

Putting languages on the (drop down) menu: innovative writing frames in modern foreign language teaching

Alison Taylor^{*a}, Elisabeth Lazarus^b and Ruth Cole^c

^a*University of the West of England, UK*; ^b*University of Bristol, UK*; ^c*The Sir Bernard Lovell School, South Gloucestershire, UK*

The paper presents findings from a school-based collaborative research project, the InterActive Education Project, which linked teachers, teacher educators and university researchers in English secondary schools (see Sutherland *et al.*, 2004). It centres on a case study from one school where students used a simple yet highly effective electronic learning tool to facilitate extended, more complex, more accurate and more imaginative writing. The subjects were secondary school students aged 14–15, whose mother tongue is English, learning to write in German. Particular difficulties of writing in German are analysed. The writing tool was developed by the project teachers and consisted of simple electronic writing frames incorporating drop down menus. Reasons for the effectiveness of this simple tool are presented. The research process and the nature of support structures provided by various aspects of the classroom environment are discussed, as are learning outcomes.

Introduction

Since the 1960s there has been a growing interest in researching second language writing, especially in the US (Matsuda, 2003). This has partially been in response to increasing numbers of English as a second language (ESL) non-native speakers accessing courses at colleges and universities. The research field is still strongly dominated by ESL research on adult learners and has branched out into areas such as teaching composition (controlled, guided and open), writing as a process rather than only a product and writing as discourse in a specific context or for a specific purpose. O'Brien (2004) has highlighted the fact that modern foreign language writing in secondary schools, especially in a UK context, is under-researched.

The process of learning to write in a foreign language (FL) is complex (Kroll, 2003) and often not the main focus of secondary teaching in the UK. The

*Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, New Redland Building, University of the West of England, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK. Email: Alison.taylor@uwe.ac.uk

communicative approach predominantly used in modern foreign language teaching in secondary schools in England stresses the importance of listening to and speaking in the foreign language. Thus students are likely to become more proficient in listening and speaking than in writing. Yet although the key four skill areas (listening, speaking, reading and writing) carry an equal weighting in the National Curriculum in England, fluent and accurate writing in the foreign language is a prerequisite for obtaining high grades in public examinations. The school inspectorate in England concurs that achieving a high level of writing with secondary students can be problematic (Dobson, 1998; Ofsted, 2003). Students are rarely required to write in the foreign language outside the formal learning environment; this is changing, however, through the increased use of computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as email and chat rooms (Warschauer, 2004).

O'Brien (2004, p. 3) writes of the intricacy of the writing process in the context of a model for second language written text production and fluency. She describes 'four internal processes: a proposer (for prelinguistic ideas), a translator (which converts prelinguistic ideas into strings of language with appropriate word order and grammar), a reviser (which evaluates both proposed and written language) and a transcriber (which turns the content of the articulatory buffer into written language)'. One of the project students in the current study expressed the complexity in this way: 'writing is hard because you've got to put it together in your head', adding 'but if you speak you can say it out loud—it comes to you more easily'. This has resonances with socio-cultural theory and the idea of private speech acting as support for learning (Ellis, 2003).

Difficulties for students writing extended texts, such as coursework, in a foreign language are compounded by differences between spoken and written language. Written language tends to demand more precision and accuracy is emphasised, which is usually not the case in the spoken form. A written text produced by a learner is more clearly right or wrong than a spoken utterance, which can be rephrased and which is rarely recorded as evidence. Spoken language tends to be more informal and speech is often made up of a series of shorter phrases rather than long sentences. It is also more ephemeral than the written word. Interesting trends have been discerned by Warschauer (2004) in that computer-mediated communication encourages people to write in a freer way, taking more risks and writing at greater length.

Writing in German may be considered by some to be relatively complicated. While word order is occasionally the same as in English, the concept of the verb as second idea in a sentence is a specific feature of German. The elements within a sentence need to follow the order: time, manner, place, whereas there is more flexibility in English (see example in next paragraph). In written German great emphasis is placed on accurate adjectival and possessive pronoun endings according to case and gender; these are often glossed over in speech. Moreover, as Grauberg (1997) points out, there are limited pointers as to the three possible genders of nouns and students have to cope with a choice of eight different plural forms. The writer of German as a foreign language also needs to cope with the following specific features: nouns begin

with a capital letter and the comma must be used precisely, and in ways which are very different from English, to convey meaning, for example preceding a clause starting with 'weil' (because). Furthermore, past participles e.g. 'gekauft' (bought), 'gegessen' (eaten) and separable prefixes for certain verbs e.g. 'eingehen' (go in), 'aufsetzen' (put on) are placed at the end of the sentence. In the context of the project reported on here the choice between the two auxiliary verbs 'haben' and 'sein' represented a real issue, since the focus of the students' work was on correct formation of the past tense.

When students who are near-beginners write German freely without a model—either an exemplar or an internalised model—their experience of using English, and particularly English word order, may influence the way in which they write. Take for example the sentence: 'Yesterday we went to London by car'. In German this would be 'Gestern (*time*) sind wir mit dem Auto (*manner*) nach London (*place*) gefahren' (literally 'Yesterday have we to London by car gone'). Students need to establish these new patterns in their minds in order to write fluently and accurately in German. The teachers whose project forms the basis for this paper were challenging the students to think by using writing frames—and helped them adapt to a new range of principles inherent in German grammar through scaffolding the learning and providing visual and kinaesthetic support.

It is recognised that the linguistic issues surrounding writing in a foreign language are complex and that debate concerning a 'critical age' hypothesis is still live, although it is felt by some researchers that early learning mechanisms are 'replaced by or at least supplemented by other compensatory ways of learning' (Mitchell & Myles, 1998, p. 18).

In terms of Universal Grammar, the teachers tried to support students to reset the parameters of the grammatical principles which they were used to in English. Towell and Hawkins (1994, p. 107) refer to three strands within the principles of Universal Grammar and how they might relate to second language learning. The first strand is to observe the parameters, or range of principles, which appear in both the mother tongue (L1) and a second language (L2); the second is to recast grammatical principles which have already been learnt in L1 and which are inappropriate for L2 (e.g. the time-manner-place order for a German sentence is very different from English); the third is to 'activate' or raise awareness of the range of principles necessary for L2 which are not already activated in L1 (e.g. the need for nouns to have capital letters in German). All three strands were addressed at various points of the teaching reported on here but there was a particular focus on the second strand, that of enabling students to adapt to and internalise new linguistic features.

