

# **Towards an Empowering Pedagogy in Teaching ESL Writing**

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The late Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire is best known for his research, writing and developmental work in critical literacy, an empowering theory of learning which gives permission for language learners to read the world as they learn a language.

To be able to read the world means to be able to decipher the powerful cultural, political, corporate and social processes which define the lives of L2 learners (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Throughout his life and distinguished career as an educator, Freire (1970) argued that students from every culture and of all ages, regardless of gender and social class, need to be able to know and understand, in the fullest sense of those terms, the relationships and experiences which exist between themselves as learners in the real world, and the institutionalized world in which they learn. It is the key to an empowering language education (Allington, 1998) and as Tribble (1996, p.14), argues it gives L2 writers access to understanding social roles and power relationship within a cultural context. Today, this translates into the 21st century multi-literacy world of externalized and augmented realities.

Nowadays for the L2 learner, this means knowing and understanding the relevance of the media through which they learn along with its significance and importance to the language they are learning. Moreover, L2 learners demand an assurance that the media through which they learn offer a guarantee of achieving successful learning outcomes, and attaining long term goals in their education. Such a critical understanding from an L2 learner's perspective empowers them to become fully literate in their L2 culture, rather than remaining forever typecast as L2 observers on the periphery of a brave new world of technology, knowledge and understanding. Today, unlike during Freire's lifetime, there is nothing seemingly radical in this view. In fact an empowering pedagogy is a universal educational value shared across the majority of the world's leading academic institutions. But what is not a shared value is an informed knowledge and understanding of the merit and mode of the media through which L2 students learn, and the effects of that media on their skill development as L2 writers.

## Literature Overview

Since the late 1980s there have been many studies undertaken to evaluate and assess the efficacy of word processing as an aid for L2 learners to produce written texts. But, the caveat is that a majority of this research has focused on L2 writers who produce essays, project work and a variety of academic expositions, while the kinds of tasks with a controlled, shorter word limit, which are often composed and created in a classroom setting, are only alluded to in the research without being observed, and seem to be considered too insignificant to warrant further investigation.

Daiute, (1985); Nichols (1986); Dalton & Hannafin, (1987); Frase et al, (1985); Johnson, (1988); Bernhardt et al. (1989); Lam and Pennington, (1995); Owston & Wideman, (1997); Li & Cumming (2001); Li (2005); San (2007); Darus, Ismail & Ismail, (2008) are just a few among the many writers and researchers who have argued that a correlation exists between word processing, L2 writing competency, and successful learning outcomes in L2 writing projects, and that CALL and adaptive and assistive technologies improve the quality of L2 writing. This must be taken to mean that communicative quality and coherency along with syntax, lexis and language mechanics showed improvement too. Yet, it's difficult to concur with such a conclusion when within this canon of research, approach and methodology are vastly different, not in agreement, and often contradictory. For example, Li & Cumming (2001) argue that assumptions are valid in research when data is collected over a long period of time, regardless of the number of subjects. This is an extraordinary claim to make. Furthermore, throughout their research they argue that any longitudinal case-study with only one subject is sufficient to conclude that "word-processing combined with proper training can help L2 learners to improve their writing skills and writing quality" (Li & Cumming, 2001, p145).

Notwithstanding the extraordinary processes they engaged in throughout their case-study, for

example the electronic recording of key-strokes, visual recording of text changes for hand-written texts and the recording of 'think aloud' protocols, quite different results could have been found with another subject or a group of subjects given the nature of different learning styles and the unique way individuals learn. Similarly, Abu Seileek's study (2003) on the use of word-processing for teaching writing was conducted over an extended period of time with two groups of freshmen. The groups were divided according to their GPA in English Language, but no data is provided on this fact, so we don't know whether the groups were mixed ability or streamed according to their GPA. In this study, the experimental group used a word-processor, while the control group used pen and paper. The groups were tested at the end of the semester and the outcomes tabulated according to the final result. Yet, no specific details on the test are given in the paper. Moreover the questionnaire given to the experimental group pre-empts any objective analysis of its results. All 30 questions contain confirmation bias towards the use of a word-processor. For example, "I am happier with my papers when I use the computer" and "I plan to continue using the computer to write my papers after this class is finished" reflect the inherent bias in the study, and in the assumptions, tone and nature of the remaining 28 questions on the survey. Furthermore, we are not given any detail on what improvements in syntactical, lexical, and mechanical range occurred over the semester. Abu Seileek's acknowledgment that the experimental group had access to extra facilities like grammar and spell checkers (2003, p.10) suggest that they were at a distinct advantage over the control group who, it appears, simply relied on their own expertise along with a dictionary and what they had learned regarding spelling and grammar. It is evident in this particular piece of research that the control group's performance and final test results are pre-empted through the researcher's particular bias towards CALL and word-processing as an aid in L2 writing.

