Using Paragraph Punch in Teaching ESL Writing

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Abstract: In the recent years, writing softwares have been used extensively in and outside of the classroom to develop and enhance the students’ knowledge on the language. The writing software which was focused on in this paper is ‘Paragraph Punch’, which was first developed by Merit Evaluation Software in 2002 primarily for schools in the United States from 5th to 10th grade. Paragraph Punch utilizes the writing mechanism whereby students are guided to brainstorm for starting ideas at first and gradually prompting them to write sentences that will eventually develop into workable and organised paragraphs. This study explores the perceptions of pre-service teachers in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) on this writing software and provides an overview of the development of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) over the years. A survey questionnaire was used to elicit the participants’ views on the use of Paragraph Punch as a potential writing tool. The findings showed that the pre-service teachers have a positive view towards using Paragraph Punch in teaching ESL writing. However, the software is more suited for beginner writers.

Key-Words: Paragraph Punch, ICT, ESL Writing, Perception, CALL

1 Introduction
ESL/EFL teachers of the new millennium are constantly on the move to discover new ways and methods to teach language more effectively. Meier believes that technology has the power to transform teaching and learning [1]. Therefore, it has become increasingly important for teachers and teachers-to-be to delve deeper into technology as a potential pedagogical tool to teach language using a more student-centered approach. Over the years, many studies have been conducted on how language learning can be improved or facilitated using technology such as blogs, word processors, and web pages [2-5]. The use of such technology has allowed educators worldwide to gain more insight on the evolution of the teaching of writing in modern classrooms.

Of all the four language skills, students who learn English as a Second Language (ESL) often find writing a daunting task due to its complexity. This is because it does not simply require learners to memorize written symbols and put them on paper. Writing involves the writer to employ high order thinking skills as well as communication skills which include conceptualization, inference, creativity, organization and the summarization of sophisticated ideas [6]. Hence, there is a growing need for teachers to come up with effective writing instruction for L2 learners. It remains crucial for three primary reasons: firstly, the ability to write well is a fundamental skill for academic or professional success [7], but is a particularly difficult skill for second language learners to master. Secondly, writing can be especially effective in developing learners’ academic language proficiency because they will be more eager to explore lexical or syntactic terms in their written work [8]. Thirdly, writing allows students to master various subject matters because it heightens learners’ awareness towards knowledge gaps and apply problem-specific knowledge into other areas [9].
Since teacher education in Malaysia today equips all teachers with the necessary knowledge of technology in education through ICT courses, the tendency to use or refrain from using technology in classrooms to teach writing strongly depends on the perceptions of teachers or teachers-to-be towards technology. Thus in this paper, the researchers aim to investigate the perceptions of pre-service ESL teachers towards the effectiveness of the writing software ‘Paragraph Punch’ as a writing tool for students in terms of its features, user-friendliness and its affective aspects. The findings will be related to implications of teaching writing in the classroom. In order to facilitate the investigation regarding the effectiveness of ‘Paragraph Punch’ as a writing tool, the researchers formulated the following research questions:

1. Does the software Paragraph Punch support the pre-writing process?
2. Do features such as tips, prompting and spellchecker in Paragraph Punch facilitate students in the writing process?
3. From the pre-service teachers’ point of view, what other aspects of Paragraph Punch can be improved to enhance writing skills?

2 Literature Review

Paragraph Punch which is a step-by-step writing improvement software assists students to build up their paragraph writing skills. Currently, there are two versions of this software, one being a demo version which is available for free online whereas another is the “home version” which can be purchased and contains an additional function which allows learners to send their completed paragraphs via email. The version used for the purpose of this paper is the demo version (Paragraph Punch version 4.2).