The InterActive project, however, had a strong socio-cultural perspective (Sutherland *et al.*, 2004), rather than focusing on theories of linguistics. The university researchers and teachers developing the research initiative were influenced by Vygotsky (1978) and interested in how the computer as a tool could support guided composition and how learning could be developed. They were also interested in looking at writing as a process rather than just a product to be assessed and, like Kern (2000), were interested in the socio-cultural dimension of writing.

The prior experience of English which the students brought to the learning situation in their German lessons accords with Vygotsky's idea (1978) that students actively construct knowledge from what they already know. In this case they needed to deconstruct their previous knowledge of English and concentrate on the features of German which were new, such as rules covering word order—and gender and case of nouns. The value of students using a supportive framework to aid the writing process was therefore very important.

O'Brien (2004) has highlighted the fact that the research trend in English as a second language (ESL) has not been replicated by published research on writing in secondary foreign language classrooms in the UK. However, the literature focusing on the relationship between Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and writing in a foreign language is growing, as is explained in the next section.

Using ICT for writing in a foreign language

Pennington (2003) has surveyed the impact of computers in second language writing and suggests that early research in the field focused attention on areas such as: pen versus word processors and student attitude and motivation. Broady (2000) and some of her colleagues investigated the use of word processors in second language writing in Higher Education. In more recent times studies have focused on information exchange via email, bulletin boards and chat rooms, for example. Warschauer's work on computer-mediated collaborative learning (1997), multi-literacies and computer-mediated communication (1999, 2004) and Atkinson's (2001, p. 2) argument that ICT implies a 'new literacy or a fifth skill in language use ... the ability to access information, to assess meaning and validity, to process and adapt language, to create meaning and to communicate using increasingly diverse media' were starting points for the project teachers.

As the study presented here focused on using an electronic writing frame produced via a word processor, Pennington's research (2003) raises a number of relevant points. The first regards students' willingness to write in a foreign language using ICT, particularly since revision and correction can be instantaneous rather than part of a later separate process. Pennington also suggests that those writing with a computer produce longer texts and posits that that using ICT may encourage writers to focus in a very particular way at word, phrase and sentence level. Immediate feedback and correction is a feature of some types of software commonly used in MFL lessons but not of the electronic writing frames produced by the project teachers.

A further finding (Pennington, 2003) is that when using a computer, planning tends to be done as writing emerges, rather than a piece of writing being planned at the outset. Pennington suggests that this may suit L2 (second language) writers, whose vocabulary and linguistic ability are less advanced than in L1 (the mother tongue). If the learners' attitude to writing with computers is positive, as tends to be the case (Slaouti, 2000; Dugard & Hewer, 2003; O'Brien, 2004), she suggests that the process of using a computer will gradually lead to equally positive effects on their

writing in terms of its fluency, length and quality. Slaouti (2000, p. 7) expresses the same idea in citing Pennington's stages through which the L2 computer writer has to progress: 'writing easier (sic), writing more, writing differently, writing better'. Within 'writing easier' is the idea that the drudgery of copying has been removed, leaving the writer freer to spend quality time on thinking about and making choices about language itself, thereby engaging in higher level skills (Dugard & Hewer, 2003). These authors also feel that the ease with which writing can be altered and the non-judgmental nature of computers makes learners ready to take risks with new language; it may furthermore motivate those with kinaesthetic learning styles.

Rendall's research into helping school students develop a sense of gender in French concluded that perhaps the most unexpected finding which emerged from her work was that 'computer programs do not have to be sophisticated, all-singing all-dancing multimedia in order to have an effect on pupils' learning' (Rendall, 2001, p. 28). This was reassuring for the project teachers who set out to design the electronic writing frames themselves.

When analysing the appropriateness of computer-assisted language learning tasks, Chapelle's (2001, p. 59) research suggests that six criteria need to be addressed: language learning potential; learner fit; meaning focused; authenticity; impact; and practicality. It will be seen that for this design initiative, addressing authenticity remained problematic, given the nature of coursework required by the examination boards, whilst the teachers were satisfied that the other five conditions applied to the project work. The teachers agreed with Hyland (2003) that the use of computers in foreign language learning is most effective where the following criteria are met: learners are skilled ICT users; they have had explicit instruction in what is required for composing on screen; computer writing activities are integrated into the course rather than being discrete activities; opportunities exist for collaboration and peer support within the learning task. It will be seen later that the study on which the paper is based met all these criteria.

Carpenter and Slater (2000) studied the link between process writing and writing using a computer. Process writing underpins much of the thinking about teaching writing in the ESL context. As such the process approach highlights skills and strategies for producing 'effective texts' and focuses on concepts of 'audience', 'purpose' and 'genre'.

Carpenter and Slater (2000, p. 27) describe a 'series of integrated tasks' including brainstorming, drafting, editing and re-drafting, with teachers guiding students to see writing as an ongoing process for which help is provided at every stage. This is in contrast to the 'product approach' which rather encourages students to focus on the minutiae of 'grammatical and lexical accuracy' of sentences and paragraphs. Kern (2000, p. 185) highlights 'the interdependencies among textual products, cognitive processes, and socio-cultural factors. That is, an approach that focuses on meaning as it is constructed *through* form in a cultural context'.

We would suggest that the project on which this paper is based was using such an integrative process. Work in the classroom involved brainstorming (whole class), discussions as to what made texts interesting and appropriate for a particular genre

(group activity) and students expanding skeleton texts as a pair work exercise. Within the computer room some of these activities supported the learning. There was also a strong focus on developing accuracy at a micro level. The use of electronic translation tools, grammar and spellcheckers was not overtly encouraged as, in the teachers' experience, novice learners frequently make mistakes when checking individual words out of context. The use of paper-based dictionaries and class files was, however, encouraged.

Having examined some of the recent research ideas on writing using computers, we now go on to examine the nature of scaffolded learning and its relevance to foreign language learning.

Scaffolding foreign language learning

The original concept of scaffolded learning (Wood *et al.*, 1976) concerned the process whereby an adult helps a child to accomplish a task which is beyond the child's ability when working alone. The support provided during an interactive problem-solving task can be seen as helping with 'engaging the child's interest: reducing the degrees of freedom, maintaining goal orientation, highlighting critical task features, controlling frustration and demonstrating idealised solution paths' (Addison Stone, 1993, p. 169). This idea of scaffolded learning draws on Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) describes this as the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and 'his or her potential development as determined by independent problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. Thus the Zone of Proximal Development could be described as an individual's capacity for new learning.

