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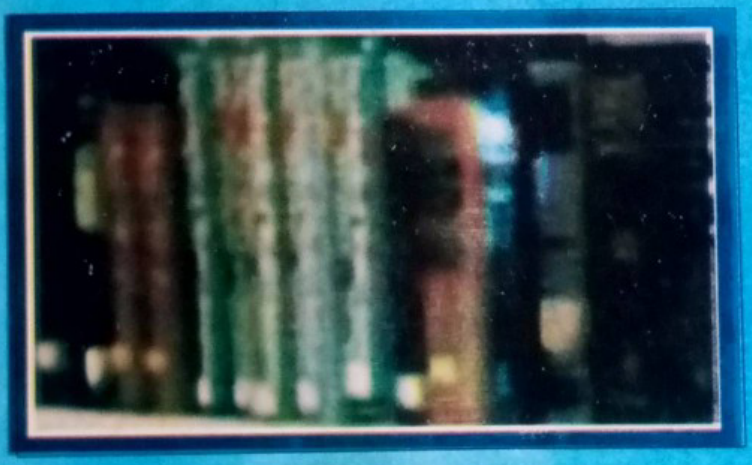

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UTILIZING COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION TO TEACH WRITING AS A PROCESS

By

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Abstract

The traditional language classroom is bedevilled with heavy reliance on the teacher and the course books, making the teaching pedagogy paper-based. Technology has however brought the desired change as learning can now take place anywhere anytime, even without the presence of a teacher. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is an instance of how technology can enhance free flow of natural communication. It involves the use of computer and associated technologies to facilitate communication. The paper reinforces the fact that there is a swift change in the teaching and learning processes, with the advent of technologies, which can improve the language teaching pedagogy. It takes a look at CMC, with reference to e-mail, and how it can be utilized to teach the stages of writing. The paper recommends that CMC should be extended to teach other aspects of language in order to improve English language teaching in schools

Technology is fast affecting every facet of the society, the educational arena, notwithstanding. With technology, teaching and learning can be easier, more interesting, and less tedious. Teaching and learning can also take place outside the classroom and without the usual classroom and without the usual teacher- dominance in the teaching situation. Technology can make learning student self-centered, with the teacher acting as facilitator, monitor and adviser. Technologies like computer are a blessing to the educational sector. It can facilitate learning that cut across age, ethnic, educational, social and economic boundaries. Computer creates independent learners and makes learning, particularly a language, stress free exercise. This paper aims to look at the importance of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and how it can be used to facilitate the teaching of writing as a process.

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Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Devis (2005) defined Computer- mediated communication as any communication transaction that occurs through the use of two or more networked computers. Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic (2004) extended the term traditionally to those communications that occur through computer-mediated formats, such as instant messages, e-mails, chat rooms. It has also been applied to other forms of text-based interaction such as text message. Handley (2010) described CMC as the broad term for technologies used by the language learners to communicate with other learners or native speakers through text or audio including e-mail, discussion forum, text messaging, chat, and conferencing. These definitions imply that computer can be used through different media, to generate natural, fluent and free communication between the language learners or users. This makes it a worthwhile technology in teaching language and writing in particular. The term computer-mediated communication was first invented and coined by Hiltz and Turoff 1978 in their study of computer conferencing. They claimed that computerized conferencing would exert a dramatic psychological and sociological influence on various types of group communication in future. They predicted that computers and the internet would become a necessity for daily life, this really has happened. Murry (2000) observed that CMC can be synchronous or asynchronous. In synchronous CMC all participants are online at the time and immediate responses can be given while asynchronous CMC occurs without time constraints. In synchronous communication mode, the communication is between two or more people in real time, such as classroom-based, face to face discussion, telephone conversation, internet chat, etc. Asynchronous communication allows communication at one's convenience, such as e-mail, text messaging, bulletin boards, etc. It enables the user to type extended messages which are electronically transmitted to recipients who may read, reply, and print, forward or file them at their leisure (Mann & Steward, 2000). In asynchronous CMC, conversational participants do not have to communicate with one another in real time e.g., in e-mail and bulletin boards. In both synchronous and asynchronous modes, CMC can be used inside and outside the classroom. For instance, all students can be connected through networked computers using local area network (LAN). This may facilitate whole class or group discussions in the classroom setting. Learners can also be exposed to the use of internet, even if CMC cannot be used in a classroom setting (probably due to shortage of computers or networking technology).

