Transformation of Traditional Writing Classes into Digital Ones [1]

Emrah EKMEKÇİ [2]

ABSTRACT

Writing is perceived as a difficult activity as it requires different competencies and abilities. Writing in a foreign language context is considered to be more difficult and needs special instruction. Considering today's students' interests and competence in information and communication (ICT) technologies, it becomes obvious that traditional writing instruction needs to be modified. This study suggests a new process writing model which is comprised of stages such as surfing, organizing, composing, revising, recomposing, and publishing. It is recommended that various online and offline tools, software, applications and web sites can be integrated in the process. The primary aim with this technology-enhanced learning environment is to involve students in the writing process in an active way by making them use various digital tools in and out of the class and thus making them take a positive attitude towards writing. The study concludes that traditional pen-and-paper foreign language classrooms can be transformed into digital writing classes through integrating some digital tools into the suggested stages of the process. It is thought that this new digital writing process will help digital natives improve their writing skills as well as breaking down their prejudices towards foreign language writing.

Key Words: writing skill, digital writing, ICT, pen-and-paper writing

1. Introduction

Writing skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context is considered to be one of the most challenging skills to master in foreign language learning process. Good writing requires having various linguistic abilities such as adequate grammar, lexical, and discourse competence as well as abilities like planning, brainstorming, organizing, revising, editing, and etc. Compared with the speaking skill which is the other productive skill, writing is more regulated and is often thought to be difficult and boring by most of the EFL students. Writing in one's own language is a challenging process. When it comes to second language writing, the process is perceived as more challenging. What is more, writing in the EFL context is regarded as the most challenging and demanding process.

The reason why foreign language writing is perceived as that challenging can be attributed to the very nature of writing skill. As stated by Weigle (2009), writing can be acquired or learned through special

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instruction and can be considered as a more standardized system compared to speaking. For this reason, teachers need to put special emphasis on teaching writing skill in order to enable learners to create more organized and comprehensive texts. Although teachers do their best to help learners develop their writing competence, students usually get bored easily and do not want to write due to the perceived hardship of foreign language writing. To overcome this perceived hardship and prejudice towards writing, teachers, researchers, and ELT practitioners have suggested several techniques so far. The most prominent way of turning traditional pen-and-paper based writing classrooms into a more funny and innovative places is to be able to activate digital competencies of today's students by integrating the latest Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) into the lessons.

2. ICT and Digital Writing

The everlasting developments in ICT have led to considerable changes with regard to writing instructions, techniques, habits, models, and so on in EFL classes. The most obvious change has been the replacement of conventional pen-and-paper writing practices with the digital ones. Given that great majority of students today are accepted as digital literate individuals, this change seems to be inevitable. ICT skills are included in the 21st century skills which mean the ability to collect, retrieve, organize and manage information, then, evaluate the quality, relevance and usefulness of information and finally generate accurate information through the use of existing resources. The primary skills assumed are a) Learning and Innovation Skills, b) Information, Media and Technology Skills, and c) Life and Career Skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), 2009). ICT skills are categorized under the Information, Media and Technology Skills. It is stated in the *Framework for 21st century learning* developed by P21 that

> 'Today, we live in a technology and media-driven environment, marked by access to an abundance of information, rapid changes in technology tools and the ability to collaborate and make individual contributions on an unprecedented scale. Effective citizens and workers must be able to exhibit a range of functional and critical thinking skills, such as:
>
> • Information Literacy
> • Media Literacy
> • ICT (Information, Communications and Technology) Literacy'

(http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/docs/P21_framework_0816.pdf)

As the framework puts it, it has become a must to have competencies required for 21st century literacy. For this reason, today's learners should be presented such learning environments that they will be able to both use and develop their existing digital literacy. That is why digital writing is attached importance in contemporary learning environments. At this point, it seems to be wise to define what digital writing means.

Digital writing refers to changed writing environments. DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, and Hicks (2010) state that 'much has changed in the landscape of what it means to "write" and to "be a writer" since 2003. Social networking and collaborative writing technologies have taken hold, if not always in our schools, certainly among our students. Bandwidth has increased in many locations, along with wireless access. Spaces and devices for creating, sharing, and distributing writing have become more robust and more accessible. Not only does writing matter, but digital writing matters' (p.1). They also

add that digital writing is not simply integrating digital technologies into writing process, but it refers to 'changes in the ecology of writing and communication and, indeed, what it means to write—to create and compose and share' (p. 4). Therefore, considering the everlasting developments in technology, it is really difficult to define what digital writing is. At this point, it is important to understand the concept 'digital literacy' prior to the definition of digital writing. While the concept of literacy means skills to read and write, the concept of digital literacy covers a wide range of skills which are necessary to be successful in the digital world. The following figure by Ventimiglia and Pullman (2016, p. 40) may help us understand the concept of digital literacy better and differentiate between traditional and digital literacy.

