

Using the Internet in ESL Writing Instruction

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Introduction

The advent of the Internet and the wide spread of technology in our life create new opportunities for language learning. Since most of the Internet content is in English, the teachers of English gain access to the enormous variety of authentic materials relating to all spheres of life at almost no cost. Especially in non-English speaking countries, such as Poland, where it is not always easy to obtain realia, the Web is the invaluable source of information, both for teachers to create classroom materials and for their classes to explore the whole world just by clicking the mouse.

The present paper will try to explore the issue of the use of the Internet as a teaching aid, or as a teaching medium, through which students are taught how to write different writing genres. After some preliminary remarks concerning the nature of on-line lessons, the resources needed and the roles of the teacher and students, I will try to analyse the most basic writing genres, such as a letter to a friend, a formal letter, a biography, a description of a person, a for-and-against essay, a notice and an advertisement, a description of a festival/ceremony, a description of a book/film/play, a newspaper report, an opinion essay and a description of a place. My purpose here will be to consider teaching each of these genres in the context of an on-line classroom, and I will attempt to demonstrate how, with the help of selected websites or other on-line techniques, writing instruction can be made more interesting, appealing, motivating and authentic.

My purpose is to propose some suggestions on how to use the Internet in the classroom to enhance learning and achieve some teaching goals, and not just play and have fun. Most of the solutions proposed in the present paper have actually been tried out in my classroom, therefore these techniques do work in real learning environment.

Summary of Previous Research

The three basic elements, proposed in the present paper to help to teach writing, namely **web pages**, **e-mail connection** and **creating class websites**, have received a lot of attention from CALL researchers in the past. I will not try to summarise here all the papers dealing with this matter, since this is beyond the scope and purpose of the present work. Instead, I would like to refer to a few articles on the topic.

Dennis Wilkinson, in his 1996 article "Getting Your Class Connected" is occupied with e-mail exchanges and elementary HTML for classroom use. The writer tries to encourage other teachers to introduce e-mail into their classrooms by giving the most basic guidelines for teachers and students, together with the URLs of places to find teacher partners to set up a successful e-mail connection. Also, the author claims that it is easy not only for the teacher and students to master sufficient HTML knowledge to set up a website, but also to come on-line for free. The paper concludes with a few useful links for teachers going on-line for the first time, giving them step-by-step assistance in their first experiences in organising a wired classroom.

The issue of using the web pages for teaching writing is raised in the paper "Using Cooperative Learning to Integrate Thinking and Information Technology in a Content-Based Writing Lesson" by Tan et.al. (1999). The first part of the paper deals with the question of cooperative learning in an on-line classroom, and the authors demonstrate and discuss different types of co-operation. The article begins with discussion of how cooperative learning promotes effective instruction of thinking skills and creativity. Next, the authors describe a writing lesson for secondary school students in Singapore in which cooperative learning is integrated with thinking, creativity and information technology. The lesson has a similar format to the ones adopted in the my paper, namely some off-line work on structures and language, on-line search, then off-line discussion of results and analysis of the pieces written by students.

How to use e-mail in the classroom is the focus of the paper by Nagel (1999), "E-mail in the Virtual ESL/EFL Classroom." It deals

with more advanced issues connected with the use of e-mail in teaching, and specifically with how to be most effective and to get optimal results in the use of e-mail as an instructional tool. This paper tries to achieve these goals by illustrating the difference between e-mail and academic writing, considering how e-mail functions as a learning tool, and whether to use a LISTSERV or not. It also addresses a number of other problems painful for a wired classroom, trying to propose some workable solutions to them. Some of these issues are: managing large volumes of mail, making workgroups work by dealing with problems of non-response, the role of motivation and interpersonal relations, the use of e-mail either as an add-on or as core, the role of the learning facilitator and the future of e-mail in the educational environment.

Ron Belisle, in his 1996 article "E-mail Activities in the ESL Writing Class," explores student and teacher benefits of using electronic mail in ESL writing instruction. The paper outlines several e-mail writing activities and sample assignments that have proven useful in his program with first and second year Japanese English majors, giving in this way well-trying ideas and solutions. The argument of the author goes that over a network, using e-mail and sharing files, students have the chance to collaborate and work together with other classmates, peers, and teachers. Therefore, acting in the electronic community can help learners create, analyse, and produce information and ideas more easily and efficiently. Through this increased electronic access to the world around them, Belisle claims, students' social awareness and confidence increases. The psychological aspect has to be taken into consideration here as well, since, in the writer's opinion, networking frees students from the limitations of traditional writing tools that often inhibit and restrict writing processes. Learning is then transformed from a traditional passive-listening exercise to an experience of discovery, exploration, and excitement, which is what the present paper also tries to aim at.

Also Belisle, in the paper "Let the E-mail Software Do the Work: Time Saving Features for the Writing Teacher," is occupied with more technical aspects of using e-mail in the classroom. Nowadays, when there is a multitude of mailing lists, producing a number of e-mail messages every day, teachers and students should be aware of the possibilities given to them by the e-mail software. Part I of this article examines two very useful features of most up-to-date e-mail software programs that can save the writing teacher time by organising, filing, retrieving, and responding to student e-mail writing assignments. Part II details a step-by-step process for downloading off the Internet a freeware e-mail software (Eudora Light), installing it up on the computer (Mac or Windows), and helping to set-up some of these time-saving features.

