Helping ESL Writers Through a Multimodal, Corpus-based, Online Grammar Resource

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ABSTRACT

Current approaches to language pedagogy recognize the fact that ESL learners need explicit help to improve the grammatical accuracy of their writing. This research investigates the utility of an online resource intended to improve advanced-level ESL learners’ writing by increasing their grammatical awareness and ability to correct the grammatical errors in their own writing. This classroom-based study investigated nine learners’ use of the resource through the use of questionnaires, interviews, records of software use, and analysis of learners’ written products.

KEYWORDS
ESL Writing, Grammatical Awareness, Corpus Linguistics, Learner Attitudes, Web-based Learning Environments

INTRODUCTION

Despite years of grammar instruction throughout their primary and secondary education, intermediate nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English still produce essays riddled with relatively basic grammatical and lexical errors. In part, this problem may be caused by a combination of first language (L1) interference and a lack of grammatical awareness. For learners to benefit from the stages of the prevalent current approach to writing, process writing, a minimum lexical and grammatical competence is required. Hinkel (2004) points out that “the new instructional methodology centered squarely and almost exclusively on the writing process that fundamentally overlooked the fact that NNS writers may simply lack the necessary language skills (e.g., vocabulary and grammar) to take advantage of the benefits of writing process instruction” (p. 9). Technological advances combined with findings derived from corpus linguistics may provide language learners with the opportunity to overcome this lack of lexical and syntactic proficiency. Innovative multimodal, corpus-based, and database-driven online grammar resources may
yield increased grammatical awareness and decreased error frequency. Success here, however, depends not only on the resource, but also on student motivation and curricular integration. In this paper, the use of the internet-based Writing Resource for the Innovative Teaching of English (iWRITE), a prototype online resource developed at a major Midwestern research university is investigated in terms of its effects on student attitudes, grammatical awareness, and the linguistic accuracy of their writing.

ESL ACADEMIC WRITING

NNSs of English enrolled in universities throughout the US are routinely required to take an English placement test (often consisting of a battery of reading, listening, writing, and grammar tests) upon arrival. The test results indicate whether the NNS can proceed to take courses alongside native speaker or whether they need to complete a course or a series of courses aimed at elevating their English proficiency. While there may be deficiencies in all four skills, writing receives considerably more attention in part due to the academic requirements and expectations at US universities. Courses in academic writing at the undergraduate level, for example, focus on helping students become better writers by addressing syntactic and lexical problems, emphasizing vocabulary development, and teaching the basics of essay and research paper organization.

Process Writing

The contemporary ESL curriculum often favors a process-writing approach, which emphasizes the process of creating meaning through invention, revision of texts, and peer editing (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Reid, 1993). Process writing, which was borrowed from pedagogy for L1 writing, focuses almost exclusively on the overall success in communication at the cost of accuracy (Williams, 1995; James, 1998). For ESL writers, however, the accuracy of their written work has been shown to be a critical factor affecting the way that readers assess their writing ability (e.g., Nation, 1990; Raimes, 1983; Read, 2000; Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984 Vann, Lorenz, & Meyer, 1991). Over a decade ago, Celce-Murcia (1991) argued that “the importance of a reasonable degree of grammatical accuracy in academic or professional writing cannot be overstated [italics added]” (p. 465).

The mismatch between what is taught and what can be accomplished by intermediate and advanced-level ESL writers has more recently been pointed out by Hinkel (2004) who argued that despite the explicit grammar instruction learners may have received throughout their past ESL instruction, they still require intensive, individualized help with sentence-level syntax. Such individualized help with syntax is unlikely to occur in peer-editing sessions. While the classroom experience that peer editing provides can be helpful, it often fails to lead to improved error awareness and error recognition (e.g., Hyland, 2002; Hinkel, 2004). In short, learners may be far from ready to benefit from process-writing approaches because of their lack of vocabulary and grammar skills (Hinkel, 2004). At the same time, ESL teachers tend to think that syntactic and lexical accuracy is less
important than strategic writing processes that are emphasized in process writing (see Santos, 1988; Vann et al., 1984, 1991).