Traditional Literacy	Digital Literacy
Finding information	Vetting information
Reading (emersion)	Skimming (searching for solutions)
Note-taking	Curating
• transcribing	• linking
Prose composition	Multimodal composition
	• information design
	• data visualization
	• dynamic storytelling (video)
	• coding/programming
Static artifacts	Dynamic assets (multiple, diverse, reusable)
Learns from teachers	Teaches self
Permanence	Change

Figure 1. Traditional Literacy vs. Digital Literacy

According to Ventimiglia and Pullman (2016), digital literate students are able to find and vet information online, see problems from digital perspectives, become self-directed learners, obtain digital students, learn software quickly, design and create digital solutions. As put by Ventimiglia and Pullman (2016), 'the goal is to teach students how to think in digital ways in order to make informed technological decisions and even, in some cases, to develop their own technology as they gain intellectual independence' (p. 42). As such, students are expected to not only find information online but also be selective in terms of its quality and validity. Thus, it can be stated that intellectual independence brings about informed and correct technological decisions in all levels of any educational contexts.

The aforementioned ideas about digital literacy and what we expect from today's students shed light on how to redesign EFL writing instruction and process. Therefore, it will come to a relief that writing practices in EFL classes have been affected from these dramatic changes in terms of writing process, products, and context. First, writing process has been affected from digital writing, because digital writing environments provide students with a sort of digital process instead of traditional pre-writing, drafting, and revising, editing, and publishing process. Second, the product students create at the end of the writing process have been replaced with various online and offline digital texts. Finally, the context students try to write in English has also been affected from various digital classroom applications. During writing process in this new digital environment, students keep in mind that their writing will be read and evaluated by more people and the piece of writing will be disseminated and digitally published more easily. In addition, digital writing brings lots of new concepts to the realm of

foreign language writing such as online writing, blogging, e-portfolio, digital feedback, wiki, online collaboration, frequent monitoring, keyboarding, etc. The following sections will scrutinize the transformation of traditional pen-and-paper writing classes into digital ones by providing the rationale and some samples.

2.1. Digital Process

Process approach to writing instruction aims to break down the writing task into smaller components. In this way, learners can focus on the process that leads to the final written product (Brown, 2001). In this process, they are expected to complete various stages such as pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. There are some other ways of approaching process writing and some more stages have been suggested by various scholars. White and Arntd (1991), for instance, suggested the following model which includes drafting, structuring, reviewing, focusing, generating ideas and evaluation. The model is presented in the following figure.

Figure 2. Process Writing Model by White and Arntd (1991, p. 11)

As the Figure 2 indicates, White and Arntd's model is comprised of some interrelated recursive stages. Students are expected to create texts upon completion of the stages. Both this model and commonly used other process writing models are employed in traditional pen-and-paper based writing classes. The process takes too much time, thus students sometimes get bored and become easily demotivated in the process. However, researchers agree that when writing is authentic, social, and interactive students tend to be more motivated and actively engaged in writing activities. (Candlin & Hyland, 2014). In addition, nature of writing has changed tremendously over those two decades because of the significant influence of digital tools and sources. Carolyn (2015) states that 'digital environments have disrupted the writing process as we once knew it due to an interwoven combination of traditional narrative sequencing, hyperlinks to other digital sources, infusions of multimedia texts like videos and podcasts, and interactive response fields' (https://www.edutopia.org).

As alternative to the stages in the traditional writing process, the digital writing stages can be introduced. The first stage is called *surfing* in which students are supposed to search for the topic and brainstorm the ideas they are going to write about on the Internet. This stage corresponds to pre-writing stage in the writing process. *Organizing* can be the second stage in the digital writing process. In this stage, students try to narrow down what they are looking for through some techniques like using quotation marks. They need to organize the ideas they have found on the Internet via colour coordinating, charting, doing in-document keyword searches, or categorizing. In this way, students get ready for generating ideas related to the writing topic. The next stage is *composing* in which