Cunningham (2000) presents the following as types of computer-mediated communication

Types of Computer Mediated Communication

Type	Brief Description
Electronic mail	Electronic communication (written or voice) between individuals.
List Servers	Applications which will distribute messages to all subscribers on a list. Includes facilities for subscribing, un-

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	subscribing and moderation of postings.
Computer Conferencing	Software which manages conferencing on computer networks.
Bulletin Boards	An electronic space for notices for particular interest groups.

Cunningham (2000) also utilized the following approaches to enhance writing development through computer-mediated communication. These are:

1. Guided writing: this involves text repair exercises which may require the learners to modify correct text to address redundancy, spelling, grammatical error, and errors of fact.
2. Free writing: this involves improving writing quality through increase in the number and complexity of revision operations; that the writer is freer to experiment and think without committing the information to paper.
3. Using the computer as a stimulus to writing: students tend to be more motivated to write for real reasons, e.g., communicating with a friend, taking part in on-line discussion or debate. In these situations there is a real audience or readership and the writer will take care to address it appropriately.

Salaberry (2001) opined that CMC possesses some basic characteristics which should guide the design of pedagogical activities. Such characteristics involve the followings:

1. The learner addresses a specific audience for purposes other than demonstrating a skill.
2. Expansion of the network of peers (sharing the work with fellow students).
3. Increased access to cross-cultural information (sharing information with other communities).
4. Increased access to experts' advice/ guidance (expert-novice interaction, native speaker-nonnative speaker contacts, etc)
5. Freedom from time and location constraints (e.g., non accessible regions or conflicting schedules)
6. Emergence of new discursive environments; absence of nonverbal cues (e.g.; more spontaneous participation in group work, increased participation of minorities)
7. Emotional involvement (increased motivation)
8. Unparalleled access to information data bases and helps on-line.
9. Emergence and expansion of a new asynchronous mode of communication (e.g., e-mail)
10. Safer environment in which learners may try to communicate with more advanced speakers.

Salaberry believes that these characteristics are relevant for the analysis of interaction among language learners.

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Impact of CMC on Language Teaching and Learning

CMC has proven successful in many ways by language teachers and researchers. For instance, Beslisle's (1996) study centered on "the effects of e-mails on language use". The study investigated the benefits of using email in the ESL learning class by teachers and students. The study concluded that emails in English as second language classroom is of paramount importance in the teaching and learning process given that the shy and slow learners can do some writings. It also gives non native speakers more chances to interact with other speakers of the target language.

Shang (2007) examined the overall effects of using email on the writing performance of Taiwanese students in English. The major findings demonstrated that students made improvements on syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy. The results also revealed that the email writing was a positive strategy that helped to improve foreign language learning and attitudes towards English.
The use of mobile phone text messages has been discovered as important in teaching and learning. SMS text message, described as an asynchronous CMC can improve students' autonomy and their language skills. Several language learning and communication programmes have been developed using SMS. For instance, Levy and Kennedy (2005) created a programme for Italian learners in Australia by sending them vocabulary words and idioms, definitions and example sentences through SMS. They also sent learners language learning- related text notifications through SMS about what they learnt during class or details of upcoming television programmes they wanted to watch.