Through Paragraph Punch, learners can learn how to write a paragraph effectively in an organised manner. After learners choose a topic for the paragraph, the pre-writing process begins. Learners will first be asked to enter words or phrases related to the topic on a notepad. This process will be stimulated by a number of prompt questions. This is similar to the brainstorming process which normally takes place in the classroom, except that with Paragraph Punch, the interaction takes place between the user and the writing software. After that, the program will demonstrate how a topic sentence is written by showing learners a sample topic sentence. Learners are later asked to write their own topic sentence as an introduction to the paragraph. After coming up with a topic sentence, learners will be asked to make sentences out of the words or phrases they have in a notepad. The process will continue until learners have generated a few sentences. This will be followed by organisation. Learners will be asked to arrange the sentences they have constructed to make a complete paragraph. Learners will be given a choice to delete the sentences that they think are not necessary. In addition, Paragraph Punch will suggest a list of transition words which learners can choose to use to make their paragraph more cohesive. For the concluding sentence, again, the software will provide a sample and learners will later be instructed to write their own. When this is done, the draft of the complete paragraph will be presented on the screen for students to review. Buttons such as “Add”, “Edit”, “Remove” and “Move” can be utilised by students to check their work. The software offers guidance in the form of brief advice on editing, style, grammar, and sentence structure. The Proofreading section of the program assists students in editing their paragraph through tools such as the ‘spell-checker’. Finally, learners will be able to “publish” their paragraph either by saving it, printing it or transferring it to a word processor. Learners will also be given the option of repeating the review process again.

The earliest study on Paragraph Punch (Version 8.1) was a media review done in the year 2002, the year it was developed by Merit Evaluation Software. The paper entitled ‘Paragraph Punch’ provided a detailed description of the software, the author’s personal evaluation of pros and cons of the software and suggestions for usage in the classroom [10]. Mei-Lin explored the impact of Paragraph Punch as well as other technology tools on English language learners’ self-perception of writing difficulty [11]. She suggested several advantages of Paragraph Punch such as spelling check and reinforcement of the writing process. In addition, she elaborated on some limitations of the software and implications of technology in teaching of writing. However, the present researchers suggest a need for this study as teachers’ perceptions are equally, if not more important than language learners’ perceptions on the effectiveness of this writing software as a writing tool since teachers are pivotal in the teaching and learning process.
Methodology
This study employed a survey research to measure the pre-service teachers’ perceptions on the effectiveness of Paragraph Punch as a writing tool for the beginner writers. The participants consisted of 30 third year TESL undergraduate students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) who were taking the course “Teaching Writing in an ESL Context” at the time the survey was administered. All the participants have acquired at least Band 4 and above in MUET (Malaysian University English Test). They can be categorised as competent or modest users of English. In addition, the participants were familiar with the use of ICT since most of them utilise the Internet for the purposes of gathering information, email, social networking etc. The participants ranged from 21 to 28 years of age.

To obtain data for the study, the respondents were first given a 30-minute tutorial on Paragraph Punch. After trying out the software, the respondents were required to answer a questionnaire which was made up of ten close-ended items. The items were designed to elicit students’ perceptions on the effectiveness of Paragraph Punch as a writing tool from three different aspects. Questions 1 to 3 focus on the user-friendliness of the software whereas questions 4 to 7 were designed to elicit responses on the features of Paragraph Punch. Finally, questions 8 to 10 pay more attention to the affective aspects of the respondents when utilising the software. The close-ended items were measured by an ‘agree-disagree’ scale to ensure consistent response. In the analysis phase of the study, percentages for each item were calculated and presented in tables.

Findings and Discussion
Items 1 to 3 examined the respondents’ responses towards the features in the software Paragraph Punch (see Table 1). All the respondents (100%) agreed that it is easy to understand the instruction in the software because it is indeed clear and straightforward. A very high percentage of the respondents (93.3%) also agreed that the layout used in Paragraph Punch is simple and systematic. Most of the respondents (76.6%) considered the software “easy to access and navigate” whereas 23.4% disagreed with the statement.