The arguments for adaptive and assistive technologies in L2 writing are compelling. But, as Laskowski (1996) argues, they are not in themselves the answer to learning to write in L2. The research is often contradicted by evidence which suggests that hand-writing is an equally essential literacy skill to develop in L2 learners. Baroudy (2008) suggests that notwithstanding the medium used teaching and learning L2 writing we have to focus on the writing behaviors of L2 learners. Similarly, Silverman (2003) argues that handwriting is a prejudice of the 20th century and marginalizes learners who underachieve just because they have poor graphic ability. Kroeker (2002) centers the arguments more moderately, suggesting a middle way with technology and handwriting, and asserts that both media are essential tools in learners acquiring sound writing skills. Furthermore, within the corpus of research on L2 writing, there are researchers who argue that producing handwritten texts is axiomatic for L2 learners because of its vital cognitive functions, and has an essential role to play alongside assistive technology and other media. Handwriting, argues Levine (1994), "is one of the most complex activities in which a learner is asked to engage. In part this is because the act of writing involves the rapid and precise mobilization and synchronization of multiple brain functions, strategies, academic skills and thought processes". Spear-Swerling (2006) suggests that teaching handwriting assists all learners, but in particular those with learning disabilities. She asserts that handwriting, rather than being a redundant skill, is still a requirement for taking notes, taking short tests, quizzes, and for doing homework and/or class work. Willingham (1998) argues that learning grows out of neuropsychological motor control processes, and as a consequence handwriting as an essential motor control process may be able to assist among other learning disabilities, dyslexia and ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Also, Jones (2008) argues that there is a high correlation between handwriting, written language and spelling ability.

Such diverse views on methodologies for teaching and learning are not unusual in L2 academic discourse. After all people have been learning languages other than their own since the early days of exploration, trading and colonization, and with a high degree of success too. But, what is interesting is the lack of middle ground in the arguments on the use of media assisted L2 writing, along with the findings of any research which suggests that empowering L2 learners to experiment with, then choose a media and method to learn, may yield greater achievements and better results.

Notwithstanding claims made by Pennington (1991, 1993) that research and arguments have shifted from advocacy or opposition to more sophisticated arguments about the type of media and in what environment it can best be utilized to assist L2 writing, the evidence suggests that the views are still quite polarized. For example, Li & Cumming (2001), Abu Seileek (2003), Li (2005), and Darus, Ismail and Ismail (2008), offer uncompromising positions on the use of word processing for teaching L2 writing. In particular, Jiang's citing of Vygotsky's argument on tool and sign (2005) and the innate capacity humans have to adapt over time to use new tools as an expression of their evolving inner knowledge and understanding is compelling in its simplicity, but vague and open to question and further research in its rudimentary Darwinian claim that learners naturally adapt to media, methods and environment over time.

Subsequently, where does this leave us as classroom practitioners, faced with myriad choices of media and conflicting discourses? More importantly how do these debates and arguments empower our L2 students to make informed choices about how they learn?

## **The Study**

A small college based case-study attempted to ascertain students' preferences in the media they use for L2 writing, as well as establish a causal link between their preferred media, and their skill development as L2 writers. At the same time, it provided an opportunity for participants to critique their chosen media and method to write, and to reflect on their learning processes.