Writing and Grammar
Grammatical awareness and the ability to recognize and correct errors is crucial for development in any foreign language and possibly even more important when developing competency in writing. At odds with the beliefs of many ESL teachers and the process-writing philosophy is the fact that many NNSs of English who attend US universities lack the ability to form even relatively simple grammatically correct sentences even though academic success presupposes accuracy. According to Johnson, “L2 grammar and reading skills play a highly influential role in students’ ability to perform well in humanities, social sciences, and business courses” (as cited in Hinkel, 2004, p. 37). Santos (1988) found that lexical errors were judged to be very serious by professors who evaluate writing. Hinkel (2004) noted a striking mismatch between what is taught and what intermediate- and advanced-level ESL writers can accomplish, which led her to suggest that learners need “intensive, individualized help with sentence-level syntax” (p. 14) in addition to the explicit grammar teaching learners may have received.

These facts have prompted some to conclude that for adult language learning, the question is no longer whether grammar should be taught, but rather a question of finding, as Brown (1994) put it, “the optimal conditions for overt teaching of grammar” (p. 349). Indeed, ESL teachers are primarily hired to teach their students language skills necessary for academic and professional success. Yet, research has shown that mere exposure to classroom interactions and instruction focused on fluency is not sufficient to help learners develop syntactic and lexical accuracy (Chang & Swales, 1999; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Jordan, 1997; Richards, 2002). Teachers obviously have an important role to play, but learners clearly need a more time intensive, interactive approach to engage in appropriately directed grammar instruction. In short, rather than continuing to teach the same way, Hinkel (2004) called for innovation. Focus on typical ESL errors and grammatical awareness through online writing tools may address some of the needs expressed by learners, who need to focus on form and who have often asked for a pedagogical tool to serve as a reference and an easy-to-use resource.

Technology-supported Grammar/Writing
Many tools developed for helping student writers are more suited to process writing approaches. These tools include the collaboratively oriented application Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment (DIWE) (The Daedalus Group, 2004) and CommonSpace. In keeping with the process approach to writing, DIWE provides a mechanism for allowing the instructor or peer tutor to enter comments on the students’ writing about organizational and content characteristics of their writing. For example, the application provides the tools to enhance the processes of invention through collaborative prewriting discussion online. The CommonSpace system, a cross-platform application from Sixth Floor Media, is packaged with a
dictionary, thesaurus, spell checker, and a manual, all of which is intended to illuminate the writing process for NNSs and enhance their writing.

More recently, Wible, Kuo, Chien, Liu, and Tsao (2001) have recommended that web-based writing environments should be developed, designed “expressly to meet the unique needs of particular learning domains in ways that traditional classrooms can not” (p. 298). One such program addressing these needs, the Intelligent Web-based Interactive Language Learning system (IWiLL), is described by Kuo, Wible, Chen, Sung, Tsao, and Chio (2002). The IWiLL program is an interactive, corpus-based online writing environment used for marking up essays and is unique in the sense that users of the system create information through their own use by adding identified errors in marked-up texts that they can search in an online database. Thus, searching the database can provide learners with information about their most common errors and give teachers an overview of recurring problems within a group of students. The ESL Tutor resource, another example of a recent computer-assisted language learning (CALL) program that targets persistent errors among Korean learners (e.g., overpassivization) of English is discussed by Cowan, Choi, and Kim (2003). The developers assembled an approximately 21,000-word corpus of Korean learner’s essays and used it as a basis for identifying persistent errors. These errors were then used to inform the design and implementation of their online resource. The resource can be integrated into composition classes and allow teachers to select particular lessons for learners to complete using ESL Tutor.

