see Appendix VI);
- three focus-groups with a total of 18 students (six students in each group) conducted in November 2005 and May 2006 (Focus-group 1, with *IT 101* students; Focus-group 2, with *IT 301* students; and Focus-group 3, with *IT 401* students) as follow-up to the student questionnaires (see Appendix VII);
- field notes from ten hours (600 minutes) of classroom observations of three modules (*IT101: Italian Language for Beginners*; *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II*, and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III*). The observations were conducted partly at the beginning of the investigation (two observations in October – November 2005, after the preliminary questionnaires but before the first semi-

structured interviews with tutors and focus-groups with students) and partly at the end of the investigation (two observations in October – November 2006, before the final semi-structured tutor interviews and student focus-groups) (see Appendix VIII);

- field notes from informal conversations and other interactions which took place in the classrooms (see Appendix VIII);
- a protocol and a rubric for classroom observations on classroom activity types and duration, as well as on the level of student engagement (see Appendix VIII);
- classroom documents (syllabi, handouts, and textbooks) and electronic artefacts (tutors' instructions for activities, snapshots of "Luisa", "GramEx", and "Text Analysis" pages) (see Appendix IX).

The following chart will guide the reader throughout the chronological sequence in which the above research techniques were used for data collection.



<b><i>Period: 2005</i></b>	<b><i>Research Technique</i></b>	<b><i>Participants</i></b>
October 2005	Questionnaires: 1. Questionnaire on Writing Habits, Practices and Instruction 2. Questionnaire on Writing Strategies 3. Questionnaire on Computer Technology Use	Students
	Questionnaires: 1. Questionnaire on Writing Instructional Strategies 2. Questionnaire on Computer Technology Experience	Tutors
Between October and November 2005	Two classroom observations	Tutors / Students
November 2005	First round of semi-structured interviews	Tutors
	First round of focus-groups	Students
<b><i>Period: 2006</i></b>	<b><i>Research Technique</i></b>	<b><i>Participants</i></b>
May 2006	Second round of focus-groups	Students
Between October and November 2006	Two classroom observations	Tutors / Students
November 2006	Second round of semi-structured interviews	Tutors

Table 4: Methodology - Synopsis Chart



### **2.1.1 Questionnaires**

The questionnaire was the main technique used for eliciting information from both groups of participants (tutors and students). They were administered in order to collect large amounts of structured and easily analysable self-reported data.<sup>3</sup>

In order to integrate and enhance the data gathered through the questionnaires, I conducted semi-structured interviews (tutors), focus-groups (students), as well as classroom observations.

Like all other research techniques developed for this study, questionnaires were carefully designed on the basis of existing literature in the fields of SLA, L2 writing, teacher cognition, and instructional technology. Existing questionnaires on instructional technology and teacher beliefs were consulted, and a planning phase was carried out, which consisted of a brief pilot study and of informal conversations with the participants. In order to pre-determine categories, questions, and possible responses to address to language tutors, three unstructured conversations were conducted with some of them. These brief conversations, as suggested by Dörnyei (2003), allowed the researcher to script answers to the questionnaire items. By doing this, I could check what kind of answers the questions would be likely to elicit and therefore test that the questions were aptly formulated and not misleading.

Two different questionnaires were administered to IFL tutors and three separate ones to IFL students at the beginning of the first term of the 2005-2006 academic year

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<sup>3</sup> Questionnaires, as a research technique, are largely used in writing research to obtain, as was the case in this study, quantitative data from a group of participants. One of their main purposes has been to discover the kinds of writing target communities require from students. Jenkins, Jordan, and Weiland (1993), for example, used a questionnaire to fine-tune the relevance of their technical writing course by learning more about the genres their L2 engineering students had to write and the attitudes their professors had about students' writing skills. Respondents were asked to indicate the types of writing they were asked to do, judge the relative difficulty that L2 students had in writing each type, rank the importance of different errors, etc.



(October 2005). The tutor questionnaires enquired about tutors' experiences with IFL writing instruction and instructional technology, while the student questionnaires explored students' prior experience, current practice, perceptions and expectations regarding IFL writing and computer technologies.

After consultation with the tutors, it was decided that questionnaire participation would be greater if students could complete and return the questionnaire during class hours. All the questionnaires handed out were returned, although not every respondent answered every question.

The quantitative data obtained through the questionnaires were integrated with forms of natural data collected throughout the study through classroom observations as well as tutor semi-structured interviews and students focus-groups.

### **a) Tutor Questionnaires**

Both the questionnaire on *Writing Strategies* (see Appendix 1), and the questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience* (see Appendix 2), administered for the investigation of instructional technology issues include two different sections.

The questionnaire on *Writing Strategies* aimed to investigate techniques and strategies IFL tutors currently use during writing instruction. The first part of the questionnaire (Part A) contains questions referring to personal data and teaching experience, while the second part explores practices and strategies applied in their daily teaching.

The types of questions formulated for this questionnaire are both open-ended and structured. Open-ended questions were mainly addressed to investigate whether the participating tutors received training on and what level of knowledge they have about writing instructional strategies (*Have you ever been trained to teach foreign language*

*writing? If yes, where and when? Have you ever been trained to teach language/writing strategies to your students? Do you feel you are up-to-date on the latest research and practice in the teaching of writing?);* while structured questions refer to their current instructional practices (e.g. *Do you normally incorporate writing strategy training in your writing instruction? If yes, how do you incorporate writing strategy instruction into your regular classroom?*).

The data gathered from this questionnaire, together with the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and informal discussions with the tutors, will serve as a basis to define IFL tutors' conceptualizations about L2 writing around guiding concepts.

The questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience* includes four sections:

- *Section I: Background, Teaching Style and Technological Resources Available;*
- *Section II: Professional Views about Computer Technologies;*
- *Section III: Experience with Computer Technologies;*
- *Section IV: Frequency of Use.*

The first section of the questionnaires gathers demographic and linguistic data (mother language, other languages previously studied, current Italian language level and year of study). Demographic and linguistic data are collected at the beginning of the questionnaire, because background questions are easier to answer and can ease the respondent into the questionnaire. Respondents, in fact, are all familiar with such kinds of questions and do not feel obliged to jump straight into the most "difficult" part of the questionnaire.



Questions 1, 2, 4 (Section III) examine IFL tutors' administrative use of computers. As used in this study, administrative tasks are defined as behind-the-scenes computer use, or any use of computers that occurs outside of teaching courses. For example, recording attendance, calculating grades and preparing handouts are all administrative uses of technology.

In question 1, respondents are asked how many hours a week they spend on administrative tasks. Respondents are asked to choose from categories ranging from less than one hour to more than ten hours.

Question 2 asks what administrative applications are normally used by respondents.

Question 4 was adapted from the *Teaching, Learning and Computing study* (Becker *et al.*, 1999). Respondents indicate how often they perform administrative tasks by selecting "never", "rarely", "sometimes", "often", or "daily".

The majority of the questions in Section III (Questions 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) and IV (Question 1) address tutors' pedagogic use of computer technologies.<sup>4</sup> The pedagogic use of computers is defined as any use occurring during teaching, by either the tutors or the students.

Questions 5 and 6 (Section III) ask respondents their preferred approach for teaching reading and writing skills with the help of computer (CALL) or with the help of computer interaction (CMC).

Question 1 of Section IV asks respondents to identify how frequently they use technology for specific tasks (instructional, communicative, creative...). The list of pedagogic tasks employing technology was confirmed by tutor input during the informal pre-interviews, which revealed that tutors use technology to demonstrate textbook-related

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<sup>4</sup> Computer technologies include: CD-ROMs, the Internet, presentation software, e-mail, Microsoft Word, digital video, spreadsheets and digital images.

CDROMs to the class, in order to present video material, and when searching for Internet sources, among others.

Section II includes 32 statements concerning tutor beliefs. The section asks tutors to rate the extent to which participants agree or disagree with each statement regarding the use of computer technology in the classroom. According to the literature on teacher beliefs, there are three main beliefs that concern language teachers. These three areas are: *a*) beliefs about learning (Borko *et al.*, 1979; Smith, 1996); *b*) beliefs about class management and planning (Breen, 1991; Gatbonton, 1999); and *c*) beliefs about the instructional task (Borko *et al.*, 1979; Smith, 1996). For the purpose of this investigation, these areas translate into: *a*) beliefs about learning with a computer; *b*) beliefs about integrating and managing computer in the classroom; and *c*) beliefs about using a computer for a specific instructional task.<sup>5</sup>

Following the model suggested by Dörnyei (2003), the questionnaire offers 4-10 statements related to each of these sub-sections. The belief statements were written to be meaningful and interesting (Oppenheim, 1992), short in length (Brown, 2001), and positively worded (Dörnyei 2003). Each belief statement is measured on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (from A to F).

Questions are designed to gather either qualitative or quantitative data, attempting to capture the “what” (quantitative) as well as the “why” (qualitative) factors underlying tutors’ attitudes and experiences, at both individual and collaborative levels. The items included in the questionnaire constitute a group of related concerns that reveal an element of awareness of computer technology use. All questions have been conceived as tools encouraging tutors to re-think and revise their current or potential computer technology use, especially in relation to IFL writing development.

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter III (Section 1.2) for a full discussion on teacher beliefs.



Items of the questionnaire containing phrases such as “I think” or “I feel” or “I am aware” aim to capture a respondent’s subjective state of mind. Respondents are also asked to indicate to what extent they agree with the proposed items on a five-point Likert scale ranging, for example, from “not important” to “very important”.

### **b) Student Questionnaires**

All three questionnaires administered to students explored the *present situation*, which refers to information about the learners’ current writing abilities, their familiarity with writing processes and written genres, their skills and perceptions, what they are able to do and what they want to achieve at the beginning of the writing course. The questionnaires considered also the *target situation*, taking into account the linguistic skills and knowledge required to perform competently in writing in a target context.

Questionnaires include both objective data – age, proficiency, prior learning experiences – and subjective data – self perceived needs, strengths and weaknesses in writing.

As with the questionnaires administered among language tutors, the first section of each student questionnaire gathers demographic and linguistic data (mother tongue, other languages previously studied, current Italian language level and year of study). Such a structure does not oblige respondents to jump in straight away to the most difficult questions.

Questions were conceived as tools aiming to encourage students to re-think and revise their writing processes; some specific questions are related to writing tasks, such as collection of main ideas, research from various sources, and outline of structure.

The first questionnaire, *Writing Habits, Practices and Instruction*, was conceived to investigate the essential elements of the communicative triangle: the writer, the reader, and

the text. The questionnaire is in English and explores background and attitudes towards FL writing in general.

The questions are divided into three major sections:

- *Part A* surveys the subjects' background information, including modules attended, Italian language level, length of time since they started their IFL learning and more specifically IFL writing development, and when they started IFL learning
- *Part B* surveys attitudes toward IFL writing, including preference and sense of achievement in IFL writing, confidence in IFL writing, perception about importance of grammar in IFL writing, and perception about importance of communicative effectiveness in IFL writing.

In particular, this section of the questionnaire aims to investigate whether students know *a*) how to generate ideas (see questions 6 and 7) and *b*) how to develop them in a written structure adapted to the needs of the reader and the goals of the writer (see questions 8, 9 and 10).

Since the choice of content, organisation, and language used in a given text depends on these factors, the questionnaire investigates whether students are aware of their purpose (what they expect to achieve through their writing) and their audience (their knowledge, background, needs, expectations). (See questions 11 and 12)

- *Part C* investigates whether students are aware of process techniques and conventions (forms and formats) appropriate for writing in an educational context.

Questions designed for the second questionnaire, *Questionnaire on Writing Strategies*, are open-ended and do not prescribe any responses. This questionnaire aimed to investigate whether the students were familiar with the process and conventions of IFL



writing, so the questions were presented in order to emphasise the main stages of the writing process: pre-writing (brainstorming and researching); writing (planning and drafting); and post-writing (revision).

Since the writing process is individual, questions investigating its various stages were designed in open format, so that participants could feel free to answer on the basis of their own writing experience. Questions were conceived in open format also because it was expected that the variety of responses elicited would be wider and would reflect more truly the personal experience of the respondents.

Up-to-date research exploring L2 writing processes often involves, primarily, student self reporting or investigator questioning (Krapels, 1990). These types of data collection can take place before, during, or after writing, and attempt to provide a basis for describing and analysing the nature of the writing process.<sup>6</sup>

Since students are not always aware of the processes, or strategies, that they are using, however, the necessity to answer the questionnaire questions may lead them to describe their writing strategies and behaviours incorrectly. While the questionnaire was particularly useful in providing certain kinds of information about the nature of the FL writing process, it needed, therefore to be integrated by other research techniques. The use of tutor semi-structured interviews, student focus-groups, and classroom observations,

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the number of studies examining the writing process in L1 and ESL, there is little empirical data with regard to the FL writing process. More specifically, while changes in how FL writing is viewed, taught and evaluated are more and more regarded as important, there is still very little data to indicate what students actually do as they write. Research in the composition shows that the strategies that make up this process are part of a “common underlying proficiency” (Cummins, 1989), deeper than any specific language, and need only be developed once, in the first language. If it is true that most of the research in the composing process has been done with writing in English as a first language, there is also suggestive evidence that writers in languages other than English use similar strategies when dealing with complex writing tasks. Writers in different languages do use the same strategies for discovering meaning and dealing with complex writing tasks, we can then deduce that some or all of the strategies transfer from the L1 and the L2.

significantly contributed to the investigation, providing further insights into the strategies students use when writing in an IFL context.

### **2.1.2 Tutor Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with tutors after the administration of the questionnaires: at the beginning of the data collection period, in November 2005, and at the end of it, in November 2006. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed and anonymized. At the end of the interviews, all narratives for a given IFL tutor were assembled and all names were removed, although code letters remained. Then full set of narratives were read independently by two different readers: 1) the observer/researcher and 2) a research assistant.<sup>7</sup>

IFL tutors met the researcher individually in their offices. The interviews lasted for 30 minutes and generally followed a standard set of questions; these, however, were adjusted as seemed reasonable during the conversation. Therefore, although a uniform interview protocol was used, data were ultimately collected using a semi-structured interview format, with open-ended questions, which allowed each interviewee to reveal his/her understanding and opinion of the topic. According to Bogdan and Bocklen, this more flexible format allows “the interviewer considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offers the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview” (1998: 94).

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<sup>7</sup> The second reader (Elisabeth Robery, language teacher in the University of Warwick Language Centre) was chosen on the basis of her knowledge about writing instruction and because she had not worked with the project until the narrative analysis began. The research assistant was also unfamiliar with any of the IFL tutors as individuals. The role of a second reader was particularly important in the case of interviews, rather than in other sections of the research, given the qualitative nature of these research techniques, which could lead to a misleading interpretation of the data collected.



Following the case study tradition (Merriam, 1998), the initial questions of the semi-structured interviews, especially at the beginning of the data collection period, focused on tutors' histories and past and present experiences.

As already mentioned in Chapter III (Section 1.1) and stated in Chapter IV (Section 3.1) the overall purpose of the interviews was to examine whether the teaching practice of IFL tutors appeared to reflect the underlying principles of writing instruction and to investigate whether and how their role in the selected classes might contribute to or hinder the implementation of instructional technology as a true form of curricular innovation.

Not only language tutors' views but also their daily practice emerged from the interviews. For example, participating tutors described how they would make use of IT-enhanced writing activities to respond to their students' needs.

#### **a) "Writing Skill Development" Section of Semi-Structured Interviews**

Conducted between the administration of the questionnaires and the first classroom observation, the "Writing Skill Development" Section of tutor semi-structured interview includes a set of guiding questions. The questions were mainly related to the pedagogical approach that participating tutors normally use to present the writing activities in the classroom (*How would you define the approach you use to propose the writing activity/activities?*); they aimed to highlight how tutors usually introduce the part of the lesson devoted to the development of writing skills (*How do you introduce the writing lesson or the writing section of your language lesson, and when in the various parts of the lesson do you communicate a purpose for the writing that is being done*), or investigate what specific phase of the writing process the given activity was focusing on (*What phase(s) of the writing process and what text structure(s) are the focus of the activity/activities you proposed?*).

## ***b) “Instructional Technology” Section of Semi-Structured Interviews***

The “Instructional Technology” section of semi-structured interviews was also conducted between the questionnaires and the first classroom observation. This section aimed to encourage tutors to explain their understanding of and opinions on instructional technology issues. With this purpose, the guiding interview questions were based on the literature about instructional technology and learning, on constructivism and on foreign language instruction.<sup>8</sup> They follow the structure of the questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience* and fall into four sections: 1. demographic – instruction and training; 2. opinion - values; 3. IT experience and knowledge; 4. IT instructional behaviour.

Relevant examples of semi-structured interview questions are listed below:

- *Describe what instructional method you use in traditional teaching and in teaching with technology and why.*

This question, referring specifically to points 2, 3 and 4 of SECTION I of the questionnaire, was expected to reveal the language tutor’s philosophy about teaching.

- *How did you get started using technology? Have you been trained in the use of instructional technology and, if yes, what kind of, and how much training did you receive?*

This set of questions referred to points 5, 6, 7 of SECTION I of the questionnaire. Some, but not all, of the IFL tutors in this study may have used technology in high school and/or university. As Jacobsen (1998) suggests, those teachers who were early adopters have first

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<sup>8</sup> Chapter II dealt with literature review on instructional technology and the concept of constructivism on foreign language instruction.



used computers when they were themselves high school or college students, and they are currently very likely to integrate technology into their teaching.

- *Is there any comment you would like to make regarding the access to computer resources made available to you by administrators?*

This open-ended question, related to point 8 of SECTION I of the questionnaire, allowed tutors to elaborate on anything they had previously mentioned.

- *Do you think technology can affect FL instruction/acquisition? If yes, how, more specifically? Has technology in any occasion changed your teaching? If so, describe how it has changed your teaching, making specific reference to your teaching style and/or philosophy, attitudes, planning, classroom management... Has technology affected student learning and/or achievement? If so, how?*

This set of questions referred to SECTION II of the questionnaire, concerning professional views on computer-based activities. As previously mentioned, the literature stresses that technology improves FL acquisition by providing students with easy access to virtually unlimited and up-to-date resources (Armstrong and Yetter-Vassot, Chun and Plass, 2000; Frommer, 1998; Moeller, 1997; Moore, 1999; Pusack and Otto, 1997), as well as helping students understand the target culture (Lafford and Lafford, 1997; Moeller, 1997; Moore *et al.*, 1998). Ewing and Pearce (2001) suggest that technology motivates students by giving immediate feedback and allowing for self-paced learning.

- *Describe your experience using technology in instruction (for example, what types of technology you use in instruction and how frequently).*

This question was related to SECTION III of the questionnaire (*Your experience with Computer Technologies*) and was meant to be the first probe into answering the sub-

questions “How and why foreign language tutors use technology in instruction?” and “What types of technology do you use in instruction and how frequently?”, serving as a starting point for discussion.

- *What factors contribute to, or inhibit, your use of technology in instruction?*

This question aimed to explore the motivations for the answers given by language tutors throughout SECTION III. The literature suggests two types of barriers to change – first-order (extrinsic) and second-order (intrinsic). In the specific case of technology use, first order barriers include limited access to hardware and software, limited time to learn and little technical support. Second-order barriers are based on one’s beliefs about teaching and technology (Brickner, 1995; Jacobsen, 1998; Seguin, 1995). According to this differentiation, openness to change when using technology depends mostly on tutors’ beliefs about teaching and technology, since, as first-order barriers are removed, second-order barriers are revealed.

### **2.1.3 Student Focus-groups**

Three focus-groups were conducted among 18 volunteer students from the three IFL modules under examination (with six students from each class), each of them met twice, at the beginning and the end of the investigation period. The focus-groups drew on data from stimulated recall meetings with IFL students; Italian writing-related episodes were abstracted to encourage reflection on IFL writing processes starting from experiences which often related to a specific classroom activity or homework assignment. Focus-groups were also designed for students to express expectations on the course content and structure, as well as on the role of the IFL tutors in guiding the writing process.



Before holding the focus-groups, the researcher asked the tutor about the students' levels of academic performance in Italian. Among the volunteers interviewed, there were some students who did well in IFL classes and others who did not, and this variety of performance level allowed the researcher to get differing opinions about the students' learning experiences.

The group discussions were performed in English, since interviewing in the first language provides much richer data, making participants more comfortable. Prior to each focus-group, students were asked for permission to record their responses on audiotape and all of them agreed. Additional observations were noted during the discussions.

I introduced each group interview by stating that I wanted to know interviewees' experiences in the IFL classroom, in particular in relation to their IFL writing experience, and that all interviews would be kept anonymous.<sup>9</sup> The length of the focus groups varied from 25 minutes to 40 minutes; the responses given by some students were shorter than expected and it appeared that some of them did not want to talk much.

The questions raised in the first focus-group, conducted at the beginning of the investigation, aimed to further explore issues included in the three questionnaires (*Questionnaire on Writing Practice, Habits and Instruction*, *Questionnaire on Writing Strategies*, *Questionnaire on Computer Technology Use*) administered to all student participants during the previous month (October 2005). The initial set of questions in the first focus-groups focused on the students' description of the main difficulties they had encountered in relation to IFL writing and on their views about the role of the IFL tutors in the classroom. From the discussion, different expectations about the courses the students were attending emerged. The other set of questions of this first focus-groups focused on the integration of technology into IFL writing development, and included follow-up

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<sup>9</sup> Students' background, contact information, and interview setting were described in each transcript cover sheet.

questions from the questionnaire regarding such topics as computer use and access, the students' likes and dislikes about using the computers, and the expected role of the computer in writing classes. Some need for expansion on the written responses had in fact emerged from an initial analysis of the questionnaires.

The second focus-group took place in November 2006, at the end of the investigation period and after the second set of classroom observations was conducted. The questions for this focus-group focused specifically on the students' learning experiences and were structured to encourage student participants to reflect on and evaluate their experiences in the class over the academic year. This was done without posing direct questions that would make them overly self-conscious; the questions, therefore, were relatively abstract and indirect. This strategy was fairly successful in getting some students to comment candidly on their own performance, the class, and the tutor. This set of focus-groups was conducted with open-ended questions such as "What do you think that you have accomplished at the end of the writing course?" and "In what way do you currently use technology to develop Italian writing skills?". Sessions were tape-recorded.

Although interview guidelines were also used for the focus-groups conducted at the end of the data collection period, follow-up questions were introduced as and when needed in order to stimulate elaboration or clarification. This happened, in particular, during the focus-groups conducted in May 2006, in order to confirm my observational conclusions and to further understand what was going on in the classroom I had observed. For instance, having observed that some of the tutors involved the students in Internet-based information searches about the writing topic, I decided to investigate students' awareness of Internet technology used for their classes.



## 2.1.4 Classroom Observations

In addition to semi-structured interviews with tutors and focus-groups with students, classroom observations were employed both to further evaluate participants framework of values about L2 and IFL writing instruction, and to substantiate questionnaire findings.

This method is based on the direct observation of IFL tutors' activities while they are teaching writing skills and of their influence on students' apprenticeship to literacy. In this study, the observations were conducted in two main types of classroom – traditional and IT-enhanced<sup>10</sup> – with the aim of analysing how IFL tutors viewed instructional actions commonly used to teach writing, and how they were responding to the software packages (“Luisa” and “GramEx”) and specialised language website (“Text analysis”) embedded in the departmental website and/or incorporated in the syllabus.

All three IFL modules under examination (*IT 101: Italian Language for Beginners* – group A with 11 students; *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II*, group A with 12 students; and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III* with six students), were observed four times between October 2005 and November 2006: twice during the first two months of investigation and twice at the end of it.

All observations were recorded in narrative form, and audiotapes were used in some of the observations, but in other cases field notes were collected (for a total of approximately 600 minute of classroom meetings, as well as a number of informal conversations). Notes were first made in a bound notebook and then typed into computer

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<sup>10</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, with the term “IT-enhanced” we refer to two types of classrooms, the classrooms equipped with IT facilities located in the Humanities Building, and the four multi-media language laboratories situated on the Language Centre premises. In the analysis of the learning and instructional context, mainly conducted through classroom observations (Chapter VI), the term will refer exclusively to the language laboratories.

file. Afterwards, I typed a complete record of the observations based on the notes taken in class.

All observations were made in person and although the very presence of an observer in the natural setting may affect an observed activity – an effect known as the “Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle” (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990) – the observations gave me an opportunity to see and hear, at first hand, things that might otherwise not be mentioned in the interviews. Field notes relating to these observations were both descriptive and reflective in nature, and included both memos and field journal entries (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998), with documentation of tutor and student activities, conversations and behaviours in the classroom. Brief pre- and post-observation conversations were conducted with tutors, in preparation for each observation or in order to clarify any questions resulting from it. Although notes were made from these short conversations, they were not tape-recorded.

The observations were planned in order to experience directly the learning and instructional environments under examination and the dynamics between participants operating in the classrooms in question.

Therefore, the observations focused on interactions, tasks, and behaviours of the IFL students and tutors. Narrative descriptions of events were recorded following a set of guidelines that specified the questions to be answered by the observation record. These included such questions as: “How does the language tutor introduce the lesson, and when in the various parts of the lesson might s/he communicate a purpose for the writing that is being done?” “What phase(s) of the writing process and what text structure(s) were the focus of the activity?” “Was there earlier instruction of which today’s lesson is an extension?”.

A field notes and classroom observation rubric was used to collect data on specific activity type and duration, and on student engagement in the current task (see Appendix 8



for a sample portion of a completed rubric). Activity type, start time, end time, and groupings (Katz, 1996) were noted. Using procedures similar to those in Wharton-MacDonald *et al.* (1998), the researcher surveyed the individuals in the classroom at ten minutes intervals and noted their activities. Specific aspects of activities, such as instructions, page numbers, language used, or notations on the board, were recorded in the field notes column, which also listed the arrival and location of latecomers, student questions, or other annotations.

For each observation the researcher collected materials that could be helpful to understand the classroom environment, such as the course syllabus and the language course guidelines with related information. After the class, the researcher asked the tutor about the preparation of the lesson, discussing, for instance, how the tutor made lesson plans, got supplements, and shared ideas with other tutors.

Each observation was rated on a five point scale ranging from internal to external focus, according to the following criteria. Observations were rated as internally focused when reference was made to student control over topics, idea generation, drafting information and informing a reader. Classroom observations were also rated as internally focused when emphasis was placed on student decision-making about purposes and sense-making, in view of the communication of ideas to an audience. Classroom observations were rated as externally focused when reference was made to tutor control of topics, idea generation, and delivery of content, such as tutor delivery of rules about form rather, than tutor interactions about communication of a message to a reader. Observations were rated as more externally focused when emphasis was placed on tutor explanation of grammar and de-contextualized words. Reference to skills and forms were rated as externally focused only when they were discussed and sequenced to facilitate the tutors' presentation, rather than in order to help students to see the purpose of their role in facilitating communication to a reader.

In sum, a process of triangulation was employed by using the semi-structured interviews with tutors and focus-group with students, observations of learning and instructional environments with and without an element of technology, and document analysis. According to Maxwell (1996), observation is a useful tool in order to obtain descriptions of behaviour and events, whereas interviews and focus groups are crucial when attempting to elicit the perspectives of participants. In this study, the observations conducted enabled me to draw inferences about participants' intended meaning and perspectives that could not have been obtained by relying exclusively on interview data; interviewing, on the other hand, was a valuable way to get additional information that might have been missed in observation and also allowed me to check the accuracy of observations (Maxwell, 1996; Wiersma, 1995). Therefore, triangulation between observations, interviews, and documents relating to modules involving different levels of writing skills (beginners, intermediate, and advanced) increased the soundness of the study, providing more complete and accurate data (Patton, 1990).

Having described the methods and techniques used to obtain the quantitative and qualitative data relating to both the participants and the learning and instructional context, in the next section we will turn our attention to the procedures followed to record the results of the data collection.



### 3. Data Analysis Procedures

An external reader<sup>11</sup> was asked to comment on ambiguity, wording, and relevance of the belief statements, questions and categories. This reader paid special attention to the second section of the tutor Questionnaire on Computer Technology Experience (related to personal views and beliefs), which presented the main difficulties. The reader was provided with the descriptions of the three subgroups of belief statements. The following items were given to each reader: 41 beliefs statements: a sheet with descriptions of each subsection: and a pencil. The descriptions of the subgroups were: beliefs about learning language with a computer; beliefs about computer technology; and beliefs about the integration of computers in the classroom. Each reader independently matched the forty-one beliefs to a subgroup, and, after the matching was complete, the readers discussed each statement and justified why that statement pertained to a certain subsection. Based on the results of this process, nine questions were deleted.

Besides deleting the nine questions mentioned above, the following changes were made to the questionnaire after receiving the readers' comments. In the first section of the questionnaire, new administrative uses of technology were included based on teachers' feedback: *a)* use a computer to complete work-related forms; *b)* post homework assignments. Second, one "barrier to technology" was added: lack of computers and large class projectors in the classrooms.

A comprehensive mapping of both the participants and the learning and instructional context was completed as foundation to the analysis of the data and its interpretation. This "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the participants as well as the learning and instructional environment, provided the situated context necessary to discern

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<sup>11</sup> See footnote 8.

patterns which revealed central themes. In addition, this description supplies the context needed to assess and interpret the study's claims.

As already noted, the overall process of data analysis started from the participants' voices. This choice reflected my planned emphasis on perceptions and views of participants as the main concepts that needed to be examined in order to understand how they played out in the learning and instructional environment, and in particular in the classroom. A recursive approach which developed successive levels of abstraction, based on a grounded theoretical framework (Athanasios and Heath, 1995; Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), was used to first triangulate central themes across the main domains, then refine these themes and further substantiate and expand them through returning to the data. As we have mentioned in the introductory section of Chapter IV, the separation made throughout this study among the two domains is artificial, being a useful framework for entering the data. Thus the following discussion of analytical procedures, while divided by domain, should be read keeping in mind the focus on elicitation of phenomena across domains partly occurring in parallel.

Referring to the research question at the core of my project, as outlined in Chapter IV,<sup>12</sup> and more specifically to its first sub-question (*Sub-question a*: What are the characteristics of the learning and instructional environment, and how do these characteristics shape participants' experiences and practice in this environment?), I used several different methods and data sources. I began with the field notes taken during the classroom observations, completing the initial coding and developing a descriptive taxonomy of relevant classroom tasks. I also tabulated the frequency counts for the classroom observation rubrics (Katz, 1996; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley and Hampston,

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<sup>12</sup> This section refers to the formulation of research questions in Chapter IV, Paragraph 3.1. Sub-questions *a*), *b*), and *c*) are all sub-questions of the main research question: "How do claims in the literature regarding the role of the use of IT in L2 writing instruction play out in the specific IFL context under examination?"



1998). By jointly examining these two data sources, I cross-referenced trends in behaviour captured in the observation rubrics with activities and occurrences noted in the field notes, using the times and dates from each. I also examined class documents to round up the description of the structure, activities, and tasks in the classroom.

I also expanded my analysis including the other domain, i.e. the participants: IFL tutors and students. Thus, I shifted the focus onto the investigation of the second sub-question (*Sub-question b: Who are the participants? What experiences, expectations and beliefs constitute their frameworks of values, as well as what understandings do they bring to, use in, and take from this learning and instructional environment?*).

I then analysed the data as follows: I refined the initial data emerging from the questionnaires administered at the beginning of the data collection process in order to prepare the ground for the observations and semi-structured interviews, or the focus-groups. As part of this process, I wrote comments tied to individual data points, memos regarding my analytic processes and emerging concepts, and journal entries as a means of reflecting on more abstracted relationships and in order to capture potential emerging themes and initial substantiating data. I also began to do frequency counts of relevant data to further test the conclusions I was reaching. I then briefly reviewed the tutors' and students' comments, focusing on content and taking notes for items which helped me to substantiate themes already identified. As I moved further into more abstract levels of analysis, I returned to the memos in order to refocus my observations. I then continued to review the data selectively in order to locate further data as evidence for the trends I had identified early in this process. I then began to isolate the themes of tutor and student expectations, the frameworks of values underlying these, and the ways in which these frameworks shaped participants' behaviours, experiences, and interpretations.

Finally, I attempted to answer the third research sub-question: *Sub-question c: (Within this specific environment, and considering the roles – implementers, adopters,*

suppliers, resisters – IFL tutors’ played in the implementation of technology in the observed classrooms where instructional technology has been identified as a component of instruction, can instructional technology be considered as a true form of curricular innovation?).

The cyclical and iterative process as described by Davis (1995) and Moustakas (1990) for data analysis was followed in the present study, in particular for answering sub-question c). Davis describes qualitative research as possessing a “cyclical nature”, in which the constant analysis of the data collected at different stages of the process gives rise to “more focused data collection... until redundancy is achieved” (444). Moustakas (1990) also stresses the iterative nature of data analysis and the importance of the immersion in the data until some type of understanding evolves.

The data analysis process for answering sub-question c) included the preparation of a first outline through the steps of organization, synthesis, immersion and also distancing myself from the data. Transcriptions and other recorded data were organized into files corresponding to each tutor. The next step consisted of categorical aggregation, which involved the careful reading of the transcripts contained in each file and the search for themes.<sup>13</sup> To complete this analysis, I read each transcript contained in each file and applied Gee’s (1999) model of discourse analysis,<sup>14</sup> following its steps and “engaging in

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<sup>13</sup> The concept of “theme” used in this study is the one provided by Van Manen (1990) in the following terms: 1) “Theme is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point”; 2) “Theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand”; 3) “Theme is the means to get a notion”; 4) “Theme describes the content of a notion”, 5) “Theme is always a reduction of a notion”. (92)

<sup>14</sup> To construct the institutional activity system in which language tutors participated at the beginning (October – November 2005) and at the end (October – November 2006) of the investigation, this study also employed Gee’s model of discourse analysis, in order to investigate the tutors’ language when externalizing their beliefs and frameworks of values concerning the use of instructional technology in the classroom. The basis for Gee’s model of discourse analysis lies in the distinction between Discourse with a big D and discourse with a small d, and in the objective that he proposes for his analysis, from which this distinction arises. For Gee, a method of discourse analysis must reflect “a theory about the nature of language-in-use” (5) which “involves asking questions about how language, at a given time and place, is used to consume the



[...] discourse-related reflections” (96). Having read each transcript contained in each tutor’s file, I applied Gee’s eighteen analysis questions<sup>15</sup> to determine the areas in which several questions coincided and which were related to the components found in Engeström’s (1994, 1999) activity system model.<sup>16</sup> This process was conducted keeping in mind the research questions posited in this study. While answering Gee’s questions and discovering common themes, information related to specific topics was highlighted and a coding system was created for each of these areas. Once this process had been concluded

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aspects of the situation network as realized at a time and place and how the aspects of the situation network simultaneously give meaning to the language” (92). Such a model requires that we go beyond what Gee defines as discourse with a small d, or “language in use”, to comprise not only language, but also the “non-language stuff” to “enact specific identities and activities” (7), namely Discourse with a big D. That is, in this model, “language has meaning only in and through practices” (6). This is reflected in the method used for analysis, where language is a medium that “simultaneously reflects and constructs the situation or context in which it is used” (Gee, 1999: 82). Thus its analysis focuses on the different social and linguistic tasks that construct the social situation in which it is used at a specific time and place.

<sup>15</sup> Gee’s proposal is based on a series of eighteen questions that focus on six different linguistic and social building tasks: semiotic building, world building, activity building (three questions focusing the nature of the activity and sub-activities that are carried out in the situation being analysed), socio-culturally-situated identity and relationship building (three questions which focus on the subject; on the identities that are revealed in the situation; and on the Discourses that are connected to these identities and relevant in the situation), political building (the questions seek to discover the relevance of social goods and the way in which they are related to the Discourse and cultural models prevailing in the situation) and connection building (the focus is more linguistic than social because the objective is to determine the connections between utterances and the coherence of the situation).