Lappanen and Kalaja (1995) used computer conferencing to introduce writing as a process. They found that students dominated the discussions and gave each other a great deal of feedback of different kinds while the teacher served as a monitor and not a knowledge-giver. Leppanen and Kalaja(1995) also found that engaging students in on-line discussion on their written assignments improved their writing skills. It develops in them the ability to manage whole meaningful texts and also learn to look at their work from different perspectives. With regard to reading, students are encouraged to read what their key pals have written for them and so develop a sense of reading for interest.

Chuo (2007) investigated the effects of the web Quest writing instruction, tagged WQWi program on Taiwanese EFL learners' writing performance, writing apprehension, and perception of web-source integrated language learning. The participants were selected randomly from two junior college classes, one as the control group which received the traditional classroom writing instruction while the experimental group received the WQWi program. The results of the study showed that the students in WQWI class improved their writing performance and there was significant reduction in writing apprehension. Dudeney (2003) recognized the WebQuests model as a potential tool by pointing out several advantages. They include providing relatively easy way to incorporate the internet into the language classroom,

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encouraging critical thinking, leading to more communication and interaction through group activities and eliciting greater learner motivation through interdisciplinary studies as well as 'real-life' tasks.

A similar research to WQWI is a study of network-based language teaching in EFL writing exhibiting the relevance of CMC to writing. Li and Tongshun (2006) opined that CMC can have positive effect on students writing competence. The purpose of the study was to find the relative effectiveness of networked-based language teaching (NBLT) in EFL writing. The study was done between two groups (control and experimental) of students in China. The results of the study indicated that students in experimental group wrote with a higher level of syntactic and lexical complexity in the post-test than in the pre-test indicating more sophisticated use of language when given more freedom and control of the learning activities. The result showed that CMC integration into EFL classrooms impact positively on language learners' speaking and writing skills.

Through CMC, a wide range of communication channels are possible. Cunningham (2000) reported of a study carried out to assess students' attitudes toward the word processing experience in the EFL writing class carried out on 37 undergraduate Japanese female students enrolled in EFL writing class. After the study, many of the students claimed that the positive use of word processing in their writing improved their performance. Moreover, the use of word processing helped them to concentrate on certain aspects of writing such as grammar, word choice and organization.

In the traditional classroom, Kitade (2000) indicated that the amount of teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction is still quite restricted within the classroom setting. Moreover, only certain grammar features that have been taught in the class are actually used by the learners, and the range of contexts in which they are used is limited. In addition, the patterns of interaction in the classroom are not always authentic and may not prepare learners for 'real' world situations. Computer-mediated communication may help to address this problem since it can provide learners with native speakers and other non native speakers all over the world. Moreover, Kitade (2000) observed that CMC differs from ordinary writing and speaking and so presents learners with a new type of interaction that may enable them to reflect upon the form and content of messages while interacting with someone in a manner close to face-to-face verbal communication

Computer-mediated communication develops language skills and critical thinking. For instance, in writing through CMC, unlike the traditional classroom environment, learners have enough opportunities to discuss their writing work and give feedback to each other. Choi and Nesi (1998) in their study on key pal project for Korean students show that children's reading skills improved tremendously as a result of exchanging e-mails with their key pals. They found that students get enthusiastic to

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read what their key pals have written to them and hence they develop a sense of reading for interest. Chun (1991) opined that children's speaking skills improve when engaged with activities based on CMC. Chun found that computer communication proved itself a medium for facilitating the acquisition of interactive skills in speaking. It may also result in active verbal collaboration as well.

One of the vital features of CMC is that it creates real natural atmosphere for learning the language and increases the students' motivation. Li (2000) stated that writing through e-mails creates authentic purpose and audience for writing, which are elements often lacking in traditional writing classrooms, the authentic sense of language communication requires students not only to read and write, but also respond to writing of others which fosters a sense of personal engagement and discovery. Ho (1997) opined that her students' communication skills improved as a result of working collaboratively on a project with class from another country through e-mail.