How can these types of tools and resources be combined into a set of tools that help ESL writers improve the accuracy of their writing? Calverley and Shephard (2003) define a good learning resource as one that is “fit for purpose” (p. 208), a definition that includes the educational aspects of a resource, pedagogical aspects, and technological aspects. Today’s writing tools need to provide a mechanism to help develop learners grammatical awareness and their ability to benefit from the grammatical feedback they receive from the software tools that they routinely use such as Word. In particular, Hegelheimer and Fisher (2006) contend that “helping learners focus on errors typically committed by learners from a particular L1 can raise the awareness of such problem areas and facilitate the detection (and prevention) of certain error types” (p. 259).

Learners also need to work with accessible model texts to get specific guidance for their writing. However, as Hegelheimer and Fisher (2006) point out, “the exclusive use of model texts that are not accessible to students is viewed skeptically by students and may lead to unrealistic expectations” (p. 259). Consequently, they argue for “direct instruction coupled with explicitly pointing out mistakes in essays written by language learners” and suggest that “[r]ecent developments in the area of corpus linguistics in general and in working with learner corpora in particular as well as advances in technology may be ideally suited to play a key role in re-inventing (or at least supplementing) grammar teaching as part of a writing course” (p. 259).

The writing tool that was investigated in this project is iWRITE, a corpus-based, database-driven, multimodal online resource. As Calverley and Shephard (2003)
put it, “building collections of online resources that focus on the needs of the users is not a simple process. The needs of users have to be ascertained and to ensure that the collection is meeting these needs, user satisfaction must be assessed” (p.219). Problematic, then, becomes the postdevelopment integration of the resource. All too frequent problems, or barriers to adoption, are pointed out by Calverley and Shephard, who argue that

users may not appreciate the potential of the media without sufficient embedded examples (providing the “WOW” factor to encourage investigation into new use) and may have difficulty in visualizing appropriate uses of media within their own context. Both of these are identified barriers to adoption. (p. 221)

Consequently, noncomparative research looking at the effect(s) of computers on writing (e.g., Pennington, 2003) and research on learner attitudes towards web-based resources (e.g., Stapleton, 2003) are crucial to gain a better understanding of the role these resources play in the development of L2 writing. Undoubtedly, research on the integration of resources cannot ignore user training, user attitudes and motivation, and curricular integration, in addition to the desirable main effect derived from resource use (i.e., a reduced frequency of error occurrence). Hence, the questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are student attitudes toward iWRITE?
2. Does access to and interaction with iWRITE effect student grammatical awareness?
3. How does the curricular integration of iWRITE affect students’ writing proficiency in terms of linguistic accuracy measured by the frequency of common errors?

METHODOLOGY

In order to assess the range of factors relevant to the success of the writing tools, the software had to be assessed in the classroom by gathering data from the students who were invested in the class and who were in need of improving their writing. Such classroom based studies of ESL writing face challenges of limited controls, which can affect both internal and external validity of a study. Internal validity is defined as “the accurate attribution of observed experimental results to the factors that were supposed to be responsible for the results” (Chapelle & Jamieson, 1991, p. 38). Thus, evidence for internal validity in research involving a CALL program aimed at improved writing is present when learner performance improves as a result of their interaction with or use of the CALL program (and the CALL program only). External validity, “the applicability of research results to instructional and research contexts other than the one in which the research was carried out” (p. 38), is present when research findings in a given context are generalizable to similar contexts. However, conducting a study using an intact classroom, while containing potential problems for both internal and external validity, can be particularly insightful provided that contextual information is included
As is the case with this study. The researcher in the study collaborated closely with the classroom instructor and was invited to attend four class periods as a guest to help with the orientation to the web-based resource.

Participants

The nine participants in the present study were enrolled in an 8-week academic English writing course at a major Midwestern research university, an undergraduate academic writing class for international students that serves as a prerequisite to first-year composition courses. Five of the nine participants were invited to participate in three semistructured interviews. These students were selected because they were typical participants for this course in terms of proficiency level (TOEFL scores ranging from 200 to 250), L1 (Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Indonesian), and the time spent in the US prior to taking the course. As determined by the initial needs and interest survey, all participants felt comfortable using the computer and the Internet. Self-assessment of the participants revealed that they rated their ability to write in-class papers and to conduct library or online research as the most problematic.