## **Limitations of the Study**

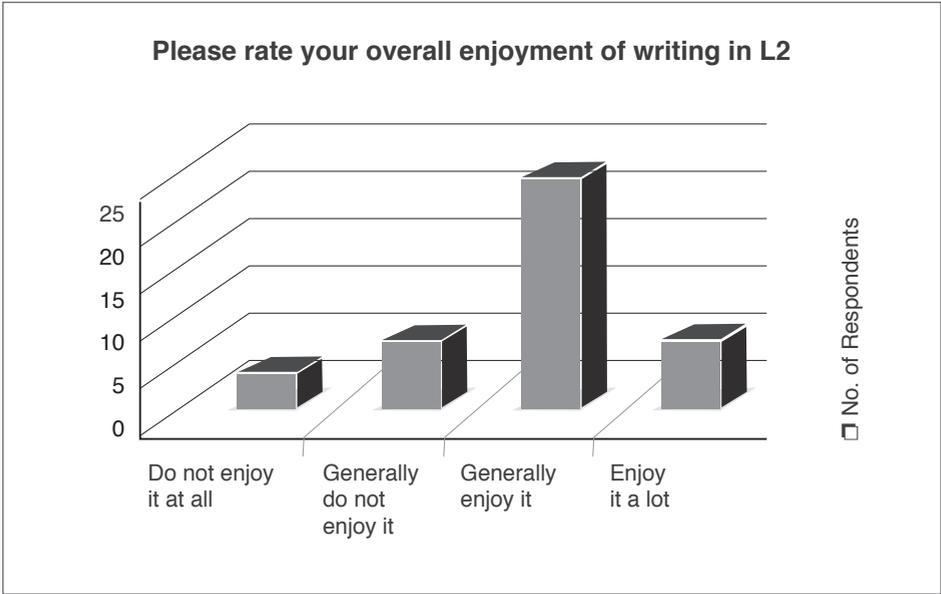
The sample groups were chosen from the same year and were given the same task to complete in one 50 minute lesson. It is recommended that any future research could focus on a range of L2 writing tasks, and a variety of media and methodologies in the teaching and learning process. Subjects should be sought out of foundations student programs through to students in the final years of their studies, because the media and method in the teaching of L2 writing may differ according to the various levels of each program. Finally, studies over one or two semesters and from a variety of institutions throughout the world would go a long way in eliminating some of the flaws and inconsistencies already cited from previous studies on the use of word-processing and CALL in L2 writing.

## **Context of the Study**

This analysis of L2 writing processes was carried out at the Higher Colleges of Technology, Al Ain Men's College (AAMC) campus. Three classes of mixed ability first year Bachelor track students agreed to participate. The majority of the students were recent graduates of the HCT Higher Diploma Foundation program, while a small minority had graduated from other programs, and re-enrolled at AAMC as part of their professional work commitments as UAE nationals.

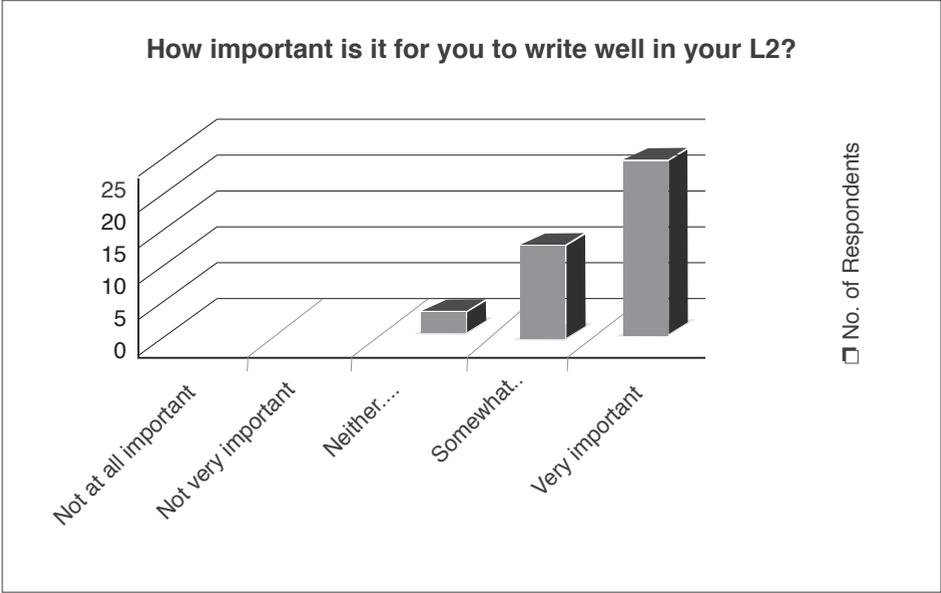
## **Survey data**

Prior to the writing exercise the students were surveyed to find out their thoughts and feelings, as well as confidence levels, along with their overall awareness about the teaching and learning of L2 writing. They were also surveyed at the conclusion of the exercise to determine their preferred method for completing class based L2 writing tasks. In Figure 1 below the students declare their overall general enjoyment of writing in their L2:



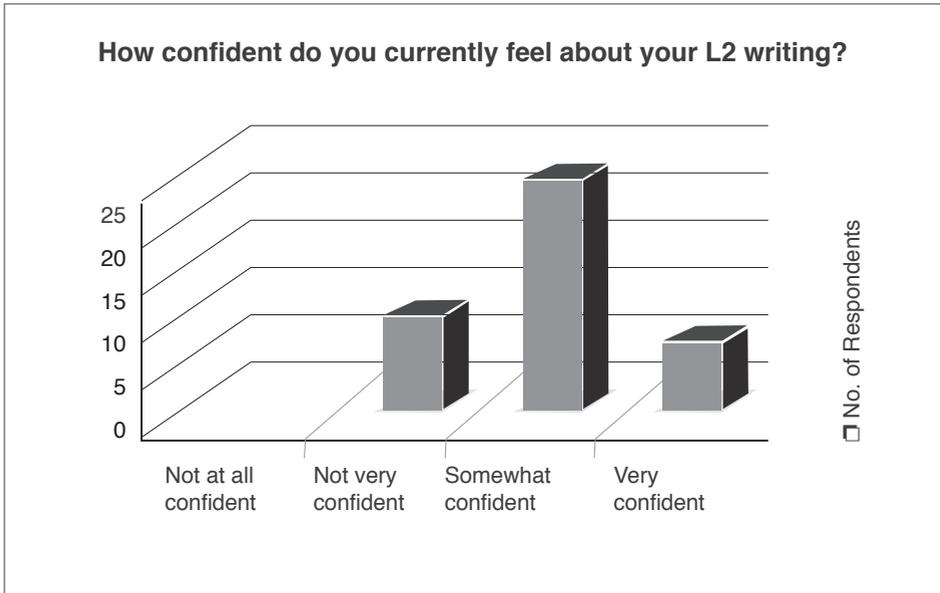
**Figure 1: the overall enjoyment of L2 writing**

Students also indicated that it was very important for them to write well in their L2:



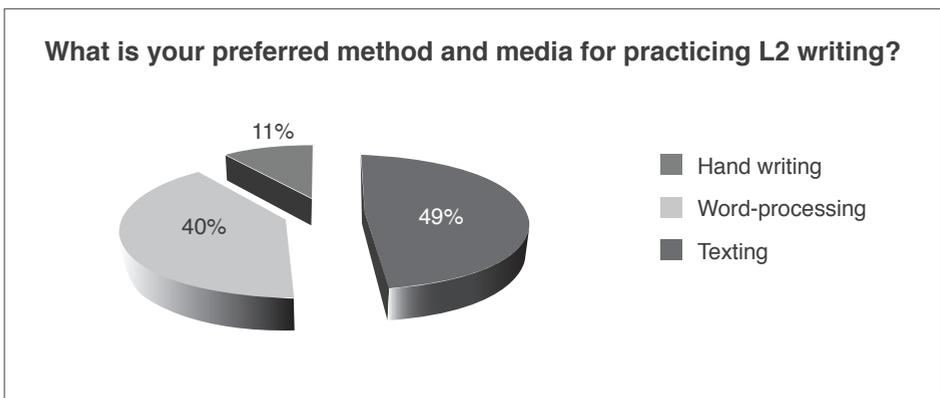
**Figure 2: the value of writing well in L2**

At the same time it was necessary for overall consistency to note that levels of confidence correlated with the enjoyment and the value of L2 writing:



**Figure 3: levels of confidence writing in L2**

However, notwithstanding the value of enjoyment, importance and confidence in L2 writing, it was central to this short study to record the subjects' preferred method for developing, improving and completing short-term class-based L2 writing tasks prior to the study. These findings would be compared to the post-survey data to see whether there had been any significant shift in preference and awareness of modalities in L2 writing after completing the written exercise.