For this project socio-cultural theory sees learning as being 'dialogically based', making the acquisition of new language a process shared between the individual and others (Ellis, 2003).

Macaro (2001, p. 137) noted in his study of learning strategies in French lessons that those students who enlisted the help of others were more likely to: check the endings of words; enjoy writing French; check that what they wrote made sense; read the writing out loud to see if it sounded right; look for mistakes that they made all the time. Krappels (1990) referred to 'composing aloud' strategies, involving either individuals or pairs of students discussing their writing.

Scaffolded learning is a key part of the design initiative described in a later section of the paper and concerns both peer support and the support provided by other sources, such as the teacher, dictionaries and class files, and by the design of increasingly longer and more complex writing frames. First, however, we look at the project within which the teachers operated.

The InterActive project

The paper draws on work carried out within the InterActive Education Project, an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded three-year project spanning

seven curriculum subjects, including modern foreign languages (Sutherland *et al.*, 2004). The prime aim of this multi-faceted project was to investigate whether, and if so how, the use of ICT in schools in England enhances students' learning. The teachers and university researchers involved in the project worked in subject teams; the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) team consisted of eight teachers² from four local secondary schools, in addition to a university researcher. During the course of the project the MFL team had meetings at the university and worked in smaller units in school; in some cases, as in this study, the subject design initiatives (SDIs) (see Triggs & John, 2004) were jointly planned by both teachers in the school.

These subject design initiatives were predicated on the belief that the intellectual activities of planning, carrying out and reflecting on one's teaching are central to professional learning (John & Sutherland, 2004). The specific focus here is an analysis of written work by students aged 14–15 (hereafter year 10) in one project school class.

At the start of the InterActive Project the MFL team of teachers, the university researcher and co-director of the project identified extended, accurate writing by students aged 14–16 (known as KS4 in England) as a main area of concern. They sought to address the issue through an intervention with ICT, known as a subject design initiative (SDI). At the time the project started this problem was well documented by Dobson (1998) who reported, as Chief Schools Inspector, that many KS4 students were 'unable to produce extended writing with complex sentences and a range of tenses' (p. 9). He further noted: 'students do not channel their grasp of structure or vocabulary into more demanding or imaginative tasks' (p. 9). These findings are echoed in inspection guidance (Ofsted, 2001) for those who evaluate students' achievement at 14–16, where one measure of achievement was the extent to which students wrote with 'increasing length and accuracy' and learnt and used 'an increasing range of vocabulary, expressions and more complex grammatical structures' (p. 11). More recent reports from the Inspectorate show that the concern about writing has not diminished (Ofsted, 2003).

Given the difficulties associated with students' producing written work in the foreign language (see Grauberg, 1997), the project teachers felt it important to find ways of supporting them to write with greater fluency and accuracy. As part of the discussion the teachers examined the use of writing frames as a scaffolding strategy, a framework to support student writing. Writing frames, a long-established convention in the teaching of other curriculum subjects such as English, History and Science, are templates which include written cues; they are used to help students organise their thoughts and support their writing on particular subjects. In Science, for example, a writing frame might enable students to think and write about the different stages of an experiment they have done through giving suggested beginnings of sentences to structure writing. The project team examined newly-published writing frames for French (Adams, 2000). These materials are topic-based and support students' writing by providing key questions and beginnings of sentences to encourage creative writing and by providing lexical support which may be accessed by students.

The project teachers (many of whom were German specialists) decided to adapt the idea of a writing frame to something which could be customised in German as well as French. They also considered simple drop down menus in Word (accessed via the Forms toolbar by clicking View → Toolbars → Forms) as a means of supporting students to write more fluently and accurately through being given a range of lexical items and grammatical features to consider. Within the toolbar (shown in Figure 1) clicking on the Field icon (third from the left) gave teachers the facility to construct drop down menus behind words or phrases within a sentence; the students were thus given alternative lexical and grammatical choices within a structured environment. This potentially allowed students to personalise their work and in the text box beneath give extra information or express opinions about what they had already written. The open-ended structure therefore encouraged creativity and enabled students to write more.

How the frames were used by project teachers will be explained in more detail in the next section but Figure 2 shows an early example of a writing frame.

The project teachers found the idea of simple drop down menus valuable and a majority of them decided to experiment with this idea as a way of supporting their students to write in a foreign language. This approach was essentially different from the writing frames in the published Adams' French materials, where English prompts are used beside text boxes and beginnings of sentences provided within the text boxes to give ideas for students' writing. Banks of lexical items, such as connectives, conjunctions and qualifiers, are also available in the published materials as drop down menus at the top of each page.

The writing frames designed by the InterActive teachers provided more grammatical structure for the students and also encouraged writing based on a model sentence, a series of sentences or longer texts. Within the blank box the student could write in a structured or freer way, which allowed them to develop the writing activity in a way which fitted their own learning needs. Students needing on-screen support could reuse some of the phrases and grammatical structures in the sentences provided, while class files and sets of dictionaries were available for those who required other lexical items and grammatical structures.

Research approaches

Data were collected from the modern foreign languages design initiatives carried out in each project school through videoing lessons. Two video cameras were placed in the computer room during the SDIs, capturing both the whole classroom and the work of individual students, but particularly focusing on six students in a pre-selected group. The group was gender-balanced and consisted of two high attaining