"E-mailing to Improve EFL Learners' Reading and Writing Abilities: Taiwan Experience," the paper by Chao-chih Liao, describes the author's experiences with using e-mail in the teaching process. The author gives a number of useful suggestions on setting up and maintaining a successful key pal connection. The article describes briefly Liao's experience during the time devoted to doing e-mail projects, outlines the leading principles for the projects, offers teaching tips for English as a Foreign or Second Language teachers of Chinese students, and finally analyses one type of Chinese e-mail discourse to benefit people who want to know more about the nature of Chinese people. This article gives insight into the intercultural aspect of e-mailing, giving some solutions on how to improve communication between students from different cultures.

Gerald Fox, in his 1998 article "The Internet: Making it Work in the ESL Classroom," considers the use of the Internet in second language instruction. First of all, the author focuses on how the Internet can be used to motivate students in their efforts to acquire English proficiency skills. Also, he discusses the most important components of a successful on-line programme such as integration of the on-line component with the curriculum, sufficient level of computer competence, both of the teacher and of students, and, finally, the active teacher involvement in a variety of roles, as the tutor, supervisor, teacher, assistant, and technician.

Trokeloshvili and Jost in the paper "The Internet and Foreign Language Instruction: Practice and Discussion" try to put forth a method of instruction giving consideration to student needs and teacher goals. The paper shows how a one-year composition course utilised the computer facilities at a major university in Japan. The course started with familiarising students with basic typing skills and general computer usage, and went on to help them understand the Internet with the ultimate goal of using it to create well-designed, well-written and interesting home pages. Students were involved in tasks and projects that required them to participate in newsgroup discussions via an intranet system, to learn how to use the Internet for general research purposes, and to create text and materials for personal home pages. The conclusion of the paper is that the idea of public displaying of student text with the help of a student home page highly motivates students to writing and having their works published, and removes the psychological barriers they might have with displaying ordinary writing. As for the characteristics of a web classroom, the authors claim that it has a widened and authentic reading audience; that peer response is becoming more common and easier; compositions have a greater attraction with their aesthetic appeal and students search to produce attractive work.

Victoria Muehleisen discusses different possibilities of using the Internet in the classroom in her article "Projects Using the Internet In College English Classes." The author strongly advocates using the Web in foreign language instruction, mainly because learning to use

a computer provides strong intrinsic motivation for learning English, the Internet places English in an international context, Internet projects are interactive and facilities for using the Net are often readily available. Some of the types of activities mentioned are: setting up a class page, teaching basic searching skills, showing students how to benefit from the advanced options of the Internet browser, writing e-mails both to each other and to international key-pals, using student discussion lists, and finally teaching students how to exploit the infinite potential of the Web to prepare classroom projects. In conclusion, the author urges English teachers to make use of the Internet in their English classes, since the projects involving the Web are a good way of motivating students to use English outside the classroom and to make English the part of their daily lives.

When considering the practical side of creating a class website, it would be useful to take into account the paper "How to Make a Successful ESL/EFL Teacher's Web Page" by Charles Kelly, which is a very detailed and comprehensive workshop on HTML and creating webpages. The paper has sections dealing with such issues as Quick-Start guide to the overview of HTML, page templates, a style guide, fine-tuning the page, samples of things which should be avoided, some things which could be done to make the page more attractive, and finally links to external sites dealing with the problem of creating successful webpages for the language classroom. Among other things, the reader can learn how to enhance the page to be fast-downloading, can realise the common mistakes to be avoided and is given ideas on what makes a successful page.

To sum up the summary of the previous research concerning using the Internet, and specifically web pages, e-mail and class website for language teaching, I would like to conclude with some general remarks about successful planning and implementing Internet projects taken from Warshauer and Whittaker's 1997 paper "The Internet for English Teaching: Guidelines for Teachers." According to the authors, teachers should carefully consider their goals, since little is gained by adding random on-line activities into the classroom. Clarifying course goals is, thus, an important first step toward the successful use of the Internet. The next crucial aspect of the Internet instruction is integration, and the teacher should think about how to integrate on-line activities into the syllabus rather than adding these on top of the rest of the classroom activities in a disconnected fashion. Also, the teacher should be aware of all the complexities of the on-line learning environment, such as difficulties in scheduling the access to the computer lab, or students finding computers outside the class time to continue their activities, malfunctioning hardware and software or problems with students' schedules not allowing them to return to the computer lab at a time when computers are available to complete their assignments. When having an e-mail exchange, the partner class might have absent students, or might not meet in a particular week due to holidays or other activities in that location, and the students might have differences in background, language and experience. The last two general guidelines on doing on-line lessons are that necessary support from the teacher should be given to students, so that they do not feel lost or overwhelmed by technology, and students should be involved in decisions about the content of their learning, which is possible given the variety and abundance of materials on the Web.

Some General Issues about On-line Lessons in the Curriculum

The first big question which needs to be answered at this point is why one should incorporate on-line lessons into the curriculum, what the benefits of such a method are in comparison with traditional instruction, and how the Internet component fits into the syllabus.

