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Computers in EAP: change, issues and challenges

Huw Jarvis looks at how computers can be used in projects in an EAP environment to develop students' language and e-literacy skills.

Computers have, over the last 15 years or so, become a vital aspect of academic study at British Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and elsewhere, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) providers cannot simply ignore such developments if they are to adequately address their remit of equipping non-native speakers (NNS) with the language skills, the study skills and the study competences needed in order to operate successfully in an academic environment. This article begins by documenting the changing role of computers in EAP and some of the arising issues and challenges. In doing so the paper identifies some of the key publications within this important and ever-growing area. The second part goes on to illustrate how some of these issues and challenges can be addressed through an example computer-based project work lesson. This is outlined and then discussed.

Historical context

Computers have, over many years, played a role of varying significance on EAP programmes at British HEIs and elsewhere. As far back as the early 90's, for example, EAP providers would, at the very least, arrange orientation sessions for learners to the HEIs word-processing provisions and library catalogues. Some providers might have drawn from the then current literature (for example Davidson and Tomic, 1994; Hyland, 1993 or Jarvis 1997a) to develop pedagogic-based word-processing tasks. During this period we also saw the development of EAP-specific tutorial computer assisted language learning (CALL) materials. Such materials were

initially text-based and would include dedicated off-the-shelf programmes such as *CALLEAP* by Sibbons and Motteram (1994) and/or in-house authored materials using a variety of programmes including *Eclipse* by John and Muriel Higgins; a text construction programme, or *Choicemaster* and *Gapmaster*; multiple choice and gap-fill based programmes by Wida Software. As the technology developed we saw a shift from text to multi-media based CALL materials and this made it possible to add video, audio and animation. Wida's products became available in multi-media format and new off-the-shelf packages began to emerge including 'Essential Academic Skills in English' (EASE) <http://www.ease.ac.uk>

From my discussion above, we can assert that the use of computers in EAP derives from two principles: that of equipping learners for academic study on the one hand and assisting language learning on the other. These issues are well documented within EAP specific literature sources such as Howarth and Herington (2000) or Jarvis (1997b, 2004).

New opportunities and arising issues

It is, however, with the arrival and widespread availability of the internet that we note new opportunities and challenges for CALL as discussed for example by Kern (2006). And it is with widespread applications of the internet at HEIs that we see a potentially significant increase in the role of computers in EAP, as well as a convergence of the two notions of "equipping" and "language learning"

within one primary delivery medium i.e. that of the internet.

In terms of assisting language learning, in recent years we have seen a renewed interest in this area and a refuting of some of the less favourable assumptions regarding "tutorial CALL"; Levy and Stockwell (2006: 185) for example note that "Although a highly valid and useful application of CALL, drill-based grammar activities, which comprise a significant proportion of grammar tutorial exercises, appear to have been the target of criticism in recent years ..." They go on to suggest that "Drill-based activities most certainly still have their place in the language curriculum". The work of Hubbard and Siskin (2004: 495) sets out to identify and then dispel a number of myths. They conclude that "... it is still a valuable part of CALL and deserves serious attention rather than summary dismissal". In EAP we see the emergence of tutorial-based web sites, many of which are listed in the English for Academic Purposes section of the English Language Resource Website available at <http://www.eapstudy.com/>

The notion of equipping learners for academic study raises specific challenges of e-literacy skills for non-native speakers (NNS) of English and it is by no means clear whether EAP providers are rising to this challenge. In a survey of provision of programmes at British HEIs, Jarvis (2004: 126-127) found that "many EAP providers may not be adequately addressing the WWW and its applications in an academic environment"; he goes on to ask, "Do students really know how to access and evaluate relevant WWW sites?"

And how to paraphrase, quote and appropriately reference material from the WWW?" In a more recent study Jarvis and Pastuszka (2008) have asked "Do students make sufficient use of the WWW? Are they confident when searching for information? Have they developed critical reading skills? Do they have a sense of technology-related strategies?" Their study concludes that "some do, some don't" – this suggests a less than satisfactory situation. Other important issues and questions include the extent and manner with which NNS interact with Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) at HEIs – this includes expectations of academics, appropriate language for emails and discussion forums.

Example project

Let us turn then to the question of how we might exploit the potential of the medium in order to equip our students with the necessary language and electronic literacy skills so that they might successfully function in English in an academic environment. Documented below is just one possibility which has been successfully used with intermediate and upper-intermediate students on a common core EAP pre-session programme – the students were going on to a variety of academic subjects at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is followed by a discussion which identifies how some of the significant issues and challenges are being addressed.

Project title

The life and work of ... (e.g. Nelson Mandela, Lady Diana, Gandhi, etc).