Figure 1. The forms toolbar in Word

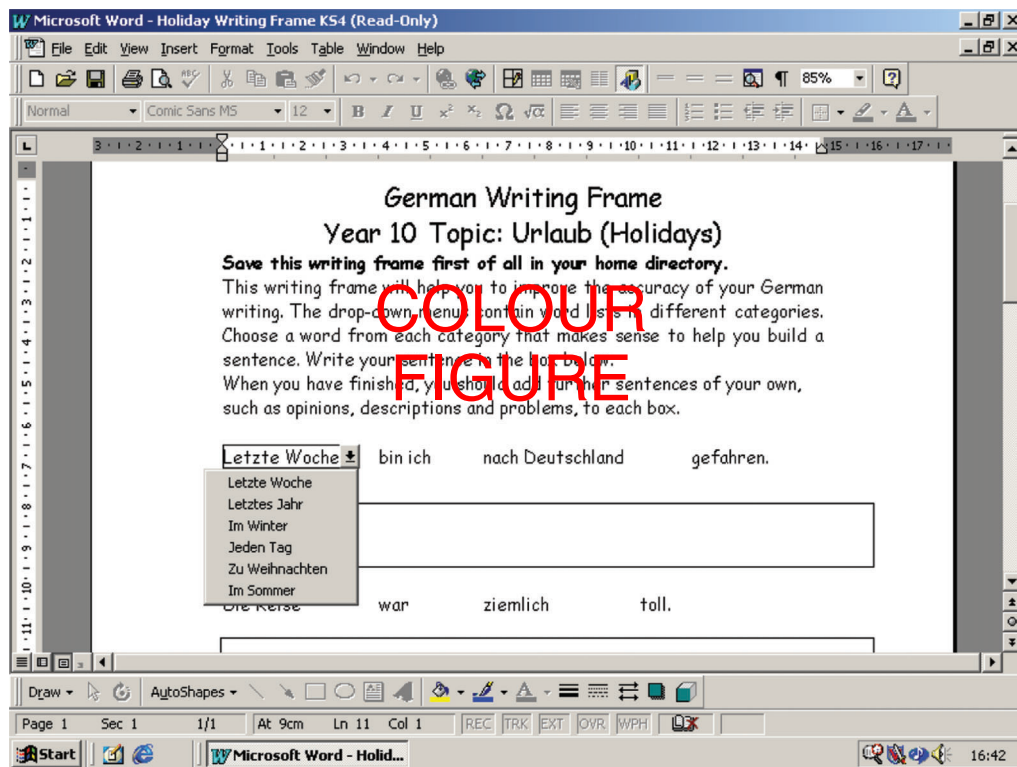


Figure 2. Section of a year 10 writing frame showing a drop down menu

students, two average attaining and two low attaining students for the class. This judgment was based on teacher assessment and termly unit test results. Semi-structured interviews with staff and students were also conducted to provide qualitative data. The six students were interviewed in pairs before and after each subject design initiative lesson in the computer room. Each project teacher was interviewed at the start and the end of the project; additionally, the teacher whose class we report on here was interviewed immediately after the main subject design initiative with the year 10 students.

The teachers in this study wished to see whether students wrote at greater length, more accurately and with more complex linguistic features in subsequent work; they therefore kept evidence of class work done before and up to several months after the MFL intervention in order to gauge development in student learning. Work done in the computer room during the SDI was also kept. A discussion took place between the teacher and the researcher about the linguistic features of students' work done prior to, during and after the design initiative. This paper exemplifies the progression made by focusing on the work of two students, one a high attainer, the other a low attainer in the class. We recognise that there were many possible factors for this progression in that the lessons in the computer room formed only a small part of the total learning experience of the group. In the normal classroom setting students were

engaging in question and answer work with the teacher, role-plays with other students and pair work discussions to improve the quality of a text. In terms of socio-cultural theory, there were a number of opportunities for students to engage in 'dialogic learning'.

The year 10 SDI formed part of a series of MFL design initiatives, starting with a pilot study (students aged 15–16) and progressing after the year 10 SDI to one with younger pupils aged 11–12, followed by an SDI with pupils aged 13–14. The iterative process involved enabled the teachers to re-evaluate and refine their work, adapting it more precisely to the needs of the next class of students.

The Year 10 subject design initiative

Within this section of the paper we report on the experience of Elisabeth Lazarus and Ruth Cole, the two MFL project teachers at the Sir Bernard Lovell School. The school is a technology-rich environment, where groups of students have been involved in exchanging letters and other materials with penfriends and e-pals; some have also participated in digital film-making and videoconferencing with students in Germany. Students regularly search the Internet and use PowerPoint for presentational purposes; they have access to a range of commercial MFL software and use web-based language sites and exercises. One in five lessons takes place in a computer room. Despite this rich ICT environment the project teachers felt that none of the available ICT tools directly addressed learners' needs in terms of extended writing.

The aim of this project was to design a simple electronic tool to enable students to move towards extended writing through a scaffolded process which would support learners in monitoring and evaluating their own and others' writing. Broady (2000) has pointed out the value of simple manipulation of electronic text in that it focuses attention on the way in which texts are generated from each other: how one text may provide a model for another or how elements from one text can be incorporated in another.

The main design initiative was trialled towards the end of the school year with a class of higher attaining students aged 14–15, taught by Ruth Cole. The two ICT lessons which were central to the design initiative contributed to a series of lessons within the topic of holidays and making hotel complaints, a common GCSE³ topic. In other classroom-based lessons students carried out listening, speaking and reading activities on the topic.

The teachers' role was crucial to the success of the design initiatives. The two project teachers worked collaboratively throughout, planning each initiative with care and analysing specific linguistic structures and aspects of grammar which they wanted to improve in their students' writing and incorporating these into the writing frames. They facilitated students' learning through writing clear instructions on the screen. They also introduced different stimuli for learning such as a past tense PowerPoint presentation and pictures and facilitated students' access to class files and dictionaries. Providing individual and group feedback was an important part of

the scaffolding role as the writing frames do not provide ‘right answers’ or give automatic feedback; the teachers were available as a further support, responding to students’ needs. Reflections on the process and a readiness to respond to students’ comments meant that refinements (for example the introduction of longer texts with one text box rather than individual sentences with mini text boxes below each one) were made at every stage of the subject design initiatives. The pivotal role of the teacher in ICT based lessons (Leask & Pachler, 1999) and as a ‘designer of complex learning scenarios’ (Fitzpatrick & Davies, 2003, p. 11) was evident.

The teachers designed a framework where students could practise sentence building with varied lexical items before using the structures in a freer way and incorporating new ideas, some of which were stimulated by the picture cues. Although the use of PowerPoint had not been envisaged as part of the original plan, the teachers happened to see examples of PowerPoint grammar presentations at a university project meeting during the planning stage for their work. Teacher analysis had shown that students found the past tense problematic; they therefore decided to incorporate a presentation on this grammar point as an eye-catching revision aid and integral part of the first lesson in the computer room.

Past participles belonging to the appropriate auxiliary verb ‘haben’ or ‘sein’ zoomed in from the left or right to the sound of Grand Prix racing cars. This was followed by examples of sentences using the wrong auxiliary verb and finally the right auxiliary verb, both with suitable sound effects. The powerful multimodal forms of texts supported the manipulation of linguistic structures through a combination of sound, text, images and animation. Having watched the PowerPoint presentation in a whole class setting, the students then began work on the drop down menus within the electronic writing frame; this gave them an opportunity to construct sentences about their holiday, typing extra information in the text box below (Figure 2).