As for **the benefits of on-line instruction**, it can be said that such lessons provide recency to the classroom, since students can experience problems or read about issues which relate to the present day, and are not out-dated because of the time that passes from the publication of the coursebook. The Internet gives students variety and choice, since they have the enormous number of sites to choose from. Every student should be encouraged to do something different, and later the class could compare their findings orally, in this way adding speaking and listening development to the lesson. This is in sharp contrast with the traditional coursebook, where the whole class is given the same text or exercise, and there is no possibility of change. Because by its very nature the Web is multi-national and without borders, the lessons with the use of the Internet serve best the goal of increasing students' cultural awareness, allow them to get to know and appreciate other cultures, giving students the feeling of having the whole world right at their fingertips and moving from one place to another without any obstacles or cost. Another benefit of the Internet lessons is that the Web materials are completely authentic, unabridged and not prepared with a learner in mind, which can be sometimes difficult in terms of language, but extremely rewarding when students realise that what they read or write is real and belongs to the outside world, not the world of the classroom and textbook. Another positive aspect of on-line instruction is the fact that students, especially teenagers, are additionally motivated through using computers and the Web, especially when they do not have the chance to use it outside the classroom. Here some students might feel a little intimidated by computers and the Web, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to remove these psychological barriers (either through giving necessary assistance or mixed grouping). Finally, on-line lessons, while done from time to time, might add some new flavour to the classroom, and the Internet instruction could spice classes up with some new elements.

The next general issue which needs to be discussed before going into details with the actual examples of writing lessons is **how this on-line component could be incorporated into the curriculum**. There are a number of factors which need to be taken into account here. First of all, the students' level of English. It can be varied, because more difficult language can be made easier by giving less difficult activities and providing more teacher's support, and vice versa. However, it is preferable to have students on the intermediate level and higher (my students are on the level of *New Headway Intermediate*), so that their grammar and vocabulary would be enough to read and digest the content of the Internet sites (which are not learner-abridged in any way). Apart from the level of general English, students need to be computer-literate in the sense that they should know how to operate the Internet browser, how to search for sites using a search engine, how to save sites or print them out, how to copy information and paste it into a word-processing programme, and should have necessary typing skills. Obviously, it is hardly possible that students will have all of these skills in the same degree, and some students are more likely to be more skilful in using computers than others. In order to level out the class, the teacher could create mixed-ability groups to give everyone the chance to participate in the lesson.

When considering **the role of the teacher in a wired classroom**, it is essential that he/she should be extremely well prepared for the lesson, with every detail planned carefully in advance, including such things as: what is the content of the sites that students are going to view, how long it takes for them to load, whether the language is appropriate and how much support students need. The teacher must not only possess all the skills expected from students (see the previous paragraph). What is more, he should be able to solve some minor technical problems (especially when there is no technician available), and have some emergency lesson plan to do in case of a connection breakdown (here a good idea might be to download some sites for off-line viewing via the Local Area Network). During the on-line lesson, the teacher needs to be extremely active in monitoring students' work, to ensure that the time that is spent on on-line work is not wasted, to prevent students from viewing material which is not appropriate for them, and finally to maintain their attention and guide them on the Web so that they become focused on the assigned task. To sum up, the teacher's wide computer expertise and his active role both before and during the on-line lesson are the most crucial keys to the success of such a lesson.

When considering **the resources needed for conducting on-line lessons**, it is recommended that the teacher must have at his disposal a computer lab with Internet access, with at least one computer per two students, with computers connected to each other in the Local Area Network (LAN), a relatively fast Internet connection, and a networked printer. The use of the lab might be a problem in some large schools, where the lab is occupied all day by information technology classes, and there is no room for English lessons. However, I hope that this problem will be overcome in time. Also, the speed of the connection may sometimes be a serious obstacle to a successful on-line lesson, but this should also improve in the near future. Ideally, students should be given self-access to the lab outside classes, to improve their typing or surfing skills, to explore the Web at their own pace, or to gather information for some class or individual projects. This is done quite successfully in academic surrounding, but is still hardly possible in secondary schools. Thus, this paper describes tasks and techniques which could be accomplished in a single lesson of 45 minutes, with some pre and post-work done off-line during other lessons of English. Finally, each student should have an individual e-mail account and should bring a floppy disk to save his work, interesting sites or incoming e-mail messages.

The last issue which needs to be considered before going into the actual examples of the use of the Internet in writing instruction is the model of **the syllabus of a course including the on-line elements**. The techniques mentioned below can be used in a writing-only course on an academic level, with the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary on upper-intermediate level or higher, and with the instruction focusing only on the analysis and practice of writing genres. In such a case, two or three hours a week would be enough, with one on-line hour devoted to searching for materials, analysing the content of websites, looking for models to analyse, while the other one or two would concentrate on the analysis and work on the materials found on the Web. However, and I would like to emphasise it quite strongly, the primary implementation of on-line lessons for teaching writing on the Web proposed in this paper is general English instruction in a secondary school, since this is the actual situation in which I have been testing the techniques proposed in the paper. In such a case, I believe that the class would need at least four (and preferably six) hours of English a week, with most spent on grammar instruction, vocabulary work and the development of skills based on a coursebook, while one hour could be spent on-line, used mainly to give students real models for analysing writing genres, making them acquainted with the Web, developing their cultural awareness and integrating all the other skills with writing. I would like to state once again that the Internet component is not a goal in itself, but it is rather a useful teaching aid, and it should be subjected to the general syllabus to enrich and give variety and authenticity to learning English.

