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Electronic Texts in ESOL Classrooms

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During the past decade, a great deal of faith has been placed in technologies as a means of shoring up perceived weaknesses in U.S. education. This is especially true if one considers the amount of activity around, and software development for, English for speakers of other languages. Promises of ‘taking care of the problem’ have subtly accompanied the mass marketing of ESOL-specific technology products. Too often the rush to acquire hardware and software comes at the expense of personnel costs otherwise associated with the training, hiring, professional development, and retention of first-class language professionals to teach English language learners. What *are* the promises of technology for children of limited English proficiency in U.S. schools? This study first set out to gain a broad view of the practices of ESOL professionals with technology and their assessments of its value. We then zoomed in to examine in close detail contexts where electronic texts¹ were being used and used well in supporting the second language and literacy development of children in Kindergarten through eighth grade classrooms. Both research activities have produced informative findings that we briefly outline in this report.

BACKGROUND

The short history of electronic text in language education has been replete with acclaim for certain of its characteristics; most notably for its speed and efficiency, patience, convenience, motivational aspects, and, more recently, for the many possibilities communications connectivity represent for teaching and learning. The research community in turn has examined these and other features of computer technology to understand their influence on reading, writing, syntax, comprehension, speaking, listening, etc. in a second language (see Meskill & Mossop, 1997 for summary). However, where research in second language literacy development consistently underscores the importance of the mentored, event-rich literacy environment, and instructional practices and behaviors that provide continual support for learners en route to second language literacy (August & Hakuta, 1998; Edelsky, 1996; Huss, 1995, Johnson, 1995; Rigg &

Allen, 1989; Toohey, 1999), parallel research that examines such environmental characteristics with electronic texts is notably absent in the literature. The few earlier studies of technologies in classrooms suggest that computers don't simply impact individual learning, but tend to reshape classroom processes overall (Cazden, Michaels, and Watson-Gegeo, 1987; Meskill & Swan, 1999). This study is concerned with the day-to-day practices of ESOL teachers in their classrooms, what it is they do with technologies, and how this is shaping second language and literacy instruction. It is responsive to the current need to extend our inquiry beyond the attributes of the machine to study how *use* of these tools can change and, in many cases change for the better, the contexts and processes of a given instructional environment (Warschauer, 1998, 1999).

METHOD

The project's initial activity was to query K-12 practitioners regarding if and how they used e-texts with their ESL learners. Data from our statewide survey and followup telephone interviews revealed a great deal of activity in ESOL that was supported in a variety of ways by electronic texts (see Meskill & Mossop, 1997). From this initial data collection activity, two reporting teachers from the same district became the focus of an intensive two-year study of the dynamics of ESOL classrooms when e-texts were integrated into second language and literacy learning. Criteria applied to the selection of these teachers from out of over 150 reporting language educators included length of time a technologies component had been in place, and teachers' training and expertise in both instructional technology and as an ESOL professional. It should be noted that in addition to substantial expertise in both areas, these two teachers enjoyed unusually positive support from their districts for their work with ESOL learners.

Data concerning these environments and their participants consist of video-taped classes (x30), interviews with teachers, students, and administrators, video talkback sessions³, and student products. In order to capture the dynamic of the learning and activity around e-texts, videotape data were transcribed using a two-step, audio-then-visual, process. Data were coded and analyzed using the qualitative research tool, NU*DIST.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

From surveying and interviewing ESOL practitioners regarding technology in their work, and through the long-term study of two technology-using ESOL classrooms, a number of instructive findings have emerged.

- A good portion of ESOL professionals use technologies as part of their second language and literacy instruction.
- Teachers report that learners are motivated by tasks with the computer (though not by self-study drills).
- Exemplary uses of technologies involve teachers designing and implementing pre-computer and post-computer tasks that optimize focus on, and use of, second language and literacy skills.
- The role of the instructor tends to shift from being central to being a sideline support.
- Evidence of learner achievements with e-texts was continual.
- Mastery of the computer translates into higher status.

Forty-nine percent of the nearly 800 survey respondents reported using some form of computer technology with their students. They especially see tools such as word processors and content-rich applications like simulations as supportive of their goals and practices. Like the majority of the survey respondents, our two focal teachers chiefly made use of two genres of software: enhanced text processing tools and content-rich simulations. Use of the former in the elementary context consisted of children creating their own stories with a software product called *Once Upon a Time* – a multimedia product that allows children to hear and make use of semantically grouped vocabulary items and manipulate accompanying illustrations of them to build stories. Use of the content-rich simulations such as *Oregon Trail* and the *Sim* series was frequent in both classrooms. Teachers pointed to the generative aspects of these software genres; e.g., the amount and quality of literacy opportunities, the content richness and relevance, and the degree to which the software could be exploited for opportunities to practice the language and literacy needed for school.