1

In the second lesson in the computer room students in Ruth’s class again worked at individual computers. The teachers had prepared a series of exercises to develop students’ extended writing and to encourage their creativity. The first exercise, a pre-writing task, used drop down menus to give students an opportunity to construct a letter of complaint about their holiday. In the second exercise a series of pictures stimulated students’ creativity in writing about complaints concerning their hotel or camping accommodation. A text box was placed under the pictures to encourage students to write about their concerns.

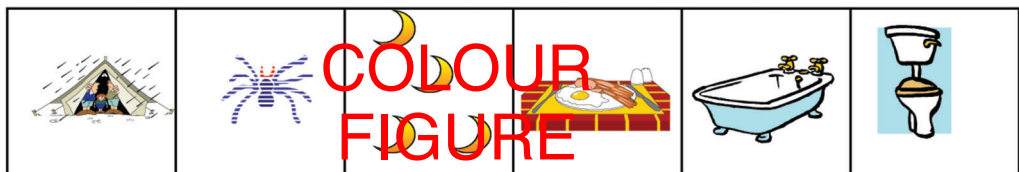


Figure 3. Picture stimuli for hotel complaints

Data analysis

The video data, which were partially transcribed, were analysed in terms of the following: strategies used by students when using the drop down menus and when writing in the free text box, and students talking about lexical items and grammar as part of peer scaffolding. Initial analysis of the video data showed that students had no problems with the technology; they were able to be independent and worked quite quickly, with little hesitation. This had been predicted by the teachers as all the students had regular access to computers both at school and at home and, as is well documented, out-of-school use of computers leads students to bring greater confidence and knowledge into the classroom (Facer *et al.*, 2003). The students' confident handling of the technology manifested itself in different ways in the project class. Ellis (2003, p. 180) argues that within socio-cultural theory the role of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has implications for task-based learning in that it is the 'activity' or the way in which participants perform a task that creates the context for learning, rather than the tasks themselves. The analysis showed that students created their own 'activity' in just such a manner.

There were several examples of this variety of approach in the way project class students worked. Some vocalised their thought process as they worked; others engaged in active discussion about choices with their friends nearby, thereby using scaffolding strategies. A number of students, instead of scrolling up to the original model to retrieve information, minimised the original text and created a word document for their free writing, toggling between the two; others used a split screen to the same end. There were also students who showed initiative by attempting to add their own vocabulary items to the drop down menus before discovering an unforeseen consequence: that if the document was unlocked to add new lexical items to the list created by the teachers, the subsequent locking of the document made the template return to its original default position (i.e. all the lexical items chosen by a student up to that point were lost and needed to be reselected). This was frustrating for any student who attempted to make lexical additions. The teachers had not predicted this problem but, once aware, encouraged the students to add their own language in the text boxes and not to the writing frame. The instances of students manipulating the tool can be seen as further examples of Vygotsky's theory (1978) that students draw on what they already know and believe, thus actively constructing knowledge.

Video data analysis also revealed that the students were fully involved in the task and frequently engaged in collaborative work. The fact that the computer screen is vertical, contrasting with writing with a pen on a flat surface, such as a piece of file paper, is likely to aid collaboration since the screen represents a more public space. In this classroom, students were ostensibly working individually (one student per computer) but the 'emotional scaffolding' (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002, p. 52) afforded by those nearby was important. Video data revealed how much verbal interplay there was between those sitting near each other; they checked hypotheses, short-circuited dictionary use through asking those near them and, in one particular case, a student assumed the role of teacher and tutor with his neighbour. He leaned

over, operating the partner's mouse, to illustrate where all the past participles were, carefully checking each sentence and gently correcting an error in the formation of one past participle. The mutual support of the students as an aid to learning seen in the video data also reflects Macaro's (2001) research finding, mentioned earlier in the paper, that students who ask for help from others are more likely to check their work and read aloud what they have written to see whether it sounds right.

It is likely that the combination of the visual and the physical movement of the mouse to scroll down or select parts of a sentence was an important factor in scaffolding the learning process. Davis *et al.* (1994, p.22) refer to the power of hands-on learning, opportunities for manipulating and exploring artifacts associated with particular concepts. They go on to say that

Teaching approaches that are focused only on formal concepts and symbol-use can be frustrating and readily forgotten. Very often, learners can make no sense of such abstractions. That is, such notions may remain meaningless and mechanical because they appear to have nothing to do with the knower's organic bodily sensations.

The physical action involved in handling the mouse is somewhat different from handling a pen. Had the task been to select words from parallel lists on paper, in order to build up a sentence across the page, the student would have been involved in either linking appropriate words across the columns by means of lines, or circling or underlining items in each column that would fit together in a sentence. When selecting parts of sentences for writing online each individual list of words can be considered without the background distraction of the other lists appearing at the same time and the student, in physically scrolling down the list, is likely to be more engaged with the task. Moreover the completed sentence can be read much more easily on screen since there are no distractors in the form of discarded vocabulary items, as would be the case if the task were on paper.

Interview data with the sample of six students and the class teacher were fully transcribed.

Nearly all the students interviewed after the design initiative reported that they enjoyed the creative opportunities afforded by the pictures. The video footage showed that in the second of the two lessons students were tending to write three or four extra lines in the text boxes and when interviewed said they thought they were writing more in this lesson than in the previous lesson in the ICT room. The picture prompts were very effective in stimulating creative complaint writing which was in many cases highly amusing. This showed that the students could successfully use the past tense and correct word order while giving free rein to their imagination. Typical of students' comments about the visuals, when interviewed, was the following: 'It stretches your vocabulary with the pictures because you can describe more'. Dugard and Hewer (2003) have suggested that graphics also aid language retention. The teachers found the use of graphics and images especially important when designing later writing frames for younger learners and those with Special Education Needs.

The data showed that revising the past tense by means of the fast-moving PowerPoint presentation was found helpful by the students. The combination of visual prompts with sound, colour and moving parts of verbs and sentences was

powerful, and demonstration of sentence formation with the correct participle aided students in memorising grammatical structures. The teachers believed that the presentation also appealed simultaneously to students with different learning styles: visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. Several students mentioned that the visual and sound effects used were particularly appropriate for their age group and one said that the PowerPoint presentation reinforced previous learning of grammar presented in a more static way in the classroom. Students were able to access the grammar presentation on the school's intranet at any point after the lesson was over; it thus remained a powerful revision aid. One interesting comment was that, unbeknown to the teachers, a small number of students used spellcheckers during the writing process.