Some Ideas for Teaching Writing Genres with the Help of the Internet Components

In this section, I will analyse different writing genres, following roughly the format and order of the units in *Practise Writing* by Mary

Stephens (Stephens 1986), for each giving some ideas for tasks and techniques done with the help of the Web or e-mail, which could make the writing instruction more interesting and appealing to students. As said earlier, I am not in favour of teaching writing exclusively in the Web, or with the Web materials only. Instead, I would like to teach this skill with the help of specialised writing skills books, which give models of writing genres, useful vocabulary and key structures, the layout of each genre and some additional activities for speaking. Such books are well-established and they have successfully taught writing. However, it is my feeling that the Internet, with its enormous variety, multi-nationality and speed of delivery has a lot to offer to writing classes at very little cost. Therefore, in each genre discussed below, my method is to do the work on essential structures, useful lexis and layout off-line during the class preceding going on-line. In this way, students would already have the necessary knowledge to compose the required genre, and while going on-line they would only explore the Web materials.

Generally speaking, the techniques proposed by me are based on three basic elements: **websites** serving students with information they need, to be later used in writing; **e-mail** (key pal connection with students of their age, sending letters) and **web publishing** (creating a students' website where they can publish their own writing, serving also as a kind of bulletin board). These three elements are used in most of the genres, but in different ways and for different purposes.

1. A Letter to a Friend

As said before, the instruction of this genre should be conducted off-line using the activities and models from the *Practise Writing* book, which serves good models and focuses on the most important aspects of this kind of writing. As an introductory activity to writing a letter to a friend, students could be asked to go to www.marlo.com/card.htm, the site where they can send free cards with animated pictures, accompanying music, etc. The activity is great fun for students, when they choose from among funny pictures, write a few lines to their friends and actually send the cards. The site gives some phrases commonly met in informal letters to choose from, so the writing itself is not too demanding, and the task can be used with lower-level students as well. The prerequisite for this technique is that students have their individual e-mail accounts, since they are asked to type their address for sending confirmation notice. The lesson is extremely motivating for students, and apart from being great fun it introduces the formal features of a letter to a friend in a friendly way.

In order to make students' writing authentic and purposeful, to motivate them additionally and to give them the chance to participate in a real writing exchange, a student key pal connection should be established. This can be easily done either via a call for collaboration on the TESLCA-L discussion list, or by making a similar call in the newsletter published by the European Schoolnet (go to www.eun.org to subscribe to this free bi-monthly service). Every fortnight the latter publishes e-mail projects from various parts of Europe, with specified age and interests of students, and in this way a teacher may find a class somewhere abroad which most closely matches the specifications of his own classroom and which has the same goal -- to learn how to interact in writing via e-mail. After setting up such a connection, it is the teacher's role to stimulate students to write, to give them some things to find out from their key pals or topics to write about. The prerequisites for key pal connection are an individual e-mail account for every student and access to a word-processing programme once or twice a fortnight to type a letter. As for the duration of the connection, it seems best if it could be alive for a longer period of time (such as a term or a schoolyear), since it could serve many teaching purposes. As it will be seen later on, a working key pal connection will be invaluable when teaching most writing genres, as in this way students will be able to write to a real person and get some feedback from him.

A lot has been written in the literature about e-mailing as a method to improve students' writing, and using a key pal connection for enhancing students' writing performance is well-recognised among both CALL professionals and wired language teachers, and here I would like to mention just a few merits of such a technique (for a full treatment, see the articles reviewed in part 2 of this paper). Real writing interaction with a person of the same age and similar interests is likely to make students interested and motivated when they receive actual responses. E-mail exchanges may lead to close cooperation and real friendship, and certainly they increase students' cultural awareness and teach them how to appreciate different cultures. The problem might be for students without computers to have the letter typed, but it could be solved either by arranging the computer lab for self-access after classes, or by having some more computer-advanced students help the less skilled, in this way adding the collaborative element.

2. A Formal Letter

While teaching a formal letter, after having analysed the model, vocabulary and structures from the book during an off-line preparatory class, students could be asked to visit the site of Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org) or the World Wildlife Fund (<http://www.panda.org/home.cfm>). While being there, students could read about the real problems in the world around them, and

specifically about abused human rights or endangered species.

I will present how to enrich and make authentic the teaching of a formal letter on the example of the Amnesty International website. On the Amnesty International website there is a page called "help the prisoners of conscience," where each month there are new cases of human rights abuse from all over the world. Students should choose one case, read it and find out what the problem is about. The cases may be summarised to the whole class (to integrate the element of speaking and listening with reading and writing), so that all students can get deeper understanding of political problems in other parts of the world. The cases are not too long, and are written in clear language so that students should have no problems with comprehension. After that, the whole class should be encouraged to go to the letter writing guide which is linked to from the case page, and read both general writing guidelines and sample letters. Then they should compare their case with the sample letters, and prepare a letter of complaint in defence of the chosen prisoner of conscience. The sites have addresses to which the letters should be sent, and if possible, it should be done, in order to finish the whole process of writing, to make the whole technique authentic, and to give students additional satisfaction of actually sending their letter to the president of the United States of America or the prime minister of the United Kingdom, even though getting any response is hardly probable.

The technique described above, when done with my students, was extremely successful in motivating them and giving them a real purpose. During and after such a lesson, students feel that they are part of the world, and that they are engaged in more important matters than just complaining about a flawed shirt. They gain insight into real problems of human rights or animal abuse in other parts of the world and have a real say in the serious matters of life. To mention just a few merits of teaching writing with the Net, it can be said that such instruction is authentic, real, operates on actual problems and students can feel proud to play a part in the matters of the

world. The major problem that occurs while using this technique is that students are not likely to receive responses to their letters, so there is no feedback for them. This could be amended either by having the teacher offering the feedback, or by students reading others' letters and discussing them.