students are ready to start writing the first draft. During the first composing stage, certain digital tools which support students in terms of punctuation, grammar, vocabulary, etc. are utilized. The following stage is *revising*. In this stage, individual conferencing, online groups (social media groups), mail groups, and synchronous editing processes are activated. *Recomposing* stage comes next before the last stage. Students are expected to rewrite the text in accordance with the feedback provided about coherence, cohesion, cohesive ties, grammar, correct vocabulary, and so on. Recomposing stage can be repeated if feedback provided makes it necessary. The last stage is *publishing* which is the one missing in the traditional writing process and is therefore considered to be the most important stage of the digital writing process. Students are aware from the beginning of the process that their products will be published somewhere on the net and disseminated quickly. This motivates them to work on the text for producing a more comprehensive and authentic pieces. The following figure indicates the digital writing process;
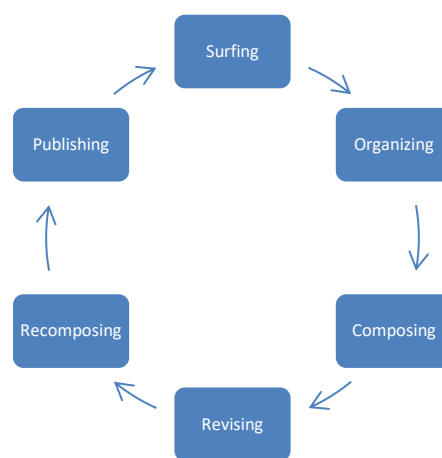
Figure 3. The stages of Digital Writing Process

Digital writing process, indicated in the figure 3, has six stages which follow each other. In each stage, students are expected to make use of the internet, digital devices, various software and mobile applications, online writing platforms, and so on.

2.2. Digital Products

The product students create at the end of the traditional writing process have been replaced with various online and offline digital texts. Students who create their texts through traditional pen-and-paper based writing process have limited opportunities to share their work. However, the product they create at the end of the digital writing process can be published and disseminated as online or offline via various ways such as blogs, wikis, Microsoft Office tools, digital stories, e-mails, e-portfolios, etc.

2.3. Digital Context

The context students try to write in English has also been affected from various digital classroom applications. During writing process in this new digital environment, students keep in mind that their writing will be read and evaluated by more people and the piece of writing will be disseminated and digitally published more easily.

Digital writing brings lots of new concepts to the realm of foreign language writing such as online writing, blogging, microblogging, social networking, e-portfolio, digital feedback, online collaboration, frequent monitoring, keyboarding, and so on.

The most important characteristics of digital writing is that students actively use online, offline, mobile and all digital tools they can benefit from in each phase of the writing process. Some useful internet sites, mobile application and digital tools for each stage are presented in the following table, and then three crucial tools will be introduced in the following section.

Table 1. Some Sample Sites, Applications, and Software *

Stages	Sources
Surfing	all browsers and search engines, The Brainstormer, A+ Writing Prompts
Organizing	SimpleMind+, Storybuilder, keyword searching, Wridea, Stormboard
Composing	Microsoft Office Word, Padlet, Pbworks, Inklewriter
Revising	Grammarly, wordsift.org, just-the-word. com, ozdic.com, wordnik.com
Recomposing	Google drive, dropbox, Microsoft Office Word
Publishing	edublogs.org, Padlet, Pbworks, Inklewriter

* The digital tools presented in this table are not limited to the suggested web sites, online applications, and software. They are only recommendations for the stages in the process.

3. Sample Tools for Digital Writing

3.1 Padlet

Padlet is an online tool which students can use to create bulletin board displaying their writing. It can be used with easily created account for free. Images, pictures, videos, links and more can be added to the page enabling students to support their writing. Students can create their walls completely open for public contributions, completely private, or moderated by themselves. Padlet is a device-agnostic tool available on the web for free and available as both an Android and iOS app. Students can use Padlet to collaborate in collecting ideas, brainstorming, and more. Teachers can use this tool easily in their Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) classroom as all students will be able to access it for free.
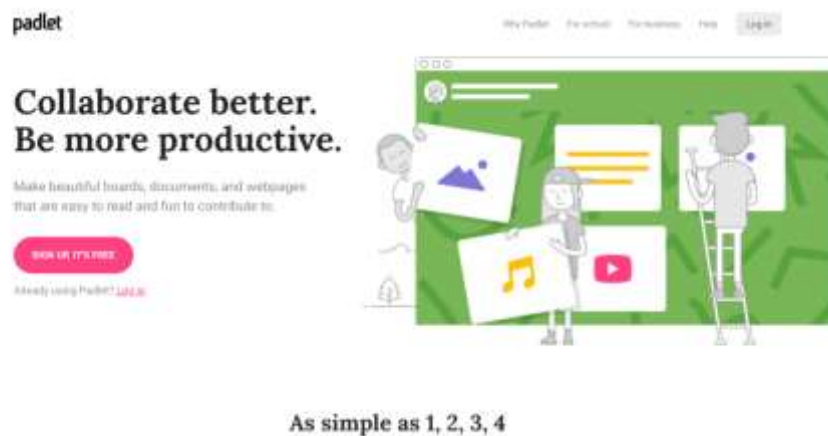
Figure 4. A scene from Padlet Homepage (https://padlet.com)

Padlet is available in 29 languages. It allows files to be uploaded from your computer. Teachers can use Padlet to collect web quest links and information to share with students. By leaving the walls open to comments, classroom discussions can be encouraged. Padlet can be employed in composing, revising, recomposing and publishing phases of a digital writing process. The end product can be published in a blog, wiki or website as well as printed out as word or pdf file.