It was clear from comments by students interviewed after the design initiative that the writing frames had helped students produce longer pieces of work, in which they handled past tense sentences with greater confidence. The following quote from a boy in the year 10 class illustrates the point that even high achieving students find it hard to get the grammar right: 'We've been doing German for four years and the teacher would say: "This is the pattern it goes in." All the time I never used to understand it'. He later commented that the structure had helped him build sentences: 'Making a sentence—it's a challenge for everyone. But it's a challenge that with the drop down menus can be met because the drop down menus set it out'. The drop down menus enabled students to see vocabulary in context—in the words of one student: 'When you scroll down the menu it gives you like marking what the word is to do with. So you could remember that afterwards and use them in the classroom'.

In an interview with the teacher after the design initiative she stated that the opportunity for students to think something through on the screen during the design initiative and to work at their own pace, with support, had been very beneficial. There had also been an opportunity for differentiated work in that some students reused the structures within the frame; others went beyond this, attempting quite ambitious sentences.

Learning outcomes

There were indications that the ICT intervention indeed supported students' learning in German. Written coursework of an unexpectedly high level, as judged by the teachers and a senior course work moderator,⁴ was produced by the students under controlled conditions one month after the design initiative. The teacher reported that all students who had participated in the design initiative were able to form past tense sentences correctly, whereas only two students in a parallel non-project class were able to do so. At the end of year 10 the project teacher's class was mixed with a colleague's class for the final year's teaching before the GCSE examination. It was noticeable that students who had been taught in the project class continued to perform better than those who had been in the non-project class. High attaining pupils gained top grades, while others gained at least one grade higher than

the anticipated minimum grade predicted. The teacher also reported a marked difference between the ease with which those students who had been exposed to electronic writing frames with drop down menus structured all later pieces of coursework and the problems experienced by the remainder of the class. While there may have been a number of reasons for this discrepancy, the teacher felt that the scaffolded tasks may have helped students write at greater length, more accurately and creatively. She used the phrase ‘value-added’ when speaking about the effect of the project on her class.

Ruth commented during an interview following the design initiative that the use of humour within the drop down menus—the fact that students could make up sentences which were completely ridiculous using structures provided—enabled them to see how they could create something humorous themselves. She stated that the drop down menus ‘unlocked something’ in the students, that it ‘worked on their imagination somehow’. She quoted one student as having said that the German GCSE practice examination was the only examination paper which she (the student) had enjoyed writing.

It is interesting to consider the evidence from the teacher about two students in the sample group of six at the end of their fifth year of secondary schooling who had experienced the ICT design initiative one year earlier. Both students were in the ‘highest ability class’ of the 15 year old cohort. The work of two particular students (Peter, a high attainer and Mark, a low attainer, relative to the standard of the group) has been selected to demonstrate the range of achievement following the ICT intervention. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

In a project interview the teacher commented that Peter’s work was very basic prior to the ICT intervention. He used simple sentences, and spelling errors were relatively frequent. She continued:

After the work with writing frames and drop down menus Peter did a piece of controlled coursework. Here he really got to grips with using more varied sentences beginning with time phrases and giving opinions. He suddenly began putting capital letters for all nouns and getting cases right. He used perfect tense, imperfect tense, present tense, conditional as well—and the future tense. So that was a very good piece of coursework. Probably an A, a very high coursework grade. He’s continued to manipulate language since then ... He grasped the idea of a strategy for writing coursework.

She suggested that using the drop down menus had given Peter a structure, enabling him to plan a written task in paragraphs and to be creative. In the year following the subject design initiative (year 11) Peter used more subordinate and relative clauses and his writing became more complex. His final examination grade, according to the teacher, was likely to be an A*, the highest grade. The teacher commented that it was unusual for a student’s work to improve so dramatically during the GCSE course.

Peter’s self-description (Figure 4.1) uses extremely basic phrases to give information. There is a lack of subordinate clauses and there are some inaccuracies in spelling. In the creative account of his dream town (Figure 4.2) Peter demonstrates his accuracy in using adjectival endings and uses the conditional

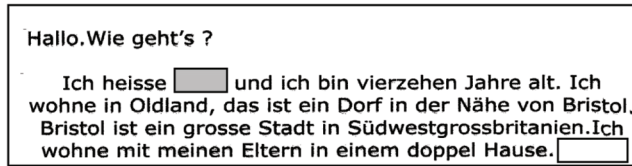


Figure 4.1. Work done by Peter early in year 10 (students aged 14–15)

tense with great confidence, combining it with the subjunctive in one sentence. He also handles ‘weil’ clauses competently, placing the verb at the end of the sentence. There are still one or two errors. The reported accident (Figure 4.3) is, despite inaccuracies, a structured and fluent piece of work containing higher level language, more complex sentences and a broad vocabulary. Word order is correct and the past tense is accurately used.

The work produced by Mark, a student likely at the midway stage of the course to achieve an average grade (C/D) in the GCSE examination, also shows good progression following the ICT design initiative. Mark started to make his written work more interesting, using a greater range of vocabulary and different tenses. He progressed well during the following year, using set phrases at first but quickly grasping how to manipulate the language. The teacher’s comment: ‘His writing is his strength’ is unusual in that many students would achieve a lower mark for writing than for the skill areas of speaking, listening and reading. His final piece of coursework gained 71/90 which the teacher described as ‘brilliant’ for that student. A senior coursework moderator⁴ commented that the register used for this piece of work was impressive.

Mark’s very basic, if quite creative, account of his dream town (Figure 5.1) is characterised by relatively accurate spelling but overuse of capital letters. He still has

Meine Traumstadt

Meine Traumstadt heisst, Sonningstadt, weil es nich geregnet hat!
 Es ist fünf Jahre alt. Ich bin Präsident. Ich wohne gern in einer
 Kleinstadt, es hat ungefähr 6000 Einwohner. Sonningstadt liegt in
 Nordwestdeutschland. Es hat einen Bahnhof, einen Zoo, ein
 Krakenhaus und ein Kino. Das Kino ist unheimlich gut, obwohl es
 zu gross ist. Ich habe fantastische Filme gesehen. Im Zoo gibt es
 viele Tiere, einschliesslich einen Löwe, einen Panda und viele
 andere Tiere. Wenn ich genug Geld hätte, würde ich einen See
 bauen. Man kann viele Spass in einem See haben. Wenn das
 wetter besser wäre, würde ich schwimmen gehen. Zu

Figure 4.2. Peter’s course work at the end of year 10 (aged 15)