CMC helps to arrest the problems of social and personal inequalities which may affect students' participation and performance in traditional classroom. It also enables both shy and weak students to participate and contribute actively at their own pace and time. Shulman (2000) showed that students who were quiet and reluctant to participate in class were the most active participants in the internet project.
According to Smith (2003), because learners can feel as if they are talking with another person face-to-face, learners elicit modified inputs from one another and are pushed to modify their own linguistics output, and receive important feedback to their target language (TL) use, thus potentially focusing their attention on their problematic utterances.

Recent studies (e.g. Kern 1995) have indicated that teachers tend to spend less time engaging in teacher-talk when CMC is conducted. As for language learning, classrooms can shift away from being teacher-centered towards being more student-centered, with the help of certain implementations of technology. If the use of CMC can steer away teachers from spending time teaching, this may again provide learners the opportunity to generate TL output. Kern (1995) opined that CMC may give rise to better quality speech. In CMC, students are active participants in the creation of knowledge and meaning. Kern (1995) was also one of the few studies that investigated the effects of synchronous CMC on grammatical competence. Kern focused his study on L2 acquisition by learners through oral (i.e., face-to-face) and synchronous CMC. He claimed that increased participation in the electronic discussion lead to proportionately greater target language (TL) production with a wider variety of verb forms and clause types. The increased amount of the TL could have influenced learners' attention on grammatical accuracy. Kern however noted that network based communication as discourse mediated by networked computers bears linguistic consequences such as missing orthographic accents and simplified verb conjugations.

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On other draw backs of CMC, Lee (2001); Blake (2000); Kitade (2000); Herring (2001) and Thurlow (2006) opined that CMC is a new form of discourse that is different from writing and speaking. Herring (2001) noted that CMC is clearly affected by technological variables such as synchronity, granulity, and multimodality as well as other non-linguistic variables such as participants' expectations and levels of innovation. Herring sees CMC as a new language unique and distinctive from standard language. Handley (2010) opined that CMC demonstrates a mix of features from prototypically spoken and prototypically written media. It shows that text type has an important role in determining the nature of the language used in CMC. According to him, the text based chat is characterized by abbreviations. Standard informal orthographies and many features of oral language while net speak is more fragmented than writing and is characterized by colloquial non-standard grammar. Socially, there seems to be some trend towards group solidarity among users of CMC. Several linguistic choices appear to be aimed at reducing social distance and emphasizing group membership. Smith (2003) added that it has unique traits that do not normally occur in speech and writing. Such traits include simplified register and syntax, abbreviations and the use of symbols to express emotions

Murry (2000) reiterated that CMC exhibits its own norms for organizing conversations and accommodating trends of discourse. Some of these challenges can however be managed by skillful teachers. Studies by Pellettieri (2000); Sotillo (2005), have shown that learners can review the language used in their previous conversations, examine their errors and see whether any corrective feedback was provided by their conversation partner(s). Pellettieri in his study found that because learners were able to watch their speech on screen as they type it out, they "monitored" their speech, which in turn led to higher quality speech. Vosloo (2009) opined that some teachers are using the quick, free flowing writing style of computer-mediated communication to spark their students thinking processes. For instance, Trisha Fogarty, a sixth grade teacher in US says, "When my students are writing first drafts, I don't care how they spell anything as long as they are writing". She does however expect her students to switch to standard English during editing and revising.

CMC in Teaching Writing as a Process

Writing is an important language skill through which a learner shows how well or how far he has learnt in school. However, some scholars Kolawale (1998), Tswanya(1998) believed that some students failed examinations because they did not know how to generate enough ideas for their writing tasks or differentiate between important details. This study aims at incorporating the use of CMC in teaching writing as a process.

The process approach to writing sees writing as a multiple of draft processes before arriving at the end product. The writer's feedback on the various drafts is what pushes the writer through the writing process to the eventual end product. Wikipedia (2011) proposes the following stages of writing. These are:

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a. Pre-writing
b. Drafting
c. Revising
d. Editing (Proof reading) and
e. Publishing.