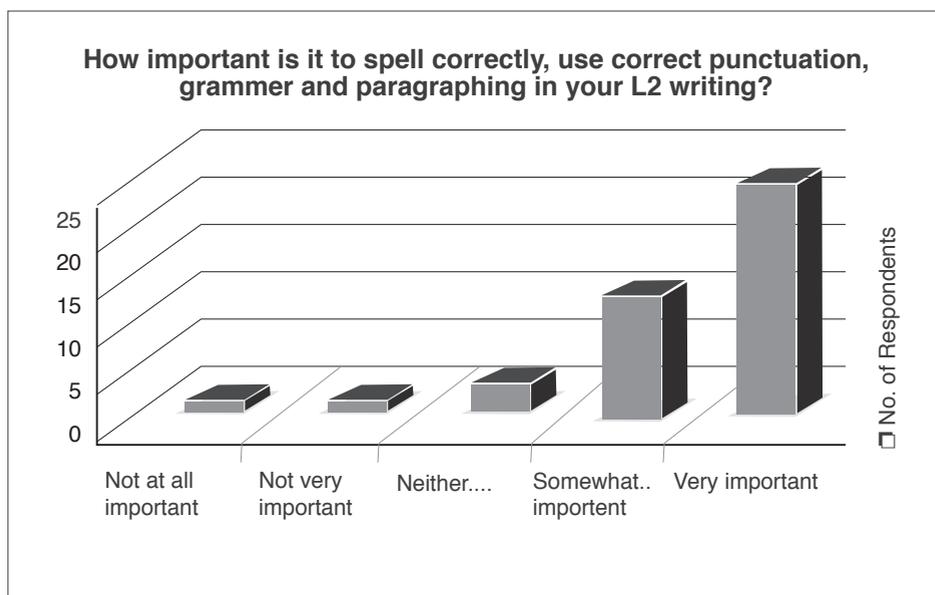


**Figure 4: preferences for practicing L2 writing**

Prior to the exercise slightly fewer than 50% of the students had a preference for hand-written work in the L2 classroom. This decreased by a further 10% for those who indicated their preference for word processing. The figures then slumped to around 12% for texting as a

medium for L2 writing. These are worthwhile statistics for any classroom practitioner, because firstly, knowing a student's preference for learning a new skill, and implementing this knowledge in a lesson plan empowers the student to participate more fully in the teaching and learning process. Secondly, it helps identify a learner's preferences and learning styles when developing their L2 writing skills. Generally, visual and kinesthetic learners in L2 tend to be drawn towards word-processing because of its visual – spatial organization of text, as well as its touch and feel in the process of writing, whereas reading/writing learners in L2 tend to be drawn towards hand-written text.

Also, in the pre-survey I felt it was important to gain an insight into the students' priorities in the learning of discrete skills as L2 writers, as this would help frame the discussion upon the completion of the written exercise in this study.

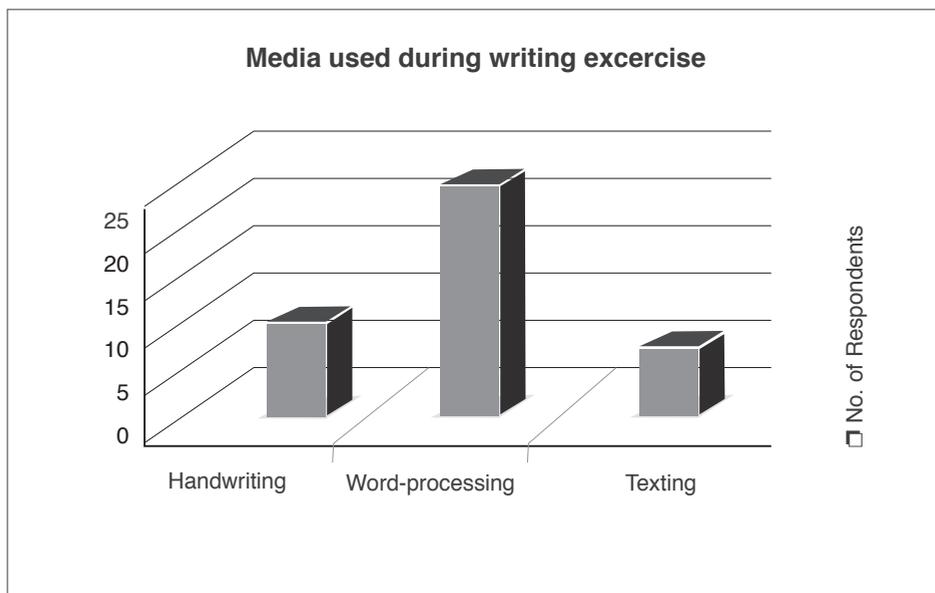


**Figure 5: importance of structure and language mechanics**

The majority of students regarded the acquisition of proficient skill development in structure and lexis along with competent spelling and punctuation as very important.

## Methodology used in the Case Study

For the purposes of the exercise within the case-study, students were able to use either their word-processor on their lap-top computers, their mobile phones, or pen and paper. To ascertain the media they would use, they drew a letter from a bowl (W = word processor, M = mobile phone, H = hand-written). If a student was not comfortable with their selected media they were able to swap with another student. This only happened once out of the 3 classes. As Figure 6 shows the type of media used for the writing exercise were fairly evenly distributed, with only slightly fewer subjects using a mobile texting device.



**Figure 6: media and method used during dictation**

The only other note-worthy variable here was that one group were able to use their grammar and spelling check in the Microsoft Word document as I wanted to tabulate any significant difference in structural and language mechanics through the use of a technology assisted language aid.