For questions regarding use, survey and interview responses consistently cited the motivational feature of technology. Children are especially responsive when they can create products of their learning to share

with others. Tremendous enthusiasm for learning with e-texts pervaded class sessions observed and student interviews. One of the focal teachers in the long-term study noted the degree to which this excitement for learning extended into both the mainstream classroom and beyond:

It does excite them. I just think it's funny when I hear "Oh my God! Wow! Cool!" ... you don't usually hear a lot of excitement like that over some of the assignments you give in class. It definitely works as a motivating tool. They motivate each other because one person will do something and another person will build on that idea and say, "Oh, I think I can do it even better."

Focal Middle School Teacher

Activities most often described in the survey/interview portion of the study, as well as those observed in the two focal classrooms shared a common overall structure. This structure can be characterized as a smooth stream of offline to online to offline activity. Prior to working on the computer, language professionals spend a focused period of time ranging from 5-15 minutes doing offline preparatory work. Both focal teachers felt this was an essential component to the successful integration of e-texts. Children are first coached to awareness of the forms and ideas they would be working with on the computer. In some cases this consisted of preparing a print (hand written/drawn) language guide and/or paper-based task to complete during their online work.

In all of our recorded classroom sessions we observed e-texts being used as tools through which and around which language use was supported by carefully crafted sociocollaborative contexts. With moment-by-moment teacher support, learners took the bulk of responsibility for initiating and following through on the computer-supported tasks they had been assigned. Guidance in the way of genuine, task-oriented questions (with agendas of language and literacy skills acquisition consistently underlying them) was continual. The locus of thought, action, and talk is learners and their learning. Teachers provide ongoing, moment-by-moment supportive talk and behavior while children work through on-line tasks and materials.

Due to the public nature of e-text activity, children's minute-by-minute successes could be shared with teachers and peers. Their finished work, be it a word processed/desktop published document, an animated story, a multimedia power point presentation, or a fully functioning city of their own design, was

consistently a source of great pride and, among peers and family members, admiration. In the case of one telephone interview, an ESOL teacher reported that her children had designed and had had a hand in producing an illustrated two-page supplement to the local newspaper. That supplement presented aspects of the home culture and adjustment to life in the U.S. Learner achievements extended from moment-to-moment successes in editing their own work or decisions, to demonstrating to the larger school and community what they could do with technology.

Throughout the course of the study, many anecdotal accounts were provided that connected status and ability with computers. Children who had received a great deal of hands on experience as part of their ESOL classes were frequently called upon by adults and peers in their schools for assistance in setting up hardware and software, troubleshooting, and teaching others. The ESOL children become experts in their classes and school.

It is very notable that in addition to enjoying excellent teachers, the two focal ESOL classrooms also enjoyed a great deal of support from the immediate and extended school community. The central district office was very active in procuring state funds to support technology acquisition, maintenance, and training for the ESOL program. Moreover, the district was very proactive in encouraging the use of technologies as tools to support thinking, talking, and writing across the content areas.

DISCUSSION

The goal for non-native English speaking children in U.S. schools is that they become full participants in the academic or ‘mainstream’ discourses. Principally, they need to be able to read, write, and understand English sufficiently well to master the content of their regular classes and, like their native speaker counterparts, do well in school and succeed on tests. Both our survey data and the results of our two-year classroom study indicate that ESOL professionals are using technologies well in supporting these goals and processes. The second language and literacy activities reported and observed take advantage of specific features of e-texts in ways that optimize learner engagement in the spoken and written work that results not only in local, moment-by-moment achievements, but also in attaining the skills they need to achieve in the

larger context of school (Meskill, Mossop & Bates, 1999). A consistent aspect of this process is that e-texts are viewed not as primary curricula that drive learning. Rather, they are viewed as tools that can be called into the service of learners' immediate needs through careful task design and continuous exploitation of teachable moments.

This study provides some evidence that examining what it is teachers do with technologies yields insight regarding the realities and potential of the medium. Studies from outside of the discipline also support this notion (see Cohen, Levin, and Souviney, 1986; Garner and Gillingham, 1998; Mergendoller, 1996). As Carol Edelsky aptly points out, what good teachers do “requires perceptiveness and courage but no unusual materials” (1996:78). Turning to the courageous and perceptive teachers who are using technologies to support their second language and literacy instruction, we can begin to learn what counts as best bets for e-texts and ESOL.

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¹ The term 'electronic text' (e-text) refers to any information displayed on a computer screen. This includes audio, video, graphics, and the written word.

³ Video talkback sessions entailed teachers reviewing videotapes of their classes and being prompted to provide commentary on their and their students' thoughts and actions.

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