3. A Biography

Teaching writing a biography should start, as before, with one hour of formal instruction from a writing skills book, focusing on structures, vocabulary and layout of the piece. When going on-line, the Web could be used as a great source of information, and students should be directed to sites which contain ready-made biographies of film stars, pop singers or famous people, to choose whoever they wish to read about. This is the element of choice and variety, which is the characteristic feature of the use of the Web in the classroom, and which traditional textbook instruction usually lacks. Here the issue of recency comes into play as well, and the Internet offers much more recent information than existing textbooks, simply because of the time passing from their publication. Also, by choosing a person who is known and contemporary to students, they are likely to be more motivated to read than with a person whom they do not know. Some of the sites where such sample biographies can be found are the following: <http://www.imdb.com/> (the Internet Movie Database), <http://www.bham.wednet.edu/bio/biomaker.htm> (biography maker homepage with links to biographies databases, guidelines on how to write a biography, etc.) or <http://www.gms.ocps.k12.fl.us/biopage/bio.html> (biographies of people from the American history, written by eighth grade students). Here, it should be said that more such sites could be found in the Internet with the help of a search engine, and my purpose here is not to focus on any of them, but rather to give some guidelines on how such sites could be used in writing instruction.

After having read a selected model, students could be asked to change it into prompts, in the opposite direction than what they previously did during the off-line lesson. Then they could exchange their prompted biographies with other students, and be asked to reconstruct them, with the URL given so that after the task is accomplished they may go to the original location and check the result. In this way, students are given the responsibility for creating materials for each other, which gives them confidence. Also, the key pal connection could be activated here, with students writing a biography of a famous person from their country and asking a key pal for a biography of a famous one from their country. Finally, the Web could be used to find out some information about an important person to write a biography at home, and then the written pieces could be published on the class website, to be read and analysed in the next class.

The techniques described above consist mainly of using the Web as the source of models to choose from for reading, sharing with the class, making into prompts and reconstructing the ready-made biographies. This gives choice and variety, absent in traditional coursebook instruction. The key pal connection gives students the chance to practise the new genre in authentic written interaction, and the use of the class website to publish students' writing (such as for instance the British Council Rome Students' Metro Pages, <http://www.britishcouncil.it/english/english/rome/students/>) makes the whole process even more authentic and rewarding for students.

4. A Description of a Person

When teaching how to describe a person, in order to practise the new genre, the key pal connection should be activated, and students asked to describe a person of their choice (a member of their family or some well-known person from their own country) to their key pal and ask for the same. Here, the teacher supervising the class should contact the supervisor of the other class in advance, in order to synchronise the calendar of events and perhaps adjust to the needs of the other class. There should be close cooperation between the two teachers, so that students get in the response what they ask for. Describing a person from one's native country and asking for the same from a key pal serves the crucial purpose of developing understanding between nations and cultures, as well as gaining greater knowledge of the world.

Another technique which could be successfully used to make writing a personal description more lively and interesting would be playing some kind of networked "Wanted" game. Students should write short and preferably humorous descriptions of people known to everyone, for example their teachers, and should give them to the teacher before class. The teacher should then put them on the class website. The students could then be asked to go to the page with descriptions, read them and try to guess who the people are. The descriptions could stay on the website as puzzles for other students of the school or just as examples of how to write such a genre.

The advantages of the last activity, namely having students read on the class website, become quite obvious when compared with the traditional way of doing it, namely one student reading and all others listening. In the case of on-line reading, it is much easier for students to follow and understand the descriptions, since everyone has them in front of their eyes and can proceed at their own pace. In this way, students are more concentrated on reading for comprehension and they are not so likely to turn off their attention in case of comprehension problems. Also, the written pieces, after the task, can be used as models for grammar and vocabulary correction, as well as for the analysis of style, register and layout of a writing piece.

5. An Argumentative Essay (Both For and Against)

With the for and against essay, the modelling of structures, introducing essential vocabulary and examining the layout of the piece, with a special emphasis on the division and content of particular paragraphs can be done using a skills book such as *Practise Writing*, or the writing skills sections in existing coursebooks.

The on-line lesson, specifically relating to reading and digesting information from web pages, could concentrate on giving students deeper knowledge of certain selected issues, so as to make their arguments more serious and more mature. What is usually a problem for learners, especially teenagers, is what to write about in some topics, especially the abstract ones. Teachers grade essays not only for their grammatical correctness and lexical richness, but for the content as well. In order to help students write more mature essays, and to give them the feeling of authenticity and the real insight into the problems they are going to write about, the Ohio University CALL Lab page with topics for study could be used (<http://www.ohiou.edu/esl/project/index.html>). It has a listing of the most common topics for essays. In choosing a topic one usually gets the choice of having the arguments for and against. In choosing a topic, the student gets the links to the websites of real organisations. Next, students should explore these websites, reading and finding out information needed for their argumentative essay. It might be too much work for one student to explore websites that are both for and against the topic, so perhaps a good idea would be to introduce the collaborative element in this writing lesson, and to assign one topic to two students using separate computers. After they have explored the websites and have found out the necessary information, they should share both sides of the story, decide whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and choose the most suitable arguments (for example in their culture or political/social reality). This part of the writing instruction could be done by students at home. The final stage would be to actually write the essays in pairs, and they could be encouraged to correct their peers' parts, as it is widely known that peer correction is usually less threatening and often more beneficial than teacher correction.

