“There’s no other way when nothing comes to mind”: Internet use in L2 writing classes

Olivia Kennedy[1] and Sandra Healy[2]

Abstract. Technology is changing traditional views of language teaching and learning, with generational and cultural differences influencing the ways that we interact with it. This paper describes an action research project undertaken at a university in Japan to understand how students use the Internet to prepare written assignments in L2, and the students’ and their instructors’ reactions towards this usage. Classroom observation and technology usage logs revealed that students use websites and applications to gather ideas at the start of the writing process, rather than coming up with ideas themselves. Thematic analysis of student journal entries suggests that many students disregarded the brainstorming method that they had been taught due to a lack of confidence either in their ideas or in their linguistic competence. Students did not identify this behaviour as dishonest, unlike 70% of the instructors interviewed. This mismatch in student and instructor views may lead to missed learning opportunities for the L2 writer.

Keywords: technological tools, academic writing, L2 writing, plagiarism.

1. Introduction

Defined by Bugeja (2004) as “stealing or closely imitating another’s written, creative, electronic, photographed, taped, or promotional or research work, identifying it as your own without permission or authorization” (p. 37), plagiarism has been identified by many universities as unacceptable behaviour. Students in the second language (L2) writing skills programme discussed here are unsure about what constitutes academic dishonesty, however. Their instructors also have

1. Nagahama Institute of Bioscience and Technology, Shiga, Japan; olivia_l_kennedy@yahoo.com; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0144-2516
2. Kyoto Institute of Technology, Kyoto, Japan; healy@kit.ac.jp; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4387-259X

How to cite: Kennedy, O., & Healy, S. (2020). “There’s no other way when nothing comes to mind”: Internet use in L2 writing classes. In K.-M. Frederiksen, S. Larsen, L. Bradley & S. Thouësny (Eds), *CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020* (pp. 156-160). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.48.1181

© 2020 Olivia Kennedy and Sandra Healy (CC BY)

varying opinions about how much unreferenced source material is acceptable for students to use. Of particular concern is the gap between how instructors expect students to undertake assigned tasks and the ways in which students use the Internet to gather information to do so. A year-long action research project was undertaken to explore the student participants' use of websites and applications to gather ideas at the start of the writing process, and the students' and their instructors' reactions to this use.

2. Method

Two classes of 20 students taking a 30-week first year L2 writing course taught by the same instructor were selected for observation. The course covered the writing of single paragraphs, personal and business emails and letters, and finally academic essays, with familiar everyday topics and more complex abstract themes. Their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores averaged 570, approximately B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). While the study of English is compulsory in Japanese schools, the national curriculum does not address productive and receptive skills equally, meaning that the students have little previous experience writing in L2.

In this mixed methods study, several types of data were collected to shed light on student usage of technology for written assignments. In-class writing activities alternated week-by-week between two writing mediums: pencil-and-paper and the fold-away classroom laptop computers. Students were free to use their smartphones, irrespective of the writing medium assigned that session. Participants submitted a form logging the technology, websites, and applications that they used in each writing session. This data was combined with detailed participant observations undertaken by the instructor during in-class writing sessions, with analysis of directed reflective journal entries written by the students at home each week, and with instructor interviews conducted half-way through the course.

A total of ten instructors (including the instructor in charge of the student participants) teaching L2 writing courses in different departments across the university were interviewed individually. Each with at least a master's level degree in Second Language Acquisition or Applied Linguistics, these lecturers were confident English users from a variety of countries, and have all published research papers in English. All participants, both students and instructors, gave informed consent, and internal ethics board requirements were met.

3. Results and discussion

In the first weeks of the course, students were explicitly taught how to organise their ideas using brainstorming and mind mapping. Students were shown how to do this in both writing mediums. However, only three of the 40 students observed over the 28 in-class writing sessions regularly started the process by brainstorming and mind mapping as they had been taught. 15 participants sometimes started with brainstorming, but the remaining 22 usually turned first to the written work of others from which to build an argument. Commonly, students first searched keywords about the assigned topic, and spent a few minutes reading about it, either on their smartphone or a classroom computer. As they read, the participants who were using computers copy-and-pasted sections of text into a newly created Microsoft Word file, and the participants using pencils and paper took notes of what they were reading. These notes were a combination of full English/Japanese sentences copied down from websites, notes in Japanese, and potentially useful English vocabulary. Both groups then set about incorporating the ideas that they had found into the structure that they had been instructed to practice, organising the information that they had gathered. Those using computers moved paragraphs around on their screens, and those using pencils drew circles, arrows, and numbers in their notebooks. In neither group did the students reference the materials or ideas they used.

