

Developing the Writing Skills: Driving towards Evolution by Innovation

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Abstract

This paper presents a website, Scrib+ (<http://scribplus.ovh.org/>) designed for educational purpose by "Laboratoire de linguistique et didactique des langues étrangères et maternelles" (LIDILEM) (<http://w3.u-grenoble3.fr/lidilem/labo/web/presentation.php>). There exist many online tools like a text editor, syntax correction software, grammar and spelling checker etc. When these tools are used individually, they are not of much help to the students in improving their writing skills. Moreover, five basic steps of the writing process: pre writing, drafting, revising, proof reading and publishing, are rarely found in the same tool. Analysis of the written sentence correctly on different level: spelling, syntax and grammar is important for improving the writing skills. According to François Mangenot^[1] (1996:65), «la production écrite est une activité cognitive complexe, aboutissant presque toujours, chez les apprentis-scripteurs, à une surcharge cognitive», the written assignment is a complex cognitive activity for apprentice-writer and it leads to the cognitive overload. Also, due to the lack of the knowledge of the sentence analysis skill, it is difficult sometimes for a student to construct complex sentences. For a given topic, sometimes it is difficult to put the thoughts in words. Scrib+ is like a shell which can be filled with different languages for improving the writing skills in that particular language. It helps the students to automatically generate a text by answering a chain of interlinked questions. This website can be classified as prompting program software. This site was tested on Thai Students learning French as a foreign language. We will also present students experience of using this website.

1. Introduction

« As we enter the 21st century, everyday language use is so tied to technology that learning language through technology has become a fact of life »^[2]

Carol A. Chapelle affirms that today the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has become an important tool in the learning of a foreign language. As for students, ICT tools have also an image of modernity. In the present hour, multimedia attracts, more and more, the young generation who consider it to be a new way of gaining information and training themselves.

The trend of using internet in last few years has changed the way we write online. The blogs and sites with the objective of creating social networks offer new possibilities for encouraging writing habit. In this *Net Generation*^[3], the challenge for a language teacher is to encourage students to use internet for reading and writing in the foreign language that they are learning. The aim of Scrib+ is to encourage the use of the existing resources and websites online for improving the writing skills. Scrib+ is based on the concept of prompting program. A prompt could be a single word, a short phrase, a complete paragraph or even a picture, with the objective of giving students something to focus upon as they write. Prompt help students to develop ideas to write which otherwise they find difficult when faced with a blank paper.

Most of the websites or software developed for improving the writing skills focus on a particular topic of grammar or vocabulary to be taught. They are based on the behaviorist theory:

- Presentation of the information
- Closed ended questions based on the information
- Response from the student
- Analysis of the response given/Feedback based on the response
- More questions based on the similar topic

Behaviourism focuses on one particular view of learning: a change in external behaviour achieved through a large amount of repetition of desired actions, the reward of good habits and the discouragement of bad habits. In the classroom this view of learning led to a great deal of repetitive actions, praise for correct outcomes and immediate correction of mistakes.^[4]

Scrib+ is based on the Constructivist theory and the Social Learning theory. Constructivist theory claims that the humans are better able to understand the knowledge they have constructed by themselves. According to constructivist theories, learning is a social advancement that involves



language, real world situations, and interaction and collaboration among learners. The learners are considered to be central in the learning process^[5]. Social Learning theory extends constructivist theory by incorporating the role of peers in the learning process. *Social learning theory is a perspective that states that social behavior (any type of behavior that we display socially) is learned primarily by observing and imitating the actions of others. The social behavior is also influenced by being rewarded and/or punished for these actions*^[6].