<sup>16</sup> Sharing the same foundations of socio-cultural theory, Engeström’s activity theory captures the social and dialogic nature of teaching and allows for a focus not only on the subject, but also on the context of, and on the artefacts that mediate, instructional activity. In addition, unlike other existing frameworks on teacher thinking, it moves beyond the view of teachers as isolated practitioners to focus on the system in which knowledge and meaning are collectively constructed and teachers act as “collaborative thinkers and actors” rather than as “lonely and autonomous practitioners” (1994: 4). That is, this model “is deeply contextual and oriented at understanding historically specific local practices, their objects, mediating artefacts, and social organization, and seeks to explain... qualitative changes in human practices over time” (1999: 378). This model not only comprises “the subject and the object” of the activity, but also “the less visible social mediators of activity... [and their] continuous transformation” (1994: 45); this framework provides a comprehensive and dynamic view of human activity. Engeström (1987, 1994, 1999) represents his model as a triangle with six interconnected components: the subject, the instruments, the object, the rules of engagement, the community, and the division of labour.



for all the data, I referred back to the coded transcripts and created a list of statements exemplifying each emerging theme for each participant. Finally, I cross-examined language tutors' and students' files, reconsidering the answer to Gee's eighteen questions in each file, and applying Glaser's (1969) constant comparative method of data analysis to determine whether different instances of data corresponded to the same category in order to find common themes. To complete this task, I followed Glaser's main rule: "While coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents coded in each category" (220). Once the coding process was complete, I converged the themes that emerged from Gee's questions and the categorization based on Engerström's (1994, 1999) framework, and constructed the institutional activity system in which the language tutors participating in this study acted. In the next step, I took into account the relationship among the different components of the resulting systems, and employed Markee's (1997) model for curricular innovation to examine the different roles – implementers, adopters, suppliers, resisters – the language tutors had played in the innovation process in order to determine whether the use of technology constituted a form of curricular innovation for them.

The preparation of the second outline included a further step, which required me to go back to the original document and to reread passages in order to better understand the data within their specific contexts. This second outline, larger than the initial one, included quotes, key words and paraphrases. The third and final outline was a more condensed version containing the main categories and subcategories.

In approaching the data, I assumed that the participants had access to data and intuitions regarding their experiences that were beyond my individual reach, and that they could contribute valuable guidance and triangulating perspectives to the study. For this reason, the participant domain was chosen to drive the analysis of data and their interpretation relied on the guidance of the participants' commentaries and the



triangulation of their perspectives.

To conclude, as the overall discussion of the research procedures illustrates, in this study quantitative measures were used primarily in the service of qualitative analysis. The questionnaires provided evidence of the particular “what”, the description of smaller components of the evidence that assists in the interpretation of the “why”, the larger system at work. In substantiating parts of my qualitative analysis with quantitative evidence, I have arrived at a fuller understanding of this learning and instructional context, and, I hope, I have been able to present a more convincing interpretation of that context to the various audiences to whom the study is of interest.

## CHAPTER VI

### ANALYSIS OF THE LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

This chapter and the following two – devoted respectively to the examination of IFL tutors' beliefs and IFL students' perceptions about L2 writing and technology – provide some detailed insights into the complexity of the “situatedness” of the study I conducted and the interpretations I have drawn from it. As Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) point out, it is precisely in the examination of the specific, the attempt “to characterize the particular” (44), that patterns are revealed. The careful mapping of the educational context described in this chapter will ideally enable us to interpret the meaning of trends in the data and establish the specific ways in which themes and processes with potentially broad applicability were operating within the project site. For example, understanding the significance of the frustrations felt by those IFL tutors taking part in this study who were using technology will be contingent on my knowledge of, among other things, their prior experience with IT and related expectations, the types of tasks they wanted and needed to accomplish with their classes, the ways in which available IT resources were implicated in such tasks, and the features of the technological aids themselves.

The broad purpose of this chapter, then, is to provide the reader with a breadth of situated knowledge similar to the researcher's. This will be accomplished through a preliminary overview of the classroom dynamics between the participants (tutors and students); this in turn will prepare the background for Chapters VII and VIII, in which the examination of data concerning IFL tutors' and students' writing experiences will attempt to shed light on their beliefs and attitudes toward L2 writing and technology. In addition, the present chapter will offer a foundation for an overall interpretation and assessment of the study's findings, and will help us to identify their applicability.



The analysis contained in this chapter focuses on the teaching and learning environment, one of the two main domains identified as the joint focus of the study. The analysis will be guided by the first research sub-question identified at the end of Chapter IV (*Sub-question a*: “What are the characteristics of the learning and instructional environment, and how do these characteristics shape participants’ experiences and practice in this environment?”).

In order to answer this sub-question, participants were observed in two different locations of the learning and instructional environments – a traditional (Room H403 in the Italian department) and two IT-enhanced classrooms (in this case the “Language Lab 1” – one of the four language laboratories located in the premises of the Language Centre of the university – and Room 4 in the IT centre).

The snapshots presented in the sections below aim to provide a detailed description of classroom actions, and the following discussion sections prepare the basis for further analysis, by relating the present study to some of the claims concerning IT identified in the literature review.

As we have seen, all three IFL modules selected for the study (*IT 101*, *IT 301* and *IT 401*) were observed four times between October 2005 and November 2006: twice during the first two months of the investigation and twice at the end of it.

Among the classes observed, one session for *IT 101: Italian Language for Beginners* (held by tutor B in Room 4, in the IT Centre premises) and two sessions for *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* (held by tutor D both in the traditional classroom H403 in the Italian department, and in the Language Lab 1, located in the Language Centre of the University) were chosen for further reflection. The selection was determined by the fact that all these classes include a writing component, and two of them (*IT 101* in Room 4 and *IT 301* in Language Lab 1) involved an element of computer-based technology.

Intermediate learners following the module *IT 301* could integrate writing activities with the software known as “Text Analysis”<sup>1</sup> and beginner level learners were able to perform remedial activities using the software packages “Luisa”<sup>2</sup> and “GramEx”.<sup>3</sup> Transcripts of actions and experiences observed in the classrooms on different dates and at different times during the data collection period are included in the three snapshots presented in this chapter.

Some of the materials and the resources used in each module observed in the traditional and IT-enhanced classrooms have been included in the field notes and in the observation rubrics. In the sections below we will be looking at the classroom documents and activity types more in detail.

### *Classroom Documents*

As mentioned in the overview of the learning environment (Chapter IV) classroom documents include syllabi, in-class work (including peer review sessions) and homework, handouts, online and paper assignment instructions, and textbooks. Tutors observed in the

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see in Section 2 of this Chapter, “Text Analysis” constitutes of a series of online activities guiding the students to the analysis of a sample written text.

<sup>2</sup> Also available at each workstation in the Language Centre of the University of Warwick and throughout the campus, “Luisa” is a dedicated grammar package developed at the University of Leeds for use by *ab initio* students in need of intensive grammar practice. The program has a reading section and reading passages and exercises at three levels, with correcting facilities.

<sup>3</sup> “GramEx” is a software available via the intranet of the University of Warwick. Each workstation in the Language Centre of the University of Warwick. Available from *Camsoft Educational Software Modern Foreign Languages* also for French, German, Spanish, and English as foreign languages, the “GramEx” programs are intended to provide tuition and reinforcement in essential areas of foreign language grammar to students of intermediate level (post-A level). The format of the exercises is essentially multi-choice gapfill, but the application also offers context-sensitive explanations to users, and is accompanied by an online grammar summary. The items contained in each activity are presented in random order each time the application is run, thus enhancing the re-usability of the material. Errors are recorded and then re-presented in a ‘remedial run’ once the exercise has been completed.



snapshots supplemented the classes with handouts, frequently consisting of photocopies of reading texts or of exercises taken from other books; sometimes handouts were taken from websites with readings.

At the time of the investigation, module *IT 101, Modern Italian Language for Beginners*, used as a textbook T. Marin, and Magnelli, S. (2000). *Progetto Italiano*. Volume 1, Roma: Edilingua, and the *Essay Writing* section of module *IT 301, Italian Language II*, adopted Italiano, F., and Marchegiani I., (2003). *Crescendo*, Boston: Thomson Heinle. Pedagogically, both books provide a foundation for the development of writing skills. The main aim of the elementary module *IT 101*, however, is to give learners a thorough grounding in reading, writing and oral/aural skills, while at the same time focusing on Italian life and culture. The book chosen to support these goals contains lively student-centered activities, easy-to-follow grammar tables and authentic color illustrations. By using modern everyday language, the book combines language and civilization. As far as writing is concerned, in the *IT 101* module students get familiar with the skills and strategies needed to approach and interact with written texts. These skills and strategies will be also applied for performing tasks based on authentic or near authentic Italian texts which students will encounter later on in their course of study, in *IT 301* and *IT 401*.

By contrast, *Crescendo*, the main textbook adopted in module *IT 301*, focuses on the development of writing skills. It is therefore worthwhile examining in depth its different sections. The volume contains authentic texts and materials taken from a variety of literary and non-literary sources, such as newspapers, magazines, books, forms, brochures, and advertisements. The diversity of materials allows for students' exposure to a wide range of writing styles and registers, from literary and formal samples to colloquial and more informal language use. Texts supply an array of real-life language models and also provide cultural information about Italy and its people. The structure of the book presents the pre-reading tasks and activities as advance organizers, in order to apply and

eventually enhance the reading strategies acquired in the *IT 101* module. In this way students are prepared to read the texts by previewing key vocabulary, using the necessary background information, activating appropriate schemata, and applying appropriate reading strategies. Despite their incomplete mastery of the linguistic code, these reading techniques facilitate the students' comprehension process and expand both their active and passive vocabulary. Vocabulary review and acquisition are featured in the first section of each chapter, "*Facciamo conversazione*", together with short cultural readings, followed by related activities. Highly topical readings, under the headings "*Cosa sappiamo degli Italiani?*" and "*Leggiamo*", give students valuable in-depth knowledge on cultural themes related to the history, civilization, social customs, and traditions of contemporary Italian society. The second section, "*Strutture*", includes a review of related grammatical structures and is concluded by related practice. The third section, "*Ascoltiamo*", emphasizes the development and practice of listening skills in a context related to the themes of each chapter. The fourth section, "*Testi e contesti*", is devoted to the reading of a longer authentic text, written by a famous Italian author. In the final section, "*Per Scrivere*", each chapter describes, in English, a useful strategy that students can apply to specific writing tasks, such as generating ideas, writing a summary, supporting an opinion, narrating a story, writing instructions, or paraphrasing. The creative writing topics in the "*Temî*" sub-sections reinforce these strategies and give students the opportunity to practise their writing skills in a wide variety of situations requiring extended discourse. Extensive writing is also encouraged in the "*Caro Diario*" section, in which students are provided with numerous opportunities to express themselves freely, exploring from a personal perspective the topics treated in each chapter.

Culture plays an important role in all three modules, but particularly in *IT 401*, where students acquire cultural knowledge by reading authentic texts, selected by their language tutor for their illustrative value with regard to culture, as well as for their



linguistic level and topical interest. Moreover, the activities undertaken by students during this module are selected and/or designed by the language tutor in order to reinforce, directly or indirectly, the gradual acquisition of notions of Italian culture, with many tasks requiring students to make cross-cultural comparisons.

## **1. Module IT 101: Modern Italian Language I**

During the period covered by this study, the *IT 101* group met for four classes per week, for a total of four hours of face-to-face instruction. As stated in the main aims outlined in the syllabus, this module takes a holistic approach to the teaching of the four communicative skills (oral comprehension, speaking, reading, writing) and provides the students with elementary notions of grammar. These are practised, among other things, through controlled writing exercises. Semi-controlled writing assignments are also requested starting from the second term. Language tutors normally assign specific homework activities, some of which require the use of Word processing facilities. All beginner IFL students are required also to carry out a certain amount of independent study, using the audio-visual resources offered by the Language Centre of the University, where they can work with CALL software packages “Luisa” and “GramEx”, CD, audio cassette and video tape players, in order to further develop the four macroskills.

During the first weeks of the first academic term, language tutors give students an introduction to the use of relevant CALL resources for language learning (the software “GramEx” and “Luisa” as well as Word processing facilities such as keyboard layouts and spell checkers, available in the open space of the Language Centre of the university).

The Snapshot proposed below shows a typical introductory session for using “GramEx” and “Luisa”, for the module *IT 101 Italian Language for Beginners* in which participants were observed in the IT Centre premises, at the beginning of the investigation

period (October 2005).

The class took place in the one of the rooms of the IT Centre, Room 4. The classroom is designed with a teacher-fronted, whole class orientation, with a desk, a master station and a projection screen at the front. All student stations faced the front of the room with all the monitors visible only from the rear of the room.

## **1.1 Snapshot 1: An IT-enhanced Introductory Section for CALL**

### **Software Packages**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2005 the Italian Language for Beginners class met in Room 4 of the IT Centre. I took a seat at the back centre of the room against the wall. At 10:15 tutor B asked the students (in English) to login to the computers, while turning off the lights at the front of the room, preparing to use the projector.

An administrator with the IT Services entered the lab, rearranged the students in the last two rows, checked some machines, and generally seemed to act disruptively. Tutor B gave the class the first instruction to open “Luisa”, speaking in English except for mentions of elements of the software. I noted that three students in the last two rows were having trouble keeping up with the instructions, while another was still logging in. The tutor circulated among the workstations, helping other students who are lagging behind to catch up. At 10:24 I observed that one student in the last row was looking at the university homepage rather than following instructions to get familiar with “Luisa”. Tutor B kept circulating to the rear of the class, inviting the students to follow instructions.

Then the tutor moved to the PC at the front of the room. At 10:42 tutor B spoke to the class in English, then in Italian, telling the students to close “Luisa” and to follow the instructions on the projection screen to open “GramEx”. She circulated among the desks to help with any problems, but for this activity, whose instructions are clearly explained on



the projection screen, there did not seem to be many difficulties, and the students all appeared to be on the right screen, typing intermittently. At 10:48 the tutor told the class, in English, to log out. At 10:53 tutor B interrupted the class and talked in English for about five minutes, to explain the procedures for submitting homework using these two CALL packages. The session ended at 10:58.

### **1.1.1 Discussion of Snapshot 1**

In pursuing the first sub-question (*Sub-question a*): “What are the characteristics of the learning and instructional environment, and how do these characteristics shape participants’ experiences and practice in this environment?”), I was especially motivated to examine two claims about the role of IT made by researchers in existing literature. These claims have been outlined in detail in the third Section of Chapter IV devoted to the formulation of the research questions.

The first claim concerns the view that:

Physical configurations of IT labs may affect interactions in ways that may impede learning. (Moody, 2001)

As a consequence, I observed the physical and material characteristics of other elements of the technologies themselves and focused my attention on the way that they might potentially affect students’ learning. Additionally, I concentrated on the claim according to which:

[...] Computer demands a different approach to writing, learning, and teaching, such that traditional notions of what writing and learning involve and traditional patterns of teacher-dominated talk are not appropriate, possible, or even desirable. (Peyton, 1999)

An important issue in relation to the first claim, as noted in Moody (2001), is the arrangement of the classroom equipment. As Figure 1 illustrates, the room used for the class under observation was rather crowded and did not easily allow for movement among stations or for the sharing of screens and keyboards. Because of this constraint, the tutor was limited to a T-shaped pattern when walking through the room, and students were generally not able to use a machine for collaborative work in groups larger than pair.

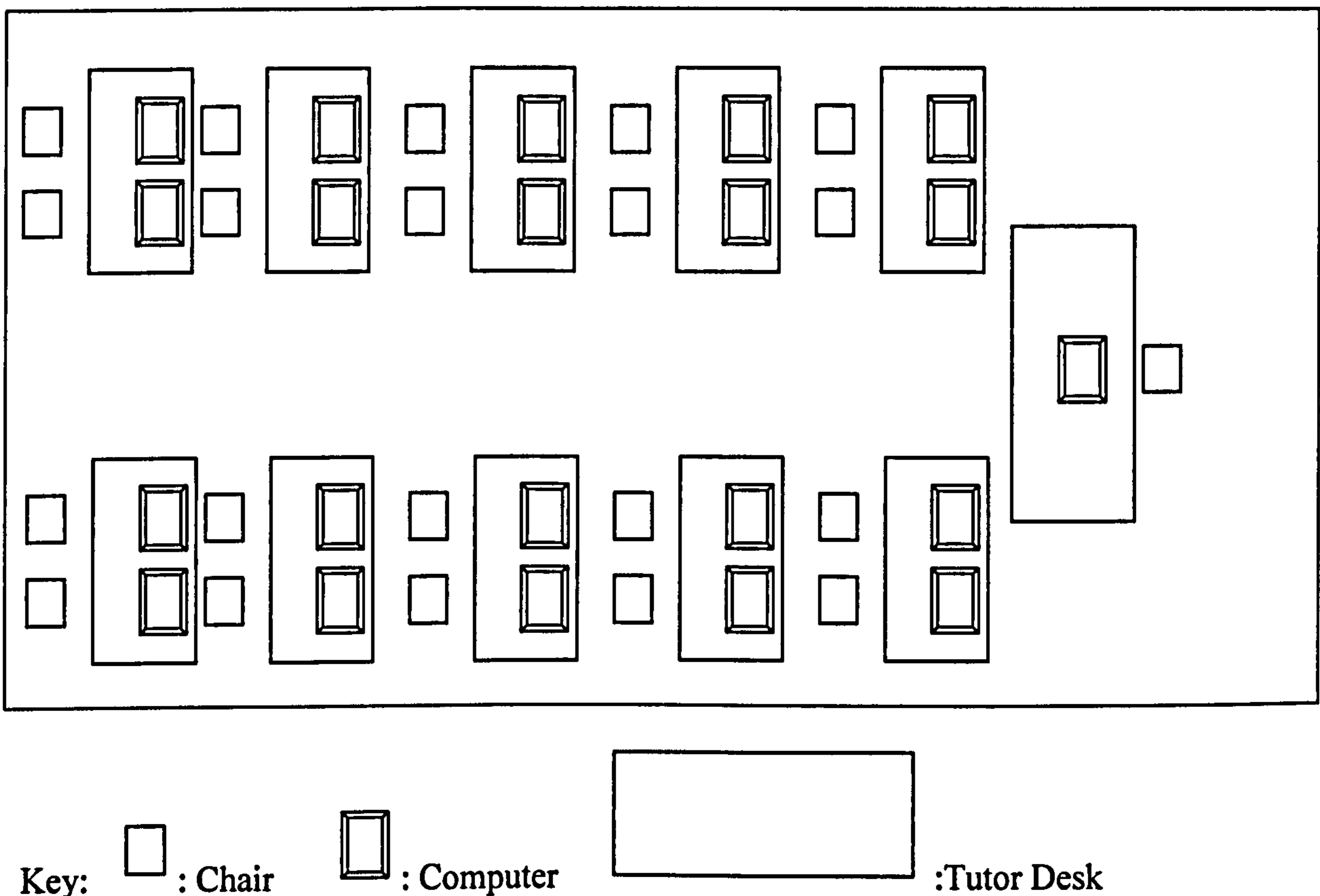


Illustration 1: Layout of Room 4, IT Centre



Although the “Luisa” and “GramEx” software packages are designed for performing individualized activities and propose structural exercises based on “screen work”, their characteristics could be adapted to activities requiring collaboration among participants, in line with the socio-cognitive theories of L2 writing currently gaining recognition in L2 research.<sup>4</sup>

However, the results of the physical arrangement of the room were two-fold. First, the configuration of the equipment and furniture limited what kinds of activities could be carried out in the classroom, preventing students from readily working in groups with equal access to screens and keyboards. Second, students tended to go off-task fairly frequently. The language tutor was aware that students were straying from their class work and tried to counteract this by often moving to the rear of the class. My analysis of the observation data, however, indicates that the tutor’s strategies were of limited success: students in the last two rows, regardless of who they were, were more often off task than students elsewhere in the room; and students in general were at least as likely to be off-task as in the regular classroom, contradicting claims that using IT is more engaging and motivating to students (Peyton, 1999). This was not an issue of motivation, since students did not seem to go intentionally off-task. Instead, it was purely an issue of difficulty in following instructions and keeping up.

In his *Electronic Literacies* (1999), Warschauer makes the point that talking about and researching the use of IT in the classroom is akin to researching textbooks. I interpreted this remark to mean that examining purely the materials used in learning is missing the point of research, and that context and implementation should rather be the focus of research, while our orientation toward information technologies should be adjusted accordingly.

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<sup>4</sup> Relevant discussion on the different theories of writing was conducted in Section 2.1 of Chapter I.

I agree with Warschauer to the extent that we should be looking at “the textbook”, at the materials themselves in the intent of identifying key features, developing taxonomies of the parameters of these features across individual sample items, and pursuing the differential roles these features play in different contexts among different learners and language tutors. Just as the layout, formatting, and graphic elements of a textbook may impact students’ ability to process information from it, so the physical arrangement of a classroom can shape patterns of interaction among students and language tutors in both positive and negative ways.

Off-task behaviour was not entirely due to the classroom layout. As a matter of fact, another critical feature of the training session was represented by the equipment problems experienced by the students and the consequent need for the manager’s and/or the technician’s assistance, which made the whole-class activity rather complicated. The physical features of information technologies, the equipment supporting their use, and the configuration of such equipment, can affect the participants. Therefore, rather than directing attention away from IT facilities as mere conduits, writing research can benefit from broadening its focus to attend more closely to the specific features of writing technologies themselves and to how these might interact with other facets of participants and environment.

## **2. Module IT 301: Modern Italian Language II**

The writing section of the module *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* met for one hour each week. As stated in the course aims, IT 301 students are trained to write different types of compositions, such as *Controlled Composition*, *Composition with Paragraph Pattern Approach*, and *Free Composition*, according to standard writing conventions referring to styles such as direct/indirect speech, to formal/informal registers and to types of writing,



such as narrative, descriptive, and argumentative essays. Students make regular use of various types of dictionaries and background texts. In particular, they are encouraged to learn how to develop and express an opinion and how to tell a story. A large part of the module includes extensive grammar revision and examination of sample texts through “Text Analysis”, an activity created with the *SiteBuilder*<sup>5</sup> virtual environment and accessible through the website of the Department of Italian. “Text Analysis” is presented online through a series of activities guiding the students to examine a sample text; with phrases interactively linked to definitions and resources helping the students with their understanding. The text is displayed on the left hand side of the page and the activities are displayed, one at a time, on the right hand side of the page. Students are guided to proceed through the activities one at a time.

Snapshots two and three, proposed below, show respectively a typical *Essay Writing* session held in a traditional classroom (H403, located in the Italian department premises), and an introductory session guiding the students in the use of “Text Analysis” (taking place in a language laboratory of the Language Centre of the university).

## **2.1 Snapshot 2: A Typical *Essay Writing* Session**

The writing session was held once a week for one hour in Room 403, a traditional classroom located on the fourth floor of the Humanities Building, in the Italian Department premises. There were at the time no computers in the assigned room, but there was an overhead projector (OHP) as well as a blackboard.

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<sup>5</sup> *Sitebuilder* is a browser-based application adopted by the University of Warwick for creating and editing web sites built on the principle of the step-by-step wizard. This wizard-like interface is the easiest way for customers to create, modify and update their own web sites eliminating the need for technical HTML knowledge.

Participants were observed at the beginning of the investigation period (November 2005). On the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, at 10 am, one of the two groups following module *IT 301, Modern Italian Language II*, was gathering in the traditional classroom. I sat in the second seat from the right in the second row, trying to be close enough to hear but distant enough from the centre of the room and the action, in order to fade out of the other participants' awareness for most of the time. When I start recording my notes, 11 students are present.

At 10:15 tutor D entered and greeted the class in Italian. Then she told the students in English to turn to Chapter II, page 40 in their textbook, *Crescendo*. She asked one of the students to pull the rear door of the class closed to block out the noise of the corridor. She continued talking in Italian to the whole class, explaining that the next essay assignment would be a description. She noted that although some students may have done a similar essay in their *IT 101* module, this one would be more in depth and would use techniques that students had learned from the previous assignment. She then asked students to look at the pictures on the chapter opening page and encouraged them to begin sharing thoughts about the chapter theme. (39, 40)

Tutor D invited students to turn to their neighbour and work in pairs, she reviewed the chapter objectives and asked the students to explain how the photo and caption relate to the chapter title. After about five minutes, tutor D nominated a student in each pair to speculate about the types of situations and readings they would encounter in the chapter; when the first student stumbled, the language tutor supplied an accurate model of pronunciation. She also interrupted to explain, in a mixture of English and Italian, two unfamiliar expressions, "*giocare con le bambole*" and "*giocare a nascondino*". (40)

After a couple of minutes, the tutor stopped the first student and nominated a second to continue, speaking first in Italian and then in English.

Before proceeding to the chapter's reading selection, the tutor stopped and transitioned to a new activity, again speaking in Italian: "*Prima di leggere il brano, vorrei*



*che ci soffermassimo su alcune parole utili. Proviamo a pensare a delle esperienze o momenti indimenticabili nella nostra vita". (D)*

She then used the activities in the section entitled "*Facciamo conversazione*", presenting the two chapter topics along with related vocabulary ("*Per indicare la frequenza*", "*Per descrivere il carattere e il comportamento*", "*Per parlare dei rapporti con gli altri*") and other background information important when approaching the topics discussed in the chapter ("*Tanti racconti del passato: l'infanzia, l'adolescenza e i rapporti con gli amici e i familiari*"). She also used the photographs and quotations as advance organizers to brainstorm the main ideas treated in this part of the chapter, encouraging students to say as much as they could when answering the questions.

It was 10:22, and the language tutor asked students to get into pairs again (choosing a different partner from the previous one) and to discuss the topic of life experience, coming up with an example.

During the pair work, the tutor circulated around the classroom and listened to individuals, providing feedback. As she circulated, speaking in Italian, she asked a pair to split up and recombine with another pair. The tutor was also evaluating student performance in group activities by grading role-plays. Of the five groups that formed, with two or three students in each of them, three used only English as they discussed the topic, while two used some Italian and some English. All five, however, used Italian as they tried to formulate their answers. Tutor D continued to circulate for a couple of minutes, observing the students' work and discussing one answer with the group writing it. She then turned to write a numbered series of items on the board, apparently the examples the groups had generated, explaining to the class in a mix of Italian and English that she was summarizing the students' examples. The groups continued to discuss their answers while she was writing.

At about 10.28, tutor D called the whole class's attention to the board and read one item aloud: "*Il momento più bello di la settimana era quando tutta la gente era in casa*". A student commented, but unfortunately I could not hear her clearly. Tutor D responded with a series of questions in Italian: "*Quando, dove, perché?*" A second student tried to complete the sentence in Italian. The tutor listened, then offered two comments in Italian, questioning the word choice "*Tutta la gente*". Unexpectedly, there were no comments on "*di la*", whose correct form would require the use of the compound preposition "*della*".

Discussion of the other items continued in a similar vein, with about five minutes spent talking about each of them. Nearly all speech was in Italian. The pattern of the discussion was that tutor D read each item aloud and then the class moved into an exchange during which several students elaborated or explained each statement, and the tutor asked questions to encourage such explanations or asking students to verify other people's experiences with examples of their own.

This discussion lasted about seven or eight minutes and, as a pre-reading task, prepared the students before the reading selection.

The tutor invited the students to go to the "*Leggiamo*" section, which contains the reading "*Vestivamo alla marinara*" (43), an extract related to the topic of the chapter and to the discussion conducted collaboratively. Tutor D pointed out to the students that pronunciation was not the focal point of the activity, and encouraged them to read individual selections silently in groups of four and to underline the main key words, looking for the general meaning of the text. After about four minutes, the tutor asked the students to share any difficulties they had encountered during their reading.

Tutor D cut off the discussion at 10:59, saying in Italian that the class had done good reading and selection of key words. Since there was no time left in class, students should go ahead with answering the comprehension questions below the text. She assigned the set of questions on page 43 of the textbook for homework, so that students could



prepare for a possible discussion. She also reminded them to submit their essay assignment, together with the written answers to the comprehension questions, to her at the end of the following class. Class was dismissed at 11:03.

## **2.2 Snapshot 3: An Introductory Session to “Text Analysis”**

Lab 1 is located in the Language Centre of the University. At the time of the observation, the language tutor’s desk in this room had a side extension holding a computer connected to the university’s network. There were also a total of 23 computer stations in the lab, so both language tutors and students had their own computer. The tutor’s computer was connected to a monitor/VCR, a tape cassette/CD and DVD player as well as to the 23 monitors of the interactive computers present in the class. Participants were observed at the end of the investigation period (November 2006).

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 2006, one group of the *IT 301* module met in Language Lab 1 in the Language Centre. Tutor D introduced the students to the “Text Analysis” website, which would be used as a support online activity to develop their meta-cognitive knowledge about the writing process.<sup>6</sup> I sat at the back of the room, in a chair moved to the centre. When I entered, just after 9 am, the technician maintaining the site was testing the equipment, and both the local area network and the Internet connection were functioning. Tutor D was helping some students boot up and the technician also began to circulate and to assist with the process.

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<sup>6</sup> As mentioned in the Section 1.3 of Chapter III, recent researchers (Englert, Raphael, Fear and Anderson, 1988) found that students with meta-cognitive deficits were dependent upon external cues to make decisions about writing. These students were more externally reliant on the teacher to tell them what to do, and how and when to carry out different tasks during writing instruction. In contrast, students with meta-cognitive control can be defined as dependent upon internal cues when they can make decisions about strategies for planning, organizing and drafting for an audience chosen by the student.

At 9:17, ten students were present, and tutor D gave extended instructions in English reminding students about how to log on to the class website, so that they could begin their activities.

After three minutes, two students were still not on the website page; tutor D asked the room at large in English “Who’s having trouble?”, then tutor D and the technician went to help the several students raising their hands or calling for assistance.

After a minute or two, tutor D paused and spoke to the class in Italian, then consulted with the technician. A few more students trickled in late, and tutor D and the technician continued helping students with technical problems (a crashed computer: one pair of students bumped out of the website accidentally: a screen mis-sized to make the scroll bar inaccessible). Those whose computers were working were reading the selected text, as their eyes remained focused on the screens.

Having left the students about five minutes for a silent reading of the passage on the initial page of the website, tutor D gave an example of how to structure the text content through a generating activity on the whiteboard. After that, tutor D explained the requirement for the submission of drafts for summarizing the text read on the main screen of the “Text Analysis” website. At 9.46 she invited the students to work in pairs and to reproduce the structure of the example in order to write a short paragraph with the general idea of the text.

At 9:52, tutor D inquired in English whether students are almost finished. In the meantime, she continued circulating and assists a student with technical problems (his screen was displaying an error message). She asked the same question again at 10:02, and went to the front desk’s PC. The verbal instruction to log out came at 10:03, and the language tutor told the class in English to hand in the work on the following lesson. Tutor D invited students to prepare a summary of the text previously read on the main page of



“Text Analysis” website using the techniques previously learned in class and to exchange their draft with their partner in the pair work before submitting it.

### **2.2.1 Discussion of Snapshots 2 and 3**

Two common elements stand out in the last two class sessions described, as well as throughout my field notes of observations undertaken during the entire academic year: first the considerable amount of Italian used for communicative purposes within classes; and, second, a pedagogy which reflects many aspects of what is often characterized as the process approach to writing instruction. The general patterns of language use which I discerned was that Italian was used for nearly all whole-class, content-oriented oral communications by all participants, and that the language tutor used English in tandem with Italian for most classroom management communication. English was preferred by most, but not all, students in small-group activities for management of classroom tasks, as well as for non-class-related conversations. A notable exception, however, was the language tutor’s choice of English for most IT-related classroom management items such as her explanation of how to access the text analysis website. During an informal conversation following the observation, the tutor herself reported this to be a conscious choice, and explained that she felt it was more important that students fully understood how to use the technologies than that they process such instructions in Italian.

The two sessions described above also portray, in the language tutor’s lesson design, her orientation toward process approach writing instruction. Characteristics of this approach which were apparent in these classrooms include the emphasis on the collaborative nature of writing through activities such as generation of examples and peer review; a focus on content and other discourse-level concerns, as in the whole-class discussion of the groups’ examples. Additionally the use of the “Text Analysis” website

offers implicit modelling of and explicit instruction in writing as a process, for instance in the generation of content separately from drafting (the example-generating activity).

At least one striking difference, however, can be noted between these two sessions (and also holds across my field notes for the observation period): the patterns of interaction in the two environments, particularly between language tutor and students, were quite different. The classroom setting shows a considerable level of teacher involvement in moment-to-moment activities, particularly whole-class activities, but also via monitoring and occasional interjections into small-group work. Tutor D appeared to be scaffolding interactions and activities to offer language support, direction, and feedback, but was ready to relax control somewhat when students attempted to assume greater initiative during face-to-face sessions in the traditional classroom (*Snapshot 2*). The activities I could observe in the Language Lab (*Snapshot 3*), in contrast, tended to have a lower level of tutor involvement. This was in part due, most probably, to the classroom layout and the time the language tutor had to divert to the need to assist students with equipment problems; these issues prevented the tutor from both physically and/or electronically monitoring student actions and language to the same extent as she did in the regular classroom.

Additionally, however, the tutor's choices of activities for the class often incorporated individualized "screen work", as was the case with the first activity in *Snapshot 3*, where students were asked to read the "Text Analysis" passage on the screen. While this activity was collaborative in nature, in that it involved students working together to improve one another's writing, it did not include synchronous interaction between students. As such, these types of individual activities were the predominant feature of the Language Lab session I observed (*Snapshot 3*). These types of activities contributed to isolate students more than small-group work (e.g. the activity requiring students to identify examples of past unforgettable experiences) in the traditional classroom (*Snapshot 2*). Individual work also demanded more monitoring time on the part



of the tutor. Thus, because the tutor had to spend extended sessions with each student individually, she spent less time interacting with each student overall, as compared with activities in which she was able to engage with multiple students simultaneously. In other words, the tutor had less face-to-face involvement with each student overall in the Language Lab compared with the traditional classroom, because she interacted with each individual student sequentially rather than with multiple students simultaneously.

This contrast in interaction patterns between the two environments may at first seem to support claims regarding the influences of IT on pedagogy and classroom dynamics, according to which students develop more autonomy in their learning, since “IT can radically transform power relations or notions of agency [between teachers and students]” (Kramsch; A’Ness; Lam, 2000).

However, other factors may intervene between such potential and its realization in real-life settings, such as the classrooms described above. In addition, although the two snapshots I have offered are taken from field notes concerning sessions of the *IT 301* module held in a traditional classroom and a Language Lab, respectively, the patterns of interaction depicted were typical also of the level I and level IV modules observed, with respect to the two types of environment (traditional and Language Lab).

### **3. Conclusions**

By focusing on the observation of the dynamics between the participants operating in a specific learning and instructional environment represented by the specific setting of the IT-enhanced sessions, I quickly became alerted to frustration or disappointment in the behaviours of some of the participants, beginning with the tutors. Of these reactions, some were evident in participants' facial expressions (gritted teeth, for example), as when they encountered difficulties with the computers. These visible reactions were recorded in my field notes, but others as we will see in the next chapter, were reported and/or confirmed by participants in interviews and informal conversations.

In the next two chapters we will turn to the participants' voices, as documented in their interviews, in order to find out whether tutor beliefs and student perceptions substantiated my own considerations, based on the observations of the dynamics between participants in the learning and instructional environment of the study.

It had begun to appear from the observations that students and tutors were sometimes operating from different expectations and had different goals for some of the writing assignments and activities conducted during the classes. For example, when working in small groups or in pairs on the basis of the instructions provided by the tutor, some students discussed the topic following the main points, but using mainly English, despite the fact that the exclusive use of Italian was required.