An aspect of the dictogloss process was used for this exercise. A short passage of approximately 238 words, which the students were familiar with, was dictated (see Appendix). A familiar piece was chosen so the students would not get distracted by content over demonstrating skills competency. Dictation is not new to language learning. It has played a significant role in language teaching and has gone through a long and varied history (Chiang, 2004). It was chosen because of its multi-modal methodology in language learning, and its innate consideration to learning styles. It engages the audile, visual and motile, or kinesthetic learner as he/she is known today. All three of these approaches are used in dictation. Moreover, as Betz (1918) points out students are able to receive very clear and precise images of words in connected prose, and are able to understand the connection between spelling and pronunciation. At the same time she highlights the value of dictation in being able to facilitate a greater understanding in the use of case endings and verb forms, as well as illustrating an understanding of the idioms of the language too. More specifically within the context of this small scale study I was able to determine the particular errors of each student and juxtapose these against the type of media used to produce the text.

## Discussion

The following charts document the number of errors made in the writing exercises. They are divided into syntactical and mechanical accuracy and broken down into four separate domains.

# Dictation Error Table

	Word Processing ( <i>Spelling &amp; Grammar checker used</i> )	Mobile Texting	Handwriting
Spelling Errors	<b>11</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>24</b>
Grammar Errors	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>
Punctuation Errors	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>
Paragraphing Errors	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>

**Table 1: Group 1 recorded errors**

Dictated Word	<i>Inserted spell checker word</i>
<b>typical</b>	<i>topical</i>
<b>course</b>	<i>coarse</i>
<b>shower</b>	<i>shows</i>
<b>quite</b>	<i>quiet</i>
<b>hostel</b>	<i>hostile</i>
<b>cafeteria</b>	<i>craftier</i>
<b>back</b>	<i>bake</i>
<b>lunch</b>	<i>launch</i>

**Table 1a: Group 1 wrong word choice through spell checker**

	Word Processing	Mobile Texting	Handwriting
Spelling Errors	<b>26</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>19</b>
Grammar Errors	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
Punctuation Errors	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>
Paragraphing Errors	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>

**Table 2: Group 2 recorded errors**

	Word Processing	Mobile Texting	Handwriting
Spelling Errors	<b>24</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>
Grammar Errors	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
Punctuation Errors	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
Paragraphing Errors	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>

**Table 3: Group 3 recorded errors**

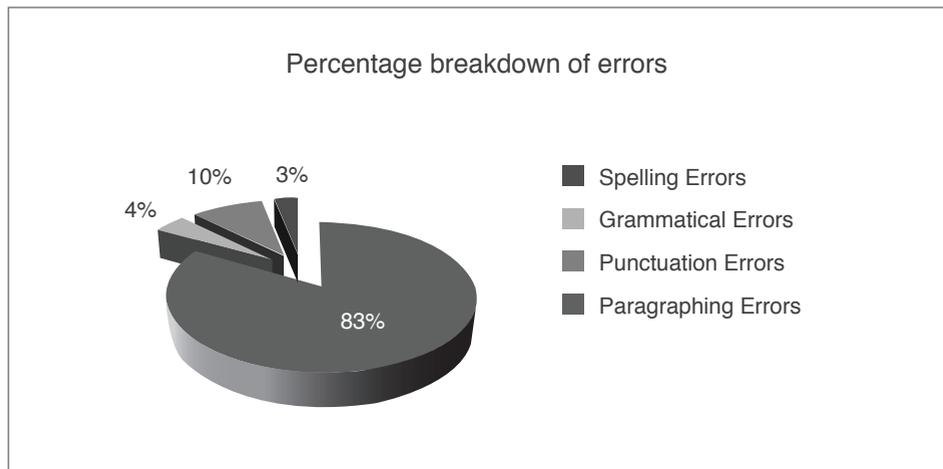
It is clear that spelling correctly was a major obstacle across all three groups in obtaining full meaning and coherency in the writing task, and this was notwithstanding access to a writing-

assisted spell checker for those who used a word processor in group one. Why is this so? Learning to spell correctly is a literacy skill and is not related to the correct use of a computer assisted learning aid like a spell checker. This is indicated clearly in Table 1a above where the lack of awareness in language structure and meaning produced correctly spelled, but incorrectly chosen words after using a technology assisted language tool like a spell checker.