These stages, according to Wikipedia (2011) are seldom described as fixed steps in a straight-forward process. Rather, they are viewed as overlapping parts of a complex whole. Teachers and students with no access to computers can still benefit from introducing e-mail writing into their lessons. Accordingly, e-mails can be used to teach writing as a process in the following steps. The teacher encourages the students to open e-mail address and introduces them to using e-mail to pass information. The teacher then commences by sending the students e-mail on any information ranging from greetings to notification of dates of examinations or date for submission of assignments. The students exchange e-mail addresses both within themselves and with key pals outside their locality so as to enable them communicate on-line. Hawisher (1992) opined that students who communicate on-line "are totally immersed in writing" through the abundance of writing, they refine their rhetorical skills of persuasion as well as sharpen their mechanical skills. He adds that that will put them in an environment in which they, constantly write and read. Through the process of sending e-mail back and forth to one another some flow of authentic writing is begun. Also, when students communicate using each other's e-mail, the focus is not on grammatical correctness. Beslisle (1996) observed that in e-mail, the audience tends to emphasize almost entirely on the message itself and much less on the form, grammar, spelling, mechanics etc.

After the students have been introduced to using the internet through exchanging e-mails, the teacher divides the class into five groups and gives each group a topic to write on. The groups should be directed to search for information from the net through sending e-mails to their key pals. From time to time, each group meets to brainstorm on the facts they have received and discuss them in class group wise. During the discussions, the information received is organized in order of importance, with main points followed by the supporting details.

Hawisher describes electronic writing as an act of bringing together multiple perspectives and creating new understandings, rather than producing something that is thought to be original. This makes "weaving together" of different views possible. Langston and Batson (1990) opined there is a new focus on "coherence". Through the network, the writer develops perspectives through which numerous data can be productively viewed, to provide coherence. If computers are available, each group should type its first draft using word processor to make the necessary corrections. As Hawisher (1992) puts it, the communication got on-line may be a mixture of spoken and written language. For instance, e-mails may contain a different format, structure and voice or short phrases that lack punctuation and capitalization. Students therefore need to switch between formulating complete sentences for the assignment and the on-line language.

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After the first draft has been typed, subsequent drafts could be made after discussions at group level to accommodate new points and more corrections. The compute word processor is of immense importance as it enables the students to produce successive drafts without rewriting or retyping the entire text. It also allows the students to cut and paste, delete and copy, check spelling and grammar as well as change every aspect of formatting to make texts longer, better and well revised.

The next stage is for each group to present its work one after the other with the teacher acting as a monitor, guide, editor, co-learner and facilitator. Both the teacher and students from other groups can make comments as a group presents its work. This is to ensure interactive presentation and free expressions leading to student's empowerment.

At the final stage, each group takes into account the observations and contributions made by the teacher and other class members and produce yet another draft, which may be the final draft. This draft is then published and copies are exchanged across groups. Each student, including the teacher is given a copy of all the works done by the groups. This activity does not only teach writing as a process but will also improve students' reading skills.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a look at computer-mediated communication and how to facilitate the teaching and learning of English language and writing as a process in particular. Unlike in the traditional classroom where a larger percentage of activities in the class are controlled, initiated and implemented by the teacher, with CMC the teacher is a monitor, an editor, a facilitator, an adviser, a guide, etc which gives room for students empowerment. Students can independently participate actively in oral and written activities taking place both inside and outside the classroom environment. This fosters constant reading, writing as well as free and natural flow of communication. It is therefore recommended that teachers should ensure that every student participates in the activities taking place in and outside the class by assigning and shifting responsibilities. Students should also be taught the importance of audience analysis so as to be able to switch from the language used in e-mail to the formal language used in academic writing. English language teachers should imbibe the use of CMC in teaching not only writing but other aspects of the language. This would make language learning a stress free and interesting exercise and go a long way to improve the teaching and learning of English language in schools.

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