In order to confirm the above observations, the next chapters will orient and focus our attention toward ways in which experiences, frameworks of values, and understandings might shape different participants' goals and expectations relating to classes.

In line with the studies conducted by Moody (2001) and Warschauer (1999), reviewed in the first section of Chapter I, this study finds central to interpreting the data the theme of disjunction between tutors' and students' expectations. Participants' expectations



and goals, and the frameworks of values underlying them, reveal both areas of conflict concerning goals and values and areas of accord, where IFL tutors and students headed in the same direction. Thus, I decided that it was important to bring the investigation into the arena of goals and expectations, as a point of entry to participants' (and especially to IFL tutors') underlying frameworks of values, as well as to their subsequent interpretations of their own experience of teaching and learning IFL writing using IT. The aim was to understand more fully what lay beneath some of the frustrations and disappointments I was observing during the sessions.

Students enrolled in the Italian department, as all students at the University of Warwick, are in the process of incorporating IT into their daily lives and regular literacy practices. This is evident in the high level of IT access the university is offering. It makes sense pedagogically to build on students' existing skills, interests, and abilities in developing L2 writing proficiencies, and, therefore, to teach writing in an environment that mirrors their habitual practices as closely as possible. Additionally, as already argued in Chapter II, real-world literacy practices beyond educational institutions are increasingly IT-mediated. These participants will most probably be entering a UK or international work force which uses a wide spectrum of IT in both English and FLs. Both of these realities argue that the integration of IT into IFL writing classes, through practices such as the ones documented in this study, needs to become a central concern in curriculum development.

In order to obtain further details concerning the selected learning experiences under examination, and to see whether optimum conditions exist for the efficient implementation of technology, we must now investigate further the participants in order to find out whether the selected language tutors expressed commitment to integrate IT into their teaching, and whether students expressed interest in using IT in their writing classes.

## CHAPTER VII

### TUTOR DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter and the following one (Chapter VIII) will focus on the analysis of data related to the participants in the study – IFL tutors and students – with their frameworks of values concerning technology and L2 writing.

The acknowledgement of the fact that the tutors' role involves complex pedagogical decisions, requiring them to establish concrete goals and objectives; to select adequate materials in accordance with planned instruction; and to orchestrate the classroom, supervising and responding to students' work (Douglas Brown, 1987; see also the discussion conducted in Chapter III, Section 1.2), underpinned the decision to devote primary attention to the analysis of data related to IFL tutors.

Then, in Chapter VIII, attention will be given to IFL students' perceptions and expectations, in order to compare and contrast tutors' and students' frameworks of values, as well as the ways in which these shaped expectations and interpretations of experience.

In this chapter, the second sub-question outlined in Section 3.1 of Chapter IV is the focus of attention. The sub-question asks:

#### **Sub-question b)**

Who are the participants? What experiences, expectations and beliefs constitute their frameworks of values, as well as what understandings do they bring to, use in, and take from this learning and instructional environment?

This question will guide the investigation of participating IFL tutors' pedagogical experiences, current practices and goals, as well as their beliefs and understandings in the area of L2 writing and technology.



I will then attempt to answer to the third expanded sub-question, which had been formulated in the following terms:

**Sub-question c)**

Within this specific environment, and considering the roles – implementers, adopters, suppliers, resisters – IFL tutors played in the implementation of technology in those observed classrooms where instructional technology has been identified as a component of instruction, can instructional technology be considered as a true form of curricular innovation?

I will also investigate IFL tutors' current instructional practices, in particular those related to IFL writing and IT, with the aim of finding out whether the element of instructional technology – mainly computer-based – integrated with traditional classroom activities can be considered as a form of curricular innovation.

Chapter V offered a comprehensive view of the methodology and research methods used in the overall research. Starting from this baseline information, the discussion below will focus on the description of the research instruments used to collect the specific data related to IFL tutors and the method used to analyse them.

The constant comparative method (Bodgan and Bicklen, 1998; Creswell, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967)<sup>1</sup> was used to analyze data gathered with the different research

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<sup>1</sup> The collaboration of the two sociologists Glaser and Strauss in research on dying hospital patients led them to write the book *Awareness of Dying* (1965). In this research they developed the “Constant Comparative Method” later known as “Grounded Theory” (see *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss, 1967). When the principles of grounded theory are followed, a researcher using this approach will formulate a theory, either substantive (setting specific) or formal, about the phenomena he/she is studying. This contradicts the traditional model of research, where the researcher chooses a theoretical framework, and only then applies this model to the studied phenomenon.

instruments (questionnaires, observations and semi-structured interviews) adopted as part of the investigation conducted among participants.

Protecting the confidentiality of each participant was of utmost importance, and in order to conceal participants' identities, all questionnaires, observations and semi-structured interview notes were tape-recorded, transcribed and coded, with identification letters in place of tutors' names.

In order to establish baseline information on the selected IFL tutors' academic background, pedagogical experiences, professional views and current processes of IT integration, the first part of the chapter will analyse initial data collected with two questionnaires administered at the beginning of the data collection period (October 2005). The *Questionnaire on Instructional Writing Strategies* focuses on questions about L2 writing instructional practices and strategies (see Appendix 1), while the *Questionnaire on Computer Technology Experience* addresses instructional technology questions (see Appendix 2).

In the second part of the chapter, quantitative data collected from these questionnaires will be analysed together with the qualitative data collected during the semi-structured interviews conducted with each of the selected IFL tutors in November 2005 (see Appendix 6). The semi-structured interviews consist of two sections: the first section completes the data collected with the questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience*, while the second section integrates the data collected with the *Writing Instructional Strategies* questionnaire. This initial layer of quantitative and qualitative data will be integrated into further strata of qualitative data obtained from the second set of semi-structured interviews conducted among the IFL tutors at the end of the examination period, in November 2006. Data obtained during the four classroom observations (see Chapter VI) from field notes and rubrics will also be taken into account. All data will be organized in themes.



It is crucial, at this point, to take into account a conceptual framework concerning the role of teacher beliefs in the learning path and in the instructional experience of each participating IFL tutor. With this purpose in mind, the next section will discuss how tutor beliefs are established, by briefly referring to research undertaken in this field by scholars mentioned in Chapter III, in which we discussed general theory on tutor beliefs. The following section is a specific application of theory to a unique context, since it addresses the specificities of the case of those IFL tutors participating in this study. In the process, we will also be dealing with the coding of the data collected and the identification of themes used to organize them.

## **1. Past and Present Experiences and Histories of the Participating IFL Tutors**

Following the case study tradition (Merriam, 1988), the initial focus of our investigation will be on the participants' past and present experiences and histories. As we have seen in the section of the literature review devoted to the concept of teacher beliefs (Chapter III, Section 1.2), Borg (2003) gave a significant contribute to the research in this field. In a meta-analysis of foreign language teacher cognition, he identified three main themes which can be used to group views concerning how beliefs are established: prior language learning experience; teacher education; and instructional practice. These three themes may contribute to the identification of the themes for the specific scenario under examination in this study: the establishment of beliefs concerning the use of technology in IFL courses.

## **1.1 Prior Language Learning Experience**

As we have seen, the combination of education and personal experience is thought to have an impact upon teachers' beliefs. Beliefs are developed during the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975), through experience acquired as students in the classroom, and the importance of this process raises serious questions with respect to teachers' use of technology. As we have seen from the classroom observations – and as also corroborated by the informal conversations with the participants both prior to and after the observations – several of the selected IFL tutors were reluctant to embrace an ample use of technology in their teaching. Some of them reported having had little "apprenticeship of observation" in the use of technology in the FL classroom. Therefore, their experiences of technology as language learners were limited and it was unlikely that many of them had observed effective models of technology use in the FL classroom. We should not, therefore, expect "prior language learning experience" to be a powerful source of beliefs about technology in FL instruction in the case under examination.

## **1.2 Language Tutor Education**

The widespread view on beliefs is that these are formed by the time individuals reach Higher Education. Richardson (1996) agrees with a number of other scholars in doubting the power of teacher education and/or training to change beliefs, and Kagan (1992) states that the personal beliefs and images that future language tutors bring to any programs of education "usually remain inflexible, [since they] tend to use the information provided in coursework to confirm, rather than to confront and correct, their pre-existing beliefs" (154).



If powerful, beliefs can even resist sound evidence that they are incorrect or unreasonable (Block and Hazelp, 1995; Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Pajares 1992). Beliefs tend to form a system of interconnected constructs, so that, over time, it becomes impossible to change an individual belief without impacting the entire belief system (Block and Hazelio, 1995). Central beliefs may be more resistant to change because beliefs can vary in strength depending on how strongly convinced a person is of their value; this intensity, in turn, can affect the possibility of change (Block and Hazelp, 1995; Pajares, 1992). Also particularly resistant to change are beliefs established early on, when teachers are still students themselves (Dwyer, Ringstaff and Sandholtz, 1990; Lortie, 1975; Richardson, 1996). These early experiences are thought to be highly influential for belief formation, to the point that it may be particularly difficult to change beliefs which are fixed by the time students reach university or enrol on master programs. This may be the specific case of Italian IFL tutors currently employed at university level in Anglophone countries, and particularly in the UK, who have often followed a complete instructional path in Italy, possibly at a time when language teaching still tended to follow the Grammar-Translation approach, and teachers were particularly reluctant towards the adoption of technological learning aids.

In sum, it seems that early education is crucial and later instructional experiences have fewer chances of influencing beliefs. Despite these claims, however, and in light of recent research, a window of opportunity may exist to modify the structure and organization of beliefs, at least to a certain extent (Cabaroglou and Roberts, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

In the case under examination, such changes could be expected, for instance, in tutors who had had specific and extensive exposure to training and other professional programmes which gave ample space to instructional technology, such as courses for

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<sup>2</sup> Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) argue that beliefs may be susceptible to subtle changes instead of dramatic changes. They found that changes in teachers' beliefs were generally minor in scale, and included processes such as confirmation, elaboration, addition, re-ordering, re-labelling, linking and reversal of beliefs (393).

professional development organized by the University (e.g. the “Teaching Certificate in Post-compulsory education”<sup>3</sup> or “Certificate in Teaching Foreign Languages”<sup>4</sup> offered by the University of Warwick).

### **1.3 Instructional Practice**

Exposure to meaningful ways of integrating technology into the language classroom can occur through other different modalities and during crucial periods. First, tutors may receive direct instruction on the use of computers during their academic studies (Bachelor degree, MA programs, etc.). In Italian universities, at least at the time of the academic path followed by the Italian participants in this study, there were no specific modules where the focus was primarily on instructional technology. Computers, or more in general IT, were not integrated into disciplines such as “applied linguistics”, “socio-linguistics”, or “FL Teaching”. Only one of the tutors interviewed followed a practical module related to technology during her university studies, and this did not include discussion of effective design and integration of technology in the classroom.

Therefore, for the majority of the participants, the pedagogical training on instructional technology they may have received during their teaching experience was limited to the knowledge they may have acquired through training workshops offered by the Universities in which they had been working.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of the study, the “Teaching Certificate in Post-compulsory Education” was offered by the Centre of Academic Practice of the University of Warwick and consisted of three main modules: 1. “Preparing to Teach”; 2. “Curriculum Design”; 3. “Assessment and Evaluation”.

<sup>4</sup> The “Certificate in Teaching Foreign Languages” was offered by the Language Centre of the University of Warwick as a part-time initial training and professional development programme available to all language tutors as an Open Studies Certificate or a Postgraduate Award. It was made up of three modules: 1. “Introduction to Teaching and Learning Languages”; 2. “Developing Language Teaching”; and 3. “Evaluating Language Teaching”.



Programs for professional development such as the “Certificate in Teaching Foreign Languages” or the open module “E-learning in Higher Education” within the “Teaching Certificate/Diploma in Post-Compulsory Education”, offered by the Centre of Academic Practice of the University, suggest meaningful and effective ways to integrate technology into the language classroom, and present tutors with models for emulating technology integration.<sup>5</sup> The “Certificate in Teaching Foreign Languages”, offered by the Language Centre of the University, also requires observation periods among co-operating tutors, in which language tutors observe each other and see the application of what they have learned. During this phase, opportunities are provided for language tutors to see working models of technology integration, and this time period is also seen as a prime opportunity to expose them to technology. By giving language tutors the opportunity to observe colleagues (including senior language tutors and other members of the teaching staff) using technology to enhance their lessons, this training experience provides clear examples of existing applications and encourages student-tutors to use technology in their classrooms.<sup>6</sup>

The problem, however, is that experienced tutors sometimes do not model<sup>7</sup> effective uses of technology (Beichner, 1993; Topp, Mortensen, and Grandgenett, 1995), leaving new and less experienced tutors with little exposure to positive examples of

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of this research, within the “Teaching Certificate/Diploma in Post-compulsory Education”, the Centre of Academic Practice also offered staff the opportunity to follow the open module “E-Learning in Higher Education”, which was project-based and allowed individuals or small groups to address a topic of particular interest in the e-learning field.

<sup>6</sup> As Richardson (1996) observes, “experience in the classroom is thought to shape beliefs and practical knowledge; in fact, a teacher may only acquire practical knowledge through classroom experience” (Richardson, 1996: 111).

<sup>7</sup> Hargrave and Hsu (2000) also hold that an ability to integrate technology into daily practice is the result of two factors: the tutor’s basic technology skills, and the effective modelling of technology integration by other members of faculty. New language tutors, for example, may have the opportunity to observe their colleagues using technology to enhance their lessons (Balli and Diggs, 1996).



technology integration. In the experience using technology, the attitudes and beliefs of colleagues are therefore to be considered.<sup>8</sup>

Even if technology is definitely accessible to students, computer-based activities, for example, may not be used regularly for teaching, as their incorporation into teaching experiences and practices is at times difficult to accomplish. In other words, the simple fact that computers are provided within the academic context does not necessarily mean that teachers will adopt technology.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In a study of student teachers, Stuhlmann and Taylor (1999) found that depending on the attitudes, competency, and accessibility of colleagues and administrators, their exposure to technology varied substantially. Two student teachers in the study had positive experiences while two had negative experiences of technology, and, correspondingly, colleagues were shown to view technology either enthusiastically, as an integral part of the course, or as an add-on. The beliefs of colleagues were found to positively and negatively impact the language tutors' teaching experience and it was also shown that these episodes can be imprinted on the student teachers during their first years of teaching.

<sup>9</sup> As a reminder of general information given in Chapter II, devoted to instructional technology, deciding not to include technology is a choice that teaching staff, including language tutors, make every day. Research in this field reveals the presence of a number of barriers to the integration of technology in teaching. One of the most common barriers mentioned by teachers is lack of time (Egbert, Paulus, and Nakemichi, 2002; Lam, 2000; Levy, 1997; Raschio and Raymond, 2003; Smerdon *et al.*, 2000; Strudler, McKinney, Jones, and Linda, 1995): teachers may not have time in their curriculum, in their day, or in their preparation time to include effective uses of technology. Lack of resources is also an important issue (Egbert *et al.*, 2002; Lee, 2000). Without up-to-date software, hardware, and facilities it is difficult to use technology. Lack of teacher training represents a third barrier (Egbert *et al.*, 2002; Lam, 2000; Lee, 2000; Levy, 1997; Raschio and Raymond, 2003; Smerdon *et al.*, 2000), since teachers may simply not know how to use technology. Also, lack of reward and recognition has been found to be a barrier to the introduction of technology in teaching (Strudler *et al.*, 1995). Finally, many other factors could influence technology use, such as age, gender, and experience; however, findings are inconclusive as to the impact of these variables on technology integration (Cuban, 2001). The learning and instructional context – understood as the combination of the inherent organization, academic priorities and culture of learning present at a specific university/instructional establishment – were also found to strongly affect language tutors' beliefs (Richardson, 1996). Understanding that context was an important factor in computer use, Gillespie and Barr (2002) included university context as a valuable component in their research on CALL adoption at three universities. They found different attitudes about CALL depending on the culture of language teaching at each institution. If the university included CALL in course content or valued CALL as integral to language learning instead of considering it an optional extra, the researchers found positive teacher attitudes toward CALL. Universities that did not reward students or staff for using CALL contained teachers that did not have as positive an



The language learning experience and academic path of the tutor, two major phases affecting the establishment of beliefs, often fail to provide the type of powerful experiences of technology that would form meaningful beliefs. Additionally, during their teaching practice, tutors may hold already well-established beliefs which may be difficult to change. Finally, context may be an important factor in any discussion on technology use in university settings, but, arguably, this context is outside the control of the tutors.

## **2. The Investigation of the Participating IFL Tutors' Beliefs**

Taking into account both findings and gaps in existing literature, and focusing on tutor beliefs and attitudes, the chapter will now concentrate on the investigation of *why* and *how* the tutors participating in this specific study decide either to use or not to use technology in their practice.

Before drawing any overall conclusions from the analysis conducted in this chapter, however, we will need to take into account other factors crucial for understanding IFL

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attitude. Overall, the researchers state that “it is clear that the changes taking place as CALL and IT is adopted take time, since they depend not only on the equipment, but also on academic organization and learning culture and cannot, therefore, occur overnight” (Gillespie and Barr, 2002: 129). Not only does the culture specific to each university influence beliefs: the effect of agents in each university can also impact beliefs. These agents could be students, principals, administrators or colleagues (Richardson and Placier, 2001). They may help or hinder the establishment of beliefs by a teacher. Either the agents may carry beliefs contrary to those held by the teacher, which can make it more difficult to change existing beliefs (Borko and Putnam, 1996); or they can influence each other in positive ways. For example, teachers may be willing to change their practices in order to better serve student interest (Richardson and Placier, 2001). In fact, students are often found to be a variable that has the potential to change beliefs. In Chiero’s (1999) study of computer use, one of the interviewees stated that her attitude towards computers changed over the years, “I first refused to use them because I didn’t know. The students used them so I had to learn” (7). Another teacher added, “for the kids to see me use the computer a lot encourages them” (7). Thus teachers re-evaluate their beliefs based on consideration of students and of their learning.

tutors' instructional practices, thought processes, decision making and attitudes to change (Richardson, 1996). These include the learning and instructional context, seen in the previous chapter, as well as the students' role and attitudes, examined in the next one.

The main aim of the investigation of beliefs, whose principles were outlined above and also discussed more in detail in Chapter IV, is to provide valuable insights into tutors' management of writing instruction, as well as tutors' decisions concerning the integration of technology in their teaching. Tutors are asked to report their beliefs about technology, its pedagogical benefits as well as its integration into the classroom. These beliefs, in turn, inform current understandings of teachers' use of technology.

The questionnaire on *Writing Instructional Strategy* (see Appendix 1) focused on techniques and strategies used by IFL tutors during writing instruction. The quantitative data collected were analyzed with the help of natural data collected through classroom observations (field notes and rubrics) and the first section – *Writing Skill Development* – of semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 6) conducted at the beginning of the investigation period (November 2005).

The quantitative data on the questionnaire administered among IFL tutors on *Computer Technology Experience* (see Appendix 2) were also analysed with the help of two forms of natural data collected through classroom observations (field notes and rubrics) and the second section – *Instructional Technology* – of semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 6) conducted at the beginning of the investigation period (November 2005). The questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience* investigated the tutors' use of instructional technology for administration and instruction and the tutors' beliefs on computer technologies and its integration for the development of writing skills.

In the section below, we will be looking more in detail at the gathering and analysis of data collected through the two questionnaires mentioned:



2.1. The questionnaire on *Writing Instructional Strategies*

2.2. The questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience*

The first semi-structured interviews conducted immediately afterwards, in November 2005, coupled both questionnaires. Further semi-structured interviews were conducted one year later, in November 2006. On the basis of the data collected, recurring themes were identified.

## **2.1 The Questionnaire on *Writing Instructional Strategies* (October 2005) and the First Section of Semi-structured Interviews (November 2005 and November 2006)**

On the basis of the findings from the first questionnaire, investigating the writing instructional strategies applied by participating IFL tutors, as well as the first section of the semi-structured interviews conducted in November 2005, we aim to reach an understanding of issues involved in the teaching of the specific skills of writing. The responses of the selected tutors, in particular the tutors teaching the *Essay Writing* sections of the modules *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* (tutor D) and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III* (tutor C) will be examined in this section.

Field-notes and rubrics from the observations conducted in classrooms with a component (*IT101*) or a prevailing component of writing instruction (*IT 301, IT 401*) will also be taken into account in the course of the investigation. Conclusions, however, will be drawn only after having taken into account also the results of the second questionnaire on *Computer Technology Use*, which will allow us to identify instructional technology as a learning component in the above classrooms.

The understanding of tutors' beliefs relating specifically to the teaching and learning of writing is viewed here as a necessary and preliminary element to the consideration of participants' data. This will be integrated, as already mentioned, with data analysed in Chapter VIII, entirely devoted to data related to students (e.g. how they learn from classroom instruction; their perceptions and attitudes toward writing; how their opportunities to learn can be improved).

The descriptions of individual teaching practices emerging from the questionnaires will be enhanced by the semi-structured interviews conducted with the selected IFL tutors in November 2005 and November 2006. The primary goal of both sets of in-depth semi-structured interviews was to gather specific information regarding the practices of language tutors, especially the two tutors offering IFL classes focusing on writing skills (*Essay Writing* sections only of *IT 301* and *IT401*). The interview questions regarding teaching habits, practices and strategies followed the structure of the related questionnaire on *Writing Instructional Strategies*, which had been previously administered. Although the questionnaire presents a uniform set of open-ended questions, responses were ultimately integrated with the addition of qualitative data deriving from the semi-structured interviews, which allowed each interviewee to reveal his/her understanding of and opinions on writing instruction.

Key questions in the questionnaires aimed to get a general description of the teaching experience and training previously received by tutors in relation to writing skills and their development, as well as their current teaching practices and strategies, while the second set of semi-structured interviews specified goals for writing instruction and discussed what characterized better or poorer writers and their needs.

During the interviews detailed notes were taken and course outlines and samples of instructional materials that the language tutors provided for students were collected; these



included the syllabus and examples of handouts.<sup>10</sup> Attention is primarily given to what the tutors said about the syllabus they were working with at the time, since the specific ways in which their courses were organized and presented indicate which particular approaches to teaching writing and/or philosophy of teaching were favoured by these language tutors.

The results obtained from the open questions of the questionnaires, as well as the opinions emerging from the semi-structured interviews, allow us to systematize/define IFL tutors' conceptualizations about L2 writing around five guiding concepts. However, it should be noted that there was considerable overlap among them for most of the classes taken into consideration. This means that any one language tutor did not necessarily structure a lesson around a single one of the five concepts presented below, since none of these seemed to take prominence in the description of practices provided by each tutor.

These conceptualizations<sup>11</sup> of IFL writing can be defined as follows:

- a. *Composing Processes*
- b. *Genres or Text Types*
- c. *Text Functions or Structures*
- d. *Topical Themes*

Although each concept places a unique emphasis on a different aspect of writing (see Cumming, 1998), they are complementary and potentially compatible with one

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<sup>10</sup> In the analyses that follows, the term *syllabus* is used to refer narrowly to a fixed plan for instruction (e.g. a course outline or program policy representing the basic elements of what is intended to be taught in the academic year), while the term *curriculum* is used more broadly and comprehensively to describe the enactment of teaching and learning that people performed and experienced in the context of a particular course (see Stern, Allen, and Harley, 1992: 20).

<sup>11</sup> Taken as a whole, these concepts provide an indication of the key options available when structuring FL writing courses. Further details are included in the relevant review literature on writing skills (Chapter I).

another. As a matter of fact, some language tutors referred to several of them in conjunction while describing their teaching practice.

These concepts guiding the organization of teaching adopted by the language tutors are regarded as important, because tutors derived from them their principal instructional decisions.

#### **a. *Composing Processes***

The majority of tutors described their course as having the primary goal, as far as writing skills are concerned, of prompting students to practice and develop their processes for composing in Italian.

The thinking that underlies the writing process was made explicit in the language tutors' responses. In particular, they described elaborate tasks for information gathering, drafting and editing, and instructional feedback as the principal means of organizing their courses.

#### **b. *Genres or Text Types***

Tutors C and A described particular types of texts or genres of writing as the principal concept guiding the organization of their writing courses. From this orientation, the principal instructional decisions reported by tutor C, for instance, were selecting, designing, and sequencing the writing tasks.

#### **c. *Text Functions or Structures***

Two tutors (B, C) conceptualized their lessons principally in terms of smaller, functional units of writing, stylistic devices, or lexico-grammatical features.



#### **d. Topical Themes**

A further way of conceptualizing writing courses was in reference to substantive content. This was mainly defined by units of key ideas that students were to address in sequence, or as topics of interest, selected by members of the classes themselves. Tutors D and C responded to student writing not just by evaluating it, but also by conveying that writing serves meaningful purposes for informing and communicating. This orientation also involved attention to processes of composition and co-operative exchanges of information, as indicated in these quotations from interviews:

“I strongly believe that the nature of interaction between tutor and students about writing is dialogic. The role of the teacher is to respond to students’ writing and to encourage students to make their thinking about writing explicit.” (C)

“The teacher can foster peer interaction around writing, encouraging students to communicate in peer groups.” (D)

Tutor D also noted the holistic interdependence of writing and other modes of communication (such as reading, speaking, and listening). Tutor C stressed the potential for learning through writing to integrate knowledge gleaned from reading or talking. Others (B and D) saw the utility of writing as a means of reporting on group tasks and expressing ideas from collaborative activities. Tutor C described situations in which writing is combined with reading tasks (to form a literate focus of instruction) or with speaking tasks as alternative modes by which students could express their ideas or relay information they had researched.

A close inspection of the interview data suggests that opting for one or another of the conceptualizations of FL writing listed above may not simply be a neutral decision,

since it may have important implications for instruction and consequences for students' learning. As Kroll (1993) claims, "Each choice made in the writing classroom speaks not only to a particular philosophy of teaching but works to shape the course as a whole." (71)

Among these experienced writing tutors, there is considerable uniformity (B, C and D) in terms of their beliefs and claims about the teaching of writing, especially in respect to aspects of writing that form the focus of a syllabus – for example whether writing is taught as an independent ability or integrated with other aspects of language performance. Of course, the influence of post-graduate education is also evident in the tutors' reflections on their teaching. Tutor D, for example, who completed an MA in Applied Linguistics and at the time of the research was engaged in doctoral research in the same field, made use of common terms and conceptualizations from recent research and theory on L2 writing, which seems to clearly emerge in D's talk about her work:

"The approach I am following to the teaching of writing is mainly the communicative approach and process writing, but in practice it is difficult to adapt them to suit the circumstances, because of the high number of students in class and the limited amount of time at our disposal... we see students only two hours a week." (D)



## **2.2 The Questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience* (October 2005) and the Second Section of Semi-structured Interviews (November 2005 and November 2006)**

On the basis of the data gathered from the administration of the questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience* and the second section of semi-structured interviews, in the section below we will give a short description of the main types of activities in which tutors were engaged, shedding light on why and how technology, and in particular computer technologies, were integrated into the instructional process.

The explanation of why tutors used technology took into primary consideration the language tutors' background and training; their beliefs about technology's role in foreign language instruction and, more specifically, in IFL writing instruction; as well as factors that contributed to or inhibited the use of technology.

The questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience* includes four main sections:

1) Your background, your teaching style and resources available to you

*(Demographic/Training)*

2) Your professional views on Computer Technologies

*(Opinion/Values)*

3) Your experience with Computer Technologies

*(Experience/Knowledge)*

4) Your process of integration

*(Instructional Behaviour)*

As we explained in the chapter presenting the methodology used for this research (Chapter V), the questions guiding the semi-structured interview mirrored the above structure.

Tutors' responses to both the questionnaire and the following semi-structured interviews conducted between classroom observations, required the identification of tutors' specific and independent uses of technology.

Seven specific and independent uses of technology by language tutors were identified in order to analyze tutors' responses on *Computer Technology Experience*.

The approach adopted in order to measure the use of technology on the part of tutors for administration and instruction involves the examination of specific ways in which tutors made use of technological aids (SECTION III – “Your experience with Computer Technologies” – point 4).

Following the example documented, for instance, in Russell, O'Dwyer, Bebell, & Miranda (2003), principal component analyses were used to develop seven separate scales that measure tutors' use of technology. These seven scales are as follow:

- Tutors' use of technology for class preparation (*Instructional Preparation Activities*)
- Tutors' administrative activities (*Administrative Activities*)
- Tutor-directed student use of technology during class time (*Student use*)
- Tutors' use of technology for delivering instruction (*Instructional Activities for Students*)
- Tutor-directed student use of technology to create products to assess (*Assessment Activities*)
- Tutors' use of technology for grading (*Grading Practices*)
- Tutor-directed student networking activities (*Networking Activities*)



By developing several separate measures of the tutors' use of technology we are not inferring that each individual measure is unrelated to the others. Indeed, it would be reasonable to assume that all of the measures have some degree of relation to each other.

The specific uses considered included the tutors' adoption of technology for the following purposes (in descending order of frequency of use):

- Keeping administrative records
- Creating instructional materials
- Communicating with colleagues
- Gathering information for planning lessons
- Accessing research and best practices for teaching
- Communicating with parents or students
- Accessing model lesson plans

The most frequent uses of technology were not instructional but "professional uses of technology related to their day-to-day needs" (Becker, 1999: 31). Language tutors reported using their computers for word processing, spreadsheets, grade calculations, Internet searches, e-mail.

Five tutors reported using a computer at least monthly for record keeping and student grading, and all of them reported using e-mail for communication. Another frequent use of technology reported by tutors was making handouts for classes, since the majority of tutors reported making handouts at least weekly, and three of them also mentioned using their computers to create tests and quizzes. One of them regularly used the *NiceNet* web site, which could be accessed by students, for posting important dates and assignments.

The majority of tutors were using technology to support their teaching, but much of this use occurred outside of class time. Since its use was predominantly for communication, lesson planning and preparation, grading, and record keeping, technology seemed underused as an instructional tool.

As far as writing is concerned, in particular, the quantitative study conducted through two main questionnaires and completed by the data collected through semi-structured interview, although limited in the participant group sample, was conducted to portray an account of instructional technology use for IFL instruction.

In the *Computer Technology Experience* questionnaire, the majority of the tutors who reported using technologies listed Microsoft Word, Netscape, and Power Point as the most valuable programs for language students. However, when, during the following semi-structured interview, they were asked if they used email or the Internet in their teaching, the majority said they used little to no technology, and only one reported high use of these technologies.

They also stated that the most important objectives for FL students using technology were finding information, analysing information, grammar reinforcement and independent work made possible by the more extensive use of computer.

Although half of the tutors self-assessing themselves in the questionnaire (SECTION I – “Your background, your teaching style and resources available to you” - point 4) chose to describe their level of competence as average (“I demonstrate a general competency in a number of computer applications”) or advanced (“I have acquired the ability to competently use a broad spectrum of computer technologies”), they did not feel sufficiently trained, experienced, or prepared to use technology at the moment of the interview.

When tutors evaluated the statement “I am adequately trained to use a number of computer applications” (SECTION III – “Your experience with Computer Technologies” –



point 13), during the interview the majority reported that they had received little to no training on technology use, especially for writing skill development. Although mostly untrained, four out of seven reported that technology should be used for writing activities, and shortage of time was the barrier mentioned for this lack of use.

The selected IFL tutors welcomed computers for writing activities only when these were based on built-in tools (such as “Text Analysis”) and if they were part of the learning resources available in the Language Centre and/or on the campus network (software packages “Luisa” and GramEx”, CDs and videos). Moreover, “Text Analysis” had been made compulsory by the tutor teaching *IT 301*, and “GramEx” by the tutor teaching *IT 101*.

The “GramEx” software was normally used for grammar revision. Tutor B mentioned that if students were having difficulty with a grammatical concept, she could take them to the Language Centre. She said she never used “GramEx” to introduce a concept, but had students use it if she felt they needed repetition. B’s students were observed both during the introductory section to the package and using “GramEx” to practice *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto* as an extension of other classroom activities. D also mentioned using the interactive language learning software “Luisa” with her group of beginner students (*IT 101*).

Besides the aforementioned software packages (“Luisa”, GramEx”) available in the Language Centre and throughout campus, via the university’s network, other CALL activities were described by tutors during the semi-structured interviews and/or were observed in the classrooms. The most common involved the use of CD-ROMs for listening and grammar activities; ancillary CD-ROMs include a variety of activities and games (aural activities in which students listen to a conversation about a specific topic and then click on the appropriate picture on the monitor; exercises in which students match phrases

and sentences about the topic; activities focusing on grammar points such as pronoun substitution; writing a short paragraph about a topic).

Sometimes tutors used ancillary aids accompanying textbooks to introduce or practice vocabulary, revise verb tenses or practice conversations. These activities, however, seldom lasted more than a few minutes. For instance, in the beginner Italian class observed, the total amount of time tutors played the audiocassette for was 10 minutes; however, normally, they stopped the tape several times to repeat what had just been heard. Listening activities were just one of several activities tutors used to focus on certain vocabulary or grammar concepts.

Many tutors used videos in their teaching; as with the audiocassettes and CDs, many of these videos were ancillary to textbooks. Tutor B had her students watch video clips about Italian music and answer questions, incorporating the subjunctive mood, on their worksheets. G's students watched short videos clips about hobbies, games and related activities, and some tutors brought Italian versions of movies for their students to watch.

Only three language tutors specifically mentioned Word processing as a technology for writing assignments outside class, although most students use Word processing in one way or another. B expected her students to use Word processing to write papers, while C required each of his students to turn in a 250-word essay every other week.

All language tutors mentioned using the Internet for research, in order to find information which would allow them to introduce the theme of oral presentations or written assignments. B mentioned using her computer for Power Point presentations, and also requiring students to create presentations on a variety of culture, grammar or vocabulary topics:

“I always try to combine the technology with some sort of presentation, trying to include the use of it with the practicing of a language skill or vocabulary.” (B)



Five tutors mentioned using technology to introduce cultural issues to their students. Only one language tutor mentioned using Power Point presentations, instead of overheads, to introduce vocabulary and grammar.

Although language tutors used a variety of approaches to IFL writing instruction, the one thing they had in common was that they all held their students accountable for assessment. A's students had to complete worksheets while watching videos. Similarly, D's students had to take notes, sometimes using a graphic organizer, while other students presented their work. Nearly all language tutors had created rubrics for evaluating student participation. B's rubrics were attached to the initial "Presentation project", for which students were required to prepare an oral presentation in Italian on an agreed topic (family, geography, history, culture, travelling), using the grammar elements learned so far. When B introduced the project, she went through the instructions and rubric, which were very specific and included scores for content as well as meeting deadlines and managing time, quality of the oral presentation (use of the language, word choice, spelling, pronunciation, delivery) that had to be conducted preferably with the support of PowerPoint slides:

"In addition to the pronunciation and their flow and if they did make a point, I normally evaluate their use of the language, accuracy and correct grammar that we have been working with." (B)

The amount of time which students were required to spend using technology during and outside class varied. Six out of seven language tutors said their students did all their work outside class time.

C said:

“I normally give them the directions and it’s completely on their own outside of class.” (C)

C expected his students to complete outside class the writing tasks assigned as homework, especially if the use of a computer was requested. He also suggested that students work at home when classes were not held.