We learn to spell from an early age through a gradual attentiveness of and recall for language structures and the letters in words (IDA, 2000). Research in this area suggests that poor spelling is related across all areas of learning where signs and other kinds of representations are used to decode and interpret meaning and understanding. However, as IDA (2000) suggest, spelling is not a purely visual learning problem, as “a person may be a very poor speller, but a very good artist, navigator or mechanic and these professions require a different kind of visual memory.”

L2 writers have to adjust to and learn an English spelling system which is considerably more complex than other Latin based languages like Italian and Spanish, because it is based on older spelling prototypes which have evolved over time from the merging of Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Greek language patterns. Nonetheless, such a system is accessible to L2 writers, but its acquisition is reliant on multi-media and methodologies which move beyond an ideological position based on one method of teaching and learning L2 writing. A middle way, one which is not technology dependent, and combines exercises with language patterns, sounds, syllables, rote learning, memorization, the repetitive writing of mis-spelt words and the use of these words in writing tasks will empower L2 writers to become more fully literate in their L2 language.

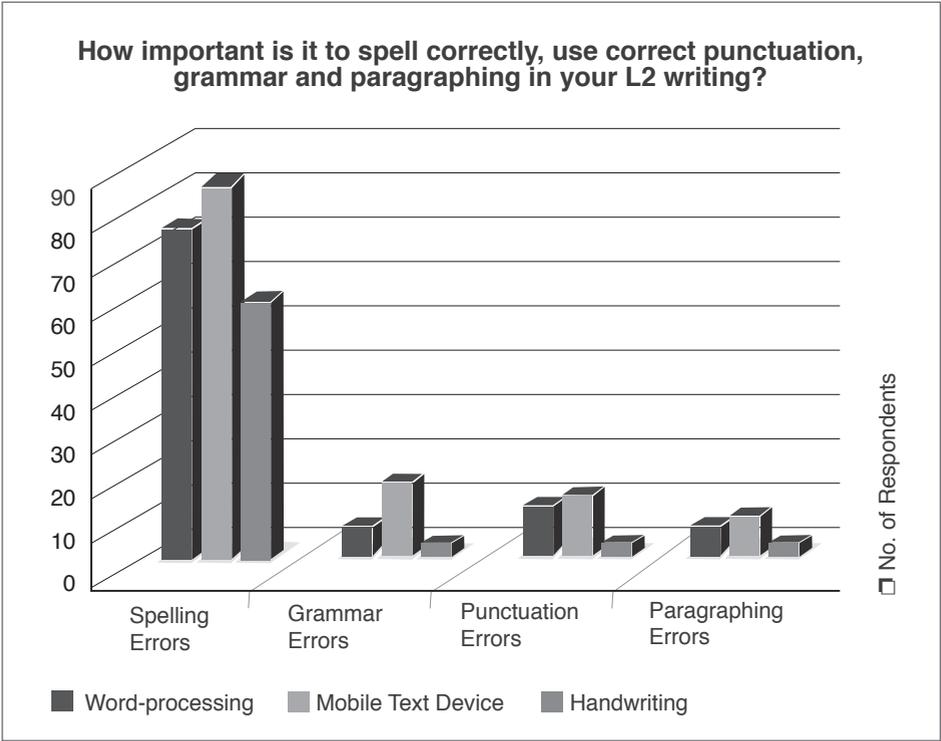
Other noted errors in grammar, punctuation and paragraphing were significantly lower across all three groups as shown in Figure 7 below:



**Figure 7: overall errors by percentage**

As indicated only 17% of all errors were related to communicative quality, grammar and other mechanics of their L2 writing. This supports Betz's (1918) claim of the efficacy and usefulness of dictation in facilitating recognition of correct grammar and punctuation. It also suggests a level of competency commensurate with students' level of ability as advanced L2 writers.

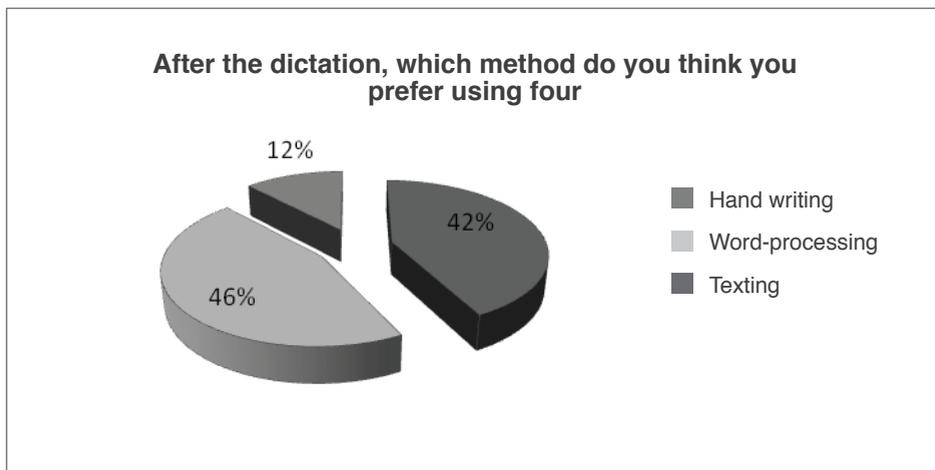
I now want to turn attention to the type of media used in the writing task and discuss any perceived causal link between media, methodology and recorded errors as indicated in Figure 8 below.