2. Scrib+: From conception to its implementation

Scrib+ is a freeware (<http://scribplus.ovh.org/>) developed in 2008 by François MANGENOT and Anuradha KHARA in the laboratory LIDILEM. This project was inspired by a software “Gamme d’écriture” which appears in the collection LIRE-ECRIRE (CNDP-CRDP). Gamme d’écriture is the french adaptation of an Italian software “Word profs” which aims at developing resources to ameliorate the writing skills. All these three software are also based on “A Cognitive Process Theory of writing” by Flower & Hayes, 1980. Their theory states: *1. The process of writing is actually an entire set of distinctive thinking processes that the writer organizes while writing. 2. Any of these processes can be embedded in another, organized hierarchly by the writer. 3. The act of writing itself is a goal-directed activity, one of a network of goals that grows and emerges through writing, and 4. The goals are created by the writer and can be changed during the writing process.*^{[7][8]}

Scrib+ allows teachers to create a series of questions or instructions based on a topic/theme which later appears on the screen as writing prompts. With each prompt, four different types of aids can be provided in different forms to encourage the learner to write. Teacher can use the text already existing on net related to the topic chosen to work upon. This text can be provided as a sample text. Teacher can also provide the link to a website containing the information based on that particular topic in the form of aid. According to Desai, Hart, and Richards (2008), “The vast amount of information that computers supply on a daily basis has allowed teachers and students new ways to explore education compared to ordinary instructional tools” (p. 329)^[9]. The writing process in Scrib+ appears as a dialogue between the student and the computer. During the writing phase, the student follows the instructions and replies to the questions already prepared by the teacher and which appears as prompts on the screen. At any given moment, the student can move backwards and modify the response to a particular prompt. The responses of the student are stored in variables. These responses get integrated in a text already prepared by the teacher and is generated at the end.

Presently, Scrib+ is developed for students learning French as a foreign language in high school faculties, Universities or in private institutions. Students are required to have at least A2 level according to Common European Framework of Reference for languages.^[10]

3. Scrib+ and learner’s autonomy

This software is designed with an aim to enhance and sustains learner’s autonomy. Pertaining to the definition of autonomy, we can quote Holec (1981: 3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 1) who describes it as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s learning’^[11].

Indeed by the various levels of text development in this software a learner is constantly incited to read the sample text, the text in the website link and the suggestions provided, before the writing process, which thus enhances self directed learning. Furthermore, during the dialogue through prompts, situations are generated wherein the autonomous learner takes a (pro-) active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975)^[12].

Autonomous learning, however doesn’t mean that the teacher’s input and support is not needed (Little, 1990)^[13]. On the contrary, only the role of the teacher changes from being an instructor to a facilitator. An instant feedback in Scrib+ is not possible as it doesn’t have a tool to check if the work of the learner is linguistically correct. Hence, the evaluation and the feedback are done by the teacher. For the optimal benefit and exploitation of this site, collaboration between the teacher and the learner is prerequisite.

Another interesting aspect of Scrib+ is Forum. A space where the learners can publish their text and receive the critics from their peers. This aspect is based on *Social learning theory*.^[5]

4. Scrib+ and the writing process

Five basic steps of the writing process consist of pre writing, drafting, revising, proofreading and publishing^[14].



Pre-writing- To stimulate student's creativity and generate ideas, Scrib+ provides them with links to the texts related to their topic. Before the drafting phase, reading of these texts help in the flow of ideas and the discovery of new vocabulary.

Drafting- After the pre-writing phase, it is easier for the learners to put the thoughts in words and to reply to the prompts. They can access the aids provided at any moment of their writing phase.

Revising- Scrib+ allows the learners to go backwards and modify or add text at any moment of the drafting and revising phase.

Proofreading- The learner can retrieve the entire text generated at the end and modify it using the Word Editor.

Publishing: Once the learner is content with his work, it can be sent to the teacher using Scrib+ and also be published on the Forum of Scrib+.

5. Evaluation of Scrib+

Scrib+ was tested in the University of Chiang Mai in Thailand as a part of a research project "Peer feedback in Computer based writing activities"^[15] by Montiya Phoungsub on 23 native Thai students having B1 level in French. Feedback provided by students concludes that Scrib+ helped them develop confidence during the writing process. The link provided by the teacher encouraged them to read the related text and develop ideas and use new vocabulary in their writing phase. They were excited about publishing and comparing their text on forum and reading comments by their peers. Few students complained about the fact of having almost the same structure of their end text. Over all, students appreciated this new method of learning.

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