“So if you are working on this tomorrow at home and having problems, you can e-mail me.” (C)

Tutors were also asked about the frequency with which they used technology-based activities. Responses varied since not all tutors responded and no tutor responded for every technology. (See Table 4 below)

	Use of video in the classroom	Use of audiotapes and CDs	Internet research	Internet grammar work	Drill and practice software	Use of PPT for presentations	Teacher presenting with technology
With every lesson	1	3					
Weekly	2	1					
Once a month					2		2
Periodically	1		3	5	4		
Once a term						2	1

Table 5: Frequency of Activities



In the same way as tutors normally plan instruction not involving technology, tutors must carefully structure technology integration and provide students with clear directions. The five tutors who referred to the importance of providing clear directions both in the questionnaires and during the interviews were observed doing so in class. Although students were allowed to pick project topics from a list of the possible topics mentioned above, B felt her students needed structure and gave printed instructions for presentations explaining the activity, requirements, due dates, grading criteria and even which verbs to use. Instructions about project presentations included also websites for starting research, and a schedule for the following two weeks identifying when the students would work in the Language Centre.

D provided similar directions:

“I always hand them in classroom a paper which explains in detail what students have to do. In order for them to know how to reach this objective, I always give them clear questions to be answered, suggested websites to start from, requirements for the final presentation that is preferably in Power Point. Last term I started to give a detailed scoring rubric for evaluating the presentation.” (D)

Tutor D also told students that having so many websites at their disposal was both an advantage and a disadvantage and suggested some students start with the web site at the bottom of the list because previously, so many students had looked at only those at the top.

During a class observation, just before students began working on their presentations, B referred to the instruction sheet she had previously given to the students, reminding them about the requirements of the activity and what they needed to learn from

the presentations. Students were normally given a limited amount of time to work on projects, and were expected to complete their work during their free time.

Both tutors in the beginner courses, in particular, agreed on the importance of giving a fixed amount of time when first year beginner students work in the Language Centre:

“When my students use drill and practice software, I try to limit their time in the Language Centre to no more than 30 minutes; otherwise the time is wasted.” (B)

Two concerns arise from this initial investigation on technology use for administration and instruction. First, tutors may feel comfortable operating with technology, in particular computer-based activities, but may not know how to integrate them appropriately to teach writing skills. Currently, they seem to be making considerably greater use of such technologies for preparing instructional material, such as making handouts or presenting instructional content in class. Another use of technology is for managerial purposes, for example for corresponding with students, calculating grades, taking attendance. In sum, IFL tutors seem to use the computer technologies for planning and preparing to teach, rather than embracing them as effective resources that enhance instruction. Some of the technologies mentioned above, such as Word processing and possibly e-mail, are so integrated in social aspects of our daily lives, that language tutors often tend to simply take them for granted, and therefore do not devote explicit attention to their impact on learning processes. As a result, those technologies appear invisible to language tutors, who treat them as neutral, overlooking the fruitful relationships between them and process-oriented pedagogy, in particular for the development of writing skills.



As we have seen, the data referring to the role of the language tutors gathered from both questionnaires was examined also in light of the tutors' reflections on their experiences which emerged from the semi-structured interviews. This data was further enhanced with the information later reported in the field notes taken during the observations conducted. For example, we could describe how tutors hold their students accountable for their learning when technology is integrated into the teaching practice; or examine class organization; or the frequency with which these tutors used technology. This information constitutes the first layer of data, susceptible of further examination after integration of the second level of data, collected through the other semi-structured interviews conducted in November 2006.

At the end of the last semi-structured interviews, participating tutors were given the possibility to make suggestions for effective instructional practices involving L2 writing and IT which they had been experimenting during the academic year or they would like to apply in the future. The suggestions given are categorized below under three rubrics, according to the type of task involved:

- i* Pre-writing
- ii* Writing Skill Development
- iii* Other Writing Related Tasks

*i Pre-writing with IT*

*- Uses of Internet Resources Available to Tutors*

The immense amount of resources readily available online can provide most of the necessary supplemental material that the language tutors need in preparation for their writing classes. Although the use of an Internet browser seems to be all that is needed,

it was suggested by tutor C that refereed lists of useful online resources be kept and regularly maintained on a single web site for easy access.

- *Uses of Internet Chatting to Facilitate Discussions with Writers*

Language tutors agreed that it would be a valuable learning experience for their students to communicate directly with professional writers over the Internet. However, observation data revealed that none of the tutors actually encouraged the students to participate in a pre-arranged web discussion forum to ask questions and get direct responses from the writers.

- *Uses of the Internet to Facilitate Project-based Research Activities*

The language tutors involved in the study engaged their students in project-based learning activities and asked them to do research over the Internet. For example, in the *IT401* classes observed, students were asked to write an essay or conduct research on a particular topic in order to compare how different writers treated the same topic. Frequently, however, students were not likely to gather all the necessary information about the topic in a short amount of time without researching on the Internet.

**ii Writing Skill Development with IT**

- *Uses of Word Processing Software during Composition*

Not all language tutors were in favour of letting students write with word processors. As one language tutor put it, "Writing with pencil and paper should not be replaced entirely by the computer because students need to learn the punctuation, the phrase order, and the grammar without the standard checker and phrase checker." (C)



- *Uses of IT to Facilitate Creative Writing*

Another use of IT in writing instruction that emerged from the investigation, involved multifaceted activities. Typical in-class writing practices involved each student's own creativity. Language tutors believed that IT tools that allow online exchanges of ideas – ranging from something as simple as email to something as complex as a specially designed supporting environment – should be able to engage students in more exciting writing activities that involve collaboration and interaction. Among the ideas on how to use IT to facilitate open writing, tutors proposed starting a story on the Internet and asking the students to take turns continuing the tale until it was finished. Another proposition saw students form teams, with team members brainstorming for the best continuing sentence or paragraph for the story. Software packages such as online crossword puzzles, games designed to drill correct usage of punctuation, etc., were also mentioned as writing instructional activities. However, none of these ideas was proposed by tutors in class.

- *Uses of IT to Support Versatile Teaching Activities*

Most of the language tutors were interested in implementing the “theme-based” teaching method to guide students through writing about a particular theme, especially those closely related to students' daily lives (B). To accomplish this, students were asked to collect materials about the theme from various sources, such as scanning pictures from newspapers or magazines, searching for exemplar pieces of writing about the topic, etc.. As another example, tutor D proposed using word processors' advanced features to edit a piece of writing together with students. The language tutors believed that, through group-wide discussion held during the collaborative editing process, students should be able to reflect on their own mistakes and weaknesses in writing.

### ***iii Other Writing Related Tasks with IT Support***

#### ***- Uses of IT to Facilitate Self-paced Learning***

Though all language tutors recognized that students learn at different paces and in different ways, their hectic daily schedules and limited class hours did not allow them to accommodate students' individual needs. One of the most often cited advantages of software-based learning was its adaptability to individual differences. Subject specific software was used to provide extra writing activities to advanced learners ("Text Analysis") and remedial activities to slow learners ("GramEx", "Luisa").

#### ***- A Dedicated Website for Italian Writing Instruction***

All the participating language tutors wished there could be a dedicated web site for Italian for tutors of IFL writing skills. They also suggested that the web site should include at least the following contents and functions: a reading instruction section, containing model lesson plans, innovative teaching strategies, good practice, research reports, collection of articles and literary reviews; a writing instruction section, including collection of topics for writing practices, instructional material about different writing styles (e.g. narrative, persuasive, expository, letters); a resources section with refereed lists of online resources such as dictionaries, thesauruses, anthologies, online texts, and other multimedia resources; an exemplary work section: samples of students' exemplary work, including composition; and a teacher-student and student-student forums.



### 3. Themes

Data collected from all questionnaires and initial semi-structured interviews were organized into themes, in the attempt to answer sub-question *c*) (mentioned above and formulated in Chapter IV as a sub-question of the main research question).

Interview transcripts were coded and analysed along with the responses provided to the questionnaires on *Computer Technology Experience* and on *Writing Instructional Strategies*. As stressed by LeCompte (2000), this step was particularly important, since it included the process of making copies of and organizing all the data, as well as reviewing research questions to note omissions, or even going back to participants to collect more data.

A temporary version of the data which was first sorted into categories and subcategories, then sorted into the three broad categories, is presented in Table 5. Since these categories were not equal in weight; some were categorised as a subset of other categories.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> However, where a subcategory included only a single comment from just one participant and did not seem similar to information in another subcategory, the information may have been removed because it no longer could be considered a theme. In another instance, when a subcategory was similar to information in another category, some subcategories were grouped.

<i>Main Category</i>	<i>Subcategory</i>
Participants	→ The language tutors
How language tutors use technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ How tutors use technology themselves</li> <li>→ How their students use technology</li> <li>→ The tutor's role</li> <li>→ What tutors said about students using technology</li> </ul>
Why language tutors use technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Beliefs/Frameworks of values</li> <li>→ Background and training</li> <li>→ Contributing factors</li> <li>→ Inhibiting factors</li> </ul>

**Table 6: Categories and Subcategories**

The material extracted from the last interviews conducted in November 2006 will help us to concentrate on some recurring themes emerging from the data.

With this purpose in mind, in the following sections we will reconstruct the relevant points emerged from the last interviews, in which tutors referred to their pedagogical beliefs and attitudes towards the use of instructional technology; to their need for training and its potential benefits; to the frequency with which they made use of instructional technology during the past academic year; and to the role it played in IFL classes.



In addition, as explained in the chapter devoted to the research methods and procedures (Chapter V), Markee's (1997) model for curricular innovation will be employed in order to examine the roles – implementers, adopters, suppliers, or resisters – played by participants in the study. This in turn will help us to determine whether the use of technology in the selected classes constituted a form of curricular innovation for the language tutors involved. The emerging themes will then be converged and the institutional activity system in which language tutors participated at the beginning and at the end of the study will be constructed.

Again as discussed in the methodology chapter (Chapter V), in the discussion below themes will be identified by giving space to the voice of the participants through direct quotations. The themes emerging from the data and outlined above will serve as a structure for the whole section below. These themes were:

*3.1 Framework of values:* the tutors' beliefs and expectations about the role of technology in FL instruction, and, more specifically, in L2 writing instruction.

*3.2 Understandings:* the tutors' instructional background and/or training obtained previous to or during the period of this investigation, as well as its presumed benefits.

Data collected from observations substantiated the themes emerging from other material, providing a picture of current applications of technology in the classroom:

*3.3 Experiences:* how the participants use specific computer technologies, both administratively and pedagogically, and how participants and their students used

technology both at the beginning (October, November 2005) and at the end of the study (October, November 2006).

### **3.1. Framework of values**

“The tutors’ beliefs and expectations about the role of technology in FL instruction, and, more specifically, in L2 writing instruction.”

The transcripts and debriefings of the interviews revealed how the tutors conceive technologies. Tutors’ views on the use of computers for administrative tasks were generally common, since all tutors reported using their computers for word processing, spreadsheets, grade calculations, Internet searches, e-mail and other administrative tasks. This confirmed what emerged from the questionnaire on *Computer Technology Experience* (SECTION III – “Your experience with Computer Technologies”) and the initial semi-structured interviews

A stated:

“It’s very difficult to be a tutor now and not to use a computer. Besides the administrative daily duties, students are accustomed to receiving hand-outs pretty frequently.” (A)

As far as instruction is concerned, findings revealed differing views and conceptions of instructional technology. In order to understand their personal conceptualization, tutors were first asked to define what instructional technology meant to them. The majority of them associated it only with the use of videos and the Internet:



**“The use of instructional videos in class and the Internet search for the oral presentation.” (B)**

**“The fact that Internet is a huge source of information makes me apply it as much as possible.” (D)**

**The importance that tutors assigned to the Internet determined the way in which they characterized the benefits that instructional technology can bring to their classes:**

**“The use of the Internet for information search can broaden students’ possibilities to read texts in Italian while finding useful information.” (E)**

**“I believe that in addition to complementing the information from the traditional textbook, Internet may give a more visual image and give a more direct idea of the information.” (B)**

**These first comments reveal that for these tutors the primary use of instructional technology, through its association with the Internet, was that of providing information to students. The consideration of the Internet as a source of data was reflected in the way the technology was used in their classes, in which given activities required students to consult certain web pages and to answer questions related to the information on those pages.**

**In general, tutors who mentioned using the Internet, praised it as a useful tool for IFL learning, and characterized their experience as positive:**

“I make use of the Internet because it gives my students the possibility to access Italian culture which is behind the language exercises we normally do in class.” (B)

“I believe that the use of the Internet is positive because it is a different medium to bring the culture aspects closer to students, which can complement the textbook and the listening activities.” (E)

Unlike the previous tutors, A correlated instructional technology with more traditional media, such as tapes and videos accompanying the textbook:

“I often use videos and tapes to accompany the dialogues that are in the text, so that students’ reading is prepared with pre-viewing activities.” (A)

This view was confirmed by the two observations of A’s classes, which were mostly based on grammar-based textbook exercises and on subsequent peer or group discussions set around the topics of the dialogues on which the two classes focused.

A seemed also especially fond of Power Point. She had even used a microphone to record her own voice with matching pictures and words on slides. For some of her classes, A posted these Power Point vocabulary introductions on her *Nicenet* space.

D mentioned using her computer for PowerPoint presentations, for instance, to introduce an Internet project, while E and F said they had presented examples and notes via Power Point, with the aim of introducing culture to their students. During the observation of *IT 101, Italian Language for Beginners*, B had created Power Point presentations on Tiziano’s paintings in Venetian churches. D, on the other hand, incorporated video clips of Italian singers into her unit on Italian art and music with the *IT 101* class.



In contrast to her colleagues, D offered a comprehensive view of instructional technology. Besides instructional tapes and CDs, she mentioned the use of music, movies and e-mail exchanges to develop writing skills in a more realistic context. Additionally, the benefits that D attributed to instructional technology went beyond those of a mere source of information, since she envisioned instructional technology as beneficial for the development of students' communicative competence:

“I do agree with those who think that technology gives the opportunity to communicate, especially in the foreign language learning context. For example, if you talk on a chat line, you read the texts that were produced by natives, and you are exposed to authentic material, showing you a way of thinking that is unlike your native language.” (D)

This view was evident in the two classroom observations that accompanied the interview. D always tried out new activities, although creating the material for her classes was not always easy, because of constraints due to the limited time available to go through all the points in the syllabus. For example she integrated activities with forum discussions<sup>13</sup> around the main topic chosen for the writing assignment. The forum discussions constituted the brainstorming phase for collecting ideas.

As was the case with tutors in previous studies (e.g. Kerr, 1991; Chin and Hortin, 1993; Weisenmayer and Koul, 1998), all the participants in the present research seemed to positively view instructional technology, regarding it as a useful tool to motivate learners:

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<sup>13</sup> With this purpose, this tutor created on *Nicenet* her own private, threaded discussions on topics she discussed in class.

**“I definitely think technology can contribute to the quality of teaching. Also, I know students usually like and feel particularly attracted to.” (D)**

**Weisenmayer and Koul (1998), for instance, share this view saying that “The use of technology may help keep the students’ attention. It really helps motivate them, giving them the opportunity to practice language skills in a realistic way, getting out of the traditional text.” (181)**

**Tutors stressed the fact that the use of instructional technology should be integrated within the other activities in the established curriculum path:**

**“Yes, I think that technology helps with the motivation and sense of reality, provided that it is integrated into the activities listed in the syllabus.” (E)**

**Besides the positive value tutors assigned to the use of instructional technology in their classes, some of them expressed their reluctance towards its implementation, because of the possible technical problems that they might encounter:**

**“Instructional technology can definitely be successful, as long as you know perfectly how to cope with its functioning. For example, I would worry about the possibility that once in class, something simply goes out of my control and the whole activity messes up... “ (C)**

**“I enjoy the activities with instructional technology, especially music and live videos. However, the technical difficulties the tutor has to face cost me stress because I feel I don’t have the technical training to solve them.” (G)**



Another interesting finding, also reported in previous studies (e.g. Chin and Hortin, 1993; Denoyianni and Selwood, 1998), was the inconsistency found in some of the language tutors' views of technology, and between the positive views they expressed in the interviews and their actual use of technology. For example, while E, in the first part of the interview, seemed to view technology in positive terms, praising it as beneficial for students' IFL learning, at the end of the interview she rejected the use of technology:

“We don't normally have enough time to deal with technological instruments and to design activities with them. This process is extremely time consuming, because we don't only need to get the resources, but also we need to develop activities that are more motivating and interesting in the students' eyes than the ones of the book. I personally can not allow myself to do that on a daily basis.” (B)

E, while expressing positive views, did not make use of technology in any of the classes observed. Thus it seems that resistance to instructional technology prevailed over her positive views. This same inconsistency seemed to be found also in C, although he did admit to using technology on a regular basis:

“At least once every other week I show a video, at times I also organize guided sessions in the Language Centre.” (C)

During the two consecutive observations, C did not use technology. When asked to explain his decision not to use technology, C said that it was due to lack of time, because in that particular moment of the academic year, he had to prioritize giving students the opportunity to revise for the assignment that was scheduled for the next lesson. For this reason, any instructional technology activity assigned to the group was regarded as useless.

## 3.2 Understandings

“The tutors’ background and training taken previously or during the period of this investigation and its presumed benefits, in order to shed light on their understandings.”

All tutors believed in the need for teacher training, but their personal view of the kind of training needed reflected their differing conceptions of instructional technology and the way in which they later defined their practice. For example, E’s view of social collaborative teaching was reflected in the comprehensive definition of instructional technology she gave:

“A training would be very important, as long as it would show how to use the different types of technology in the class, because I imagine we could organize different kinds of activities for the different categories of technology, such as videos, music, web sites, chat... I would be interested in seeing how other language tutors apply these technologies and eventually share ideas and opinions about the possible outcomes.” (E)

B also expressed her belief in the need of training, but at the same time pointed out the lack of time at her disposal both for training workshops and for applying in her teaching practice techniques and methods learned. The application B is talking about, however, mirrored a different attitude towards technology, merely seen as a means to teach explicit grammar in class.



“I wish I could have opportunities to learn more how technology could enhance my teaching: for example, I would like to learn how to create a quiz online or exercises where students are required to fill in the blanks with the correct responses, and have the computer answering to them. Yes, this would save me a lot of time, because I could devote much more time to the actual explanation in class, and leave students to apply it into practice at home. The only problem is *my* time: I wouldn’t really know where to fit the time for the training.” (B)

Three tutors mentioned ways in which they provided online information and main points of lessons to their students. D said that she could create a document in Word, copy it and paste in her *Nicenet* space. Other tutors referred to the possibility of having more knowledge to enhance the existing online communication they already had been establishing with students:

“My students can already have access to information on the course whenever they want; I normally publish online the main points of the lesson, especially for those who can not attend on a given day. However, I would like to find a more interactive way of relating to my students, because at times I would like to experiment new ways of delivering the content, for example through a kind of platform, and then have the space to discuss and share personal opinions simultaneously.” (D)

### 3.3 Experiences

“Descriptions of how participants and their students used technology both at the beginning (October, November 2005) and at the end of the study (October, November 2006), and in particular how the participants use the specific computer technologies both administratively and pedagogically.”

A further finding resulting from the interviews, observations, and debriefings was the expression of the tutors’ frustration at the pedagogical and time constraints imposed on their practice:

“I use songs, instructional video, and film whenever I can. The big problem is the syllabus: there are many things we have to do in the little time at our disposal, at times I wish I could have more freedom... Despite the fact that we have to prepare ourselves the syllabus at the beginning of the year, I know we have a plan with the things we have to teach and a fixed final exam, so that you have to cover given points. I don’t want my students to have disadvantages with respect to students in other sections.” (A)

A’s and C’s resistance to the use of technology seemed to be formulated along similar lines, by referring to their lack of training in the implementation of technology, indirectly criticising the system:

“I find implementation of instructional technology not only difficult, but also extremely time consuming. If I had to develop a website activity, for example, I would spend hours on one single activity.” (C)



The practice in which their discourse was now embedded became more oriented towards resistance than towards the application of instructional technology. Through their criticism referring to the lack of time available to integrate the established curricular path with other kind of activities, tutors seemed to justify their refusal to implement technology in their classes:

“Given the time constraints, text remains a very good resource. I don’t think *anybody* would have the time to deal with technology in the classroom on a regular basis. With technology I mean resources that *people* can use to accompany the main text, such as the video. It may also be possible that students don’t like this activity too much, some of them may find it boring, depending on the topic.” (C)

Whenever asked to assume responsibility for their beliefs or for their classroom behaviours, A and C resorted to the third person subject or to indefinite pronouns. By resorting to words such as “anybody”, “nobody”, “people” to explain their rejection of instructional technology, they made their experience “collective”, to create a community of practice with tutors in the same situation.

In spite of the change in their discourse patterns at the end of the study, A and C were still unable to assume responsibility for their practice when it came to the application of technology in their classes. That is, these tutors chose not to apply technology at all or to use it only partially, instead of focusing on issues related to their and their students’ roles in the classroom, and varying the activities provided in order to better suit their students’ needs. Furthermore, they validated their choices by defining the structure of the established syllabus and the lack of time as restrictions, using these as a means to justify their refusal to use technology.

By detaching themselves from their responsibility as language tutors, these tutors reproduced the beliefs and pedagogical foundations of their previous experiences as language learners, in which the absence of technology was a common denominator:

*“Nobody among experienced language tutors could experiment language learning with the computer: we learned with traditional methods. In the path I had chosen for my university, for example, the grammar-translation method dominated. But I then could put into practice the language skills living in the country where the language was spoken. I have to say I had a strong grammatical basis though...”* (C)

C’s resistance to the implementation of instructional technology seems particularly acute since not only he refused to use any activities with the integration of instructional technology, but he also expressed his determination not to spend time on something in which he did not believe. C’s attitude and behaviour thus qualified him as a passive resister in terms of instructional technology.

Tutor A also chose to use the course textbook more often than the syllabus required. In contrast to the other tutors, D showed clear willingness to assume ownership of and responsibility for her practice as a tutor:

*“Even when I feel anxious about using technology in the classroom, I also feel that I have the responsibility towards my students to make the classroom activities as good as I possibly can.”* (D)

D’s sense of responsibility toward her practice also affirmed her identity as a researcher, combining her work as a language tutor and as a researcher. As a result, D’s classes triggered her wish to explore pedagogical repercussions of the application of



different kinds of instructional technology, even if she did not feel completely comfortable when applying them. The material to which she was exposed in her classes and the continuous processes of trial, analysis, and reflection on which her practice was based provided D with an awareness of the pedagogical aspects of her process of material development:

“I personally don’t rely only on the activities presented in the textbook, so I try first to find out what students’ interests are, and then I search for sites and make up activities. At times I push the students to search the Internet and find topics that are more interesting for them and report back to me about what they read and how they reacted to it. If I prepare fixed questions, then all what they do is just answer them retyping portions of text without really understanding the meaning.” (D)

By structuring activities according to the students’ interests, D ensured that her students played an active role in the classroom. This was also evident in the two classroom observations, in which she established herself as a facilitator. For example, when she completed a video clip reconstruction activity during the first observation, she allowed students to take charge of the activity, assuming a secondary role, and assisting them only when required. D completed the activity as planned, and after the observation she reflected on her students’ work:

“I think for the students it was an interesting activity, because it was new and they saw the results of their effort. This raised their motivation, also because they knew that I was paying attention to their wants, their needs, and their opinions too. Next week I will ask them for feedback, if they think this activity was beneficial for them or not.” (D)

By trying out new forms of technology with which she was not familiar, and by reflecting on the results of her practice, D thus constructed a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defined this concept as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86); he used it to characterize actual and prospective levels of cognitive development. Engeström (1994) also refers to this concept as “a contextual area between the traditional practice and alternative future directions” (128). Through her participation in the communities of her classes, D was able to move to a higher level of thinking, which would allow her to abandon her previous practice, resulting in the development of her ability as a language teacher. In addition, these classes also triggered an expansive learning cycle,<sup>14</sup> which allowed her continuously to reflect on, modify, and improve her practice. D adopted new roles and instruments to question her role as a language tutor who used technology. She then was able to analyse her existing practice, to try out new forms of technology as well as new types of related activities in her classes, to reflect on the results, and if successful, to implement the same techniques again by developing her material, considering the pedagogical aspects involved in the process. D’s newly found identity as a language tutor set her apart from her colleagues. Even though she followed the established curriculum path, as did the other language tutors, she created activities based on the knowledge she was acquiring in her classes, and on the material to which she had access in these same classes. Through her use of instructional

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<sup>14</sup> The conception of the expansive learning cycle originates in Engeström’s (1999) theory of expansive learning, which he defines as follows: “The theory of expansive learning is based on the dialectics of ascending from the abstract to the concrete... [The] initial abstraction is enriched step by step and transformed into a concrete system of multiple, constantly developing manifestations. In an expansive learning cycle, the initial simple idea is transformed into a complex object, a new form of practice... The expansive cycle begins with individual subjects questioning the accepted practice, and it gradually expands into a collective movement of institution” (382-383).



technology and development of new activities, she acquired active ownership of her practice as a teacher and as an activity developer. Her wish to improve her students' learning process and her practice, as well as her exposure to existing SLA research, triggered her need to carry out research in her own classes, investigating pedagogical aspects of different kinds of instructional technology. This gave her the tools to actively reflect on the pedagogical benefits of the use of instructional technology in FL classes. D's more extensive use of technology seemed to define her role as an implementer, as an adopter, as well as a supplier of instructional technology. Unlike the other tutors, she established herself as an agent of change by expanding the use of technology in her classes through the creation of new activities.

In her behaviour during the two observed classes – while the other tutors did not fully (or even partially) use technology, because of the upcoming student assessments –, D took the assessment as an opportunity to try a different kind of technology:

“I proposed issues for discussion that came from the Internet search I had assigned them and said to them they had a limited amount of time – like 20 minutes – to address all of these questions in the online forum and this just would go to help them study for the exam. And then as follow-up, we discussed the same topics the next day in class, but face-to-face.” (D)

Other tutors referred to the difficulties they encountered or had encountered when applying technology in their classes; and they mentioned the need for training. The majority of them correlated the Internet with instructional technology and their views revealed inconsistencies between their positive feelings toward and actual limited use of technology. In contrast, D not only had adopted instructional technology, but also analysed

her practice and her students' learning process, as well as incorporating changes to improve her and her students' patterns of behaviour.

The way in which the observed writing classes held by different tutors were organized was similar: the tutor devoted the first 10 minutes of class to the correction of the grammar-based exercise assigned for homework, or to the introduction of the new topic through brainstorming activities, for example; in the next 30 minutes of class, the tutor provided students with specific instructions based on the handout guide-lines; and the last 10 minutes of instruction were devoted to the discussion of some of the students' answers and problems. However, despite the familiar structure of the class, there was a significant difference in students' observed behaviour. When asked to characterize a class in which she integrated instructional technology, F did it mostly in negative terms:

“It was very hard for me to control what was going on and I ended up losing the control of the class. In addition, the fact that students become very dependent on me and on my directions means that it didn't have a real pedagogical effect or advantage. Except for some students who created some sort of interest, for the majority of students the learning experience was not useful.” (F)

This comment reveals F's inability to see much pedagogical value in the use of web-based activities and her concerns for issues related to classroom management. This attitude may have also been the result of her own aversion to instructional technology, which may have resulted in F questioning the need to incorporate technology at all, if the textbook could provide students with the same resources. This is clearly illustrated in the following comment:



“Language teaching has been delivered for many years without the help of computers in the classroom. In addition, we don’t actually know, even nowadays, whether technology has positive effects on language learning. I recognize that students may be excited about the idea of using the computer in classroom because it’s new for them and some of them could end up learning better. But the vast majority simply get lost and lose their time. Yes, for generations we learned languages without the computer...” (F)

F was then asked to characterize the negative aspects of instructional technology:

“I noticed that the use of instructional technology in the classroom makes you waste a lot of time. Given the limited amount of time at our disposal, tutors need to know exactly how to structure the activities and the way to have students stay on task and complete the task effectively.” (F)

In contrast to other tutors, F did not mention technical difficulties. This may be due to the fact that during her limited experience of application of technology, she did not experience technical problems. B, and D, who made more use of technology on a regular basis, referred to technical problems as its main negative aspect:

“The scary problem is the access to some web pages, because it takes students a long time to access some pages. This problem always gives you a sense of frustration because you can’t do anything about it.” (B)

Unlike the previous tutors who stressed their characterization of negative aspects of the Internet, D did not base her criticism on any specific form of instructional technology, but she focused on its pedagogical aspects:

“Maybe a negative point: we should have more classes with computer positions available to students, in order for each of them to experience working with the computer in class with their own computer terminal.” (D)

The willingness to give every student the opportunity to experience using the computer in the classroom supports D’s view of technology as a valuable tool for IFL learning, and it is proof of her role as an adopter.

D also felt the need for more training, but the way in which she characterized it varies from other tutors. The majority of the tutors referred specifically to the need for knowledge that would allow them to make better use of the Internet, expressing the same limited characterization of technology that had guided their views.

D’s and the other tutors’ experiences with instructional technology were investigated both at the beginning and at the end of the study. D managed to modify her practice and to transform the initial system into a new one, while the other six tutors remained in the same position they occupied at the beginning of the study. The varying degrees to which they made use of technology not only situated them at different stages of the implementation spectrum as implementers, resisters, suppliers, and adopters, but also influenced the fate of technology as a true curricular innovation, and had important consequences for the classes they were teaching.

D’s teaching experience shows how classes may trigger an expansive learning cycle, which allows for continuous reflection, modification, and successive improvement in the delivering of teaching. Tutors need new roles and instruments to question their role as language tutors who use technology. Through them, they may be able to analyse their



existing practice, and to critically assess new forms of technology in their classes, to reflect on the results, and if successful, to implement those techniques by developing their materials considering the pedagogical aspects involved in the process.

#### **4. Final Thoughts: The Question of Innovation**

Having illustrated some of the tutors' experiences, this final section will analyse their pedagogical implications, including the IFL tutors' role in the process of integrating technology.

The investigation conducted on tutors' professional use both of writing instruction and of IT offers some understanding of the two issues. Only one of the language tutors had ever introduced some form of IT-integrated instruction in her writing classroom, and the majority said that the average time they spent using IT for teaching-related tasks was less than one hour per week. Moreover, the majority of them believed that implementation of IT-infused instruction would place an extra burden on them. Nearly all tutors interviewed recognized they did not feel ready to adopt computers nor to adapt them to make the most of the advantages they bring to instruction. The tutors' lack of training is reflected in course design, where most of the time the tutors' assignments for the writing classes did not incorporate activities requiring the use of computers. From the outset, for instance, tutor B did not feel confident about her knowledge of instructional technology, and this was reflected in her planning and conceptualisation of the sequences of an instructional environment:

“I would feel a little bit less in control with instructional technology than I do with a traditional lesson because [in those cases] I then just go back to my lesson plan and say: right this is what I need to do.” (B)

She felt uncomfortable with the whole realm of technology in that she could not really define it succinctly in the way that other learning areas are defined. Similarly, tutor F and A spoke about the difference between technology and face-to-face lessons in their first interviews:

“Traditional lessons can be so structured and defined, with technology you can’t be right or wrong and that’s what I keep telling my students: it doesn’t matter what you produce, it’s really the process or how you go about doing it. But then that’s really hard to define.” (F)

Tutor A was aware also that knowledge limitations hindered the possible implementation of technology programmes:

“Limitations? I guess, background tutors’ knowledge. I feel I don’t know enough.”  
(A)

The differences in attitude that existed between D and the other tutors are a reflection of the changes manifested in the institutional activity system in which they participated. It is probable that these changes originated in D’s exposure to technology applications in her academic life, which allowed her to establish a link between her practice and her work as a graduate student. D was thus able to take charge of her practice by assuming an active role in her class, creating her own material to monitor her students’ writing process, designing and incorporating more technology-based activities in her classrooms than was the case with her colleagues, and finding her own voice as a practitioner. In contrast, the other selected IFL tutors found it difficult to establish a link



between their practice and their graduate classes or academic interests, and, thus, their communities of practice remained isolated and unconnected.

Although there were opportunities for IFL tutors to discuss pedagogical issues among themselves and with other colleagues, the importance of the role they played in the implementation of instructional technology was barely considered. This might have negatively affected their behaviour and their attitudes toward duties involving instructional technology, with consequent lack of collaboration, as well as limitation of opportunities for development and improvement.

Hargreaves (1994) defines this kind of environment as “fragmented individualism”, a situation in which the lack of communication between tutors results in their isolation and limits their scope for collaboration and growth. This isolation influences the role IFL tutors play in the implementation of instructional technology, ultimately affecting the fate of technology as a form of true curricular innovation.

In his model, Markee (1977) defines innovation as “changes in teaching materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values” (53). Since the incorporation of instructional technology in writing classes involves the modification of some of the teaching materials, technology could be considered an instance of curricular innovation. However, if the role played by the participating teachers in the implementation of technology and the institutional factors that affected it are analysed, this interpretation is called into questions. For a curricular innovation to be successful, the participants have to move from the position of implementers to that of adopters and suppliers, embracing the innovation and adapting it to answer the needs of specific instructional environments, while, at the same time, preserving its theoretical and pedagogical bases. If we consider the role that tutors played in the implementation of technology in the writing classes under examination, we see that this development was only fully manifested by one tutor: D. While D gradually evolved from being an implementer at the beginning of the academic

year, to a supplier, and, at the time of the second interview and last observations, to an adopter, the other tutors remained “partial” implementers throughout the study because they made use of the new material in a limited way, without ever fully embracing technology.

Considering that only one of the seven participating tutors moved from the role of implementer to that of supplier and adopter, and thus fulfilled the first requirement for the success of an innovation, we cannot define the implementation of instructional technology as such within our selected learning environment. In the light of the role played by the other six tutors and the local nature of D’s actions, instructional technology cannot be characterized as a form of true curricular innovation in the context under examination. D’s evolution cannot be said to have contributed to the success of technology as an innovation, since her actions remained localized and only affected her own groups, without ever translating to the other tutors’ classes.

According to Markee (1977), innovators such as D are not often successful, because “they are too different from their colleagues to serve as role models” (59). D’s inability to exercise any influence on the fate of technology as a curricular innovation could have resulted in her position at the end of the spectrum in the innovation process, accentuating the differences between her and the other tutors.

Rogers (1995) believes that “the relative advantage of an innovation, as perceived by members of a social system, is positively related to its rate of adoption” because “potential adopters want to know the degree to which a new idea is better than an existing one” (216). That is, when participants recognize a need for innovation and view the material positively, they are more likely to adopt it. In order to better investigate this point, the next chapter will consider and analyse students’ perceptions of the adoption process. If there is compatibility between the participants’ values and beliefs and the new material, the adoption process could also be facilitated. As far as tutors are concerned, good examples of



this phenomenon are offered by D's and A's experiences. D's adoption of instructional technology was clearly influenced by her belief in the positive value of technology in FL instruction and by the advantages she felt it brought to the class:

“The use of technology definitely enhanced what we can do in the classroom.” (D)

In contrast, A did not perceive any need for change, nor did she feel technology had more technological value than the existing practice:

“I personally believe that technology is not essential because people have been learning languages effectively for a long time without it.” (A)

D's and A's perceptions affected the role that they played in the innovation process, placing them at opposite ends of the spectrum, and, ultimately, influencing the fate of technology as a form of curricular innovation.

Overall, even though the tutors responded to most of the questions in an optimistic way, several answers show substantial contradictions. The insights the tutors provided offered little help in establishing a reliable comparison between what they taught and the relation this may have with teaching and learning with the support of technology. Yet the analysis of the data collected among the selected IFL tutors provides not only descriptive evidence of their teaching practice, but also crucial insights on their pedagogical beliefs. The latter, in turn, cannot be disconnected from the different pedagogical practices implemented in the classroom and closely tied to the way students view the presence of technology in the classroom, which will be examined in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER VIII

### STUDENT DATA ANALYSIS

The student data analysis will give further space and visibility to the participants' voices. It will integrate the data collected from the seven selected IFL tutors taking part in the study and offer important insights aimed at answering the second sub-question outlined in Chapter IV, namely:

#### **Sub-question b)**

Who are the participants? What experiences, expectations and beliefs constitute their frameworks of values, as well as what understandings do they bring to, use in, and take from this learning and instructional environment?

