Beyond Process Theory – How New Technologies Are Changing the Way We Write and Communicate

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Abstract

New technology is changing the way we teach and the way students learn. The process of writing a text can be fundamentally different with the use of modern word processing tools such as "Quip" or "Google Docs". These apps and websites allow students to share their writing with each other and their tutor thus enabling synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. In addition, space is provided for an online chat-box creating a new channel of communication and thus a further level of analysis. These tools mean that a tutor can help and encourage students while they write a text not have to wait until they have finished a first draft. This paper will consider the effect modern technology is having on the theory and process of writing and how it is changing the relationship between the students and the tutor. A "Post Process" approach will be examined which places more emphasis on collaborative writing and provides an opportunity for the tutor to co-construct texts with the students. The use of online dialogue as a means of encouraging communication between students and the tutor will be discussed and illustrated with examples from a research project of EAP students at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi.

New technology is changing the fundamental process of writing and communicating. An increasing amount of human interaction now occurs in a text-based form online either on mobile phones, mobile devices or computers. The information can be transmitted instantaneously but it can also be stored, reviewed, edited and rewritten. With the development of mobile technologies communication and learning can take place "anytime and anywhere" [1]. This is having a significant effect on the process of learning and specifically writing for EFL learners. In addition to making it easier for students to share documents with each other, receive feedback from the teacher and make multiple edits, mobile technology also facilitates student collaboration and collaboration with the tutor to co-construct a text.

If writing is a "historically dynamic process" [2] that is always changing and developing then it is important to be able to reinterpret and integrate new perspectives into writing theories. A popular approach in EFL teaching is "Process Writing" which can be seen as a reaction against product oriented or traditional rhetoric. It emphasized the process of writing not the product and broke the writing process down into several stages – planning, drafting, peer review, tutor feedback, redrafting and final product.

This process approach was beneficial for the second language learner as it allowed for a review of grammar and lexis as well as content and organization. However in the 1990's Process writing itself came under attack. It was criticized for producing a "Theory" of Writing with its own set of generalisations that should be correct most of the time [3](Olson in Breuch 2002). A Post Process Theory developed that emphasized that writing was not a body of knowledge that could be taught. Other factors were also important such as the situation where the writing takes place, the audience it is meant for and the dialogue that occurs between students and the tutor. However, as Matsuda [4] points out, this does not necessarily mean the end of Process Theory. It is best understood if seen as an extension or development of a process-oriented pedagogy where more emphasis is placed on the communicative interaction between students and the tutor. Writing should be seen as a social construct not an individual one. The tutor should "actively collaborate" with the student to co-construct the text. This collaborative approach is supported by Vygotsky's [5] socially constructive perspective of learning which argues that human development is essentially based on social interaction – we learn from each other, specifically, from a "more able" other. This is now referred to as "scaffolding". Such scaffolding can also occur among peers when collaborating in pair or group work. [6] [7]. Research has shown that collaborative work between students can significantly improve their writing skills [7][8][9][10]. Modern technology facilitates this collaborative approach by allowing students to work

together on a text both synchronously and asynchronously without having to be in the same place at the same time. It is therefore both place and time independent [11].

We will consider in more detail how new technologies facilitate this development into post process writing with its social emphasis on tutor and peer collaboration. I would argue that new technology has changed the process of writing itself by fundamentally changing the relationship between the tutor and the student. In addition it also facilitates a more collaborative approach between students and allows for the use of a new level of analysis during the construction of the text. Let us examine in more detail how these changes are taking place.

First modern technologies make communication between the tutor and the students faster and easier. This has two important effects. First it changes the way the tutor can give feedback to the student. For example, following the traditional process approach, the student would write an essay and give it to the tutor – either hand written or email. The tutor would then read it, make comments and pass it back to the student who could then edit the text accordingly and then pass back to the tutor for more suggestions or a final grade. Even using email and Word this was still a cumbersome process. Now using apps and websites like "Google Docs" and "Quip", the student can work on the document and "share" it with the tutor at the same time. The tutor can watch the student work and make suggestions during the process. When the student has finished the first draft, the tutor can immediately provide feedback as can be seen in Fig 1.
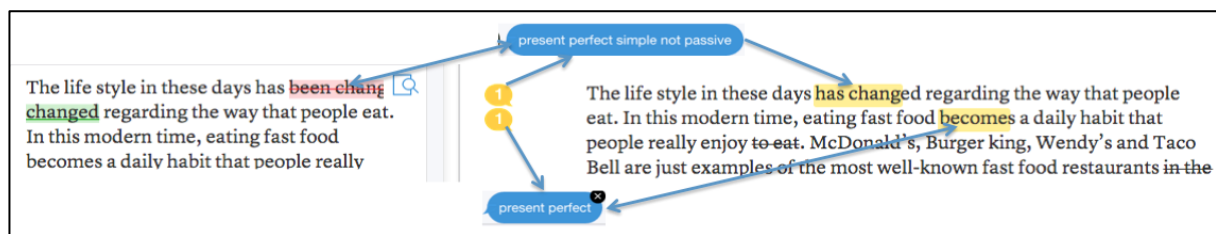

Fig 1. A section of the screen from "Quip" shows the original text on the left showing the edits and the edited text on the right. Two yellow highlights open up to show comments from the tutor. The top comment has been acted upon by the student and we can see that the text has been changed. The second error has yet to be changed.

The student can make changes and the tutor can see these changes and make new comments. This process can happen quickly and repeatedly without having to wait for the document to be handed in, marked and returned. In this way we can see that modern technologies have changed the process of writing itself.