After such an on-line lesson, it would be advisable to have a discussion on the topics students were assigned, so that the whole class could hear the arguments, evaluate them and utter their own opinions on the matters. Also, after the essays have been written and corrected, they could be put on the website, read by students in class and discussed. Students could be asked to read the essays, extract the arguments from them, reorder the paragraphs jumbled by the teacher, reconstruct the missing words, and do some other reading activities from Cambridge FCE Paper 1. This can be easily done by the teacher with simple Copy, Cut and Paste commands.

While teaching an argumentative essay on-line, I propose using the two techniques already introduced. First of all, web pages, and

especially home pages of organisations dealing with the topic of the essays, can provide students with authentic and deep arguments, give them the feeling of first-hand experience, and make their writing experience more purposeful and realistic. The second element suggested here, namely the class website, could be used for post-writing work, namely the analysis of the language used, the extraction of arguments, the whole class discussion, reading comprehension tasks, and many other activities. In this way, the teaching of a for-and-against essay may lead to a few more hours of instruction integrating all skills and exploring the language and structures used in writing.

6. Notices and Advertisements

When considering how to improve teaching this genre with the use of the Web, it could be said that again, as with most other genres discussed before, the Internet may constitute a source of varied materials to analyse. Especially on-line newspapers can be useful here, such as for instance the *Daily Telegraph* (www.telegraph.co.uk). I am giving the URL of this particular newspaper because when asked, this website said I could do whatever I wished with their articles if used for non-profit, educational purposes.

Therefore, during the on-line lesson, students could be encouraged to go to the section of classified ads on *Electronic Telegraph* site, browse through them, choose the one(s) that are of interest to them, simplify or expand them (if they are too long/difficult or short/easy for the level of this particular class). In this way, students are given choice and variety not encountered in ordinary book instruction. What is more, from the very beginning they have the feeling that the ads and notices they read are real, and not just made up for learning purposes. Newspaper ads can be a source of new useful vocabulary, and a teacher may also focus students' attention on the layout, structures and characteristic features of the genres on the authentic examples from the website, instead of using the ones from the textbook.

After that, students should be led to the second element of the on-line writing classroom described in this piece, namely the use of the class website. In order to practise writing the genre of notices and advertisements, they should be encouraged to write ads and notices concerning their own school life, set in their reality, to be put on the site and accessible to everyone. Such a site, when accessed by other students in the same school or town, can serve as a free bulletin board, obviously to some extent supervised by the teacher. My point is that it is the teacher who is the administrator of this class website, and he should make the decisions about what can and what cannot be published here, but I think that in the case of notices and ads, he should be rather permissive and allow all materials which do not infringe on good manners, the policy of the school and the law. Students must in no way get the feeling that their work is censored, since this would immediately kill their spontaneity and might have harmful effect on their willingness to cooperate.

7. A Description of a Festival of Ceremony

The Internet, by definition international, multi-cultural and (almost) limitless, is the best source of information about the customs and habits of other nations of the world. Searching the websites and exploring unknown traditions or celebrations, making the use of the multimedia dimension when watching films, listening to traditional music or viewing photographs, can give students the unforgettable experience of getting to know other cultures in depth without ever moving from the classroom (e.g., explore Wales following www.tourism.wales.gov.uk). Reading and talking about the multitude of Web materials relating to festivals or celebrations can deepen students' cultural awareness and appreciation for other cultures.

In order to teach the description of a festival or ceremony more authentically and meaningfully, students should be guided to exploit the enormous potential of WWW. Therefore, they should be assigned some festivals or could be allowed to choose for themselves, and then they should browse the websites relating to their task. The teacher's role here is to give students a precise checklist of things they have to find out, so that they are guided in their reading (such as what is the date, where is it, what is the origin, why does the celebration take place, what do the people do, etc.). Depending on the time available and the speed of the Internet connection students could be given the festival names, asked to type them in an Internet search engine and explore the results of the search query. This is advisable when the connection is fast, and the teacher wants to give students full freedom and choice. However, if the time for the on-line lesson is limited to one period of 45 minutes, and the connection is not extraordinarily fast, it might be a better idea to have students go to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) LinguaCenter (<http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/web/pages/holidays/purpose.html>) calendar page. There students can find major American festivals marked in the calendar, and they can choose their favourite. When clicking on the name of the festival, students get a number of links to different sites relating to it, such as the official sites of the organising committees, pages prepared by UIUC, etc.

The goal of the on-line lesson here is for students to complete the charts or checklists with the information extracted from the

websites. They may save pages to their personal floppies for further reading at home or print them out in class. At home they should write a report about the assigned festival, following the format and using the vocabulary and structures learnt during the off-line lesson preceding the Internet search. The reports, after being checked, should be put on the class website, and in the next lesson students could read them and discuss them together. Finally, in teaching this genre also the third component of on-line lessons, namely the key pal connection, should be used, and in order to practise the new genre, students could be asked to write a report about a festival from their native country and ask for a similar description from a key pal.