As in the preceding chapter, devoted to the analysis of tutor data, we will take into account the learning and instructional environment, focusing on how the students perceived the dynamics taking place in the classroom, with the aim to explore their views and frameworks of values about IFL writing development and IT applications.

Also as in the case of information relating to language tutors, in order to protect the confidentiality and identity of each of the student participants, the transcription and codification of data made use of identification numbers in place of students' names.

In the first part of the chapter, we will explore students' perceptions of the main difficulties related to IFL writing and their views about the role of the IFL tutor in the classroom. We will also enquire about the expectations and the pedagogical value students associated to specific activities proposed by tutors. In the second part of the chapter, devoted to the integration of technology into IFL writing development, and in parallel to what happened in the chapter on tutors, we will explore what difficulties and benefits



participants may have encountered using IT in connection with IFL writing, taking into account the interaction between IT factors and participants' individual and group characteristics (such as prior levels of experience with specific types of IT applications and different grades of proficiency in Italian).

Based on the results of this investigation, this chapter aims to further flesh out the areas outlined in the conceptual framework as necessary for an effective mapping of the context where participants' current practices and views interact. Starting from these current practices and views, portions of which were shaped by their prior experience and knowledge, participants – IFL tutors and students – may approach the classes with different expectations of one another, of learning Italian, of using IT, of teaching and learning how to write. On the basis of their expectations, participants may also invest different amounts of time, energy, and effort in various aspects of their courses, including specific class activities.

Mirroring the examination of IFL tutors' experiences, frameworks of values, and views on the relationship between L2 writing instruction and technology, the investigation conducted among students is also limited to classrooms with a component (*IT 101: Italian Language for Beginners*) and a prevailing component of writing instruction (*IT 301: Modern Italian Language II and IT 401: Modern Italian Language III*), and where an element of instructional technology was integrated within instruction.

Following the same method adopted for the data gathering and analysis related to the tutors, the research uses qualitative analysis, but is also supported by some quantitative methodologies. Initial data were collected through the following three questionnaires: *Questionnaire on Writing Practice, Habits, and Instruction*, *Questionnaire on Writing Strategies*, and *Questionnaire on Computer Technology Use*, administered at the beginning of the data collection period (October 2005). Then, relevant quantitative data was integrated with the qualitative data collected during the three focus-groups (Focus-group 1;

Focus-group 2; Focus-group 3) conducted with a total of 18 volunteer students (six students per group). Additionally, data was triangulated with findings from field-notes and rubrics completed during classroom observations (which were conducted after the questionnaires and between the focus-groups). As with the analysis of data collected among the selected tutors, the students' voices will be given a chance to be heard, by reporting direct quotations.

## **1. Student Experiences of IFL Writing**

This first part of the chapter intends to examine the data concerning students' writing experiences in order to shed the light on difficulties students encounter when composing in IFL. Their conception of good writing and of the role they would like the tutor to take in order to help them overcome their difficulties and improve their writing skills, will be taken into particular account, eventually aiming to draw conclusions about the expectations and interpretations of both groups of participants.

### **1.1 Initial Coding and Themes**

As already described in the previous chapter in relation to data related to the tutors, in order to identify focal themes, quantitative data collected from the questionnaires on *Writing Habits, Practices, and Instruction* and on *Writing Strategies* were integrated with notes of classroom observations and transcripts of the focus-groups conducted among the 18 volunteer students. Three themes were identified:



### *1.1.1 Attitudes towards IFL writing*

### *1.1.2 IFL writing difficulties*

### *1.1.3 Views on writing instruction*

#### **1.1.1 Attitudes towards Italian Writing**

Although most of the participants thought that writing was a difficult task, which required tremendous effort, all agreed that writing was important for them. Given that the importance of writing was a common theme, we were interested in determining why they felt writing was important. Two main themes emerged in this respect: the first was that knowing how to write in a language meant knowledge of the language as a whole; and the second was that the degree of importance depended on the role of writing in the participant's life.

All participants believed that writing was an important skill that a learner had to acquire in order to be competent in Italian. For example, student 1 believed that writing was one of the basic skills a person needed when learning a language, and he stressed that his knowledge of the language was not complete without knowing how to write properly. He said:

“It is very important... My degree programme is in Single Honours Italian and I cannot call myself an Italian specialist if I don't know how to write in Italian... If your specialization is in any language you must know how to speak, read, and write that language. Especially writing... If a person knows how to write very well in any language, this means he knows everything about it.” (1)

He added:

“I know it is not easy to write... you don’t only need to do a lot of practice, but you need also to possess a great knowledge of grammar and vocabulary which gives the ability to write very well.” (1)

It is significant that student 1 was stressing the importance of grammar and vocabulary in writing. This indicates that he realized that writing required the writer to apply different language principles in order to produce a text and also shows that writing was viewed as an advanced stage of learning, one which a person would not reach before becoming competent in grammar and vocabulary.

This view was confirmed by student 6, who believed that a person can not write before knowing the grammar of the language. She stated that “nobody knows how to write in a language without knowing its vocabulary and its grammatical rules.” (6)

These statements indicate how many concerns the participants had about vocabulary and grammar. This might be a result of the participants’ previous learning experiences in IFL, which included attending the basic module *IT 101: Modern Italian Language for Beginners*, offered in their first year of study at university. In that module grammar and vocabulary were often stressed, although not taught as isolated elements of the language.

Moreover, the participants always associated the importance of writing with its role in their future jobs, after they graduated. For example, student 9 thought writing was important because he wanted to work as a translator, and he believed writing would be an essential part of his job. He said:



“If I don’t know how to write, I don’t think I am going to be a good translator. I need to know how to write to produce a good translation that Italian readers can understand.” (9)

This answer demonstrates that the importance of writing was based on what writing could do for the participants in the job arena. This phenomenon occurred even among those participants who clearly stated they disliked Italian writing; student 12 for example, disliked writing but thought it was important for her job:

“I personally don’t like writing, but I think we have to learn how to write. This is because the first thing you would be asked when you get a job in a company is to write business letters in English and in your main foreign language.” (12)

If a participant thought that writing would not be a task necessary for the sake of his/her future job, his/her opinion about the importance of writing diminished:

“It is important, but not as important as speaking.” (8)

Although all participants believed that writing was important, there were 21 participants who rated the importance of writing below that of other language skills. These participants said that speaking was the most important skill. Student 2 said:

“Writing is indeed an important skill, but not as important as speaking. In everyday life what you need most are speaking skills.” (2)

Student 15 also expressed a similar view. She said:

“As long as you don’t master the speaking skill, you will never be able to write. I wish the language modules could focus more on speaking so we could better communicate with native speakers of Italian about everything.” (15)

In light of these statements, it would seem that writing was not seen as a daily need, at least not as much as speaking. This also may be due to the notion of immediacy, where speaking is a tool of communication that involves less physical distance because of the familiarity of the topic, familiarity of the partners, and mutual cooperation between the speakers in reaching understanding. The participants felt that speaking demands less language knowledge, but provides them with comprehensible input that develops their language fluency. In addition, speaking provides them with more opportunities to practice Italian, a need which most participants repeatedly expressed.

Among the participants who believed that writing was important, there were five who showed interest in the Italian *Essay Writing* course and said they liked to write in Italian. However, this interest was generally associated with their fondness for their tutors, who provided encouragement and support. This indicates that the students’ positive attitude toward writing were a result of their positive attitudes toward the relevant tutors and the way they taught. Student 3 said:

“I like the Essay Writing course. The tutor is very helpful, he is not the kind of tough tutor who makes you... hate to go to class and hate everything about writing... The tutor this year is trying to make things easier and he tries his best to make us understand.” (3)

Student 13 also liked the course when the tutor was supportive:



“Frankly speaking, before I took the *Essay Writing* course I hated anything about writing. But I realize the tutor put forth a lot of effort to make us better writers, and he always tries to make the course interesting.” (13)

As student 13 further explained, she liked the tutor’s style of teaching, such as when he would go over the students’ mistakes and correct them. In addition, she liked the tutor because he provided elaborate explanations of the problems each student had. These participants evaluated and developed attitudes toward a course based on the tutor’s work and personality. In other words, when they found the tutor to be a kind person who provided comprehensible explanations of the subject, they developed positive attitudes towards the writing course.

### **1.1.2. IFL Writing Difficulties**

A number of writing problems were identified by the participants. The first set of problems is related to a number of formal aspects of the Italian language, such as tense, vocabulary, and cohesive devices. A second cluster of problems emerged as the participants also showed the inability to apply Italian rhetorical patterns in their writing. Students reported that they had difficulties in obtaining ideas for their writing topics and they depended heavily on translation for finding and expressing their ideas.

#### ***a. Vocabulary***

The first problem that participants believed they had with writing was the lack of vocabulary, a problem that tutors also stressed when asked about their students’ writing difficulties. Student 8 felt that her lexical repertoire was limited:

“It is very frustrating the fact that sometimes I have the idea but I don’t have the words for it.” (8)

All 29 participants indicated that limited vocabulary made their writing difficult and prevented them from conveying their ideas. Student 10 complained, in particular, that she lacked the words of everyday language:

“My problem is that there are a lot of words I cannot remember. Sometimes, I don’t find names for simple things...” (10)

The participants’ concerns about not knowing the names of different things were common. Student 17, a learner attending the *Essay Writing* section of *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II*, gave an example of how difficult it was to write without knowing the basic names for aspects of a topic, which caused her distress. She said:

“When the tutor asks us to write about the environment for example, I find it hard to know the specific vocabulary, even if we did some brainstorming activities in class... so I end up having the ideas but not the words for it.” (17)

In addition, there were participants who expressed concerns about using the wrong words in their writing, which they would not discover until they got their paper marked by the tutor. Student 4 explained:

“I usually get some words underlined which are wrong words as the tutor indicates. When I used it I thought it was right but the tutor said I had to use another word...”



One time I used the verb *sapere* in a sentence then the tutor crossed the verb and wrote *conoscere*. I didn't know the difference until he explained it to me." (4)

This example shows that participants depended on translation from the first language, where they used one word for many.

Student 8 attributed the problem of using the wrong words to her dependence on the bilingual dictionary. She explained:

"If I don't know the Italian meaning of a word... I use the bilingual dictionary but most of the time I get trapped because the word I use is not suitable in that context and doesn't fit in the sentence." (8)

Many students mentioned using online dictionaries which enabled them to look up words and obtain meanings in both Italian and English (the most used is [www.WordReference.com](http://www.WordReference.com)). It is reasonable to suggest that these dictionaries might increase the students' dependence on translation, which would in turn lead to their chances of using inappropriate lexical items.<sup>1</sup>

The participants were clearly aware of their vocabulary problems. Some participants believed that the reason why they had a limited vocabulary was related to their lack of reading. Student 2, for example, believed that her failure to read more written Italian texts was the main reason for her problem with vocabulary. She said:

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the ESL context, James Baxter (1980) observes that when a learner uses a bilingual dictionary, he/she tends to employ a single lexical item that may not convey the meaning intended, while using a monolingual dictionary gives the definition of the word in such a way that the learner can choose the suitable lexical item and express his/her intended meaning.

“I don’t read and this is my problem... I think I should read at least daily Italian newspapers but my timetable is too busy... I can’t spend extra time figuring out the meaning of the new words in the article. This is why I believe the tutors should give us reading homework every day and make us translate at least one article.” (2)

These suggested solutions were based on assumptions students generated as a result of their learning backgrounds and personal experiences as language learners. In addition, their talk about possible solutions is an indication of the amount of concern the participants had regarding their vocabulary problems.

### *b. Grammar*

Grammar was frequently mentioned by the students when the researcher asked about their writing problems. The word seemed to be used very broadly, which required asking further questions to identify the specific problems participants believed they had with grammar. They were asked to explain and provide examples and as they explained, two major linguistic problems emerged: tenses and cohesive devices. As a matter of fact, most of the participants mentioned that they had more than one of these linguistic problems.

For instance, the possessive adjective which refers, in Italian, to the thing possessed, is hard to understand for English speakers. The Italian rule is made even more difficult by the fact that, as shown in the examples below, there are some cases in which the Italian possessive adjectives are preceded by the article and others in which they are not.

Mary è sola perché i *sua* genitori vivono all'estero



The correct version is the following:

Mary è sola perché i *suoi* genitori vivono all'estero

Rachel ha diciassette anni ed è la più giovane della famiglia: suo fratello ha ventidue anni e *sua* sorella ventiquattro.

The correct version is the following:

Rachel ha diciassette anni ed è la più giovane della famiglia: suo fratello ha ventidue anni e *sua* sorella ventiquattro.

The examples given above show a typical mistake among IFL students. In the second sentence, the use of a possessive with a noun referring to a family member in the singular form does not require the article before the possessive adjective.

Using the correct past tense was also a major problem that participants expressed concern about, and they complained about not being consistent with one tense in their writing. They indicated that when they wrote, they switched between the different past tenses. Student 11 said:

“I usually find it difficult to use the correct past tense, I am confused between the *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto*.” (11)

There were several participants similar to student 11, in that they could not understand the concepts or the rules that determine the proper tense, especially in a subordinate proposition.

In addition, other participants expressed concerns about using irregular verbs. They believed that irregular verbs were difficult to understand because of their prevalence in the Italian language, which required memorization. Student 16 said:

“In Italian there are a lot of irregular verbs which I should know, but I find it extremely difficult to remember all these irregular verbs and distinguish them from regular ones?” (16)

In the participants' written texts, there were a few occurrences where irregular verbs were used improperly, such as adding the suffixes *-ato*, *-uto*, *-ito*, to the past simple form, or just using the base form of the verb instead of the past or the past participle form. Although this problem is uncommon, it indicates that the participants may have needed additional exposure to these forms. It should be mentioned that in the previous year of university study, and especially in the module *IT 101: Modern Italian Language for Beginners*, students are introduced to a list of irregular verbs, which they have to memorize and apply in written and oral activities. Students, however, tend to forget these forms, since they have not employed them regularly in their writing. In addition, most of the *ex-IT 101* students now in *IT 301* and *IT 401* had spent their previous year in Italy participating in the “Year abroad program”.<sup>2</sup> This group of students had the opportunity to apply and strengthen grammar rules and ameliorate the fluency.

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<sup>2</sup> The year abroad is an important and integral part of nearly all degree programmes in Italian, which allow participants to study at an Italian University in their second year. The only exceptions to this rule are those students who are taking languages degrees *with* Italian (who spend their year in either France or Germany). This early immersion in both the language and the culture of the country helps participants attain more rapidly a higher level of ability in the Italian language and generally leaves them better prepared for the final two years of study.



### *c. Choice of Prepositions*

Another major problem participants cited was the choice of prepositions. They complained about their inability to distinguish the differences between a number of prepositions.

Student 4 explained:

“I think I have a serious problem with prepositions... I always use the wrong one, especially when it comes to *di* which I usually mix with *a* and *per* before the infinitive.” (4)

Student 3 also said:

“I always get it wrong with prepositions, especially when I try to translate the English *to*, in order to give the meaning of a final action.” (3)

All prepositions mentioned in the previous sentences seem to be among the main obstacles that English speakers face when writing in Italian. The usage of Italian prepositions is different from the patterns in English. One preposition in English may convey the same meaning as several Italian prepositions. In other words, prepositions rarely have a one-to-one correspondence between the two languages.

### *d. Cohesive Devices*

Several participants talked repeatedly about the problem of connecting sentences, which led the researcher to ask them to elaborate on this problem and give examples from their writings. Student 5 said:

“I know my sentences look isolated... this is because they are not connected... The tutor told me that, and he keeps telling me that I need to use some words like *Quindi* (“Then”), *Inoltre* (“Moreover, In addition”), *Tuttavia* (“However”), *Di conseguenza* (“As a results”), *In conclusione* (“In conclusion”)... to make my writing look better... But I usually fail to do that.” (5)

As these participants explained and as I could observe during their peer review/response session, they usually wrote short sentences in order to avoid grammatical mistakes. This avoidance strategy discouraged the participant from taking risks and learning to use cohesive devices or becoming familiar with different grammatical structures.

Although there were only two participants who mentioned this problem, there were a noticeable number of students who depended on sequential numbering to keep their writing coherent. For example, a writer I observed would start by saying that there were three reasons for environmental pollution, and then list a number of reasons by starting each sentence with a sequential number such as *In primo luogo* or *Dapprima* (“First of all”), *In secondo luogo* (“Secondly”), *In terzo luogo* (“Then”)... to make each point clear. However, sentences were too short and they lacked elaboration. The participants considered this simple way of writing as a safe approach to keep their writing coherent and free of grammatical mistakes. It is worth noting that, during the interview, the tutor of the relevant module attributed this problem to the students’ lack of familiarity with how the Italian written sentence is structured. He said:



“A common problem my students have consists in putting basic sentences together. But when the sentence becomes complex and starts to have clauses, they loose track and they seem lost [...] because they have not actually practiced those skills themselves.” (C)

Most participants mentioned that they were doing fine in the grammar section of the *Essay Writing* course and they were getting high grades; but when they were faced with a writing task, it seemed that grammar became extremely difficult. When participants were asked to explain the reasons behind this phenomenon, most of them could not answer the question, and only a few believed they needed more practice in Italian writing. However, it seemed evident that these participants performed grammar drills at the sentence level but did not practice grammar in larger writing contexts. This notion was confirmed by the writing tutor who believed that his students were not trained to practice grammar at a broader textual level. Tutor D said:

“The first problem I noticed in writing is that the students haven’t practiced writing as a whole... doing narrative, description or any other genre as a whole.” (D)

#### *e. Translation*

Translation is one of the most common problems participants cited. There were six participants out of 29 who, during the focus-groups, mentioned they depended on English to perform Italian writing tasks. This process of translation came in different forms and was implemented at different levels. Some participants claimed they would start to think and formulate their ideas in Italian before they started the actual writing. Others said they started writing in Italian by translating English words into Italian. There were also a few

participants who claimed they translated complete English sentences into Italian. Student 6 explained:

“I usually think of what I wanted to say in English and then write it in Italian... I imagine the whole topic and how I would write it if it were in English.” (6)

Student 8 also explained how she sketched her main ideas and vocabulary in English and then translated them into Italian.

“I normally write the key words and ideas I want to use in English first. After I get all the important things I start writing on another paper.” (8)

There were other participants who claimed they sometimes wrote the whole sentence in English and then translated it into Italian. Student 11 said:

“When I prepare a writing plan, I have clear ideas in mind and I know how to say it in English. So I write in English first and then I translate it into Italian. But this is not that easy and sometimes there are expressions you can not translate because there is no equivalent meaning to it in Italian... So I am forced to leave that idea and switch to another one, and I feel very frustrated, because eventually I can not say what I really want to say.” (11)

The participants' dependence on translation is an indication of their limited repertoire of vocabulary. This was a common problem among a portion of students in the *IT 301 Essay Writing* group who had had less exposure to the target language in their previous years of language study. The group of students attending the *Essay Writing*



section of module *IT 301* was not homogeneous in terms of linguistic background and Italian language exposure previously received. The *Essay Writing* class was aimed at students who entered their course of study in Italian at the University of Warwick as beginners, with a GCSE, or with an A Level or equivalent in Italian. Although during the initial years the departmental learning aims tend to ensure the achievement of homogeneous knowledge of the written and spoken language, the group of students who do degrees in French or German with Italian (“... with Italian” degrees), and who therefore only devote one quarter of their time to Italian, by taking only the language option, still receive a limited exposure to the target language. As a result, the time devoted to the development of the four macroskills is notably less than the time devoted by both students taking “Italian and...” and “Italian with...” degrees (in which Italian language, culture, and literature modules form one half or three quarters of the degree course with the other half/quarter being made up of modules in the other subject combination) and the students taking the “Single Honours” (in which the focus of their study is placed on Italian language and culture). Especially as far as language modules and year abroad are concerned,<sup>3</sup> the latter courses are pretty much on a level, since most participants in *IT 301* are third year students who did year one in Warwick (as beginners or otherwise) and then spent year two in full immersion in Italy.

This dependence on translation did not emerge among those students, who had had the opportunity to study at an Italian University in their Second Year,<sup>4</sup> and are, overall, better prepared than some of their colleagues, because of this early immersion in both the language and the culture of the country. According to the tutor of *IT 301*, “...with Italian” and “option only” students, i.e. those taking no more than one module per year in Italian, were not trained to think in Italian, due to the relative lack of exposure to the target

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<sup>3</sup> Language proficiency and year abroad are the main differences between “... with Italian degrees” and “Italian and...” or “Single Honours” degrees.

language:

“Some of them, taking other degrees *with* Italian have just returned from an enriching year abroad experience in Germany or in France. They seem puzzled about expressing themselves in Italian and of course this is due to the fact that they were not extensively exposed to the language. During their first year of study at Warwick, obviously the tutor didn’t speak Italian all the time in the class. So this disparity created an obstacle.” (D)

Moreover, it is obvious that most of the participants did not practice writing on their own and wrote only when their tutors asked them to do so, which gave them few chances to develop their writing competence and build their store of lexical items.<sup>5</sup>

#### *f. Organization*

Lack of organization and failure to follow the rhetorical patterns of Italian written texts was one of the main problems that emerged during the student focus groups. On the occasion of the interviews, tutors teaching the *Essay Writing* sections of both *IT 301* and *IT 401* confirmed that their students struggled greatly with Italian writing conventions and most of the time failed to produce well-organized texts.

Tutor C explained:

“The first thing they have as a problem is that their ideas are not arranged and the arguments are not clearly illustrated. Overall, they find it difficult to arrange their ideas.” (C)

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<sup>5</sup> According to Kroll et al. (2002), recent research on word association and lexical development among adult second language learners suggests that beginners tend to access L2 words via L1 meanings; however, as the fluency in L2 increases, the access to L2 words via L1 decreases. Therefore, some participants’ heavy dependence on translation can be read as an indication that they are still at the initial phases of L2 learning.



Tutor D also showed similar concerns, although her more experienced students displayed greater familiarity with the organization and rhetorical patterns of Italian. She said:

“Some of my students still encounter problems in structuring a thesis, and in limiting, using details and supporting examples.” (D)

Although both tutors stressed their students’ problems with these textual features, only seven learners among the 29 participants said that they had difficulty organizing their ideas in written texts and that, as a result, their sentences looked scattered and their paragraphs were incoherent. Student 16 said:

“When I write about certain topics I feel I have the ideas... but then the big problem is how to put them on paper. I eventually mix them together and sometimes I end up writing about the same ideas in different places in my paper.”  
(16)

Student 18 also had similar concerns:

“My difficulty is to make my ideas link to each other and look organized. When I write about one idea, then I don’t know how the next idea can be linked to it. So my essay never presents very well organized ideas...” (18)

Student 8 also complained about her inability to build coherent ideas:

“I feel that my sentences are not connected to each other also because the tutor told me about it many times. But it is difficult to get rid of this problem.” (8)

Student 11 said he understood the organization of a text in Italian, but he complained about the problem of disorganization and the difficulty of providing a good topic sentence. He explained:

“Writing in Italian is different from writing in English. In English you have to start with a topic sentence, followed by details and conclusion. In Italian also you have to have three parts -introduction, body, and conclusions -, but there are additional, and more complex, conventions to respect.” (11)

These responses demonstrate that these participants were aware of rhetorical differences between English and Italian and of the need to write in a different way. This awareness was a result of the nature of the course followed, and especially of the *Essay Writing* section of *IT 401*, in which academic writing was the focus. As I observed, the tutor spent a great deal of time explicitly explaining this writing style and how students should present their ideas. However, the necessary awareness does not seem to have developed in the students. There were several participants, in fact, who were not aware of these differences. This happened mainly among students of the writing section of *IT 301*, where the tutor, at the beginning of the academic year, had only just introduced the Italian rhetorical forms. Student 4 said:

“I see little difference and I write the same way in English and in Italian, without paying much attention on the rhetorical issue...” (4)

Student 6 described writing as follows:

“When I write, whether in English or in Italian, if I have certain ideas about a topic I simply talk about these ideas one by one... sometimes I have lots of ideas, sometimes very few... it really depends on the topic.” (6)



Another student maintained he used the same methods in English or in Italian.

Student 8 said:

“I try to present my ideas in a logical way whether in English or in Italian...” (8)

This problem can be understood in light of the fact that these students did not have any previous experiences with extended Italian writing. The lack of organization was a common problem both among those participants whose specialization was not in Italian, and who therefore had limited chances to write in that language, and also among those who participated in the year abroad program, since the oral emphasis of the academic assessment in Italy gave them the opportunity to enhance their oral skills at the expense of the written ones. This resulted in a lack of writing experience and a lack of familiarity with Italian written styles and rhetorical patterns.

Another reason for this type of difficulty was brought up by one of the two tutors of the essay writing classes, who believed that the students only wrote for their tutors, and linked the problem to a lack of awareness in terms of audience. In other words, when they wrote they did not target different readers other than the tutors, whom they assumed would understand their writings; consequently, they did not develop different expository writing forms that could help them in presenting their ideas to different readers.

### *g. Strategies*

The participants were asked to describe their writing process in Italian from the beginning stage of writing until the revision stage. From the descriptions provided in the *Questionnaire on Writing Strategies*, students can be divided into two groups. The first group showed a lack of writing strategies, while the other utilized a limited set of strategies. The first group, which consisted of ten participants, claimed that they started writing immediately, without any planning and when they finished they submitted their

papers with no revisions or editing. In contrast, the second group, which consisted of 19 participants, used limited strategies, like writing the main points of the topic on a separate piece of paper before starting the writing task, and also made editing changes, covering mainly spelling and grammar. Neither group spoke of in-depth revision for content or organization.

The majority of the first group claimed they started immediately without previous organization or planning. Student 16, for instance, said:

“As soon as I know the title of the essay, I start writing: at times I think and try to find how I should start especially if the topic is new to me...” (16)

Student 6 said:

“I normally collect all ideas I want to talk about in my mind. After that, I start writing, and I get more and more ideas and write them immediately.” (6)

This group also showed that they did not spend time revising after they finished writing. Some of them even said they did not look back at the paper, while others just had a quick glance at it. Student 2 stated:

“I always finish writing at the last minute, so I don’t have the time to go back and find the mistakes I may have made. I am sure about some recurrent mistakes, but at times I have no choice but to keep them, because it would take too long to go over and correct them.” (2)



Another participant, student 3, explained why she did not revise:

“If I read and read again my essay, then I’m sure I will find many spelling mistakes... many words spelled incorrectly... and at that stage I could do nothing about. Also, sometimes I feel not sure which preposition I should use in front of an infinitive, whether it is *di* or *per* or *a* and I simply leave them as they are.” (3)

Most students in this group seem to assume that they are unable to change or improve their writing, and they see no benefits in revising. These participants, however, considered “revising” to be a task consisting of fixing grammatical or spelling mistakes only; whereas ideas and content were never considered as part of the revision process.

The responses to the *Questionnaire on Writing Strategies* given by the remaining 19 participants showed that they possessed a limited amount of writing strategies, at most writing down the main points before the actual writing and revising for spelling and general organization after it. Student 13 stated:

“Before and during my writing, I always keep track of my ideas and key words guiding my essay.” (13)

15 out of 29 participants stated that they wrote multiple drafts before they submitted their written assignments. Student 4 stated:

“Before I write the final essay, I usually write at least two drafts. Generally in the first one I put all the ideas I have, and in the second one I try to be more organized by giving them a logical structure. When I write the final essay, I copy the final draft very carefully trying to avoid the grammar and spelling mistakes.” (4)

When asked to write on a topic, several participants mentioned spending a great deal of time thinking of what they should write and how they should start. Some of them

mentioned getting frustrated when asked to write on a specific topic, claiming that they wrote one sentence or a word and changed it constantly without achieving progress.

Student 16 said:

“The biggest difficulty is starting to write an essay. I normally spend a lot of time holding my pen, writing a sentence and crossing it out, writing another one and crossing it out again...” (16)

These kinds of difficulties in starting to write were common among many participants. One possible reason behind this frustration was the students’ lack of pre-writing strategies, such as brainstorming, planning, or drafting, which would aid them in the first steps toward completing the writing task successfully. As I observed these participants in their classrooms during a semi-controlled writing assignment, I also did not notice them using any type of writing strategies when engaged in writing activities. This lack of effective writing strategies was also confirmed by a writing tutor (C), who believed that this group of students were not trained to use writing techniques, whether in English or in Italian. In the individual interview that took place at the beginning of the academic year, tutor C said:

“Even when I teach them to write step by step, how to select a topic, how to write an outline and apply it, some of them simply don’t do it, because they were not told about the importance of these strategies back at college. The tendency this group have is to start writing directly without following any effective writing steps or techniques.” (C)



Beside the group of participants who was completely unaware of the availability and effectiveness<sup>6</sup> of the writing strategies they could utilize in their writing because they had not received explicit or implicit training in either English or Italian writing, another group claimed they used writing strategies, simply following the steps they had used in their L1 writing experiences. Some of them, however, described these strategies as limited to writing down the main points of the topic and revising for spelling.

#### *h. Lack of Ideas and Writing Topics*

One of the main difficulties that emerged among the participants while describing their writing process was the lack of ideas on the writing topics they were requested to write about. The majority of the students in the writing section of module *IT 301* explained that they had difficulty talking about the topics selected for assignments. They usually found that their submissions were short. Student 16 said:

“I find it difficult to write one sentence because I don’t find what to say and need new ideas about the topic.” (16)

When the participants were asked about the reasons behind the problem of lack of ideas, they gave several answers. The main reason they cited was linked to the nature of the topic given by the tutor. They believed the topics they were asked to write about were difficult, boring, and irrelevant to their lives. As I looked at the type of topics they wrote about, I found that they were derived mostly from their textbook. Some participants

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<sup>6</sup> In several studies (for example, Edelsky, 1982), it has been proved that learners utilize strategies from their L1 when writing in L2; researchers have concluded that writers apply first language strategies to aid them in their L2 writing. According to Friedlander (1990), who studied the effect of L1 on writing in ESL among 28 Chinese-speaking students, students who lacked L1 strategies reported a similar lack of strategies when they were writing in their L2. Thus, the learner problems increase if writers lack writing strategies in their first as well as their second language, and if they have not had the chance to be trained in or exposed to them.

explicitly stated they got frustrated when they were asked to write about topics which were outside their experience. Student 6, for instance, said:

“I get frustrated when the tutor asks me to write about things I am not familiar with. For example, after having read and discussed an article in the book on the greenhouse effect, the tutor asked the class to write about this topic. First, reading one article is not enough to know a new topic, and to tell you the truth, I hated that topic and consequently got a bad grade for it.” (6)

Two further participants believed in the importance of reading as a primary source of information, and linked their lack of ideas about different issues to the limited amount of reading conducted.

“The most important think to start writing is to have a sufficient background on a given topic. In order to have it, I need to do a lot of reading.” (5)

Student 18 shared the same view:

“It is very annoying when you are in front of the blank paper and you keep asking yourself ‘How could I start?’ or ‘What could I say?’” (18)

While believing in the importance of reading, and therefore looking at reading as a source of information which they only needed for their writing, these two participants admitted with regret that they often did not practice reading. This also indicates that these participants thought of writing only as a tool for presenting and providing information on a specific topic. Therefore, the difficulties they faced were not only a result of writing about unfamiliar topics, but also depended on the nature of the writing they were supposed to do. They had to use a range of expository forms that required the writer not only to provide information but also to analyze, criticize, and provide substantiated arguments.



Unfortunately, the participants' experiences with writing in their L1 or L2 do not indicate that they had adequate training in such type of writing.

Tutor D also confirmed this situation. She believed her students not only struggled to adopt new expository forms in Italian, but also to generate ideas and think critically. She also attributed this problem to the students' learning background where they were not trained to think critically in their L1:

“Unless they have been trained and encouraged to do it, students cannot use rationality skills – such as structuring a paragraph, developing ideas, providing examples, giving more information and contradictory information, ending a paragraph up, linking it to the next paragraph on a FL - which they have not fully developed in the first language. That means that not only they are struggling to express themselves in the new language, but they also have to learn something that goes behind the language itself, involving cognitive strategies in a language that is not their own.” (D)

Since these participants expressed distress about the writing topics they were discussing in their writing classes, I asked them about the kind of topics they found interesting. The vast majority said they liked to write about personal and social issues. For example, student 6 said:

“I would rather write about problems and issues that are closer to my life, for example the university admissions system or fee increase.” (6)

Student 5 said that she wanted to write about her daily life, which she believed would improve her Italian level:

“We should write a little every day, and since so many things happen to us daily, we could use them as a writing topic. If we managed to maintain this habit, our Italian would improve steadily.” (5)

In addition, the participants claimed that they had no choice about the topics on which they wrote and wished their tutors allowed them more choice in order to write with ease and interest. Student 2 said:

“We barely have chances to write whatever we want. I wish the tutor would ask us to write topics we chose, because this would make me more interested in the topics I feel I could write more about ...” (2)

The participants liked to be assigned topics on which they could write at ease because the information was available to them and they did not have to seek material from different resources.

According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), there are two models of writing: “knowledge-telling” and “knowledge-transforming”. While “knowledge-telling” deals with the type of writing in which writers use information derived from their life experiences, “knowledge-transforming” deals with the kind of writing that requires cognitive skills that enable the writer to analyze and reflect. With the first model, less skilled writers feel less anxious because the only task they conduct is telling information which they already have. With the second model the writing task becomes more complex because it demands a higher order of thinking and analytical skills.

Therefore, the participants’ difficulties with writing about the topics assigned by their tutors would seem to stem from the fact that writing about such a subject and in different genres requires a series of problem solving activities and cognitive tasks, in which most participants had not been trained, either in their first or in their second language.



### *i. Writing in Groups*

During the observation conducted in the writing section of module *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II*, the tutor often asked the students to engage in writing groups, in order to discuss and answer a given question or complete a writing activity mainly derived from the students' writing textbook. I discussed this issue with the participants, trying to learn about their attitudes and find out how they benefited from writing in groups. I found that 21 participants had positive attitudes toward writing groups and believed that group work was useful to them. They believed writing groups provided them with more ideas, new vocabulary, and correct grammar; some students also believed that working in groups helped them to relax and increased their self-esteem. Student 6 said:

“When I am working in groups, I find myself writing about an idea that was not in my mind and learning something new.” (6)

Student 11 also believed that group members helped him to learn new vocabulary and to correct his spelling and grammar:

“Working in groups presents many advantages, for example, the members of the groups can be good at different things: one is good in grammar... one in spelling... one in structure... So there is always someone who corrects the others' mistakes.” (11)

Student 16 said he learned by asking other members of the group:

“Sometimes I do not want to ask the tutor a basic or stupid question in front of the class. So I ask another member of the group, and most of the time they tell or explain willingly.” (16)

Student 18 believed that group work made him confident and increased his self-esteem:

“When I work in group, I don’t feel the pressure I normally feel when writing by myself.” (18)

Although there were a large number of participants supporting writing groups, there were many who said they received no benefit from them. They believed group work was a waste of class time and could sometimes cause embarrassment. Student 8 said:

“I personally don’t like group work, because it is just a waste of time. Most of the students ignore what we should do and talk about irrelevant things. Sometimes, there is one student only who talks and does all the work and the rest are just listening.” (8)

Student 1 endorsed this point of view, saying that the teacher should invest the class time in teaching:

“I want the tutor to focus on teaching us and not leave us working in groups.” (1)

Student 9 believed that group work is not useful if the tutor does not guide the students. She said:

“Sometimes the group work is useful, but sometimes is not, especially when the tutor leaves the group without watching the students who in the meantime are just losing their time. The tutor should tell us what to do and see if we are progressing.” (9)

In light of the participants’ responses and on the basis of the observations conducted, I found that the main objective of these writing groups was to enable the students to complete a writing activity through collaboration. The participants in different



groups mainly worked on trying to think of a topic sentence, or provided ideas about a topic discussed in their textbook, and sometimes they just tried to finish a drilling exercise.