DEUTSCHLAND JEDENTAG

GESTORBEN AUF DER STRASSE

Gestern Morgen um neun Uhr passierte ein schrecklicher Unfall auf der Bundesstrasse 43 zehn Kilometer von Hamburg. Ein Bus gefahren von Herr Roger Webster, prallte an ein Ford von Herr Schnieder. Die Opfer, Herr Schnieder hat sein Kopf verloren, und er hat ein Arm brochte. Der Mann, der gestorben war, telefonierte als der Unfall passierte. Der 30-jährige Busfahrer, Roger Webster aus Hamburg, wurde leicht verletzt und er musste ins Krankenhaus gehen. Herr Webster bremste aber man konnte nicht gut sehen weil es regnete und es fast dunkel war und er prallte ins ein Ford. Der Fahrer hätte die Polizei rufen können, aber er war sehr betrunken, als die Polizei sich ankündigte. Viele Personen wurden schwer verletzt auch. Ich habe den Unfall gesehen. Meiner Meinung nach war es der schrecklichste Unfall letzten Zeiten, sagte Dr Brown. Das Auto hatte Totalschaden und das Bus hatte Blechschaden.

Figure 4.3.

6

Meine Traumstadt

Meine Traumstadt heisst Superville liegt in der Nähe von Wonderland. Das Wetter ist Super als das Wetter ist sonnig und warm. Ab und zu das Wetter ist Furchtbar, es ist sturmisch und es gibt Schnee. Meine Traumstadt ist ziemlich gross, weil meine Traumstadt hat ungefähr Zehn Million Einwohner. Meine Traumstadt, Superville ist vierhundert Jahre alt und die Landschaft ist sehr interessant. Superville liegt in NördDeutschland. Meine Traumstadt hat ein gröss Vergnügen Park mit einem Kino in der Mitte und man kann gut Sport treiben, weil auch hat zehn Fussball und Rugby Stadion und es gibt vier Sportzentrum. Auch

Figure 5.1. Work done by Mark in July, year 10 (aged 15)

problems in using ‘weil’ clauses correctly. Figure 5.2 shows quite a sophisticated and well-structured account of an accident; here we see more complex sentences with relative clauses and the passive form attempted. Word order is mostly correct and two past tenses are also used fairly accurately. Mark’s use of capital letters is now more accurate. The register is appropriate for this type of journalistic writing.

The teacher also made another important observation about the work of her class: at the end of year 10 (students aged 15), after the design initiative, it was clear that the students in her group could all form a correct sentence in the perfect tense when writing under test conditions, whereas only a small number of students in other year 10 classes in the same school who had *not* been exposed to the MFL design initiative could do this in coursework written under examination conditions.

When the 15-year-old students were tracked the following year, it was apparent that the highest attaining students wrote accurately and in an original way; others were slightly less accurate in their use of tenses but still wrote with great flair and showed an impressive awareness of appropriate register. The changing of abstract grammatical concepts into something concrete which the student could physically handle through operating the mouse was clearly very powerful and enabled the students to grasp the principles behind the construction of the perfect tense in German. They also structured their coursework in a very organised way following the MFL design initiative.

Conclusions

As we have discussed in this paper, a very simple idea—that of drop down menus within electronic writing frames—can be used by teachers to support students to enhance their writing in a foreign language. The use of PowerPoint presentations to reinforce grammar also appeared to be very effective. The data from this case study shows that students showed real engagement with the task presented, wrote at

Unfall in der Morgen

Gestern Morgen passierte ein Unfall um sechs Uhr auf der Bundesstrasse 47 zwischen Hamburg und 23 Kilometer von Hameln. Es schneit und war sehr kalt, und es war fast dunkel, man könnte das gut nicht treiben.
 Ein Ford, gefahren von Herr Robert Quinn, fuhr die Strasse entlang Richtung Hamburg. Plötzlich kam ein anderes Auto, von einem Passanten ein Skoda von Andy Thomson gefahren, am ende der Strasse. Herr Quinn bremste, aber es war zu spät und er konnte nicht halten.
 Er prallte gegen das Skoda und Herr Thomson wurde schwer verletzt und ein Krankenwagen wurde von ein nahe Reisende gerufen. Und der Mann, der verletzt wurde, wurde zu Krankenhaus genommen, wegen seiner Verletzungen.
 Der 27 jährige autofahrer, Robert Quinn aus Berlin, wurde leicht verletzt
 Der Reisende, der den Unfall gesehen hat, sagte es war ein schrecklicher Unfall. Das einzige dass ich tun konnte, war die Polizei anzurufen. Die Reisende, die das Skoda von Andy Thomson fahren, hat es sehr schlecht gefunden.

Figure 5.2. Work done in February, year 11 (aged 15–16)

greater length, using more complex structures and paying more attention to accuracy. The electronic writing frames appear to have been an important factor in helping them internalise correct word order for past tense sentences, producing subsequent assessed pieces of writing on paper for the GCSE examination which were judged to be of a very good standard linguistically. It was also found that the students who had participated in the design initiative handled the writing process with confidence throughout the next year of their schooling. The idea of electronic writing frames with drop down menus has been sustained within the Modern Languages Faculty and is spreading within and beyond the Sir Bernard Lovell School. Interesting outcomes with younger students and those having specific literacy difficulties will be reported elsewhere.

Although we have reported in detail the work of only one design initiative, the central idea was taken up by six of the project teachers and used productively to stimulate and support their secondary school students to produce higher quality writing in a foreign language. Two project schools⁵ worked on refining the initial idea of drop down menus in French; there are indications in the form of student interviews and video footage that this simple idea has provided invaluable scaffolding and that students have been enabled to develop fluent and creative coursework writing via a new route. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has shown great interest in the work and a video (DfES, 2005) was made of Ruth Cole's lesson with a year 9 class (students aged 13–14).⁶ This has been disseminated to all secondary schools in England.

A novel and highly replicable method for encouraging students to produce structured and fluent writing has thus been created by the InterActive project teachers using simple generic software. Although the sample size is small, it is possible that the project students' strong oral performance which was noted and praised by Ofsted⁷ a year later may have been influenced by the MFL design initiative. This would be an interesting area for future research.

Acknowledgements

The project discussed in this paper is funded by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme (Award No. L139251060). The work of the design initiatives could not have taken place without the hard work and creativity of Ruth Cole, Elisabeth Lazarus and their students at the Sir Bernard Lovell School, South Gloucestershire. We are also grateful to Terry Atkinson for his inspiration and support during the early stages of the project and to Professor Rosamund Sutherland for her help and advice during the writing of the paper.