8. A Description or Review of a Book, Film or Play

In case of this genre, the Internet should be used again as a source of varied, authentic, interesting and current models of reviews of books (Amazon.com, the Internet bookshop - <http://www.amazon.co.uk/>), films (the Internet Movie Database - www.imdb.com) or theatre plays (London Theatre guide - <http://www.londontheatre.co.uk/>). It is definitely more motivating for students to go to one of these websites, browse through the titles available and choose one book, film or play that is of interest to them, and not have the whole class read the same model. In such a case their willingness to read and find out some information about it may be rather low. In case of the on-line lesson, such elements of the Internet as authenticity, variety, choice and recency are exploited. Especially recency is crucial here, since students are likely to have negative feelings towards descriptions or reviews which they do not know and as such do not care much about.

Therefore, the on-line lesson should be devoted to searching the sites mentioned above, choosing the film/book/play and reading about it. After reading, students would retell to the whole class what the book or film they chose was about, and in this way listening and speaking skills would be catered to as well. It would be good if such a lesson was done after the work on structures and layout of the piece, because while reading the real reviews students could analyse how much they formally conform to or depart from the models analysed. The final element of the on-line writing lesson would be for students to write a real review of a film, book or play they have seen recently to be put on the website. Here, this section of the class website could serve as a real forum for the evaluation of new films/books and the source of information and recommendation for students. Also, students from other classes could be encouraged to write about films and books later on.

One has to remember all the time that the sites proposed in this paper are real and unabridged. Thus, the language is likely to be to a certain degree above the students' level, which is obviously beneficial in terms of language learning (Krashen 1981 theory of "I + 1" - comprehensible input on the level slightly higher than the students' one), but may cause problems with comprehension and may discourage students from participating in the lesson. In order to prevent such a situation, the teacher should check the contents of the sites beforehand, try to find some operating on easier language, give students' easier tasks or provide greater teacher support during the on-line lessons. The example of a task which could serve to grade the complexity of the activity (which is also the option for mixed-ability groups, where there are more advanced and less advanced students at the same time), would be to take a review or description from one of the databases, either try to shorten and simplify it (for less-skilled students) or expand and elaborate it (for more advanced ones). Also, the Internet tasks can be graded by the site, since some sites operate on more basic vocabulary, while others on more sophisticated (see Krajka 2000, where I explored this issue in reference to on-line newspapers sites). It is visible in the case of newspapers, where the language of tabloid papers (especially *The Sun*) was easier, while quality ones (*The Independent* or *Daily Telegraph*) were more demanding in this respect.

9. A Newspaper Report

It has already been said while discussing other genres that on-line searching the Web pages enriches the writing instruction with authenticity and recency, placing students in the context of what is currently happening in the world. On-line newspapers are the best source of current information virtually for free. To access a central index of newspapers from all over the world, go to www.onlinenewspapers.com.

The sites of on-line newspapers could be used as the great resource of materials for reading, analysing language, gaining information about the world or increasing cultural awareness. Some of the activities which could be used during the on-line lesson are: reading stories and summarising them to the class, reading headlines and making them into full sentences, predicting and reconstructing the content of the articles from the headlines, comparing the presentation of the same topic in newspapers from different countries (preferably involved on the opposite sides of the conflict); analysing the style, language and the way of presentation of the topic in tabloid and quality British newspapers, writing about the same event in both tabloid (subjective, sensational) and quality (objective) fashion, making a tabloid story a quality story and vice versa. Finally, after all these exercises, students could be asked to write a newspaper report, preferably of some event that is close to them, in the sense that it happened in their surrounding (either school,

town or country). Students could be asked to prepare a news bulletin in English, with one part of the class writing in the tabloid fashion (subjective and sensational), while the other half about the same events in the quality way (objective, impersonal), to be put on the class website. After one issue, students could change sides, with the tabloid team writing quality stories and vice versa. These ideas, and many more, can be found in the paper "Some Possibilities for Using On-Line Newspapers in the ESL Classroom" (Krajka 2000).

One of the many benefits of the activities described above is that students learn how to write a newspaper report about authentic events, at the same time gaining greater knowledge of the world and expanding their vocabulary inventory, with free and quick access to the news from different parts of the world. What is more, the writing tasks described above give students insight into the business of journalism, teach them how to manipulate information to convey personal opinions, and let them experience the effect of propaganda and relativity of truth first hand.

The last point to note about the writing tasks described above is that using on-line newspapers apart from viewing on screen is a breach of the copyright law, and for such activities as modifying articles, changing the headlines into full sentences, making the articles easier or shorter, and anything else that involves editing, permission from the syndication department of the relevant newspaper has to be granted (see Krajka 2000 for details on copyright issues of on-line newspapers).

10. A Personal Opinion Essay

I will not go into detail discussing this particular genre, since the procedure of the on-line writing lesson for this genre would be similar to point 5, a for-and-against essay. Of course, the formal characteristics, and especially the language and structures are different from an argumentative essay, and this difference should be introduced and emphasised during the off-line lesson focusing on a model and formal features of the genre, done before going on-line.

11. A Description of a Place

The Web, with its multitude of sites relating to travel, is a perfect place to get to know some unknown places, to take a virtual trip to the countries and towns that you might never visit personally, to learn more about the geography, history, culture, people and customs of some distant lands. This is a perfect time for students to broaden their knowledge of the world, to help them explore and understand other cultures.