The nature of the work that the students undertook in these groups required them to engage in an ongoing process in order to improve their writing. Observing them, I noticed that they worked at sentence level rather than on a whole text, which enabled them to finish the task in a short time and see the result promptly. As a result, however, these participants did not enjoy the benefits of writing groups as expected by the tutors. Since the nature of the work done in those writing groups focused mainly on textbook assignments, the participants had few chances to share their texts with each other. Additionally, when they had the chance to read somebody else's text, they focused on the language and not on the content. As I observed the students working in groups, I heard them discussing how a word was written or how they should use a preposition or a conjunction, while the ideas and the organization of their essay did not have priority in their discussion.

Most students spent long periods of time reading silently, trying to understand what they were reading, and only when they finished they would share a few comments. Some participants did experience peer response, but the activity was not successful for several reasons. First of all, they did not realize the pedagogical values of peer response/review and they believed this sharing was only done to obtain feedback on word and sentence correctness. The second reason is that these participants did not see immediate results from peer response, which made them develop a kind of mistrust in their peers' ability to help. They also believed that a reader should possess a high level of language proficiency that would enable him or her to identify and correct their writing errors.

This is the case of student 8:

“I had some students read for me, but I did not learn much. Whenever they say something on your piece of writing, it is never something I could benefit from. In order to take advantage from this activity, I would need someone better than me...”  
(8)

The belief that a reader should possess a higher level of proficiency in Italian is the main reason why these participants identified their tutor as the only one who could help them to improve their writing.

Generally, therefore, it was noticeable that the participants liked working in groups when they were asked to perform a writing activity that required a collective answer, such as providing topic sentences or providing vocabulary. In contrast, when the participants were asked to read for each other they became less enthusiastic.

### **1.1.3. Views on Writing Instruction**

In the discussion conducted during the focus-groups, the participants were invited to express their views regarding the writing instruction received and what they needed their tutors to do in order to improve their writing skills. Their needs focused on three issues. First, they wanted their tutors to make numerous corrections, focusing mainly on grammar. Second, they wanted their tutors to give them more writing tasks in the classroom. Third, they wanted the tutor to discuss their writing problems more often in the class.

Student 16 explained:

“I think the main problem with writing is linked to our weak level of grammar, so the tutor should concentrate more on how to write with no mistakes.” (16)



Student 1, also concerned about her grammar, believed that her tutor should work with her individually and show her how to write correct Italian paragraphs:

“While I am writing I make a lot of grammar mistakes. I wish the tutor could look at my mistakes carefully and show me how I could correct them... Only with this guidance, I will improve my Italian writing skills.” (1)

Other participants believed that their tutor should give them a lot of writing tasks in the classroom, so the tutor could follow them step-by-step and correct them as needed while they wrote. Student 13 said:

“We should do more writing in class because when I write in class I get a lot of help from the tutor instantly ... he will tell me how to write in the correct way. This makes me feel more relaxed and able to write things that I might not be able to if I wrote alone.” (13)

Student 16 shared the same view:

“Writing under direct supervision is very important because we can learn how to write correctly.” (16)

Others suggested more discussion with the tutor about common writing problems.

Student 1 stated:

“The one who knows most the students’ writing problems is the tutor. I am convinced he should discuss these problems with each student and show how one could write better.” (1)

By examining these demands, it is evident that these participants' experiences with writing and specifically with writing in Italian affected two aspects of their attitudes: their conceptions of good writing and of the role of the tutor. First, these students' Italian learning gave too much importance to Italian grammar. Consequently, they thought that a good written text was equivalent to a text free of errors. They also believed that their writing errors could be avoided if the tutor provided instant correction and feedback. In addition, these participants saw the tutor as the only one who could help them develop their writing skills. This indicates how much trust these participants had in their tutors as the sole providers of knowledge.

## **2. Student Experiences with Computer Technologies and Writing**

In this second section of the chapter, students' experiences, frameworks of values and views about writing with the help of computer technologies will be analysed. The *Questionnaire on Computer Technology Use* was administered in October 2005 to elicit students' attitudes toward their experience with computer technologies applied to language learning and, more in particular, to IFL.

From the questionnaire findings, the observation field-notes, and the transcripts of the focus-groups organized with 18 volunteering students, it was clear that the use of computers attracted a significant number of students and many used them as a learning tool. The questionnaire surveyed students' previous computer experiences, including when they started using computers, software they had used, and experience on and attitudes towards CALL.

In response to the computer technology questions, all 29 questionnaire respondents reported prior experience. During the 2005-2006 academic year, when the data collection



took place, it seems that the majority of students involved in the study were taking full advantage of available access to IT resources. They had regular access to and frequently used computer technologies: 22 students reported daily use of computers, and another seven used them at least five days per week. Mean duration of each computer session reported was 2.7 hours, though this varied constantly, with a range from 10-15 minutes to as much as 15 hours on weekend days.

These figures suggest high levels of computer use among student participants. 22 out of 29 students responding to this same question during focus-group sessions reported the presence of computer access in their dormitory rooms. The student participants reported a wide range of computer-based activities both in the questionnaire and during the focus-group session. The activities pursued by these students included a mix of academic and non-academic tasks. In the academic arena, 12 respondents noted that they used, or had used, computers to do homework or other assignments for classes other than IFL, but only three had used IT during actual class time in other subjects, and three of the five courses mentioned were computer courses, while the other two were “Media for Teaching and Informatics”.

The students’ range of experiences with IFL software was very low. Students found useful those learning tools proposed by IFL tutors for the development of writing skills, such as the packages “Luisa” and “GramEx”, as well as the Website “Text Analysis”. During the focus-group sessions, however, some of them pointed out that these packages do not reflect the social and collaborative use that electronic mail, chatrooms, or discussion lists on worldwide networks such as the Internet have made available.

Notable in the responses is the high number of non-academic activities undertaken by students, with Internet surfing and email appearing frequently, as well as further items with ambiguous academic ties, like the university forums and blogs, with their synchronous and asynchronous communication functions, which students reported using

primarily to “talk” with classmates or friends at university. These non-academic activities, however, were all carried out primarily in English. Surprisingly, only seven students acknowledged playing computer games; this might reflect actual usage patterns, but it may also indicate a reluctance to admit such a “wasteful” use of time, or perhaps a divide in students’ perceptions, indicating that this particular recreational activity was not conceived as IT-mediated. Perhaps less unexpectedly, of the four students identifying games as one of their activities in the interviews, three were male and only one was female, a ratio consistent with popular perceptions regarding recreational IT users.

During the first observation, which took place in November 2005, shortly after the administration of the questionnaire and the first focus-group, I noticed that several students typed their writing assignments, while others submitted them in handwritten form. This observable fact, together with the positive view expressed both in the questionnaire and in the focus-groups towards the social and collaborative uses of electronic mail, bulletin boards, or discussion lists, encouraged me to investigate the role these students assigned to computer technologies as writing tools. With this purpose in mind, the last focus-groups were devoted to investigating further the role that computers have in enhancing the participants’ experiences of writing.

The following section discusses how the 18 participants in the three focus-groups felt about using computer technologies, how often they used them for writing purposes, and how computers were used as writing tools, specifically with the view of improving their writing products and overcoming their writing problems. The themes identified during the analysis of data include: 2.1 Writing online and 2.2 Italian electronic writing.



## 2.1 Writing Online

The majority of the participants believed that writing with the computer helped them in organizing their materials, allowed them opportunities to meet more people, and made them more knowledgeable about current events and issues.

During focus-groups, Student 8 confirmed the main findings resulting from questionnaires and observations:

“I use it mainly for browsing the Internet... I read newspapers and keep updated with current events. I usually go to a number of bulletin boards and sometimes I go to chat rooms. You can find different people and discuss different issues.” (8)

Like many other participants, student 8 displayed great interest in Italian online chatrooms, where computer users read postings by different people and respond to them. These postings usually discuss politics, sports and other contemporary issues, usually encouraging the participants to engage in ongoing dialogues as communities that share the same interest.

Since other participants mentioned having experienced posting and reading from Internet Italian online chatrooms, I assumed they had various opportunities to participate by writing. As a result, I believed more investigation needed to be conducted into the participants' views regarding how these online chatrooms affected their Italian writing. Their views about these effects were mixed. There were nine participants who believed online chatrooms had no effect on their writing because the texts they wrote were short, simple, and colloquial. Student 9 said:

**“I don’t normally write more than a short comment on a piece of news, so I don’t think I will benefit from online chatrooms as a writer...” (9)**

**Student 1 shared the same view, indicating that what he wrote was just “talking”:**

**“The writing style generally used in chat is not real writing, because we normally write like talking...” (1)**

**The other group, which consisted of another nine participants, believed that their writing was improved in terms of quality, and emphasized that they wrote correctly, in terms of grammar and spelling. They also added that they could write more than usual, because they found the topics interesting. Student 11 specified:**

**“I know many people read the postings, so I try write as accurately as I can, trying to be organized and of course avoiding spelling mistakes.” (11)**

**Student 6 believed that reading other postings inspired her to find new ideas and write about them. She said:**

**“When I visit the online chatrooms, initially I don’t have anything in particular to write, but as soon as I read other contributions, I get new ideas and feel I have to respond to this or that person... sometimes I just get a new idea and write about it.”  
(6)**

**This brief investigation on students’ use of Italian online chatrooms indicates that the Internet users found in these sites opportunities for writing as well as motivation to**



engage in continuing discussions about different issues that interested them. However, their views of the role of these online chatrooms in improving writing differed: it seems that the participants' views were influenced by the type of chatroom they joined, both in terms of issues discussed and language used. For example, if online chatroom users discussed serious issues like politics or the use of Italian language, they thought their ideas and language improved.

## **2.2 IFL and Electronic Writing**

Although all the participants in the study owned and used a computer, there were only seven out of 29 who indicated they used their computer for Italian language purposes. Moreover, in spite of their complex and differentiated use of the computer in English, these participants reported that they used computers for IFL purposes mainly in the form of Word Processing, which they said helped them in spelling and grammar.<sup>7</sup>

During the focus-group interviews, these participants described the computer programs they used and how they used them for writing. Student 9 asserted that computers helped her as a language learner:

“I have always been using the computer for my writing assignments both in English and in Italian. When I work with my PC at home, I can see my spelling mistakes and correct them. It is a good way for memorizing the correct spelling and avoiding the same mistake.” (9)

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<sup>7</sup> On computers available on University premises, however, the spelling check facility in languages other than English (French, Italian, and German) has been removed in the belief that students will, as a result, memorize better the spelling rule of the target foreign language.

Student 5, who also used Word Processing, explained:

“Microsoft Word is the only program I use for writing... It makes my writing look neat and it is an excellent tool for spelling mistakes and grammar. On the computers available on campus, unfortunately, there is no spelling and grammar check, so I prefer working from home. When I type I can tell immediately from the red underline that my spelling is not correct or from the green underline that something in the sentence is incorrect.” (5)

The tutor of module *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* suggested to her students that they should register for the free chat<sup>8</sup> hosted by the “Guerra Edizioni” website,<sup>9</sup> where students can interact with the native speakers enrolled. Student 3 also believed that doing some chatting online forces the person to learn how to type fast, because someone is usually waiting and expecting a rapid reply. Interacting with real people actually encouraged student 5 to practise the target language, as a result of the time he spent chatting. Like the previous participants, student 3 mentioned using Microsoft Word processing. In addition, she mentioned using an Internet search engine to write correct sentences. She explained:

“When I am writing on the computer and do not know a word in Italian, I type in English and use the word dictionary to translate to Italian, for example, *WordReference.com*<sup>10</sup>. I also use the *Google* search engine to know how to write prepositions... sometimes I don’t know whether to use, for example, *di*, *a*, or *per* (“of, to, for”) with a certain infinitive verb.” (3)

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<sup>8</sup> <[http://www.guerra-edizioni.com/chat\\_new/](http://www.guerra-edizioni.com/chat_new/)>.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.guerra-edizioni.com>>.

<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.WordReference.com>>.



Student 5 claimed that she used word processing not only for spelling, but also to avoid her bad handwriting:

“When I write with pen and paper I feel stressed so with all the mistakes and crossing-out, my paper would be impossible for the tutor to read, also because I have very bad hand writing. By using a computer I can get a neat and organized paper.” (5)

In addition to the use of Word processing, three participants indicated that they used e-mail to write to their friends. For example, student 16 usually sent e-mails in Italian to one of his friends:

“I still keep in contact with close friends I met during my year abroad in Italy. With them I don’t feel afraid to make mistakes, I write them about my study and life.”  
(16)

These participants had few experiences of using e-mail in Italian and no experience of using Italian resources or Websites that are available online<sup>11</sup>

Student 11 explained this was due to a lack of knowledge of what is available for them as IFL learners and as writers. Student 11 observed:

“I imagine the benefit of the Internet, but I have not enough information on where there are useful resources. The only thing that I used it for is reading Italian

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<sup>11</sup> The following are some of the Websites mentioned in the *Student Questionnaire on Computer Technology Use*: <<http://www.sapere.it>>; <<http://www.enciclopedia.it>>; <<http://www.proverbi.it>>; <<http://www.parole.virgilio.it>>; <<http://www.italica.rai.it>>; <<http://www.cruciverbaonline.it>>.

newspapers... I usually go to the English version on line and then go to the Italian version... just to make sure I understand the content. I have to say that this helped me a lot in learning vocabulary and in knowing how different sentences can be written.” (11)

The perceptions, views and frameworks of values about the support of technology for writing skill development which emerged from the participants’ voices during the focus-group sessions substantiated the initial data gathered through the questionnaires.

Overall, the participants seemed to be enthusiastic about technology. Consensus among the participants’ focus-group responses indicates that the Word Processing tool affected most or all the participants in similar ways. In particular, students noted the usefulness of the available Word Processing tools for editing their writing. The spell-check feature, mainly used out-of-campus, was mentioned more often (five students), with grammar check next (four students). Two students also highlighted the thesaurus tool. Students saw these as “convenient” resources above and beyond what was available in non IT-enhanced contexts – resources which helped them improve their writing:<sup>12</sup>

“I find it convenient to use the thesaurus tool while I am writing on the computer, I can work faster.” (9)

Although students seemed eager to use Word Processing and to access the Internet also for learning purposes, they had little access and essentially no training in the use of computer-based activities for the development of writing skills. “GramEx”, “Luisa”, and “Text Analysis” were the only learning tools known and mentioned during the

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<sup>12</sup> As Ferris and Hedgock (1998) point out in their review of research on technologies in writing classrooms, however, the effectiveness of such tools in actually improving writing teaching and learning is unclear. (274-275)



investigation, and according to 19 questionnaire responses, they did not allow students to develop social and collaborative writing skills. In order to put into practice the more social and socializing aspects of writing, several students mentioned using Italian chatrooms or discussion lists, but they did not see the pedagogical value of either of them.

Thus, it seems that the students' effective chances to utilize computers as a tool for IFL purposes were quite limited. Moreover, as I analysed the results of this section of the study, it emerged that almost none of the students in the observed classes were using computers in any of their other classes, and the majority had no, or at most one, prior class experience of using IT as part of a lesson during actual face-to-face time. As a result, the use of technology as an integral part of language classes "stuck out" in their experience. The language tutors too, as we have seen, viewed the use of technology as a distinctive component of the learning and instructional environment, describing its current use more as a learning support than as part of integrated delivery, promoting communication and interaction among students.

At the end of the academic year, despite the fact that participating students had excellent IT access and IFL beginner students had a language lab with individual monitors, students were still not recognizing computer technologies as learning tools that were available to aid them in composing writing assignments, and, more importantly, they had no clear understanding of the role that IT may play in the writing process.

Students were not able to achieve this kind of awareness, because they had not been taught from the very beginning about the role computers could play as they learned to compose in IFL. By not informing the IFL students, IFL tutors did not adequately prepare them for pedagogical innovations. Such lack of information resulted in a delay in raising their understanding about the possible benefits of technology-based instruction. More importantly, this lack of initiative showed the lack of training that existed in the use of computers applied to the teaching of writing.

It seems therefore important that tutors are given guidance as to how to conceptualise experiences relating to the role of technology in education and suggestions as to how to go about its implementation. Explicit guidance for tutors can be gained from a number of sources – for example, from experienced tutors and curriculum advisers, but also from tutor support materials. As with traditional teaching resources, tutors should consider the implementation of a number of pedagogical practices that help students to use the resources available productively.

In this specific learning and instructional environment, key pedagogical practices and models of effective use seem therefore necessary if tutors are to help students understand the value of IT in IFL writing. For example, peer revision, a commonly used tool in the L2 writing classroom, can be adapted to the computer setting by sending students' essays as attachments through the email system. By using the Internet in this way, students not only would participate in an exchange of messages, but would also be able to use the second language to comment on a classmate's paper. By taking place beyond the boundaries of the classroom, this type of activity could also help those shy students who in the regular classroom might not feel comfortable when providing oral feedback. The exercise could also be used to teach students working on a topic how to look for related material that exists online, so that they could recommend useful sources to the person writing the paper.

So far, we have seen how each group of participants has been dealing with L2 writing and technology. In the next, conclusive chapter we will bring together all the evidence which emerged from the project, to see whether the attitudes and expectations of each group of participants trace a pattern of conflict and divergence or one of convergence and accord.



## **CHAPTER IX**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

As anticipated in the general introduction, this study intended to explore the validity of a series of theoretical models referring to SLA principles, specifically related to the fields of L2 writing (Chapter I) and instructional technology (Chapters II and III), as well as to the theory of teacher beliefs (Chapter IV). In the existing literature, the study identified specific claims regarding the role of IT in writing instruction. These claims were discussed in Chapter IV and included the following statements:

1. “Physical configurations of IT labs may affect interactions in ways that may impede learning.” (Moody, 2001)
  
2. “Internet access by its nature alters pedagogy, changing the teacher’s role from authority/centre/‘talking head’ to coach/collaborator.” (Luke, 2000)
  
3. “IT can radically transform power relations or notions of agency [between teachers and students].” (Kramsch; A’Ness; Lam, 2000)
  
4. “Computer demands a different approach to writing, learning, and teaching, such that traditional notions of what writing and learning involve and traditional patterns of teacher-dominated talk are not appropriate, possible, or even desirable.” (Peyton, 1999)
  
5. “Writing using IT is motivating to students.” (Chiao, 2000; Phinney, 1991)

In order to examine how the claims recapped above played out in the specific case of IFL taught in a university context, the applied part of the research described relevant teaching and learning experiences concerning three IFL modules (*IT 101: Italian Language for Beginners*; and the *Essay Writing* sections of *IT 301: Modern Italian Language II* and *IT 401: Modern Italian Language III*) taught in the Department of Italian of the University of Warwick.

The motivating, guiding question at the core of the applied part of the study was also formulated in Chapter IV in these terms:

**Research Question (RQ):**

“How do claims in the literature regarding the role of the use of IT in L2 writing instruction play out in this specific IFL context?”

In order to answer this main question, this study conducted a contextualized investigation involving the learning and instructional environment (mainly the classroom) in which 29 students and seven tutors shaped the dynamics of the learning process.

The primary focus of the study was the investigation of both the specific learning and instructional environment and the participants – IFL tutors and students – operating in it. In order to guide the investigation of these two domains, two sub-questions were formulated in Chapter IV:



### **Sub-question a)**

What are the characteristics of the learning and instructional environment, and how do these characteristics shape participants' experiences and practice in this environment?

### **Sub-question b)**

Who are the participants? What experiences, expectations and beliefs constitute their frameworks of values, as well as what understandings do they bring to, use in, and take from this learning and instructional environment?

These sub-questions provided a comprehensive conceptual framework for mapping the context, organizing data into primary dimensions – environment and participants – and then distilling salient themes that ultimately bridged those domains.

Participants approached the learning and instructional environment, and in particular the classroom, with different expectations, based on their frameworks of values, portions of which were shaped by their prior experience and knowledge. From these frameworks of values and expectations, participants, especially IFL tutors, derived different behaviours, investing time, energy, and effort in various aspects of their courses. When using IT, and mainly computer technologies, they encountered some difficulties, as well as a few benefits. Prior and current experiences as well as learning and teaching strategies diverged at this point: some participants experienced at least partial disappointment and frustration; others showed more enthusiasm and appeared to be able to work beyond the initial problems in order to complete tasks and reach some of the goals set for their classes. What was noticeable, in any case, was that the (albeit partial) incorporation of elements of IT into classroom activities and student writing assignments did not transform teaching and learning in ways consistent with prior claims about IT in

writing classes. This process indicates that, in this specific context, IT was used in unanticipated ways, suggesting that complex and reciprocal influences occur with the integration of IT into L2 writing instruction.

The present study highlighted several dominant themes emerging from the data (the role played by the language tutors in delivering writing instruction in IT-enhanced and traditional classrooms; the role played by the students in the learning process; and the consideration of technology as a form of true curricular innovation in this specific learning and instructional environment). In doing so, it proved capable of adding to the discussion regarding the integration of IT in L2 writing practices and instruction. These findings also address previously noted gaps in the research literature, and allow us to discuss the assumptions underlying them.

In examining the related literature, I was able to critically evaluate prior findings regarding the role and behaviours of language tutors and the role and participation of students. While conducting this evaluation, I examined the frameworks of values held by each of the two groups of participants with regard to L2 writing and learning, in both regular and IT-enhanced classrooms, and specifically in relation to their experiences in the IFL context.

First, I found that the study's findings in relation to IFL tutors' prior and current experiences, their choices in managing the classes and their instructional practices, as well as their expectations and interpretations (in contrast to those of their students), lend further strength to the voices insisting on the importance and potential impact of support for language tutors – often ignored in much L2 writing research – on the learning of writing (Warschauer, 1999). My data suggest that, in contrast to Peyton's (1999) claim, the IFL tutors involved in my study did not really relinquish much control in the classroom when using IT. Instead, they tended to hold on to a teacher-directed approach similar to the one encountered in the traditional classrooms observed. This occurred in spite of the tutors'



best intentions and of their attempts to apply a student-centred approach, since students appeared to want them to assume a more authoritarian – and in all likelihood more familiar – role, particularly in relation to language and writing issues. The students did, however, seem agreeable to a more collaborative and egalitarian classroom management style and to group writing tasks – characteristics frequently associated with use of IT, and particularly with the use of networked computers, in other studies.

In addition, and again in contrast to Peyton's (1999) claims, my analysis does not indicate that these students found anything substantially transformative in the integration of IT into their learning environment. Their classroom and study practices for the most part showed little evidence of changes directly related to the integration of IT elements in specific lessons or in the module syllabus as a whole. Those students who had considerable prior experience with IT continued to use technology for independent study and non-academic activities, but did not really adopt the autonomous and collaborative practices which are the focus of process approaches to writing and are touted as all-but-unavoidable in IT-enhanced contexts. Nor did these students appear to find IT-enhanced writing more motivating, as Chiao and Phinney claim (Chiao, 2000; Phinney, 1991). In fact, some found it less so, especially if they had difficulties with computers or were slow typists. Nonetheless in this IT-enhanced learning environment, according to experiences reported during focus-groups, some students noticed a number of changes over time in their writing practice and process. Ultimately, then, in answer to the main question motivating the study, i.e. "How do claims in the literature regarding the role of the use of IT in L2 writing instruction play out in this specific IFL context?", the data gathered in this study leads me to reply that – for these students and tutors, engaging in learning and teaching at this particular site – much of the optimism projected onto IT, and particularly onto computer technologies, has yet to be realized.

The integration of IT into writing syllabi at this site, however, did have some pedagogical implications, albeit in unexpected directions. These include the different responses of individual students in the classroom (which meant that some students appeared hindered while others seemed helped by the use of IT), and the potential for connecting with and capitalizing on some students' familiarity with Italian and IT extending beyond the classroom.

The analysis conducted in the previous chapters indicates that these participants' diverse frameworks of values played a central role in shaping the dynamics of the writing classes – but in ways not necessarily consistent with predictions in the literature regarding IT-enhanced instructional environments. In fact, these frameworks of values shaped what participants expected from, and saw in, the classroom in ways consistent with their prior experience and individual beliefs about language, learning, and L2 writing. At least in the context surrounding this study, and in contrast with somewhat under-examined claims by Luke (2000) or Peyton (1999), the introduction of IT did not appear simply or predictably to direct this process. Instead, as posited by Egbert *et al.* (1999), the web-based activities, such as those included in “Text Analysis” (along with the individual critical reflections and group discussions conducted under the tutor's supervision); the use of Word processing for composing; and the availability of software packages such as “Luisa” and “GramEx” for remedial writing activities, all interacted as elements in a dynamic network which included participants' frameworks of values, expectations, and investment of energies.

The experiences of these participants suggest that the introduction of IT into their classes did not revolutionize the instructional and learning environment, since participants' existing underlying frameworks of values about the respective roles of tutors and students, the teaching practices, and the learning processes were not immediately transformed.

On the other hand, IT was not a neutral element of the learning and instructional environment either. Rather, technology-enhanced activities observed during this



investigation have served as a means to highlight both converging and conflicting individual values and ideas held by participants about the teaching and learning of IFL writing skills with the integration of IT, as well as their pedagogical goals.

Both students and tutors recognized a need for pedagogic innovation. According to the data analysis conducted in Chapter VIII, students seemed definitely attracted by computer-based technologies and many used them as a learning tool. They mentioned, however, that they did not have enough experience of using Italian online resources or the websites that are available on the market, especially for the development of writing skills. In addition, the majority of the tutors participating in the investigation recognized that they are not currently incorporating many activities requiring the use of computers to make the most of the advantages they bring to instruction, especially for the development of writing skills. As we have seen in Chapter VII, during the semi-structured interviews IFL tutors could identify potential benefits of instructional technology for enhancing the instruction of writing skills with effective pedagogical practices implemented in the classroom, but they eventually pointed out their own need for training.

Although in the writing classes under examination the role that the majority of participating tutors played in the introduction of technology did not move from the role of implementer to that of supplier and adopter – a role, the latter, that was fully played by only one tutor: D – the selected IFL tutors provided descriptive evidence of their IT-enhanced teaching practices, and interesting ideas on innovative pedagogical uses of technology were expressed, although many of them had not been yet put into practice.

As outlined in Section 2.2 of Chapter VII, the participating IFL tutors suggested new uses of Internet resources available to them (Section 2.2.i); proposed innovative communicative and interactive tools in which students could participate (Section 2.2.ii); suggested ways to further exploit software-based learning in order to accommodate students' individual needs and *therefore* facilitate self-paced learning (Section 2.2.iii); and

wished that a dedicated website for Italian writing instruction were available as a point of reference for teaching materials and resources (Section 2.2.iii).

As already mentioned in the conclusive section of Chapter VII, IFL tutors' pedagogical beliefs are closely linked to the way students view the presence of technology in the classroom, and to the traditional role students tend to associate with the IFL tutors. Conflicting frameworks of values emerged primarily from the investigation of this specific aspect – the role associated with the IFL tutor – conducted among IFL students. An aspect of special importance is what the analysis implied regarding the students' apparent reluctance to take the initiative, for example by being the first to intervene in classroom group discussions. The evidence presented here suggests that such hesitations may have been founded primarily in a perceived lack of IFL skills in general, as opposed to skills in IFL writing. Such a distinction indicated that the training of L2 writers in effective critical analysis and group discussions needs to nurture the students' sense of responsibility with respect to their own FL learning process, in addition to cultivating the image of the self as a writer.

Moreover, this evidence suggested the need to dig into participants' underlying frameworks of values to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of teaching and learning IFL writing skills in this specific environment. As mentioned earlier in Chapter V, devoted to *Methods and Procedures*, my own key to entering the data was provided by the words and behaviours of the participants themselves, which constituted the focus of sub-question *b)* and the domain of inquiry.

The initial focus was then on the participants. Early in the course of the data collection I became aware of incidents of frustration or disappointment in the words and behaviours of some tutors and students. Of these reactions, some were evident in participants' tone of voice, such as when they encountered difficulties with computer technologies. These occurrences were recorded in my field notes, while others were



reported by participants in semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. In my analysis of the questionnaires along with the semi-structured interviews, field notes, classroom observation rubrics, and class documents such as syllabi, it began to appear that the students and tutors were sometimes operating from different expectations and had differing goals for some of the writing assignments and activities performed in class.

Thus, my own experience in this instructional and learning environment refocused my attention on ways in which each participant's views and understandings might shape different goals and expectations for the classes. My sense of the importance of this theme was reinforced in reviewing Moody's (2001) and Warschauer's (1999) studies, both of which find the theme of disjunctions between tutors' and students' expectations central to interpreting data. In their accounts, Moody and Warschauer illustrate the need to dig into participants' underlying frameworks of values in order to gain richer insights into both what sets into motion the dynamics of a class, and what participants see the results of those dynamics to be in their own teaching and learning. It seemed therefore important to deepen my investigation into the arena of expectations, using this as a point of entry to participants' frameworks of values and their resulting interpretations of the experience of teaching or learning IFL writing using IT (and in particular computer technologies) which they accumulated during the years covered by the study.

In order to do that, I attempted to substantiate my initial awareness of this theme. The three expanded sub-questions formulated in Chapter IV guided the investigation:

**Expanded sub-question bi)**

- Why do participants in this specific IFL learning context use technology?
- What beliefs do they have about the role of technology in the FL language instruction and learning process? More specifically, what do IFL tutors report they expect about computer technology, and in particular about the integration of computer technologies in the L2 writing instruction? And what do IFL students report they expect about the pedagogical benefit of learning a FL and, more specifically, L2 writing with the support of technology and computer technology?

**Expanded sub-question bii)**

- What technology background and training do the language tutors and students have?

**Expanded sub-question biii)**

- How do these language tutors and students use technology?
- How are they using the specific computer technologies in administrative contexts?<sup>1</sup>
- How are they using the specific computer technologies pedagogically?<sup>2</sup>

In order to answer the sub-questions above, I used quotations from participants that illuminated issues related to their expectations, goals, standards, and frameworks of values (question *bi*), training and prior experience (question *bii*), and reactions to, understandings of, and interpretations of their own experiences and current IT use (question *biii*). I looked for what participants communicated about these elements both through their words, during the semi-structured interviews and focus-groups, and in their behaviour in the classrooms,

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<sup>1</sup> Administrative use is the use of technology for managerial, preparatory, or organizational work in relation to teaching.

<sup>2</sup> Pedagogical use is the use of technology with students in the classroom in the form of either teaching with technology or assigning student technology projects.



as documented in my field notes and observation rubrics. From this basis I was able to follow and maintain connections to the other domain – the learning and instructional environment, and, in particular, the classroom – as I began to interpret what I was seeing in the participants' data.

In particular, the classroom observations coupled with the semi-structured interviews and the focus-groups suggest that conflicts between the tutors and some of their students regarding *a)* their respective roles and responsibilities, and *b)* their ideas about learning, may have impacted participants' investment of energy and engagement in activities. These outcomes appear to be deeply rooted in participants' underlying frameworks of values regarding the teaching and learning of both IFL and writing, and the integration of IT into these processes in the specific IFL classrooms under examination.

## **1. Areas of Conflict**

The close analysis conducted revealed that the tutors and students expressed somewhat different ideas of their own and one another's roles and responsibilities with regard to the class itself and especially to initiation and control of activities during instruction. They also had a different understanding of IFL writing practices and effective means of learning. While sustained also by other data, these areas of conflict emerged, in particular, from the observations conducted in relation to the module *IT 301* and from the comments given by tutor (D) after the observation, as well as from the focus-groups conducted among the students.

In the next section we will describe each of these diverging visions, with the aim to unravel the different frameworks of values tutors and students operated from. An area of conflict was represented by a specific class activity, requiring students to work in pairs during specific stages of the writing process (i.e. the generation of examples). Another

related activity was a homework assignment – peer review – which was assigned at the end of the IT-enhanced class for the module *IT 301* I observed (see *Snapshot 3* in Chapter VI). The tutor spoke freely about her frustration with the outcomes of the work in pairs and the responses to the peer review assignments, suggesting that she had not seen her goals accomplished. She felt that students had put little effort into and had learned little from the activity. She saw them as for the most part unable to offer effective critiques of one another's writing, speculating that either she had not given them sufficient training to utilize this “technique”, or they simply did not have the language proficiency to accomplish it on their own. She reported that the students also complained to her that they too found the activity unrewarding.

In contrast to the tutor's focus on the students' lack of success in the peer review task, however, the tutor reported that students, in speaking to her, focused on the responses they gave, rather than the ones they received, saying they had not received enough feedback, or feedback of sufficient depth, from their peers, and adding that they felt that they should have more feedback from the tutor instead (D's comments after the observation conducted on the *Essay Writing* section of the module *IT 301, Modern Italian Language II*). This is indirectly corroborated by the students' own comments about feedback: while nine indicated a need or desire for feedback from the tutor, only one cited other students as potential sources for feedback, and two more included giving feedback to other students in description of their own responsibilities as students. Thus, while both tutors and students found the feedback given in the peer review activity inadequate, students seemed to believe the primary focus of the activity to be receiving useful feedback that would assist them in improving their own writing, as opposed to developing the ability to critique written texts effectively by learning to give feedback on other people's work, which was the tutor's focus. Tutors and students then assessed the value, and the failings, of the same peer review activity differently.



At least one possible reason for this different focus appeared in many students' comments about the way in which they saw the role of the tutors. Most of the comments were collected among students in focus-group 2 (*IT 301*), but these data were also sustained by comments from focus-group 1 (*IT 101*) and focus-group 3 (*IT 401*).

Four students cited the tutor's responsibility to "[tell] students errors in usage and [give] correct usage and vocabulary, [give] ways to say different things" (Focus-group 2), suggesting that these students saw the tutor as the only expert resource for linguistic accuracy in the class, a source preferred over their peers because the individual "student doesn't know how to refine" his/her writing (Focus-group 2). Six participants also viewed the tutor as the authority on writing quality or style, noting as one of her responsibilities "tell[ing] students good ways to write" (Focus-group 2). Three students expressed a preference for individual teacher/student meetings because they saw the tutor as the authority and because "she needs to tell students errors" (Focus-group 3).

Another important area of divergence emerged, in regard to the initiative and responsibility of participants during instruction. The ideal student, as characterized by many of the participants, shows up, invests mental effort, and simply does what the tutor asks. S/he is receptive to and prepared to receive instruction from the tutor. This is illustrated in one student's comment that a tutor and his/her students must "interact" – which, when I questioned her, she then characterized as "the tutor asks questions, students discuss" (Focus-group 2), putting the responsibility for initiation of exchanges and activities entirely on the side of the tutor. Among further comments showing this perception that initiative rests with the tutor are the statement that a good teacher "makes students feel interested" (Focus-group 3), and the one according to which s/he "finds every student's problem" (Focus-group 1). Even among a group whose interview responses indicated relatively high levels of initiative and application, as noted below, this receptive position does occasionally appear in comments such as "most students who come [to class

regularly] will achieve their goal” (Focus-group 3). Two students volunteered in their interviews the view that, in their experience, FL teachers pushed students harder in high school than at university (Focus-group 1) and that tutors at university “won’t pressure students” (Focus-group 1), further suggesting that some students continued to expect, based on their past experience, to be pushed by their tutors rather than to drive their learning themselves.

These expectations contrast sharply with those of the tutor, who viewed students as “responsible for their own learning” (D’s Comments after observation). At least some students seemed to hold similar views about some aspects of their learning. The *Questionnaire on Writing Practice, Habits and Instruction*, indicates that 13 students out of the 29 participants took time beyond class to use or study Italian, also with the support of computer technologies. In discussing a good student’s qualities, four respondents noted that these included some sort of independent work beyond the requirements of the class. A nascent sense of autonomy seems to have developed in response to the tutor’s efforts to cultivate such attitudes, since one student felt that the tutor’s role was rather to “make [it] possible for students to learn” (Focus-group 1).