**Figure 8: errors by skill and media used in writing task**

Overall errors are recorded as slightly higher for users of the mobile texting device, when compared with those subjects who used the word processor. The margin of errors across the four writing domains for those who hand wrote their dictation appear significantly lower across the domains of spelling and grammar and paragraphing, and slightly lower for punctuation errors. Apart from the incorrect use of the spell checker in group one, there seems to be no clear connection between the media used and the errors recorded. The slightly better result from the subjects who hand wrote the exercise could be attributed to several factors including familiarity with hand-writing as an in-class modality for producing text, as well as its lack of a distracting interface (screen, keypads, special features, etc.) which may often serve as a diversion from the task at hand. Moreover, prior to commencing their tertiary courses, students who participated in this study had for the most part arrived from a national education system which had taught L2 writing through the medium of pen and paper.

The students who participated in this study commented further on these findings. In a post survey (see Figure 9 below), 46% of the students who participated in this study indicated that they preferred using word processing for their L2 writing, while a slightly lower number, 42% indicated that they preferred hand-writing. A significantly lower number said they preferred to use a mobile texting device. This differs markedly from the answers given in the pre-survey question on the preferred method and media for practicing L2 writing in class. Initially the subjects in this study chose hand-writing over word-processing. This suggests that giving students a choice and allowing them to experiment, empowers them to critically evaluate how they learn and to critically appraise and understand the media through which they learn.



**Figure 9: post-survey preferences**

## Conclusion

The use of a variety of methods and technologies to teach L2 writing often surpasses any critical appraisal of the media being used and its capacity to redefine and/or alter perceptually or permanently subject content. This includes the effect on stated learning outcomes, which ultimately define an L2 learner's successful achievement in their course. For example, as this short study has shown, learning the rubrics of L2 writing, along with understanding content knowledge, grammar, spelling and the application of L2 within an academic, social and cultural context, goes beyond the media and methodology used and seeks from the L2 learner a critical understanding of how he/she learns.

This paper has suggested that the media and methodology in themselves aren't enough for the L2 learner at various levels of L2 learning, to master the skill of L2 writing. It has shown through a short, practical classroom-based study, that in order to become competent, independent L2 writers, L2 learners need to be empowered to:

- i. Critically appraise and understand the way they learn
- ii. Critically appraise and understand the content of their learning
- iii. Critically appraise and understand the media through which they learn
- iv. Understand how they acquire, retain, then apply the knowledge of how to write in their L2

While this paper has highlighted significant gaps in previous studies on L2 writers, and the media through which they learn to write, it has opened up further debate on the importance of hand-writing and the use of assistive and adaptive technologies in empowering L2 learners to become competent L2 writers.

An empowering literacy is a pathway to personal fulfillment and success as an L2 learner, and writing a key L2 literacy skill, provides access for L2 learners to fully enter a second language literate culture.

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# Appendix

## Dictation Exercise

My name is Waleed and I am going to tell you about a typical day in my busy life.

First of all of course I get up. That's usually about 6am but sometimes later if I don't hear my alarm clock! Then I always have a shower and get dressed. Next I have breakfast. I often have toast and tea but sometimes I have some eggs too. After that I leave the hostel to get the bus to college, where I start my classes at 8am. I usually have lunch in the cafeteria with my friends at about 12 o'clock and then I have more classes until 4pm. Sometimes I take the bus back to the hostel, but quite often I stay and do my homework in the library. After that I go back to the hostel and have some dinner.

In the evening I usually watch TV for about an hour and then I go into town with my friend Ali. Sometimes we go to the cinema to see a movie but only if there is an action movie on. Ali doesn't like watching anything else. After that, we have a coffee in the Mall. I don't stay out late.

Finally, I go back to the hostel and phone my family before I go to bed. I never go to bed after midnight during the week because I have to get up early.