In order to do that the teacher should have students find out information about some distant place. Then, with the help of travel search engines such as www.travelnow.com or www.go.com students should browse through the results of the query for the place of their choice, read and extract the most crucial pieces of information about it. Again, as it was the case with the description of a festival/ceremony (see point 7), students should have a precise checklist of things to find out, so that their attention is focused precisely on the task of finding out specific bits of information. Of course, the teacher's role is to monitor students' activities in the Web, so as to make sure that the content of the sites viewed by them conforms to the teaching purposes, and that they remain focused on a few most informative sites, without moving from one to another because of the limits of time (it is assumed here, as well as in the whole paper, that the on-line component lasts not more than one 45-minute period, and both the teacher and the students need to make the best use of this time in order to accomplish the task).

After students have found the answers to the questions on their worksheets, and after they have analysed the model, structures, vocabulary and layout of this writing genre, they could proceed to writing a report about the place they have chosen, using the information from the worksheets. The reports, as usual, should be put on the class website, so that during the next on-line lesson the whole class could read their pieces, discuss the places described and perhaps choose the most interesting ones to spend summer or winter holidays in.

Finally, the key pal connection should be activated for the purpose of practising this genre, and students could be asked to write a description of some interesting place in their town or country, asking the key pal for the same.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be said that writing instruction should be enriched with the Internet component, in order to provide students with choice, variety, authenticity, and recency and to give them a real purpose for writing, to allow them to experience the authentic written interaction with other people, to motivate them additionally through using computers and the Web, and to give them the feeling

of self-confidence when seeing their works published on the class website.

There are three elements of on-line lessons, which are used while teaching most of the writing genres. Web pages are the endless source of varied, authentic and unabridged materials to choose from, both for the teacher and students. The key pal connection can be profitably used for every writing genre, giving students a real purpose for writing and teaching them written interaction while communicating in writing with their peers of similar age and interests. Finally, the class website as a publishing medium for students' pieces gives the chance to reward students, to make them read others' pieces attentively, and is an interesting and cheap way to promote students' writing. While creating this class website, more technologically advanced students could be actively involved as authors/webmasters/graphic designers (responsible for typing, designing, updating), which would give them even more satisfaction and develop advanced computer skills.

As it could be seen from the discussion of each writing genre, I am in favour of devoting at least two periods to teaching one genre. The first class, entirely off-line, would be focused on analysing model pieces, work on structures and vocabulary based on a specialised writing skills book. This could save on-line time necessary for browsing, reading and digesting information from the Web, and also while browsing the Internet sites, students would already have the knowledge of the formal requirements of the genre, and could see how these work in practice. Time allowing, the on-line lesson should be followed by another off-line or on-line lesson, done after students wrote their pieces, the teacher corrected them and they were put on the class website, in order to discuss students' performance, to let them experience one another's writing, and to develop listening and speaking skills on the basis of the information gained during the on-line class. Therefore, it can be said that the on-line writing lesson proposed can be divided into a "pre-stage", a "while-stage" and a "post-stage", which is the same format as that of reading, listening or speaking activities.

The solutions described above could be applied to a writing-only course, and on higher levels of proficiency, and there is little danger that more advanced students would get bored (because of the great variety and graded difficulty of websites). What is more, the activities described above do not develop writing solely, but integrate all skills (reading, vocabulary work, speaking/sharing with the class, listening to others).

A final point about the on-line writing instruction is that the Web should not be used all the time, or the Web materials only, but rather a teacher should enrich lessons with the Net component when it is really profitable for students and could help them in their learning.

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- **2. Web pages used in the paper**
 - a letter to a friend: www.marlo.com/card.htm (sending cards with animated pictures), www.eun.org (European Schoolnet site, to establish a key pal connection)
 - a formal letter: <http://www.amnesty.org> (human rights abuse, sending a formal letter in defence of prisoners of conscience); <http://www.panda.org/home.cfm> (the site with the information about endangered species)
 - a biography: www.imdb.com (the Internet Movie Database), <http://www.bham.wednet.edu/bio/biomaker.htm> (biography maker homepage, with links to biographical sites all over the world, sample biographies of famous people); <http://www.gms.ocps.k12.fl.us/biopage/bio.html> (biographies of famous Americans, written by eighth grade students)
 - a for and against essay: <http://www.ohiou.edu/esl/project/index.html> (Ohio University CALL lab page, with a list of topics for essays and for each topic links to organisations giving arguments for and against)
 - notices and advertisements: www.onlinenewspapers.com, www.telegraph.co.uk (*Daily Telegraph* page, the section of classified ads)
 - a description of a festival or ceremony: <http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/web.pages/holidays/purpose.html> (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Lingua Center page, with festivals marked in the calendar and links for each festival)
 - a review of a book, film or play: www.Amazon.co.uk (the Internet bookstore), www.imdb.com (the Internet Movie Database), www.londontheatre.co.uk (a guide to London theatres on-line)
 - a newspaper report: www.onlinenewspapers.com (the index of newspapers from all over the world), www.telegraph.co.uk (the electronic version of *Daily Telegraph*)
 - a personal opinion essay: <http://www.ohiou.edu/esl/project/index.html> (Ohio University CALL lab page, with a list of topics for essays and for each topic links to organisations giving arguments for and against)
 - a description of a place: www.travelnow.com, www.go.com (travel search engines), www.tourism.wales.gov.uk (explore Wales following this link to the official Wales Tourism Board)
 - British Council Rome Students' Metro Pages, example of a students' homesite: <http://www.britishcouncil.it/english/english/rome/students/>

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