3.1 PBworks

PBworks lets teachers and students create a collaborative online space in any subject, allowing as many people as you want to edit, make changes, add new content, etc. It is similar to wiki pages on which students can share what they design, produce, write, paint, etc. Public and private pages can be created. Products can be shared by URL. Multiple users can collaborate on the same project.

Figure 5. A scene from Pbworks Homepage (http://www.pbworks.com/education.html)

PBworks requires registration and premium version includes additional features or storage. PBworks is useful to have students work online in small groups. It can be used in composing, revising, recomposing and publishing phases of a digital writing process. Since it is a collaborative space, students can provide peer feedback for their pieces of writing. The end product can be published and shared.

3.3 Twine

Twine is a free tool designed to allow students to write and publish interactive stories. Interactivity is the most important feature of the tool. It can be used online or downloaded for Macs and Windows. It helps students create interactive stories. It is described on the its web site as 'You don't need to write any code to create a simple story with Twine, but you can extend your stories with variables, conditional logic, images, CSS, and JavaScript when you're ready. Twine publishes directly to HTML, so you can post your work nearly anywhere. Anything you create with it is completely free to use any way you like, including for commercial purposes' (http://twinery.org).
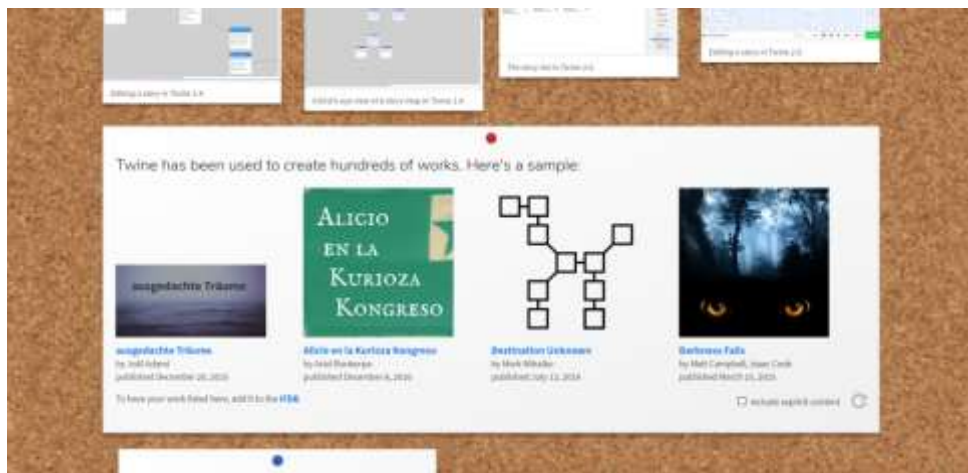

Figure 6. A scene from Twine Homepage (http://twinery.org)

The tool has game-like features, so young learners will be more motivated to use it in writing classes. Twine can help especially the students who get easily bored in writing classes. It does not offer practicing different genres but it can be a good beginning for raising awareness about writing.

4. Conclusion

Writing is one of the language learning skills considered to be the most challenging one to master and develop. Writing is perceived as a difficult activity; therefore, writing can be acquired or learned through special instruction and can be considered as a more standardized system compared to speaking. The point of departure of the current study is based on the assumption that students get bored and become demotivated easily in traditional pen-and-paper foreign language classes. Although this assumption has been proved in different studies, this study is different from the previous ones in that it suggests digital writing classrooms as alternative to traditional ones. Writing process in this model is comprised of stages such as surfing, organizing, composing, revising, recomposing, and publishing. For each stage, various online and offline tools, software, application and web sites can be integrated. The primary aim with this technology-enhanced learning environment is to involve students in the writing process in an active way by making them use various digital tools in and out of the class and thus making them adopt a positive attitude towards

writing. The study also dwells on changing nature of process, product, and context of writing process. As a conclusion, traditional pen-and-paper foreign language classrooms can be transformed into digital writing classes through integrating some digital tools into the suggested stages of the process. It is thought that this new digital writing process will help digital natives improve their writing skills as well as breaking down their prejudices towards foreign language writing.

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