Overall, it seems that the central theme running through these examples is a substantial difference in the tutors’ and students’ ideas concerning control, initiative, and responsibility. The tutors’ focus appears to have been the cultivation of students’ autonomy and the reduction of their dependence on the tutors, pursued by encouraging the learners to develop their own critical eye through activities conducted in pairs or in groups as well as exercises such as peer review. The students, on the other hand, also seemed to expect a division of responsibilities between tutors and students, but along different lines. They appeared to want the tutor to take a more active role in their writing processes and language learning, giving more feedback and correcting errors directly more often. Some students, as we have seen, did express an ideal of student initiative in seeking out



opportunities outside the classroom, beyond the explicit requirements of the course, through additional writing and reading practice. It seems, however, that in the actual classrooms and when dealing with assignments directly tied to the courses, many students continued throughout the year to expect the tutor to take a central position.

These participants' expectations complicate claims in the literature regarding the integration of IT in writing instruction according to which Internet access, by its nature, alters pedagogy, changing the teacher's role from authority/centre to coach/collaborator (Luke, 2000). A further claim called into question concerns the view according to which the introduction of computers linked to website activities (such as, in our case, the "Text Analysis" site) into the face-to-face element of language courses demands a different approach to writing, learning, and teaching, such that "traditional notions of what writing and learning involve and traditional patterns of teacher-dominated talk are not appropriate, possible, or even desirable" (Peyton, 1999). In spite of tutors who expressly supported ideals of student autonomy and independence in their teaching philosophy, and also incorporated in their syllabus and class planning activities intended to develop such autonomy, the students in many ways continued to view the tutors as central and were unwilling to take on such authority themselves, even in the limited context of web-mediated activities.

Because IT is frequently claimed as a means to motivate (Chiao, 2000; Phinney, 1991) and encourage students to take more active roles in, and more responsibility for, their own learning, examining ways in which issues of control, initiative, and responsibility are realized in a specific context becomes particularly important. The present study may serve to moderate much of the enthusiasm around the use of IT in writing instruction. The experiences of these tutors and students illustrate how factors such as conflicting ideas about who is responsible for students' learning and what such responsibilities entail may affect whether and how such high ideals are realized in actual IT-enhanced courses. In the

modules examined, the use of IT *per se* does not appear to have radically transformed power relations or notions of agency during the course of the year, in contrast with the experiences reported by participants in studies by Kramsch, A’Ness, and Lam (2000). Rather, tutor and students appeared to continue to negotiate these issues based namely on their ongoing experiences in, ideas of, and values related to, their respective roles. As the next section indicates, these different frameworks of values regarding tutors’ and students’ roles in combination with participants’ ideas about learning IFL and, in particular, developing IFL writing skills led to additional conflicts in the classrooms.

The tutors’ goals for the classes encompassed both discourse- and sentence-level issues. The main objectives, as stated in the syllabi, included development of “language” (*IT 101: Italian Language for Beginners*) and “writing skills” (*Essay Writing* sections of *IT 301* and *IT 401* modules), terms which could possibly be interpreted as including grammar and vocabulary. These objectives, however, were preceded in the syllabi by others focusing on content and other discourse-level concerns, such as choosing topics (*Italian Language for Beginners*), generating ideas (*Italian Language for Beginners* and *Essay Writing* sections), identifying and analyzing target audiences (*Essay Writing* sections), and applying the appropriate rhetorical patterns to a specific writing task (*Essay Writing* sections).

Tutor D, in particular, further reported in an interview that she tried with her classes to attend primarily to content and organization for *Essay Writing* intermediate groups. Tutor C also mentioned his focus on content as well as language accuracy for *Essay Writing* at advanced level. This focus was reinforced in the tutors’ classroom talk, for instance when, in preparing students for the *Essay Writing* assignments, tutor D stated: “I will tell you what part is not clear and what part is good” (Field Notes from the observation conducted on the *Essay Writing* section of the module *IT 301, Modern Italian Language II.*), emphasizing that the communication of meaning was her primary focus. In addition, in



reflecting on her own teaching practices, she judged that she had focused less on grammar than in the previous classes she had taught and reported that she had decided to alter her continuous assessment methods in the second term to reflect this change, adding an in-class composition and reducing the number of grammar questions. Previously, the continuous assessment had been entirely grammar-oriented (Field Notes from the observation conducted on the *Essay Writing* section of the module *IT 101, Italian Language for Beginners*). The tutor's intended message regarding writing foci thus emphasized a balance between both discourse and sentence-level concerns, in general slightly prioritizing discourse-level issues.

In contrast, students entered the *Essay Writing* section of the *IT 301* module with somewhat different foci. The first focus-group among *IT 301* students (Focus-group 2), organized at the beginning of the data collection period (November 2005), included the question: "What are your goals for this class?" Students' answers ranged across a number of discourse-level concerns, including style, fluency, knowledge of genres, organization, and generation of ideas. Vocabulary, however, was specified as their primary focus by seven students, grammar by four, and correctness and accuracy by three. For some, this focus did not change during the year. Of the seven students who reported improvements in their writing during the focus-group held toward the end of the second term (May 2006), four, all intermediate level students attending the module *IT 301*, assessed their own writing improvement primarily in terms of grammar and vocabulary. For some, grammar and vocabulary may well have remained the primary foci throughout their IFL writing course. According to the tutor, students in the department often complained to her that the third year writing course tutors, all native Italian speakers, gave internal essay scores that students perceived as too high. The tutor believed that this perceived disjunction in evaluation was due to the students' previous experience in studying FLs at high school, where they were taught mainly by non-native speakers who "care too much about the

language structures they use, without paying attention to the expression of their ideas” (Focus-group 2). Thus, the non-native speakers they encountered as FL high school teachers may have shaped students’ expectations about how their writing should be evaluated, by giving more feedback on sentence-level linguistic issues and/or privileging these areas within their grading system. Therefore, one of the factors influencing students who had previously studied foreign languages in high school could be identified with their past experience with language learning. During the first focus-group held among *IT 101* students (Focus-group 1), two students mentioned that language textbooks currently in use at high school level, though influenced by communicative approaches, still use a lot of grammar/translation methodology, requiring students to memorize vocabulary and grammar rules for use in relatively decontextualized exercises. This group of students seemed still influenced by their previous years of FL instruction.

Revision was another area where the tutors’ expectations did not fully correspond to students’ practices. The *IT 401* tutor emphasized his expectation that students would write multiple drafts of their essays, stating this in class at the beginning of the academic year: “you have to revise a few times” (Field Notes from the observation conducted on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2005 in Room 403). He also built revisions into the assignment schedule and asked the students to submit a first draft to the tutor before submitting the finished piece for a grade. Such an emphasis on drafting is a defining element of the process writing approach, which has been a major influence first on L1 and more recently on L2 writing pedagogy.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the tutor’s stress on revision, however, in the *Questionnaire on Writing Strategies* 19 students reported that they wrote only one, or sometimes, at most, two drafts, using Word processing. The tutor speculated that perhaps these students did not

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<sup>3</sup> In module *IT 301* the selection of textbooks for the *Essay Writing* section and the tutors’ endorsement of process writing approaches were in further evidence. *Crescendo*, the text adopted for *Essay Writing* courses, explicitly references process approaches and the ways these are integrated throughout the book, including the presence of prewriting strategies in each chapter.



know where to begin revising, due to low proficiency levels in Italian and/or Italian writing. Only four students reported that they revised a draft more than twice for the writing classes. This seems particularly surprising given frequent speculation in the literature according to which the ease and speed of revision using Word processing software support and encourage students to revise more often (see Ferris and Hedgcock, 1988) – clearly a desirable benefit deriving from the incorporation of IT in writing classrooms according to those oriented toward the process approach.

One possible explanation of these “revision difficulties” can be found in the responses students gave about the use of computers during the revision stage of writing. When asked what they liked about using computers for writing, nine students endorsed their “convenience” (Focus-group 1 and Focus-group 2) and six noted they worked “fast” or “faster” on computers (Focus-group 3). These responses may indicate that some students tended to use Word processing to streamline their existing writing practices, rather than having their composing processes transformed through exploration of the diverse capabilities of the software they used. Nine students, in fact, reported using Word processing only for editing or simply to “type in” an otherwise completed draft, using the technology as a typewriter rather than as a composing tool. Students also stated that they frequently used computers for composing homework, but, as these tasks were done individually, they did not have opportunities to view other students’ composing processes in action, or to observe the ways in which technology could support these practices.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the use of the students’ L1 versus their L2 was also an area of divergence between the tutors and some of the learners. Tutor D, for example, told me early in the year that she generally used Italian in whole-class discussion of content topics, but she preferred

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<sup>4</sup> Another possible influence on revision strategies might, of course, be found in the students’ prior experiences with writing instruction, in which revision may not have been introduced or emphasized. In order to confirm this hypothesis, however, we would need further evidence.

to use English to clarify grammar points and other meta-linguistic, abstract issues. My observations indicated that this was in fact her usual pattern of language use in the classrooms. I also noted that she permitted students to use English in their small group work, although as she circulated she generally spoke to them in Italian and sometimes directly encouraged them to switch to it in their own interactions. In addition, she generally used English for oral classroom management in activities requiring the use of computers, because she was concerned that students fully understand directions for activities that were generally novel to them in both procedures and vocabulary. During focus-groups, however, three students expressed the belief that only Italian should be spoken in Italian classes, even though my field notes showed that no student actually adhered to this in practice (Focus-group 2).

From the above discussion, it seems clear that IFL tutors and students were sometimes operating from different beliefs about the nature of learning to write in Italian and about the role of IT. The tutors' views appeared to be drawn in large part from the process approach to writing instruction, with its emphasis on content, discourse-level concerns, and frequent revision. Despite this, many students were not fully aware of the way writers make decisions as they write.<sup>5</sup> Some of them, in particular, seemed more focused on product and sentence-level issues, and this focus persisted throughout their course of studies, in spite of influences to the contrary. These differences may in turn have shaped the participants' perceptions of what elements of classroom instruction or feedback they believed most valuable, and their choices as to how to use IT in composing.

Such a divide, as any composition tutor can attest, is not necessarily uncommon in either L1 or L2 writing classes. In light of claims such as Peyton's (1999) – according to

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to remember, however, that the limited time available to L2 writing courses is almost certainly insufficient to provide a proper holistic approach to writing and to meet all students' needs. For the details relating to organization of the single courses and of their content, see Chapter VI.



whom the use of present-day IT demands a different approach to writing, learning, and teaching – this difference is significant in this particular context. In our case, major changes in the students' ideas about learning Italian and about writing, even in the face of apparently contrary influences from both the tutor and the writing technologies available, do not seem to have occurred.

I feel that a major issue complicating the situation, at least for these participants, is that of IFL ability. Some tutors (B, C, D), for example, saw themselves as simultaneously trying to balance the teaching of writing skills with the teaching of language in general, as one of them made clear during the final interview:

“Two thirds of intermediate [level] students understand the point of the assignment and the criteria. The remaining third don't understand academic writing conventions such as principles of organization, use of introduction, conclusion, etc.” (D)

Tutor C in the advanced writing classes added in an informal conversation which took place after the classroom observation:

“I try to focus on content, then language; I feel there are still little problems at this level with language.”(C)

These statements appear to have played out in practice as a division of attention between sentence-level problems, which both tutors and students more closely identified with linguistic knowledge, and discourse-level issues, which seemed to be perceived as writing issues rather than language issues. If one accepts this distinction, the experience of these tutors and students suggests that the dual demands of trying to acquire both sets of

skills and knowledge may not leave much room for either tutors or students to radically transform their ways of teaching and learning, some of which they are only just developing, in the directions which IT enthusiasts predict.

## **2. Areas of Accord**

In examining participants' expectations and goals, and the frameworks of values underlying them, my attention was drawn to dissonances, and I therefore focused first on the areas where conflicts concerning goals and values appeared evident between the tutors and the students. Such a focus, however, can obscure the full set of experiences of the participants if it neglects the places where they were in accord, or at least headed in the same direction. In some cases, a transference of values, a dissemination of new understanding, or a negotiation heading toward consensus can occur from tutors to students, students to tutors, or from one student to another, resulting in real learning. The classrooms observed were rich in such areas of agreement.

One aspect, in particular, that both tutors and students valued was the relaxed atmosphere of the classes. Six students commented during the focus-groups (Focus-group 1 and 3) on the comfortable, low-pressure environment in the classroom. My observation notes indicate that one tutor (B) made a point of cultivating such an atmosphere through games and the use of collaborative activities. This informal atmosphere, while certainly not limited to IT-enhanced contexts, is nonetheless closely associated with them in the literature, and it may be that the integration of IT contributed to such a learning environment at this site, by adding additional collaborative activities and allowing students to work at their own pace on some tasks. The data collected for this study, however, do not offer sufficient evidence of a more relaxed atmosphere in IT-rich classes rather than in



“traditional” ones, and further, richer data would be needed to conduct this specific investigation.

Another area where some elements of concurrence emerged was the growing attention devoted by some students to discourse-level concerns and, in particular, an increased awareness of genre on their part. As noted above, tutor C specifically and repeatedly focused students’ attention on genre conventions and rhetorical devices in his in-class lectures, materials, and activities, and the formal writing assignments themselves were characterized in these terms, i.e. as argument papers, descriptions, and so forth. At the end of the academic year, six of the 29 students interviewed (all of them regularly attending either the *IT 301* or *IT 401 Essay Writing* sessions and for the most part of high proficiency level in Italian) were referencing genre labels and conventions from the classes when discussing their writing in interviews. This suggests that the process approach advocated by the tutor did influence at least some students’ thinking about and evaluation of writing, to the extent of focusing their attention on discourse-level concerns.

Finally, though they may not have fully articulated and agreed on the terms of the partnership, it seems that both tutors and students viewed one another as partners in the learning process. While the tutors set standards of students’ performance, some of them also solicited students’ opinions during the discussion, asked for input regarding class activities (tutor A), and encouraged students to select their own topics for written essays (tutor C). Four students also expressed this sense of collaboration during the focus-groups, for instance by stating that “the tutor and students set goals together” (Focus-group 3).

What relation, if any, the integration of IT into the learning environment may have had to this sense of collaboration, however, is not evident. A further, specific investigation of the learning environment would be necessary to see whether and how we can create a conducive learning environment for the effective integration of communication technologies.

### **3. Final thoughts**

My overall interpretation of this study's findings is that much potential has yet to be realized both in the area of writing skills development and, more specifically, in the integration of IT within L2 writing instruction. In the process of recursive data examination I undertook, I found it easy to identify missed opportunities and failed expectations, but less simple to suggest how these difficulties might be overcome in the future. Yet I continue to believe that IT can have a productive place in FL classrooms and in the hands of L2 writing students – perhaps precisely because my perspective includes these opportunities and expectations.

My viewpoint echoes that of some of the student participants themselves: even as they identified problems with IT, and especially with computer technology used in their writing development, they continued to offer reasons why they liked and enjoyed writing with the help of computers. Many of their comments centred on either particular aspects of software, on features such as grammar and spell-checkers, or on the communication capabilities of email and chat, or similar applications. Some of their thoughts, however, went even further towards expressing expectations and perceived opportunities which IT seemed to them to be offering:

“It can improve my writing skills” (18)

“[The computer technologies] add to the opportunities to learn” (6)

That these ideas persist among participants in this study speaks powerfully of the potential that these participants see for IT in the writing class. Some of these students – learners immersed in a relatively technology-advantaged context and familiar with IT from



other academic as well as non-academic arenas – clearly have high hopes for IT in their Italian *Essay Writing* classrooms.

Overall, however, little collaboration or communication was seen among the IFL students and the IFL tutors. For example, there was little attempt to promote other, out-of-class, interaction among students and language tutors, such as discussion lists on worldwide networks.

As we have seen in the literature review, the interaction of writers and readers, incorporated in the broader notion of context,<sup>6</sup> provides students with a further understanding of writing processes, language forms, and genres. This social, interactive and collaborative approach to learning could be positively reflected in the way technology is used in the classroom, where electronic mail, bulletin boards, or discussion lists on worldwide networks have been made available by advances in technology. The use of linked computers, for example, whether in the laboratory or in the classroom, has introduced the possibility of bringing real life experience into the writing classroom, helping both students and tutors to integrate technology in their activities in a more collaborative manner.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever our ultimate beliefs, however, as Martha Pennington (2003) suggests, there is no doubt that teachers are responsible for the appropriate use of technology to “promote and transform literacy” (286). Since the integration of technology, like any other teaching resource, involves complex pedagogical decisions, such as the establishment of concrete goals and objectives (Brown, 1987) by the teachers, IFL tutors will need to look

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of context incorporates ideas from New Literacy Studies according to which writing only makes sense within wider social and cultural practices (e.g. Barton and Hamilton, 1998). “Context” is more than the interactions of particular writers and readers, since it refers to how institutions, societies, and cultures themselves influence writing.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the inconsistency in the results of studies on the use of computers in second language composition, Lourdes Ortega (1997) states that L2 scholars hope that the use of computers will help the active collaborative integration of technology in the field of L2 writing.

at both the advantages and the disadvantages of each technology before making a choice and arriving at a conclusion, however interim, about the impact of IT-enhanced instruction. The picture painted above confirms the fact that the role of the teachers has not changed yet; on the contrary, it has been re-energized as an agent of change, guide, instructor, and mentor.

My sense, then, at the end of this study, is that IT has great potential but its presence alone is not sufficient for those potentialities to become reality. I believe that IT, by itself, cannot transform our literacy practices and pedagogies; rather, in order to make use of those opportunities for transformation which IT can facilitate, students, teachers, and researchers must challenge themselves to rethink the ways in which they write, teach, and learn, familiarizing themselves with the new and altered means of communication that IT can offer; reflecting upon, and raising their awareness of their own practices in writing, teaching and learning; and establishing a meta-awareness of the related processes. Finally, students, teachers, and researchers need to take control of the shape and design of these technologies in order to better suit them to their current needs – while also balancing these with a constant openness to unforeseen opportunities.

While I acknowledge that L2 research has neither proven nor denied the effects of computers in the writing classroom, I continue to believe, based on my own experience in both teaching and learning, which has been supported by the evidence gathered with this study, that computer technologies can facilitate and enhance the teaching of L2 writing in a more collaborative and interactive manner. More importantly, I strongly believe computers can have positive results if the instruction of writing is planned effectively and activities are integrated into the established syllabus.

When evaluating IT-enhanced instruction, we need to consider tutors' beliefs and expectations underlying their frameworks of values, as well as the way students view the presence of technology in the classroom. In essence, then, my position echoes the approach



of Mark Warschauer (which has been supported throughout this study) in arguing that the interaction of IT and social practice, “literacies” and pedagogies occur multidirectionally and multidimensionally. Therefore, rather than opposing most of the optimistic claims already in circulation about IT, I would add my voice to those who qualify these claims with conditionals. My qualifications are:

- if IFL students as well as IFL tutors can find their way to embracing different ways of learning;
- if IFL students assume greater responsibility for their own learning;
- if institutions will devote collaborative resources (including those necessary for IFL tutor development in the use of technology-based instruction) to supporting all aspects of the integration of IT into IFL modules and, in particular, their writing sections;

...then the potentially transformative power of these altered and, perhaps, new “literacies” may be realized in writing pedagogy, and both tutors and students will be able to see that technology can be positively related to the teaching and learning of composition.

## 4. Directions for Further Research

This dissertation, grounded in L2 writing research, classroom-based research, and a combination of qualitative and quantitative traditions, fuels the dialogue between theory and data to refine our understanding of writing practices and instruction within a particular context. Its motivation arose from *a)* the growing use of IT in writing and writing pedagogy, outstripping studies of methodology; *b)* the changing orientation in FL research toward close, contextualized studies of learning environments; *c)* the need to expand the dialogue between L2 researchers and practitioners (Matsuda and Jablonski, 1998); as well as *d)* the need to look at “minor” languages, other than EFL.

This study stands at the crossroads of these diverse strands, examining “what particular teachers and students do, think, and accomplish in and through writing in relation to the settings in which they live” (Cumming, 1998).

The research process followed to conduct this study has largely mirrored the process of learning to write, being discovery-oriented and recursive. In considering and welcoming new aspects that could not be predicted from the initial stages of the project, the design of this study is not one which establishes or tests a pre-existing hypothesis. Rather, the purpose of my study was two-fold: first, to provide a detailed description of a specific learning environment, in order to “characterize the particular” (Ramathan and Atkinson, 1999), in response to the claims about the use of IT in writing practices and instruction emerging from recent research, particularly in relation to the use of computer technology in FL (and even more specifically in IFL); and, second, to unearth generalizable findings and so suggest potentially fruitful areas for future study.

It is also my hope that, in characterizing the particular, I have accurately transmitted the voices and experiences of the participants in this study: IFL tutors and students. I chose the participant domain to drive my analysis of the data because precisely



the participants were the experts on the particulars of their experiences. In the belief that the participants were able to access knowledge and interpretations that I could not reach on my own, I relied fully on the guidance of their commentaries and the triangulation of their perspectives with IT and writing in interpreting the data.

Although this type of research allows for the generation of abstractions and the possibility of comparability across contexts, I hope that the outcomes of this study may not only be used to inform academic research, but also be applied to the daily tasks in instruction and learning. More specifically, I hope that IFL tutors and students will find reflections of their own experiences with both IT and writing among the voices of the participants, and use these insights to refine and innovate their own practices.

Like many other studies in the field of SLA and L2 writing, the present work does not provide definitive answers to the complex questions of language learning. Rather, as is also common, this project has raised many more questions than it has answered, providing the basis for further suggestions as to future research in the area of SLA theory and pedagogy, and leaving many directions open for future inquiry. Some of the specific questions the study raises are of special importance to researchers and practitioners. These include:

- How can newly designed – and emergent – features of modern technologies, namely writing hardware and software, better support L2 students in general and, more in particular, L2 students at different proficiency levels?
- What sorts of tasks are particularly amenable or appropriate to the integration of IT, and what types are better suited to other media for L2 students at various levels?
- Is there any transfer of skills between IT-enhanced and traditional environments, for example in the areas of fluency, information processing, integration of texts

from multiple sources, and so forth? Are these skills maintained when movements between environments occur?

- What socio-cultural factors present in different groups – such as beliefs about the roles of tutors and students, ideas concerning appropriate classroom behaviours, or preferences for activity types and configurations – affect how IT is actually used, and its effectiveness within instruction, in real settings?
- What material factors present in various settings – for example, layout of computer labs and condition of equipment – affect the effective integration of IT in real settings?
- What characteristics of a student make him or her an optimal or less than optimal learner as far as the use of IT for writing is concerned? What individual differences affect, for example, students' knowledge, enthusiasm, and motivation?

At the end of this study, I also see a continuing need for descriptive, interpretive research in other contexts, ranging from technologically-advantaged sites such as the one I examined to others with more limited presence of IT, so that researchers and practitioners can gain a better grasp of ways in which, for instance, prior experience with IT, or the lack of IT, along with culturally shaped expectations regarding teaching and learning FLs and writing, shape the role of IT in diverse writing classrooms.

At a further level of abstraction, the study suggests several ramifications which can be of value for educational and, more specifically, for composition research. First, the study confirms the importance of zooming the research lens in and out, shifting the focus among several levels of the educational experience, from individual participant, to subgroup, to entire group, in order to obtain a fuller and more complex interpretation of events.



The study also carries broader implications which are specific to applied linguistic research. In particular, it demonstrates the value of integrating the analysis of the learning and instructional environment, focusing attention on participants' voices and situating those voices in context.

I believe these implications are not only important for the specific IT-enhanced instructional settings taken into consideration in this study, but also for any teaching and learning context where new technological resources are made available to tutors and students alike. Both groups will need to take responsibility as the main actors in transforming the role of IT from a neutral and transparent into a critical and visible component of learning. Only then, will instructional technology and SLA principles be able to work together to enhance L2 writing instruction.

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# Appendix 1

## Tutor Questionnaire on Writing Instructional Strategies

### PART A: Personal Data and Teaching Experience

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Your field of specialization:

\_\_\_\_\_

Please specify the module/s you teach in the Italian Department:

a.

\_\_\_\_\_

b.

\_\_\_\_\_

c.

\_\_\_\_\_

d.

\_\_\_\_\_

e.

\_\_\_\_\_

1. Your experience in the teaching of Italian as a Foreign Language:

- Less than one year
- One to three years
- Three to five years
- Five to ten years
- More than ten years

**2. Your experience in the teaching of writing:**

**(Please check if Foreign Language or First Language)**

- Less than one year  FL  First Language
- One to three years  FL  First Language
- Three to five years  FL  First Language
- Five to ten years  FL  First Language
- More than ten years  FL  First Language

**3. Your experience in the teaching of writing in the Department of Italian of the University of Warwick:**

- Less than one year
- One to three years
- Three to five years
- Five to ten years
- More than ten years



PART B: Teaching Habits, Practices, and Strategies

1. Please specify how much time of your language lesson you normally dedicate to Foreign Language writing (including controlled, semi-controlled and free composition).

Please disregard this point if you teach the module *Essay Writing*.

---

2. List in the first two columns below the tools and equipment, including materials such as textbooks, photocopying materials, and equipment such as OHP, pen and paper that you use in your writing lessons. Write in the second two columns additional tools and equipment you would like to use.

<i>Equipment in use</i>	<i>Material in use</i>	<i>Additional Equipment</i>	<i>Additional Material</i>

3. Have you ever been trained to teach Foreign Language writing? If yes, where and when?

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4. Have you ever been trained to teach language/writing strategies to your students?

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**5. Do you feel you are up-to-date on the latest research and practice in the teaching of writing?**

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**6. Do you normally incorporate writing strategy training in your writing instruction?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**7. If yes, how do you incorporate writing strategy instruction into your regular classroom?**

- Through *direct* instruction: students are informed of the value and purpose of strategy training.
- Through *embedded* instruction: students are presented with activities and materials structured to elicit the use of the strategies being taught, but are not informed of the reasons why this approach to learning is being practiced.
- Through *metacognitive* instruction, informing students about the purpose and importance of the strategies to be trained and providing instruction on the regulation and monitoring of them.

**8. If yes, do you familiarize your students with writing strategy applications with the help of:**

- Readily available material
- Material you develop as well as instructional techniques you carry out
- None of them



**9. By using the scale below, indicate how often you use the following teaching practices in your writing classroom**

You have your students define their purpose and audience when they write about something:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

You have your students plan their writing:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

While your students write, you talk to them about what they are writing:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

You have your students make changes to their essays to fix mistakes and improve them:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

You have your students use a computer to make changes to their essays:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

You have your students look for information on the Internet to include in their essays:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

You have your students write long answers to questions on tests or assignments that involves reading:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

You have your students do persuasive writing (e.g. letters, reviews...):

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

You use extended essays/papers on assigned topics to assess student progress in reading:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

You use individual/group projects or presentations to assess student progress in reading:

Never                       Rarely                       Sometimes                       Often

*Thank you for completing this questionnaire!*

*Your contribution will be precious for the improvement of writing skills instruction  
in Italian as a Foreign Language.*

## Appendix 2

### Tutor Questionnaire on Computer Technology Experience

#### SECTION I:

#### Your Background, your Teaching Style and Resources Available to You

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

1. List all the modules you teach, as well as their levels and the relative hours per week of class time:

Module title	Level	Hour/Week
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

2. State your preferred teaching methodology.

Please tick and choose only one.

- a. Largely teacher-directed (e.g., teacher-led discussion, lecture)
- b. More teacher-directed than student-centered
- c. Even balance between teacher-directed and student-centered activities
- d. More student-centered than teacher-directed
- e. Largely student-centered (e.g., cooperative learning, discovery learning)



**3. You are mainly using:**

- Textbooks
- Self-made materials

**4. Please read the following descriptions of the proficiency levels a user has in relation to computer technologies. Determine the level that best describes you:**

**a.Unfamiliar**

I have no experience with computer technologies.

**b.Newcomer**

I have attempted to use computer technologies, but I still require help on a regular basis.

**c.Beginner**

I am able to perform basic functions in a limited number of computer applications.

**d.Average**

I demonstrate a general competency in a number of computer applications.

**e.Advanced**

I have acquired the ability to competently use a broad spectrum of computer technologies

**f.Expert**

I am extremely proficient in using a wide variety of computer technologies.

**5. Have you ever participated in any computer workshops/courses before?**

- Yes
- No

**6. If YES, list all the computer workshops/courses you attended:**

Year	Duration	Place	Competence Achieved
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

**7. Specify the total amount of training you have received to date on using computer technology in the language classroom:**

- a. None
- b. A full day or less
- c. More than a full day and less than a one-semester course
- d. A one-term course
- e. More than a one-term course

**8. Using the scale below, how would you rate student access to computer technology at Warwick?**

- a. Poor
- b. Acceptable
- c. Good
- d. Very good
- e. Excellent

**9. How would you rate language tutor access to computer resource in the Italian Department?**

- a. Poor
- b. Acceptable
- c. Good
- d. Very good
- e. Excellent



## SECTION II

### Your Professional Views on Computer Technologies

**1. Using the scale provided, please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the use of computer technology in the classroom:**

- A. Strongly Disagree
- B. Moderately Disagree
- C. Slightly Disagree
- D. Slightly Agree
- E. Moderately Agree
- F. Strongly Agree

**2. The use of computer technology in the classroom...**

- 1.Increases academic achievement (e.g. grades).
- 2.Results in students neglecting important traditional learning resources (e.g., library books).
- 3.Is effective because I believe I can implement it successfully.
- 4.Promotes student collaboration.
- 5.Makes classroom management more difficult.
- 6.Promotes the development of communication skills (e.g., writing and presentation skills).
- 7.Is a valuable instructional tool.
- 8.Is too costly in terms of resources, time and effort.
- 9.Is successful only if teachers have access to a computer at home.
- 10.Makes teachers feel more competent as educators.
- 11.Is successful only if there is adequate teacher training in the uses of technology for learning.
- 12.Gives teachers the opportunity to be learning facilitators instead of information providers.
- 13.Is successful only if computers are regularly maintained by technical staff.
- 14.Demands that too much time be spent on technical problems.
- 15.Is successful only if there is the support of parents.
- 16.Is an effective tool for students of all abilities.

- 17. Is unnecessary because students will learn computer skills on their own, outside of university.
- 18. Enhances my professional development.
- 19. Eases the pressure on me as a teacher.
- 20. Is effective if teachers participate in the selection of computer technologies to be integrated.
- 21. Helps accommodate students' personal learning styles.
- 22. Motivates students to get more involved in learning activities.
- 23. Could reduce the number of teachers employed in the future.
- 24. Limits my choices of instructional materials.
- 25. Requires software-skills training that is too time consuming.
- 26. Promotes the development of students' interpersonal skills (e.g., ability to relate or work with others).
- 27. Will increase the amount of stress and anxiety in students' experience.
- 28. Is effective only when extensive computer resources are available.
- 29. Is difficult because some students know more about computers than many teachers do.
- 30. Is only successful if computer technology is part of the students' home environment.
- 31. Requires extra time to plan learning activities.
- 32. Improves student learning of critical concepts and ideas.



## SECTION III

### Your Experience with Computer Technologies

**1. On average, how many hours per week do you spend using a computer for personal use outside of teaching activities?**

- a. None
- b. Less than 1 hr
- c. 1 hour or more, but less than 3 hours
- d. 3 hours or more, but less than 5 hours
- e. 5 hours or more, but less than 10 hours
- f. 10 hours or more

**2. What applications do you regularly use?**

\_\_\_ Word \_\_\_ Word Perfect \_\_\_ Excel \_\_\_ Power Point \_\_\_ Access  
\_\_\_ Internet Explorer \_\_\_ Netscape \_\_\_ Outlook Express \_\_\_ Outlook \_\_\_ Eudora  
\_\_\_ Acrobat \_\_\_ Acrobat Reader \_\_\_ Others (\_\_\_\_\_)

**3. Indicate how often you integrate computer technologies in your teaching activities:**

- a. Not at all
- b. Rarely
- c. Occasionally
- d. Frequently
- e. Almost Always
- f. All the Time

**4. How frequently are computers used in your program for each of the following tasks?**

Please circle frequency levels	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Daily
<b>Administrative activities</b> (e.g., letter/report writing or record keeping)	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Instructional preparation activities</b> (e.g., preparing lessons, materials )	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Instructional activities for students</b> (e.g., classroom instruction or tutoring )	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Delivering instruction</b> (e.g. ppt presentations)	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Assessment activities</b> (e.g., testing, advising, or placement)	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Grading practices</b> (e.g. spreadsheets for calculating final score)	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Computer networking activities</b> (e.g., e-mail, Internet, WWW)	1	2	3	4	5

**5. Which is your prefer format for teaching reading/writing activities with the help of the computer? Please rate from 1 (less preferred) to 5 (most preferred).**

Multiple Choice	
Drag and Drop	
True or False	
Fill in the Blanks	
Writing Paragraphs	
Writing Essays	
Writing Dialogues in Peers	



**6. Which is your preferred format for teaching reading/writing through the help of computer interaction? Please rate from 1 (less preferred) to 5 (most preferred).**

Click to Answer	
Type the Response	
Listen to the Instruction	
Record Answers	
Read the Instructions	
Exchange e-mails	
Partecipate in Forums	
Create Blogs	

**7. How much time do you spend on visiting Websites a day?**

- Less than 30 mins.
- 30 mins. to 1 hr.
- 1 hr. to 2 hrs.
- more than 2 hrs.

**8. Have you ever used materials obtained from the Internet in your class?**

- Yes
- No

**9. If YES, how often do you use them?**

- Only once ever
- Once or twice a month
- Only a few times ever
- Every week
- Once or twice a term

**10. Tick the Italian language learning online resources you know from the following list:**

- [www.didael.it](http://www.didael.it)
- [www.corso.italica.rai.it](http://www.corso.italica.rai.it)
- [www.bbc.co.uk/languages/italian](http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/italian)
- [www.italianforyou.it](http://www.italianforyou.it)
- [www.italicon.it](http://www.italicon.it)
- [www.cyberitalian.com](http://www.cyberitalian.com)
- [www.helios.unive.it](http://www.helios.unive.it)
- [www.linguanet.it](http://www.linguanet.it)
- [www.italicon.it](http://www.italicon.it)

**11. Tick the Italian language learning online resources you recently used from the following list:**

- [www.rete.co.it](http://www.rete.co.it)
- [www.adesso.heinle.com](http://www.adesso.heinle.com)
- [www.bbc.co.uk/languages/italian/talk](http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/italian/talk)
- [www.educational.ra.it/ioparloitaliano/corso.htm](http://www.educational.ra.it/ioparloitaliano/corso.htm)

**12. Tick the name of website/websites providing online learning/teaching material you know from the following list:**

- Iluss – Italiano Online
- Eleaston
- Tuttitalia
- Linguavox
- Centro Studi Onlus
- Lingua Italiana Online
- Linguanet

**13. Tick the name of online program/programs addressed to Italian language tutors you know from the following list:**

- Milia Online
- Italianistica Online
- In.IT
- Italinemo



**14. Please read the following descriptions of the proficiency levels a user has in relation to computer technologies. Determine the level that best describes you:**

**A.Unfamiliar**

I have no experience with computer technologies.

**B.Newcomer**

I have attempted to use computer technologies, but I still require help on a regular basis.

**C.Beginner**

I am able to perform basic functions in a limited number of computer applications.

**D.Average**

I am adequately trained to a number of computer applications.

**E.Advanced**

I have acquired the ability to competently use a broad spectrum of computer technologies

**F.Expert**

I am extremely proficient in using a wide variety of computer technologies.