Notes

1. Elisabeth Lazarus was Curriculum Manager for Modern Foreign Languages at The Sir Bernard Lovell School during the lifetime of the InterActive Education project and a member of the project team.
2. Each teacher had 15 days funded for meetings and planning.

3. The examination taken at the end of five years' secondary schooling in England.
4. An official working on behalf of the examination board who moderates the marking of students' work by other examiners.
5. Fairfield High School, Bristol and Filton High School, South Gloucestershire.
6. DfES (2005) *Embedding ICT @ secondary Key Stage 3: modern foreign languages* (Video Case Study 3) (London).
7. The Office for Standards in Education (the schools' inspection service in England).

References

- Adams, J. (2000) *French writing frames 11-14, creative and imaginative writing* (Dunstable, Folens).
- Addison Stone, C. (1993) What is missing in the metaphor of scaffolding? in: E. A. Forman, N. Minick & A. Addison Stone (Eds) *Contexts for learning* (New York, Oxford University Press).
- Atkinson, T. (Ed.) (2001) *Reflections on ICT* (London, Center for Innovative Learning Technologies).
- Broadly, E. (2000) *Second language writing in a computer environment* (London, Center for Innovative Learning Technologies).
- Carpenter, C. & Slater, P. (2000) Integrating process writing and word processing into second language learner curricula in: E. Broadly (Ed.) *Second language writing in a computer environment* (London, Center for Innovative Learning Technologies).
- Chapelle, C. A. (2001) *Computer applications in second language acquisition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Davis, B., Sumara, D. & Luce-Kapler, R. (1994) *Engaging minds: learning and teaching in a complex world* (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Association).
- DfEE & QCA (1999) *The national curriculum for England: modern foreign languages* (London, DfEE). [2]
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005) *Embedding ICT @ secondary Key Stage 3: modern foreign languages* (Video Case Studies) (London, DfES).
- Dobson, A. (1998) *MFL inspected—reflections on inspection findings 1996/7* (London, CILT).
- Dugard, C. & Hewer, S. (2003) *Impact on learning: what ICT can bring to MFL in KS3* (London, Center for Innovative Learning Technologies).
- Ellis, R. (2003) *Task-based language learning and teaching* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Facer, K., Furlong, J., Furlong, R. & Sutherland, R. (2003) *Screenplay: children's computing in the home* (London, Routledge Falmer).
- Fitzpatrick, A. & Davies, G. D. (Eds) (2003) *The impact of new information technologies and Internet on the teaching of foreign languages and on the role of teachers of ô ô foreign language* (EU, Directorate General of Education and Culture). Available online at: europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/ict.pdf, 1-105. [3]
- Grauberg, W. (1997) *The elements of foreign language teaching* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press).
- Hyland, K. (2003) *Second language writing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- John, P. & Sutherland, R. (2004) Teaching and learning with ICT: new technology, new pedagogy? *Education, Communication and Information*, 4(1), 101-107.
- Kern, R. (2000) *Literacy and language teaching* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Krappels, A. (1990) The elements of foreign language teaching, in: B. Kroll (Ed.) *Second language writing process research* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Kroll, B. (Ed.) (2003) *Exploring the dynamics of second language writing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Leask, M. & Pachler, N. (1999) *Learning to teach using ICT in the secondary school* (London & New York, Routledge).
- Macaro, E. (2001) *Learning strategies in foreign and second language classrooms* (London, Continuum).

- Mahn, H. & John-Steiner, V. (2002) The gift of confidence: a Vygotskian view of emotions, in: G. Wells & G. Claxton (Eds) *Learning for working in the 21st century* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Group).
- Matsuda, P. K. (2003) Second language writing in the twentieth century: a situated historical perspective, in: B. Kroll (Ed.) *Exploring the dynamics of second language writing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Mitchell, R. & Myles, F. (1998) *Second language learning theories* (London, Arnold).
- O'Brien, T. (2004) Writing in a foreign language: teaching and learning, *Language Teaching*, 37(1), 1–28.
- Ofsted (2001) *Inspecting modern languages 11–16 with guidance for self-evaluation* (London, Ofsted).
- Ofsted (2003) *Modern foreign languages in secondary schools* (Ofsted subject report series 2001/2) [4] (London, E-publication).
- Pennington, M. C. (2003) The impact of the computer in second language writing, in: B. Kroll (Ed.) *Exploring the dynamics of second language writing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Rendall, H. (2001) Developing a greater sense of gender in French: ICT integration at initial learner level, in: T. Atkinson (Ed.) (2001) *Reflections on ICT* (London, Center for Innovative Learning Technologies), 15–29.
- Slaouti, D. (2000) Computers and writing in the second language classroom, in: P. Brett & G. Motteram (Eds) *Learning and a special interest in computers: learning and teaching with information and communications technologies* (Eynsham, IATEFL Publications). [5]
- Sutherland, R., Armstrong, V., Barnes, S., Brawn, R., Gall, M. & Matthewman, S. *et al.* (2004) Transforming teaching and learning: embedding ICT into everyday classroom practices, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 20(6), 413–425.
- Towell, R. & Hawkins, R. (1994) *Approaches to second language acquisition* (Clevedon, Multilingual Matters Ltd).
- Triggs, P. & John, P. (2004) From transaction to transformation: ICT, professional development and the formation of communities of practice, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 20(6), 426–439.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scriber & E. Souberman, Eds) (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
- Warschauer, M. (1997) Computer-mediated collaborative learning: theory and practice, *Modern Language Journal*, 81, 470–481.
- Warschauer, M. (1999) *Electronic literacies—language, culture, and power in online education* (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Association).
- Warschauer, M. (2004) Technology and writing, in: C. Davidson & J. Cummins (Eds) *Handbook of English language teaching* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer).
- Wood, D., Bruner, J. & Ross, G. (1976) The role of tutoring in problem-solving, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17, 89–100.

Authors Queries

Journal: **Educational Review**

Paper: **127815**

Title: **Putting languages on the (drop down) menu: innovative writing frames in modern foreign language teaching**

Dear Author

During the preparation of your manuscript for publication, the questions listed below have arisen. Please attend to these matters and return this form with your proof. Many thanks for your assistance

Query Reference	Query	Remarks
1	Should this read Figure 3 instead of Figure 2? Figure 3 is not cited in the text.	
2	DfEE & QCA — add text citation or delete here. If retained, please give acronyms in full.	
3	Please give date last accessed.	
4	Please add URL and date last accessed.	
5	Please give IATEFL in full.	
6	Please supply caption for Figure 4.3.	