Not only is it changing the process of writing, it is also changing the relationship between the tutor and the student and the way teaching and learning takes place. The student does not have to write the text on her own, it can be co-constructed with her tutor. The tutor can provide support to the student at every stage of the process not just when the first draft is finished. The tutor is clearly "actively collaborating" with the student throughout the process.

Secondly, while the student can "share" her text with the tutor to receive feedback, she can also "Share" it with other students so they can work together on the same document. This clearly facilitates collaborative writing but this collaboration may be further enhanced when students can communicate with each other in a chat box while looking at the text. Modern technology makes it easy for students to produce and share documents with each other and their tutor and take part in synchronous and asynchronous dialogue about the text. This dialogue can be referred to as online dialogue or computer-mediated communication. This form of communication is used extensively today in text messaging, instant messaging, emails, chat rooms and social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook. It therefore seems to be natural to incorporate it into collaborative academic writing. In Fig 2 we can see an example showing the chat on the left and the text on the right. The students are discussing whether to change the phrase "all around the world" to "worldwide" or "multinationally". It is interesting that they use a mixture of English and Arabic. Student C asks what is happening. Then A explains that "multinational" means everywhere and they should keep the text as it is.
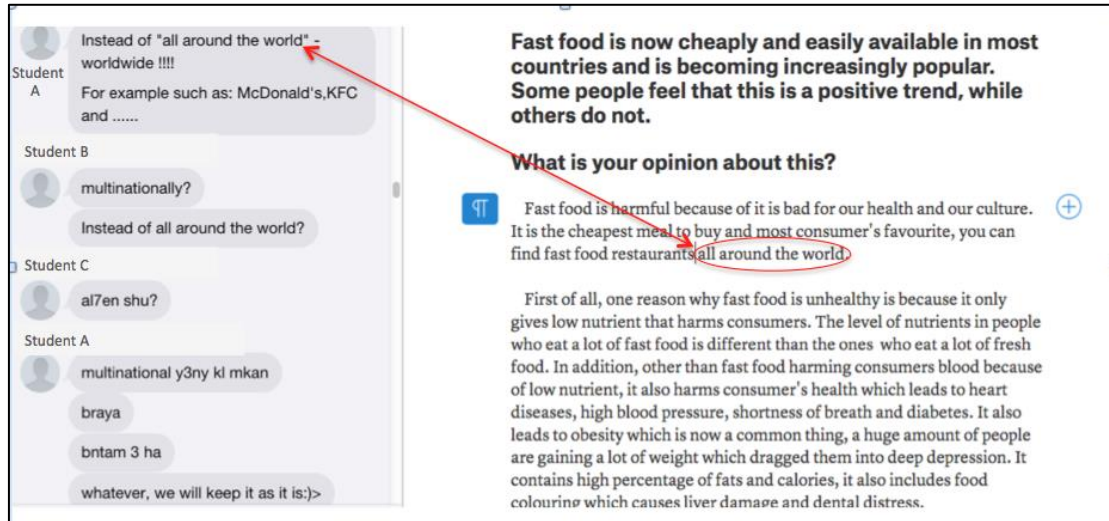
Fig 2. Screen shot from "Quip" showing online dialogue between students on the left and the text they are discussing on the right.

This online dialogue can cover many topics – the students may discuss their individual roles; the organization and form of the text; they encourage, support and prompt each other; critique each other's work and discuss the feedback from the tutor. They often use their L1 or a version of their L1 as we saw above. This may give them a sense of ownership of the app or website. In Fig 3 we can see some examples of when the tutor is involved:

Above we can see a timely intervention by the tutor in a synchronous discussion. To the right the tutor prompts the students to define what is meant by fast food. Notice the informality of the chat and the use of emoticons.

Fig 3. Some examples of online dialogue with the tutor "actively collaborating" in co-constructing a text with the students.

This "chatbox" which facilitates online dialogue is creating a new space for communication that is informal and flexible. The students can use a combination of different languages including emoticons. This informal approach may make them feel more relaxed which may affect their motivation, group dynamics and individual expression. For example students who may lack confidence speaking and

expressing their opinions in a group or to their tutor may feel more comfortable communicating by online dialogue.

The more flexible approach to the process of writing means the tutor can identify organizational or language problems as they arise and provide some input to the group or the class as a whole. This allows for more flexibility in teaching styles. Thus technology is creating a new environment for learning and teaching to take place. Sims [12] argues that the term mobile learning should be replaced with C3 learning for "technology-enhanced environments that enable collaborative, contextual and connected learning". This new approach blends formal and informal teaching and learning to a connected generation. This combination of formal and informal teaching and learning can be seen with the online chat and use of emoticons contrasted with the formal, academic nature of the text itself. The students are connected to each other digitally and therefore more frequently than if they were just in the classroom. It should be remembered that mobile technology means students are using their phones as well as their iPads. Indeed some reported that they found it easier to type on their mobile phones. This mobility also means they have the opportunity to write and edit their work more often.

We have seen how new technology, particularly mobile technology, is changing the writing process by providing more opportunities for communication between the tutor and the students and making this communication faster and easier. This encourages collaboration among students and between students and the tutor thus changing the essential nature of writing, teaching and learning. There are many criticisms of the over-use of technology in the classroom but when it fosters new forms of communication, allows students to work effectively with each other and their tutor, motivates them to spend more time on their writing and takes the work out of the classroom, it has to be viewed as a positive tool for education.

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