Aim

At the end of this project you will have practised the language of narrative and learned how to make appropriate use of computers for academic study.

Task

This project has two submission parts and a number of stages. It involves working in small groups of three. At the end of the project you will need to submit a 2,500 word-processed document to your tutor, for which you will receive feedback and a mark. You will also need to present a 20 minute

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PowerPoint presentation for which you will also receive feedback and a mark. Everyone in your group needs to participate in both parts of the project. This means that you will need to share out the work and meet regularly with your group. You will also need to make use of computers in a variety of ways in order to successfully complete the tasks. You will be marked on your participation in the process as well as the final products. The marking criteria are posted on the VLE.

Word-processed work: You need to follow standard academic conventions for presentation of work and referencing conventions (specifically from websites). You should include at least two relevant illustrations, appropriately acknowledged and at least three web-based references. You must include at least one direct quotation and at least one paraphrased idea from a minimum of three sites that you are required to use and fully reference.

PowerPoint presentation: Your PowerPoint presentation should follow the same guidelines as for the word-processed work above, but you should also include a short video clip (two or three minutes) which needs to be embedded in your presentation – again you will need to fully acknowledge your sources.

There are a number of clear stages which you need to follow and these are documented below.

Stages

1. *Week 1 – Thinking about the topic, looking at possible websites, planning and requesting approval from your tutor.* Meet with your group and agree on a proposed title; prepare a draft outline which includes the areas that you

intend to cover, rough organisation of your ideas, at least X3 possible websites and at least X2 possible illustrations (again from the web). Submit your plan as an email attachment and use the email to ask your tutor if they are agreeable to the proposed title and whether they have any suggestions to improve content. Remember to cc everyone in the group into this email – your tutor will reply with specific suggestions to everyone in your group. You should not start the second step until your tutor has approved your title and plan.

2. *Weeks 2 and 3 – Gathering information and preparing first draft word-processed work.* You need to research your topic and prepare a first draft. At this stage your writing should focus on content (rather than accurate language and surface features). Post your draft work as an attachment on the VLE by the end of week 3 and invite your classmates to comment on the content. (Your tutor will also post some questions for everyone to consider.)

3. *Week 4 – Looking at and commenting on other groups' work.* Working as a group, arrange a time to meet your group and download your classmates' word-processed work. Use the "Comments" function of the word-processor to answer the questions posted by your tutor; add any additional comments of your own. Save your work and upload it for the writers to consider. Within the VLE forum add an overall comment about the content of the writing that your group has reviewed.

4. *Week 5 – Drafting and editing work.* Look at the comments posted by your classmates and make content revisions to your work try to address some of the

most important comments that other groups have made. At this stage you should also revise your work so that it is as accurate as possible with correct surface features.

5. *Week 6 – as for week 4.* However, this time you should provide feedback on the use of language and the surface features of the writing. (Your tutor will also post some questions for everyone to consider.)

6. *Week 7 – Submission of word-processed work. Discussing presentation content and arranging roles; finding possible video clips to use.* Submit hard copy of your word-processed project to your tutor. Meet with your group to discuss your presentation content and how it is going to be divided (provisional sections) also decide who is going to talk for each section. Everyone is required to speak for at least three minutes. Think about how your slides are going to be different from your word-processed text. By the end of the week you should send an email to your tutor in which you document your provisional sections and identify who is going to speak to each section and for approximately how long. You must also submit at least one video clip that you are thinking of using in your presentation – include reasons for selecting the clip. You may, however, choose to submit up to three clips – however many clips you submit you must ask your tutor's approval for the clips – some ideas for selecting clips are posted on the VLE.

7. *Week 8 – Receive feedback and a mark on word-processed work; working on presentations.* Your word-processed work can be used to help you with your presentations.

8. *Weeks 9 and 10 – Delivering presentations and commenting on your own presentation and the work of others.* You will be provided with a timetable slot to present work. You should observe and participate in the presentations of the other groups and you are required to post feedback sheets to these groups on the VLE. You will also receive formal feedback and a mark from your tutor. It is proposed that, with your consent, your presentation will be video-recorded and posted on the VLE for comments and feedback. This will allow you to see yourself in action and

to consider the feedback in relation to such observations.

Discussion

It is worth noting that within projects of this type computers are not seen as being removed from other syllabus EAP components, rather their role is integrated into the delivery of the programme. Bax (2003) refers to this as the “normalisation” of CALL. In this example EAP syllabus items include: the language of narrative; process writing; organisation of text; presentation skills such as outlining, signposting, recapping, etc. Students are negotiating titles and content; sharing ideas with classmates and making recommendations to others. They are developing time-management skills and getting to grips with group-based written projects and presentations.