Table 1: Respondents’ response on the user-friendliness of Paragraph Punch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The instructions in Paragraph Punch</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The layout of Paragraph Punch</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The software is easy to access and navigate</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Items 4 to 7 focused on the respondents’ responses towards the user-friendliness of Paragraph Punch. As Table 2 shows, the respondents generally agreed that the software is user-friendly. A very high percentage (90.0%) agreed that the spellchecker feature does assist them in rectifying spelling errors in their writing as they go along navigating the software. Only 10% of the respondents disagreed with item 4. Almost all the respondents (93.3%) seem to agree that the prompting feature, one of the prominent aspects of Paragraph Punch, do help them in producing more ideas for them to keep writing. Almost ninety percent of the respondents (83.3%) believed that the tips provided in the software provide helpful additional information, which further consolidates their understanding of the construction of their paragraph. Moreover, the majority of the respondents (96.6%) concur that the software allows them to draft and write in a more organised manner.

Items 8 to 10 aimed to probe what respondents feel when they use Paragraph Punch. A relatively high percentage of the respondents (70.0%) agreed that the software allows them to work on their own. Most of the respondents considered Paragraph Punch to be lacking in the ‘fun factor’ and interactivity which is reflected in a high percentage of 63.3% in comparison to 36.6% who feel that Paragraph Punch is an enjoyable writing software to use. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents (93.3%) expressed that the prompting feature and specific instruction found in Paragraph Punch increase their confidence in their writing whereas 6.6% disagreed with the statement.
The findings of this study have provided evidence that pre-service teachers consider Paragraph Punch as an effective software which can be utilised by teachers to teach writing, specifically for beginner writers. The features in the software are practical because they allow beginner writers to have a basic understanding of the construction of a paragraph through a step-by-step writing process which includes selecting a topic, constructing a topic sentence, generating supporting ideas and writing a conclusion. The researchers propose for the software to be used as an introductory tool in teaching writing. This is because as students progress in their writing skills, they would gradually develop recursive writing styles and the rigid step-by-step layout of the software might not cater to these developing writing needs. Teaching writing through technology is most effective when students can access an individual computer every day [12] [13]. This cannot possibly be done in the schools where computer labs are limited. Hence, besides utilising Paragraph Punch to teach writing in the classroom, the researchers also suggest that teachers encourage students who have personal computers at home to practice their writing daily using the software beyond school hours as it provides the drill-and-practice so often needed to perfect a skill. In summary, despite the obvious limitations which come with Paragraph Punch, the bottom line is for teachers to integrate it into their writing instruction creatively so as to maximise its benefits for ESL writers.

References:


Table 2: Respondents’ response on the features of Paragraph Punch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. The spellchecker feature in Paragraph Punch helps me to identify and correct spelling errors in my writing</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The prompting feature in Paragraph Punch helps me generate more ideas for my paragraph</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The tips feature provides useful information which supports my writing</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Paragraph Punch allows me to outline my ideas and write in a more systematic manner</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 3: Respondents’ response on the affective aspects of Paragraph Punch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Paragraph Punch allows me to work independently</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Paragraph Punch is fun and interactive</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The prompting and specific instruction in Paragraph Punch makes me feel more confident in my writing</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Conclusion

The findings of this study have provided evidence that pre-service teachers consider Paragraph Punch as an effective software which can be utilised by teachers to teach writing, specifically for beginner writers. The features in the software are practical because they allow beginner writers to have a basic understanding of the construction of a paragraph through a step-by-step writing process which includes selecting a topic, constructing a topic sentence, generating supporting ideas and writing a conclusion. The researchers propose for the software to be used as an introductory tool in teaching writing. This is because as students progress in their writing skills, they would gradually develop recursive writing styles and the rigid step-by-step layout of the software might not cater to these developing writing needs. Teaching writing through technology is most effective when students can access an individual computer every day [12] [13]. This cannot possibly be done in the schools where computer labs are limited. Hence, besides utilising Paragraph Punch to teach writing in the classroom, the researchers also suggest that teachers encourage students who have personal computers at home to practice their writing daily using the software beyond school hours as it provides the drill-and-practice so often needed to perfect a skill. In summary, despite the obvious limitations which come with Paragraph Punch, the bottom line is for teachers to integrate it into their writing instruction creatively so as to maximise its benefits for ESL writers.