Thematic analysis of the students' journal entries suggested that many of them disregarded the brainstorming method that they had been taught due to a lack of ideas (n=24). Many students also mentioned a lack of confidence in their own ideas being of value (n=21) or in their own ability to express those ideas (n=11). Other students wrote about knowing little about the topic that they had been assigned (n=9) or how to approach it. Some (n=6) pointed to time as the reason: "I finish faster if I don't start from nothing". The most common theme that students wrote about, however, was the fact that they were allowed to use technology in the classroom writing sessions. Of the 29 participants who mentioned this, 12 explicitly stated that it meant that they did not need come up with ideas by themselves. One student pointed out that the few times that their high school teachers had asked them to write English compositions had been in class without dictionary or Internet support, and that the instructor of this course had implicitly encouraged the use of these tools by allowing them. A 2019 survey conducted by O'Neill that explored the use of search engines to support the writing of assessed tasks found that the proportion of American university learners of French and Spanish using this technology was even higher than in the study presented here, perhaps due to the limited use of technology in Japanese schools; in O'Neill's (2019) study, when asked if they used

websites to gather ideas for writing, 24.6% of participants reported sometimes, 29.5% usually, and 21% always.

Nine of the ten instructors interviewed for this project were surprised that students disregarded the brainstorming method, and many (n=7) identified the alternative method of coming up with ideas described in the first paragraph of this section as dishonest, with three raising the issue of plagiarism. Others suggested, however, that some of the techniques that the students went on to use as they organised their ideas and polished their sentences were beneficial for improving L2 writing. Pecorari (2016) defines patchwriting, summarising, copying phrases or parts of sentences, and copying whole sentences then changing words or phrases or the order of ideas as "non-deceptive textual plagiarism". However, they are also methods through which learners can become more familiar with the language they are learning. The L2 writer does not mean to deceive, but rather simply to perform the task required of him/her. When specifically asked about these acts, eight of the instructors interviewed for the present study felt that these were helpful techniques for L2 writers.

When asked about plagiarism, half of the student participants wrote in their journals that it hurts the person whose work is copied. The possibility that plagiarism could remove chances to develop yourself or your skills was raised by 14 writers. Six students wrote about the loss of trust if plagiarism was discovered, and four warned against copying from potentially unreliable sources because of the potential to spread misinformation. This clear denunciation of plagiarism shows that participants were unaware that the method many of them used to come up with ideas could be considered as such.

4. Conclusions

A wealth of information on the Internet is merely a tap or click away, and the temptation to use it for academic writing proves hard to resist for first year university students lacking information and confidence. The normalisation of technology to the point at which it becomes invisible (Bax, 2011), combined with the ease of the copy-and-paste function can lead to students missing valuable learning opportunities if they are not given careful guidance. Additionally, it seems brainstorming is not viewed as a useful technique by learners. Further research is needed on this topic, as well as into ways to include technology in a way that enables originality of both thought and expression, while giving learners confidence in their abilities and improving their L2 writing skills.

References

Bax, S. (2011). Normalisation revisited: the effectiveness of technology in language education. *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching, 1*(2), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijcallt.2011040101

Bugeja, M. (2004). Don't let students "overlook" internet plagiarism. *The Education Digest, 70*(2), 37-43.

O'Neill, E. M. (2019). Online translator, dictionary, and search engine use among L2 students. *CALL-EJ, 20*(1), 154-177.

Pecorari, D. E. (2016). Writing from sources, plagiarism and textual borrowing. In R. M. Manchón & P. K. Matsuda (Eds), *Handbook of Second and Foreign Language Writing* (pp. 329-348). Walter De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614511335-018

Research-publishing.net

Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2020 by Editors (collective work)
© 2020 by Authors (individual work)

CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020
Edited by Karen-Margrete Frederiksen, Sanne Larsen, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny

Publication date: 2020/12/14

Rights: the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence**. Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.48.9782490057818) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover theme by © 2020 Marie Flensborg (frw831@hum.ku.dk), based on illustration from freepik.com
Cover layout by © 2020 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-81-8 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2020.