## SECTION IV

### Your Process of Integration

**1. Indicate how frequently computer technologies are integrated into your teaching activities (also outside of the classroom) for each of the uses listed below.**

Instructional (e.g., Language Drill - Multiple Choice, Drag and drop, True or False, Fill in the Blanks, Language Tutorials)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Communicative (e.g., e-mail, CMC, Computer Conferencing)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Organizational (e.g., spreadsheets, record keeping, lesson plans)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Analytical/Programming (e.g., statistics, charting, graphing, drafting)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Recreational (e.g., language games)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Expansive (e.g., brainstorming)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Creative (e.g., desktop publishing, digital video, digital camera, scanners, graphics)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Expressive (e.g., Word processing, online journal)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Evaluative (e.g., assignments, portfolio, language proficiency testing)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always

Informative (e.g., Internet, CD-ROM)

A.Never  B.Sometimes  C.Fairly often  D.Very often  F.Always



**2. Please read the descriptions of each of the six stages related to the process of integrating computer technology in teaching activities. Choose the stage that best describes where you are in the process:**

**A. Awareness**

I am aware that technology exists, but have not used it – perhaps I'm even avoiding it. I am anxious about the prospect of using computers.

**B. Learning**

I am currently trying to learn the basics. I am sometimes frustrated using computers and I lack confidence when using them.

**C. Understanding**

I am beginning to understand the process of using technology and can think of specific tasks in which it might be useful.

**D. Familiarity**

I am gaining a sense of self-confidence in using the computer for specific tasks. I am starting to feel comfortable using the computer.

**E. Adaptation**

I think about the computer as an instructional tool to help me and I am no longer concerned about it as technology. I can use many different computer applications.

**F. Creative Application**

I can apply what I know about technology in the classroom. I am able to use it as an instructional aid and have integrated computers into the curriculum.

*Thank you for completing this questionnaire!*

*Your contribution will be precious for the improvement of writing skills instruction in Italian as a Foreign Language.*



## Appendix 3

### Student Questionnaire on Writing Habits, Practices and Instruction

The above questionnaire is available online

<[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence\\_abroad/questionnaires/http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence\\_abroad/questionnaires/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence_abroad/questionnaires/http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence_abroad/questionnaires/)>

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the 'Writing Support - Questionnaire 1' page. The page header includes the Warwick University logo and the text 'Text only • Sign in'. The main heading is 'Department of Italian' and the page title is 'Writing Support - Questionnaire 1'. A left-hand navigation menu lists various links such as 'Home', 'Research', 'Staff', 'Courses', 'Postgraduate Studies', 'Residence Abroad', 'Writing Support Questionnaires', 'Writing Support - Questionnaire 1', 'Writing Support - Questionnaire 2', 'Writing Support - Questionnaire 3', 'News & Events', 'Seminar Series', 'SSLC', 'Personal Development', 'Useful Links', 'Careers Advice', 'The Language Centre', and 'AHRC Workshop Series'. The main content area is titled 'PART I: Personal data' and contains several form fields: 'Name and surname' (text input), 'Your mother language:' (dropdown menu with 'Please select one'), 'Other languages previously studied:' (text input), 'Your department at Warwick:' (text input), 'Year of study:' (dropdown menu with 'Please select one'), 'Enter your current level of Italian:' (radio buttons for 'Beginner', 'Intermediate', 'Advanced'), 'If you were NOT beginner when you joined the Italian Department, please specify where you learned Italian:' (radio buttons for 'A level', 'GCSE', 'Other (please specify)'), and 'Other types of course:' (text input). The browser's status bar at the bottom shows 'Internet' and '100%' zoom.



# Writing Support - Questionnaire 1

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WARWICK

## PART I: Personal data

Name and surname

Your mother  
language:

Other languages  
previously studied:

Your department at  
Warwick:

Year of study:

Enter your current  
level of Italian:

- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced

If you were NOT  
beginner when you  
joined the Italian  
Department, please  
specify where you  
learned Italian:

- A level
- GCSE
- Other (please specify)

Other types of  
course:

## PART II: Writing habits and practices

In what sort of  
physical setting do  
you prefer to write?

- At home on my own peace
- In the library because I can have free and easy access t
- In class because I can interact with teachers and peers
- Wherever the physical setting is not important to me

Whith what material  
do you prefer to write?

- With pen pencil and a piece of paper
- With the computer using Word Processing
- With the computer using other supports



Why?

What time of day or night do you prefer to write? Why?

What do you find easiest in writing? What causes you the most problems? Please select a number from 1 to 3 to indicate how difficult you find each of the following writing aspects:

1 (not difficult)

2 (difficult)

To understand and stick to the topic proposed in the title (content)



To search for valuable information and insights (content)



Planning the total essay and structuring the ideas (process)



To organize clearly the piece (reader awareness)



To relate topic to reader's knowledge (reader awareness)



To lead and engage the reader (reader awareness)



To use correct grammar structures (mechanics grammar)



To spell words correctly (mechanics grammar)



To build varied and effective sentences (style)



To use clear and precise language for example appropriate words (style)



- To keep a consistent and appropriate style (style)
- To apply punctuation rules appropriately (punctuation)
- To choose adequate vocabulary (vocabulary)

Do you think you are a good essay writer?  Yes  No

Why yes?

- I write fast
- I have been told so
- I get good results
- I know the grammar and spelling very well
- I have valid ideas
- Other (please specify)

Other reasons for positive answer:

Why not?

- It takes me too long to write an essay
- I have never been told so
- I have never got good marks
- I find it difficult to express my ideas confidently
- I make recurrent grammatical and spelling errors
- Other (please specify)

Other reasons for negative answer:

**- Consider the following text adapted from the newspaper *La Stampa*, 24 set**

### **Il preside che ne ha vietato l'uso**

#### **"La minigonna va contro i sani principi scolastici"**

ORTONA (Chieti) "Non sono né un retrogrado né un bacchettone, come si è cercato di un'autorità scolastica che cerca non di instaurare bensì di far ben rispettare quei sani quanto afferma, con una punta di stizza, il preside dell'Istituto Tecnico Commerciale d'Ortona alle polemiche sorte in merito ad una sua circolare che invita le ragazze a non indossare minigonna. Tutto questo clamore, come se si trattasse di una grande operazione moralistica al di fuori di una ordinaria ordinanza che vieta un qualcosa che ieri era lecito e concesso. È una circoscritta reazione di molti studenti. "Questa mattina - afferma - nella sede distaccata di Guardafiume mi hanno espresso la loro solidarietà, condividendo il provvedimento e convenendo su quanto abusano delle loro grazie e della moda che consente loro di mostrarle. C'è una bella d



qualche volta, ho dovuto richiamare qualche ragazza perché mostrava un po' troppo..

When you read the title of the text above, do you formulate hypotheses with the help of your background knowledge and/or experience related to the content?

Empty response box for the first question.

When you read the title of the text above, do you consider the key words in it? Do you make special effort to interpret the meaning of the prompting title correctly, analysing the author's possible intentions involved?

Empty response box for the second question.

When you read the text above, do you pay attention to the type of text (e.g. is the text a description, a letter, an interview, a report)?

Empty response box for the third question.

When you read the text above, do you focus on text organization/structure (e.g. introduction, body of text, conclusion)?

Empty response box for the fourth question.

If you had to write a 300 word essay identifying the content of the article above and the reactions it caused

Empty response box for the fifth question.



among the readers, would you address the main topic in the introductory part of your composition?

Would you think of the potential reader of your composition? Would you make stylistic changes accordingly?

Would you wonder how your reader will react to the statement you make?

Would you plan your essay?

Would you consider the rhetorical structure of your writing as part of the planning phase?

**PART III: Writing instruction**

**A) Type and amount of writing instruction previously received**

Where did you learn to put your ideas in writing?

- At primary school
- At secondary school
- At University
- Other (please specify)

Please specify the precise setting (English lesson, Italian or other foreign language lesson, special support given by the



teacher):

How many hours of English writing did you have at school each week? How long did the writing lesson last?

- Primary school
- Secondary school

If any, how many hours of foreign language (e.g. French, German, Spanish, Italian) writing did you have at school each week? How long did the writing lesson last?

- Primary school
- Secondary school

How did you learn how to write?

- The teacher explicitly explained the procedures to follow (e. and post-writing)
- The teacher implicitly made me reflect upon the importance
- I have never received implicit nor explicit instruction on writ.

How long would the teacher spend in giving EXPLICIT guidance?

If any, what is the best advice you have ever been given about writing? (For example a useful advice you were given in order to write effectively)

If you knew someone who was having difficulty when writing what would you do to help?

What would you like to do better when you are writing?



B) Techniques and tasks learned

Please note: the following questions are about your ENGLISH WRITING (or your moth

How frequently do you use each of the following writing techniques to help your writing process? Please select from 0 to 3:

0 (never)                      1 (sometimes)                      2 (regularly)

Using the brainstorming techniques for collecting ideas and generate word lists for writing (content process)

Create spidergrams or mindmap diagrams for structuring ideas during the prewriting phase (content process)

Discussing ideas with other students (content)

Discussing ideas with the teacher only (content)

Reading a model text (system process)

Identifying purpose and use of the model text (genre context)

Memorising model essays (genre)

Learning about organization of text (e.g. introduction body part and conclusion)

Thinking about who the possible reader will be (genre content)

How frequently do you perform each of the following writing task type to support your writing process? Please



select a number from 0 to 3:

0 (never)

1 (sometimes)

2 (regularly)

Extract information from  
a written text (content)Combine sentences  
provided in material  
(system process)Practice construction of  
simple and complex  
sentences (system)Reorganize jigsaw texts  
or scrambled sentences  
(system genre)Complete gapped  
paragraphs with target  
structures (system)Complete unfinished texts  
(system genre)Practice use of  
metalanguage to identify  
part of texts (e.g. topic  
sentence thesis  
introduction) (genre)Compare texts with  
different purposes  
structure audience (genre  
context)Create a parallel text  
following a given model  
(system genre)Draft a text based on the  
outcome of pre-writing  
activities (content  
process) Practice specific  
rhetorical patterns  
(narrative description  
argument proces)  
(process genre)Practice various text-  
types (letters summaries  
criticisms) (process genre)Revise a draft in response  
to others' comments  
(content system process)



genre context)

Proofread and edit a draft for grammar and rhetorical structure (system process genre)

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

Read and respond to the ideas or language of another's draft (content system process genre context)

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

Research write and revise essay length text for specific audience and purpose (content system process genre context)

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

Please note: the following questions are about YOUR EXPECTATIONS ON THE ITALIAN next academic year

What do you expect from a writing course in terms of writing instruction (writing techniques and tasks and objectives to reach)?

In your opinion what are the writing techniques that an Italian writing course should focus on? Please select a number from 1 to 3:

1 (not important)

2 (important)

Brainstorming techniques for collecting ideas and generate word lists for writing (content process)

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
-----------------------	-----------------------

Spidergrams or mindmap diagrams for structuring ideas during the prewriting phase (content process)

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
-----------------------	-----------------------

Discussion of ideas with other students (content)

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
-----------------------	-----------------------

Discussion of ideas with



the teacher only (content)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading a model text (system process)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Skimming a passage with advance organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scanning for specific information with selective attention	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Making inferences about meanings of new words	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Taking notes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Producing oral or written summaries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Identify purpose and use of the model text (genre context)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Thinking about who the possible reader will be (genre content)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Memorising model essays (genre)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning about organization of text (e.g. introduction body part and conclusion)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

In your opinion what are the types of writing task that an Italian writing course should focus on during an academic year? Please select a number from 1 to 3:

	1 (not important)	2 (important)
Practice use of metalanguage to identify parts of text (e.g. topic sentence thesis introduction) (genre)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading a model text and extract information from it (content)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading various text formats appropriate to different purpose and	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



audience

Compare texts with different purposes structure audience (genre context)

☐

☐

Complete unfinished texts (system genre)

☐

☐

Reorganize jigsaw texts or scrambled sentences of it (system genre)

☐

☐

Create a parallel text following a given model (system genre)

☐

☐

Practice construction of simple and complex sentences (System)

☐

☐

Write the final and polished draft focusing on grammar and spelling

☐

☐

Draft a text based on the outcome of prewriting activities (content process)

☐

☐

Practice specific rhetorical patterns (narrative description argument) (process genre)

☐

☐

Practice various text types (letters summaries criticisms) (process and genre)

☐

☐

Revise a draft in response to others' comments (content system process genre context)

☐

☐

Proofread and edit a draft for grammar and rhetorical structure (system process genre)

☐

☐

Read and respond to the ideas or language of another's draft (content system process genre)

☐

☐



context)

Research and write and  
revise essay length text  
for specific audience and  
purpose (content system  
process genre context)

In your opinion how much amount of time (%) should roughly be dedicated in an Italian

Revising relevant  
grammar points

Please select one

Searching resource  
material and  
information

Please select one

Reading relevant  
resource material

Please select one

Presenting text  
structures

Please select one

Presenting text  
formats appropriate  
to purpose and  
audience

Please select one

Using a variety of pre-  
writing techniques

Please select one

Practicing writing with  
peers and teacher

Please select one

Reflecting upon the  
written piece and  
revising it accordingly

Please select one

---

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

Send form



## Appendix 4

### Student Questionnaire on Writing Strategies

The above questionnaire is available online

<[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence\\_abroad/questionnaires/http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence\\_abroad/questionnaires/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence_abroad/questionnaires/http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence_abroad/questionnaires/)>

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the University of Warwick Department of Italian website. The page title is "Writing Support - Questionnaire 2". The left sidebar contains a navigation menu with the following items: Home, Research, Staff, Courses, Postgraduate Studies, Residence Abroad (with sub-items: Writing Support Questionnaires, Writing Support - Questionnaire 1, Writing Support - Questionnaire 2, and Writing Support - Questionnaire 3), News & Events, Seminar Series, SSLC, Personal Development, Useful Links, Careers Advice, The Language Centre, and AHRC Workshop Series. The main content area is titled "PART I: Personal data" and contains the following fields and options:

- Name:
- Last name:
- Languages previously studied:
- Your department at Warwick:
- Enter your current level of Italian:
- If you were NOT beginner when you joined the Italian Department, please specify where you learned Italian:
  - A level
  - GCSE
  - Other (please specify)

The browser window shows the address bar with the URL [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence\\_abroad/questionnaires/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence_abroad/questionnaires/) and the status bar at the bottom indicates "Internet" and "100%" zoom.



# Writing Support - Questionnaire 2

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WARWICK

---

## PART I: Personal data

---

Name

Last name

Languages  
previously  
studied:

Your  
department at  
Warwick:

Enter your  
current level  
of Italian:

If you were  
NOT beginner  
when you  
joined the  
Italian  
Department,  
please specify  
where you  
learned Italian:

- A level
- GCSE
- Other (please specify)

Other type of  
course:

---

## PART II: Writing strategies

---

### BRAINSTORMING STRATEGIES

Before writing  
an essay do  
you normally  
write down



key words and concepts to brainstorm ideas in abbreviated verbal or graphic form?

Do you create diagrams to visualize the main brainstormed ideas?

### RESEARCHING STRATEGIES

Do you use reference sources of information in the target language that may help you develop new ideas on the writing topic; for example textbooks, newspapers, and prior work?

Do you successively group, order, classify, or label the material collected for the writing stage based on common attributes? (e.g. you could order

newspapers  
and articles  
either  
chronologically  
or  
thematically)

While reading  
the written  
sources  
collected (e.g.  
textbooks or  
newspaper  
articles), do  
you usually  
attend or scan  
key words,  
phrases,  
linguistic  
markers,  
sentences, or  
other types of  
information?

### PLANNING STRATEGIES

Do you  
generate a  
plan for the  
different parts  
(e.g.  
introduction,  
body and  
conclusion) to  
be integrated  
in the final  
essay later  
on?

### WRITING STRATEGIES

Do you seek  
the help of  
your mother  
language to



render ideas  
in writing?

While  
executing the  
written essay,  
do you pause  
and return to  
the previous  
stages to alter  
or make new  
plans as the  
writing  
progresses?

Do you check,  
verify, or  
correct writing  
performance  
(coherence,  
cohesion,  
structure of  
the text,  
language  
correctness)  
in the course  
of the writing  
stage or do  
you normally  
postpone it to  
the final  
editing?

### REVISION STRATEGIES

Do you  
conduct a final  
check of the  
outcomes of  
language  
performance  
against an  
internal  
measure of  
completeness  
and accuracy,

for example  
checking the  
language  
repertoire?

---

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

Send form

Page contact: Daria Mizza

Last revised: Thu 19 Oct 2006



## Appendix 5

### Student Questionnaire on Computer Technology Use

The above questionnaire is available online

<[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence\\_abroad/questionnaires/http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence\\_abroad/questionnaires/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence_abroad/questionnaires/http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/italian/residence_abroad/questionnaires/)>

WARWICK Text only • Sign in

### Department of Italian

#### Writing Support - Questionnaire 3

SECTION I - Your Background and resources available to you

First name

Last name

Department

Email address

Please read the following descriptions of the proficiency levels a user has in relation to computer technologies. Determine the level that best describes you:

Have you ever participated in any computer workshops/courses before?  Yes  No

If YES, list all the computer workshops/courses you attended

Please select one



# Writing Support - Questionnaire 3

## SECTION I - Your Background and resources available to you

First name

Last name

Department

Email address

Please read the following descriptions of the proficiency levels a user has in relation to computer technologies. Determine the level that best describes you:

Please select one

Have you ever participated in any computer workshops/courses before?

- Yes
- No

If YES, list all the computer workshops/courses you attended

Courses in chronological order

Year

Duration



Place

Competences  
achieved

Using the scale  
below, how would  
you rate student  
access to computer  
technology at  
Warwick?

- A Poor
- B Acceptable
- C Good
- D Very good
- E Excellent

Using the scale  
below, how would  
you rate student  
access to computer  
technology at your  
host University in  
Italy?

- A Poor
- B Acceptable
- C Good
- D Very good
- E Excellent

---

## SECTION II - Your use of Computer Technologies

---

On average, what is  
the TOTAL number of  
hours a week that  
you spend on a  
computer?

- A. None
- B. Less than 1 hr
- C. 1 hour or more but less than 3 hours
- D. 3 hours or more but less than 5 hours
- E. 5 hours or more but less than 10 hours
- F. 10 hours or more

On average, of these  
hours how many  
hours per week do  
you spend using a  
computer for  
personal use outside  
of learning activities?

- A. None
- B. Less than 1 hr
- C. 1 hour or more but less than 3 hours
- D. 3 hours or more but less than 5 hours
- E. 5 hours or more but less than 10 hours
- F. 10 hours or more

What applications do  
you regularly use?

- Word
- Word Perfect
- Excel
- Power Point
- Access
- Internet Explorer
- Netscape
- Outlook Express



- Outlook
- Eudora
- Acrobat
- Acrobat Reader
- Others (please specify)

Other applications:

What is your most common activity when using a computer?

Indicate how often you integrate computer technologies in your learning activities:

Which is your preferred format for practicing reading/writing with the help of the computer?

Which is your preferred format for practicing reading/writing through the help of computer interaction?

How much time do you spend on visiting Web Sites a day?

Have you ever used materials obtained from the Internet for your Italian studies?

- Yes
- No

If YES, how often do you use them?

Tick the Italian online resources you know from the following list:

- www.sapere.it
- www.enciclopedia.it
- www.proverbi.it
- www.parole.virgilio.it



Tick the  
Italian "edutainment"  
Web Sites you  
recently used from  
the following list:

- [www.cartonline.com](http://www.cartonline.com)
- [www.italica.rai.it](http://www.italica.rai.it)
- [www.cruciverbaonline.it](http://www.cruciverbaonline.it)
- [www.favole.org](http://www.favole.org)

---

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

Page contact: Daria Mizza

Last revised: Thu 19 Oct 2006

## Appendix 6

### Tutor Semi-structured Interview Main Questions

#### 1. First Section: Writing Skill Development

- *How would you define the approach you use to propose the writing activity/activities?*
  
- *How do you introduce the writing lesson or the writing section of your language lesson, and when in the various parts of the lesson do you communicate a purpose for the writing that is being done?*
  
- *What phase(s) of the writing process and what text structure(s) are the focus of the activity/activities you proposed?*
  
- *Was there earlier instruction of which your observed lesson is an extension?*



## **2. Second Section: Instructional Technology**

- *How did you get started using technology? Have you been trained in the use of instructional technology and, if yes, what kind of, and how much training did you receive?*
- *Is there any comment you would like to make regarding the current access to computer resources made available to you by university administrators?*
- *What factors contribute to, or inhibit, your use of technology in instruction?*
- *Do you think technology can affect FL instruction/acquisition? If yes, how, more specifically?*
- *Describe your experience using technology in instruction (for example, what types of technology you use in instruction and how frequently).*
- *Describe what instructional method you use in traditional teaching and in teaching with the help of technology and why.*
- *Has technology in any occasion changed your teaching? If so, describe how it has changed your teaching, making specific reference to your teaching style and/or philosophy, attitudes, planning, classroom management...*
- *Has technology affected student learning and/or achievement? If so, how?*

## Appendix 7

### Main Questions for Student Focus-groups 1, 2, and 3

#### 1. Attitudes towards IFL Writing

- *How important is writing for you?*
- *How often do you write in Italian?*
- *Do you enjoy writing in Italian? Why?*
- *Do you write in Italian in your spare time? If so what kind of essays do you usually write?*
- *Are you usually satisfied with your Italian writings?*
- *What do you do to improve your writing?*

#### 2. IFL Writing Difficulties

- *Does writing cause stress to you? Why?*
- *How long does it take you to compose one paragraph or an essay?*
- *Do you face any kind of difficulties in writing in Italian? If so, what kind of difficulties do you think you have?*
- *What kind of topics you find more difficult to write about? What kind of topics make you feel comfortable to write?*
- *Do you find it difficult finding ideas for your topic? Why?*
- *Do you think your writing exactly reflects your initial idea about the topic?*
- *Describe the way you start writing an essay in Italian.*
- *Does lack of vocabulary that expresses your thoughts make it difficult for you to write?*
- *Does lack Italian grammar make it difficult for you to write? How?*
- *Does spelling of some words make it difficult to write?*



- *Do you revise your writing? If yes, how many times?*
- *Are you aware of the rhetorical differences between English and Italian? Could you describe the main characteristics an Italian text should have?*
- *Do these rhetorical differences cause any difficulties to you?*

### **3. Views on Writing Instruction**

- *What do you expect to learn from your current Italian Language or Italian Essay Writing course? How do you think this course will benefit your writing development?*
- *Do you think this course helps you in improving writing? Why?*
- *How many essays are you required to write for your current language/Essay Writing course?*
- *How do you feel when your tutor asks you to write an essay? Why?*
- *How do you feel when you finish writing? Why?*
- *Do you think writing is important for you as an Italian learner? Why?*
- *How do you think writing will help you as a language learner?*
- *What do you think is important for good writing?*
- *Do you like to share your writing with your classmates? Why?*
- *Do you think working in peer-review is useful for proofreading your final draft?*
- *Do you find encouragement from your tutors or classmates to write in Italian? How?*
- *What do you think are the duties/responsibilities of IFL tutors? Of students? What do you think are the characteristics of a good teacher? A good student?*

#### **For the last (May 2006) focus-groups only:**

- *Do you see any differences or changes in your writing between last term and this term? If yes, which ones?*
- *What has been easy for you in this class? What has been hard?*

#### **4. Experience of Writing Online**

- *Do you have easy access to Internet?*
- *Do you ever use the Internet as a resource to brainstorm ideas given your chosen/assigned writing topic?*
- *Do you ever use the Internet to conduct background research for developing the topic assigned/chosen?*
- *Do you find Internet use useful/not useful for the brainstorming or research phase of the writing process?*
- *Do you ever use the online dictionaries during your writing?*

#### **5. Experience of Electronic Writing**

- *How often do you use the computer for writing purposes? Why?*
- *Do you have easy access to computers at home? On campus?*
- *Do you like to hand write or type your essay? Why?*
- *When you write a paper or an essay on the computer, what do you do? What things do you do using paper, and what things do you do on the computer?*
- *What do you find useful/not useful about using computers for writing?*
- *What do you find useful about using software packages such as "GramEx" and "Luisa" for writing skill development?*

**For the "IT 301: Modern Italian Language II – Essay Writing" section only:**

- *What do you find useful about using software tools such as "Text Analysis" for writing skill development?*



## Appendix 8

### Classroom Observation Protocol and Rubric

Classroom number: \_\_\_\_\_ Building: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Term: \_\_\_\_\_

Module: \_\_\_\_\_

Language tutor of lesson observed: \_\_\_\_\_

Observation Length: \_\_\_\_\_ minutes

**1. Student activity type:**

Individual \_\_\_\_\_ Small group \_\_\_\_\_ Whole class \_\_\_\_\_ Student Presentation \_\_\_\_\_ Tutor Presentation \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Macroskill addressed for each activity:**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Macroskill</i>	<i>Field Notes</i>
1. Individual	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening <input type="checkbox"/> Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Writing	
2. Small Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening <input type="checkbox"/> Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Writing	
3. Whole Class	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening <input type="checkbox"/> Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Writing	
4. Student Presentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening <input type="checkbox"/> Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Writing	
5. Tutor Presentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Listening <input type="checkbox"/> Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking <input type="checkbox"/> Writing	

**3. Primary nature of student activity:**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Macroskill</i>	<i>Field Notes</i>
1. Small Group.	<input type="checkbox"/> Passive & Receiving <input type="checkbox"/> Creating & Producing	
2. Whole Class	<input type="checkbox"/> Passive & Receiving <input type="checkbox"/> Creating & Producing	
3. Student Presentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Passive & Receiving <input type="checkbox"/> Creating & Producing	
4. Tutor Presentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Passive & Receiving <input type="checkbox"/> Creating & Producing	
5. Technologies in use	<input type="checkbox"/> Passive & Receiving <input type="checkbox"/> Creating & Producing	

**4. Technology in use:**

\_\_\_ Computer \_\_\_ Internet \_\_\_ Video \_\_\_ CD \_\_\_ Software packages

**5. If technology in use were computer or software packages, during the observation students use:**

- Drill and practice
- Word processing
- Power Point

**6. Objectives fixed for the use of technology:**

- Practice or reinforce listening
- Practice or reinforce reading
- Practice or reinforce writing
- Practice or reinforce speaking
- Learn content-related concepts
- Communicate with peer
- Develop a project
- Learning/consolidating/practicing new vocabulary
- Applying new grammar elements



**7. In activities using technology, a certain degree of collaboration is exhibited:**

<i>Degree of Collaboration &amp; Interaction</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Field Notes</i>
Students exhibit familiarity in the effective use of available technologies	<input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Regularly	
Students are highly engaged in the use of technology	<input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Regularly	
In using technology students are focused on the intended objectives	<input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Regularly	

## 8. Classroom observation rubric:

<i>Item Observed</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>1.</i>	<i>2.</i>	<i>3.</i>	<i>4.</i>
Learning Objectives	•	• There are clearly no learning objectives for the lesson.	• The learning objectives for the lesson are unclear and not well articulated.	• The learning objectives for each lesson are clearly articulated by the tutor.	• The learning objectives for each lesson are clearly articulated by the tutor. Students are able to work towards the objectives.
Classroom Environment	•	• Furniture is inflexible and does not support various learning activities.	• Furniture is largely inflexible. Rearranging furniture between activities is possible but time consuming.	• Furniture arrangement is somewhat flexible.	• Furniture arrangement is flexible; it supports independent & collaborative work.
Online Environment	•	• Student work is minimally or not displayed; it is all tutor assigned.	• Student work is displayed; it is mostly tutor assigned.	• Student writing (independent and assigned) is displayed.	• Student work is prominently displayed, accessible, and a learning resource.
Opening Phase	•	• Class does not start with a brainstorming phase. • The tutor distributes an assignment.	• Class occasionally starts with a brainstorming. • The lesson is tutor-driven, does not relate to student needs.	• Class generally starts with a brainstorming. • The lesson is teacher driven, has a clear learning objective.	• Class frequently begins with a brainstorming. • The lesson is focused, and has a clear learning objective.
Process & Content	•	• Students do not go through the writing process (gather, choose a seed idea, draft, revise, edit, publish).	• The tutor sometimes interact with students, but does not assess progress or inform instruction.	• Students go through the writing process often with tutor guidance. • Students sometimes write their own ideas in their notebooks which spawn seed ideas for developed pieces.	• Students go through the writing process independently throughout the academic year. • Students direct their writing time and ideas. They move seamlessly through the writing process in a timely manner, completing many multi-drafted, thoughtful pieces of writing.
Interaction	•	• The tutor does not interact with students to assess progress and	• Students have limited engagement in the writing process.	• The tutor often interacts with students, and lets them interact between each others. Most of	• The tutor interacts with students and strongly encourages interactions



		inform instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students can work independently, but need to check in frequently with tutor for guidance on next steps.</li> <li>• Students have infrequent choice in setting goals for their learning.</li> </ul>	the time the tutor assesses progress or informs instruction.	among them. In addition, the tutor uses the interaction to help inform instruction.
Student Independence & Ownership	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are not engaged in the writing process.</li> <li>• Students have little stamina for independent work.</li> <li>• Students have either no choice in the direction of their work or they have complete freedom with no guidance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students seldom meet to share their work.</li> <li>• The tutor summarizes student main essay writing styles and recurrent mistakes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are actively engaged in their writing process.</li> <li>• Students are able to work independently with occasional consultation with tutors.</li> <li>• Students have increasing choice. The tutor is introducing the expectations that accompany choice.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students direct their learning in collaboration w/ tutor.</li> <li>• Students can work independently for extended periods of time.</li> <li>• Students have choice within a set of agreed upon expectations.</li> <li>• Students are able to explain their writing decisions, and make choices based on their needs.</li> </ul>
Sharing and Publication of Essay Writing	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students do not have opportunities to meet and share their essay writing.</li> </ul>	•	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students regularly meet to share their work.</li> <li>• Students are able to summarize their writing style and recurrent mistakes.</li> <li>• Student work is occasionally celebrated through sharing or online publication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students regularly meet to share their work.</li> <li>• Students are able to summarize their writing style and recurrent mistakes.</li> <li>• Student work is regularly celebrated through sharing or publication.</li> </ul>

## **Appendix 9**

### **Classroom Documents**

#### ***Syllabus IT 101: Italian Language for Beginners***

**Timetable Group A:** Monday TBC

Tuesday TBC

Wednesday TBC

Thursday TBC

**Timetable Group B:** Monday TBC

Tuesday TBC

Wednesday TBC

Thursday TBC

Reading Weeks: week 6 of terms 1 & 2

**Course Aims and Description:**

This is a foundation course in Italian language, including elements of contemporary Italian society and language awareness. It aims to give students:

- Basic command of Italian in the four communicative skills (oral comprehension, speaking, reading, writing);
- Elementary notions of grammar;
- Relevant information on life in Italy today.

By the end of the year students will be able to sustain everyday conversations in Italian, read authentic texts (e.g. newspaper articles) and follow the gist of TV extracts.

The course consists of 4 hours of teaching per week for 23 weeks; there are 4 language hours per week. Students will also be required to carry out self-directed work using the language centre resources (TV, cassettes, etc.) and dedicated IT packages. From the second term oral work will include short presentations by the students. Italian newspapers, magazines and TV extracts will be used throughout the year. Especially during the second half of the course particular attention will be devoted to topics of relevance to the year abroad.



**Textbooks:**

- Marin, T., and Magnelli, S. (2003). *Progetto Italiano I*. Roma, Italy: Edilingua.
- Danesi, M. (1995). *Master the Basics*. New York: Barrons.

Both books are available from the university bookshop.

Recommended for all who "hate grammar":

- Adorni, S., and Primorac, K. (1982). *English Grammar for Students of Italian*. Ann Arbor, MI: Olivia and Hill Press.

**NB: We recommend that you buy a good dictionary. For help with choice please consult tutor.**

**All students are requested to obtain a username for the university computer network.**

# **Syllabus IT 301: Modern Italian Language II**

**Timetable Group A:** Wednesday TBC

**Timetable Group B:** Thursday TBC

**Teaching time:** 1 hour per week over 23 weeks; reading week 6 of terms 1 and 2

## **Course Aims and Description:**

The course aims to help students develop their writing skills.

This goal will be achieved through the following fundamental steps:

- 1) A systematic revision of basic grammar and structures (mainly syntactic), in order to obtain written formal accuracy;
- 2) The regular use of various types of dictionaries and background texts, the study of the basic elements composing an efficient and effective writing process: planning, drafting, revising and editing.

According to the language writing stage, different types of compositions such as *Controlled Composition*, *Composition with Paragraph Pattern Approach*, and *Free composition* will be proposed:

By the end of the year students should be fluent in different styles (direct/indirect speech, formal/informal register) and types of writing, such as narrative (reports), descriptive (descriptions, story telling) and argumentative writing (essay).

## **Examination:**

The examination will take place in June in written form: 3 hour paper consisting of 1 essay of minimum 400 words and 1 summary of about 300 words.

## **Textbooks:**

- Italiano, F., and Marchegiani, I. (2003). *Crescendo*. Boston, MA: Thomson Heinle.
- Proudfoot, A., and Cardo, F. (1997). *Modern Italian Grammar. A Practical Guide*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Collins bilingual dictionary and Zingarelli monolingual dictionary



**NB: The exam at the end of the year will be based on topics and activities taken from the course. Attendance and active participation are essential. Absence from classes and failure to submit written work will be taken into consideration when deciding final results.**

# **Syllabus IT 401: Modern Italian Language III**

**Timetable Group A: Monday TBC**

**Timetable Group B: Tuesday TBC**

**NB:** The aim is to have two evenly balanced groups. In choosing other options, remember it might be impossible to move either class to different times or different venues.

**Teaching time: 1 hour per week over 23 weeks; reading week 6 of terms 1 and 2**

## **Course Aims and Description:**

- a) The course aims to help students consolidate and extend their writing skills acquired in preceding years. In particular:
- to familiarize students with different text types in terms of content and style (*articolo di cronaca, tema di opinione, tema pro e contro, recensione, racconto, riassunto*);
  - to familiarize students with a more formal register of written Italian and to broaden their vocabulary;
  - to polish up students' written language focusing on Anglicism, false friends, language contamination, colloquialisms;
  - to consolidate problematic grammatical structures.

This will be achieved through the following steps:

- 1) the regular use of various types of dictionaries and background texts, in order to extend and perfect the use of Italian lexicon, as well as selecting and organizing relevant information from these sources to write task specifications;
  - 2) the study of the basic elements composing an efficient and effective writing process: planning, drafting, revising and editing.
- b) In addition, the course will introduce a variant to the study and practice of textual summary, from English texts into Italian. It will constitute a compulsory section of the essay paper in June.



The teaching of essay writing and summary from English into Italian, leading to an examination paper with two compulsory sections, will take place on alternate Mondays (group A) and Tuesdays (group B).

Homework set the previous week will be collected on the following Monday or Tuesday. Work not given in by Tuesday noon (group A) or Wednesday noon (group B) at the latest, either in person or in my pigeon hole, without good reason, will be marked as missing. Class discussions and corrections will deal with points of style and grammar as they arise. You are invited to ask if you want any particular aspect of the language to be covered, arising from your home assignments or independently from it.

### **Examination:**

The examination will take place in June in written form.

It will consist of a 3 hour paper worth 30% of the total language mark for the year, divided into compulsory, equally weighted sections, consisting of *a)* one essay of no less than 600 words on a topic chosen from a list of titles and *b)* the summary of an extended extract of English prose.

**NB: The exam at the end of the year will be based on topics and activities taken from the course. Attendance and active participation are essential. Absence from classes and failure to submit written work will be taken into consideration when deciding final results.**