Teacher input can occur before, during or after the project. Where such input fits best is in itself an interesting debate, but one which is beyond our scope here. We will not discuss in detail the suggested timing, or the extent to which this is done in or outside the classroom as our example is only intended to give an indication of the possibilities. The answer to these questions will, of course, vary considerably depending on the length of the course, the number of input hours, the amount of homework given, access to computers in the language school, college or university. The suggested project can obviously be amended to take account of such variables. This example deliberately uses the same topic for the presentation and word-processed submission in order to allow learners to get a sense of some of the similarities and differences between the two areas of academic writing and academic speaking. For example, we look at how to avoid learning word-processed text off by heart for a presentation; we also explore the need for presentation slides to keep text to a minimum. In order to overcome possible problems with students having different computer skills, I will try to pair up or group together so that a competent user works with a less competent one.

Computers used in this way, however, also allow for the inclusion of other important, but less traditional EAP syllabus items. Students are accessing

information from the web and learning how to evaluate and reference such information, I encourage students to use Google scholar and Google video for this. They are developing their critical reading skills. My input discussions with students have focused on which search engines to use and the differences between .com, .org and .edu or .ac. They are learning how to post material on a VLE and comment on work posted by others. Here I have provided input on the need to include a short piece of appropriate text with the posting of any attachment; we have also looked at the language that can be used to post comments about other people's work within the VLE. The VLE used at the author's HIE is *Blackboard* <http://blackboard.gcal.ac.uk/>, but any hosting site is possible and for any practitioners who do not have institutional access to one, I am reliably informed that *Moodle* <http://moodle.com/>, which is available free of charge, is just as useful. Students have also used the “Comments” function of the word-processor to provide input to classmates. They have done so with guidelines from the tutor. Example content questions might include: Is the sequence logical? Are any key events missing? Does the work include reasons for events occurring (where applicable)? At the later stage this process is repeated with accuracy-based questions. Examples here include: Can you identify any punctuation errors? Do the writers include adequate sequencing devices? Do the referencing conventions follow established academic standards? Students are practising sending emails to each other in order to set up meetings as well as emails to a tutor to agree on a title and request help with the project. Here I have used post-project input to discuss the need to include a relevant subject in an email. We have noted that leaving it blank or using inappropriate language such as “help me with this” are unlikely to be viewed very favourably by lecturers, compared to “request help with project” as a subject! We have also looked at how degrees of formality might change depending on who the email is being sent to and the relationship with the recipient (classmates or a tutor). Students are learning to present academically acceptable

word-processed work and to make use of a variety of software tools within this. They are learning how to make sensible use of the many possibilities that PowerPoint offers, but without deviating from the primacy of content. Here I have advised students to keep it clear and consistent and not overdo the endless presentation possibilities that the software offers. Above all they are using computers in an academic context, they are integrating a variety of software packages, they are developing their language skills and getting a sense of how computers are used on academic courses – and all these factors are helping them to be better equipped for their future studies.

Conclusion

It was over 10 years ago that I began, in this journal (Jarvis, 1997c), exploring EAP-based “authentic lessons” that could be developed by exploiting the web, and; slightly more recently, (Jarvis, 2000) arguing for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) study skills. I think that it is fair to say that these articles have stood the test of time in two respects. Firstly, the idea of “authentic text” (anything on the web not specifically written for the language classroom) and “authentic task” (activities which are likely to occur outside the classroom, such as using computers to access and transmit information, to write an assignment or give a narrative-based presentation) creates an “authentic learning experience” and as such it equips our EAP students well – it is something that they are likely to need to do in the real world i.e. on their degree programme. Secondly, access to computers and the importance of managing information has significantly increased over the last eight years; there is much more information out there and a wider range of skills are now required to deal with it; for such reasons perhaps, these issues are now discussed in terms of electronic literacy skills rather than the ICT study skills that they once were.

More students arrive on EAP programmes with previous experience of using technology than ever before. Such experience may include academic-based activities and almost certainly social-based ones – the growth in social networking sites has been massive. With such

changes comes an expectation that computers will be also used on their EAP programme. We have also seen a significant rise in VLEs and discussion boards as well as availability of material beyond written text; video material on the web can now be downloaded at a reasonable speed. Above all computers at HEIs are now much more fully integrated into all aspects of the work of an academic department and today there are no administrators and very few lecturers, if any, who do not make use of such technology in some way, shape or form. With a little imagination, as has been demonstrated here, EAP providers can, should and arguably now must respond by integrating the use of computers into their programmes. It is hoped that this paper has provided some insights into how to achieve this.

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