Materials

The students used the iWRITE tools to help them with their writing. Student data were gathered through the use of an initial needs analysis, written reflective journal assignments, and three semistructured interviews. Four writing tasks were examined to assess the effects of iWRITE.

iWRITE

The iWRITE program is a prototype of a corpus-based, database-driven online grammar/writing resource for intermediate learners of English. Learners can view essays written by NNSs of English in which errors have been marked and solutions to specific errors have been proposed. The program consists of five sections: Solutions, Essays, Practice, Marking, and Corpus, plus a logout option.

In the Solutions section, learners have access to all marked up errors contained in the learner corpus. They can select a specific error (e.g., tense consistency) and look at all the instances in which that error occurred. In addition to viewing the error in context and the error’s correction, users can view the error in the context of the essay. For all word-level errors, a link to an online corpus is provided. In the Essays section, learners can select essays from different countries. Initially, the essay is displayed unmarked, but learners can choose an error category (word or sentence level) and see the errors highlighted along with the explanations of the errors appearing on demand in the right-hand frame. In the Practice section, learners can work with generated Word worksheets in which the errors in one error category are highlighted. In the Marking section, learners can watch and listen to a video of an instructor annotating an essay verbally and electronically (using the Track Changes feature in Word). The marked-up version of the essay is download-
able for later use. The guiding principles for the development of iWRITE were to enable users to learn from teacher models and to create an interactive and scalable resource that can be embedded into the curriculum (for a detailed discussion of the development of iWRITE, see Hegelheimer & Fisher, 2006).

Data Collection

The researcher gathered data on the learners’ perceptions and use of iWRITE through the use of three instruments and computer records of their online interactions.

Needs Analysis

In addition to fundamental questions about the participants’ demographic information, the needs analysis consisted of 20 questions aimed at determining the subjects’ preferences with regard to writing, the use of computers and the Internet for instructional purposes, and the level of motivation, among others (see questionnaire in Appendix A).

Journals

The project included two reflective journals. The first journal consisted of a single postresource introduction journal and the completion of an introductory scavenger hunt-like series of tasks that provided participants with the opportunity to become familiar with iWRITE. The second journal involved participants writing about their experiences after they received a marked-up essay.

Interviews

Three 20-minute semistructured interviews were conducted during the second, fourth, and the eighth week of the semester. The first interview served as an introductory interview in which the participants and the researcher could become acquainted. Additionally, participants were asked to reflect on their problems in English in general and with writing in particular. The main goal of this interview was to assess their perception of iWRITE and whether they were planning to use it outside of class. Interview 2 (during week 4 of the semester) was aimed at determining whether participants had used iWRITE, possible changes in their perception of it as a writing tool, and how comfortable they were with the error code. The third interview (week 8 of the semester) allowed the participants to reflect on the semester overall, their use and perception of iWRITE, and the writing assignments completed during the semester.

Online Interactions

Learner interactions with the online resource were recorded into a database. Every time learners logged on, the log-on time and duration, along with the exact path learners took was recorded into a database. This tracking functionality was developed with ColdFusion and built into the system. In short, every link learners click
on is stored in a database and can be retrieved to reconstruct learner interactions with the resource.

Writing Assignments

During the course of the semester, the participants completed five major papers. The topics of the papers were such that the learners moved from experiential and anecdotal essay writing to research-based writing. Paper 3, which involved coauthoring, and Paper 4, a longer research paper, were excluded from the data analysis (see the prompts for all three papers in the Appendix B).

Procedure

The academic writing class met five times per week for 1-hour sessions over the course of eight weeks during the summer session 2003 (June – August 2003). The students met in a computer classroom twice a week; the in-class activities associated with the research were conducted on Mondays, which is when the researcher was invited to attend class and to introduce the activities in weeks 2-4. After receiving human subjects’ clearance, all students enrolled in the class were given a consent form, and the researcher asked for volunteers to participate in the study. Data relevant for this study were collected as described below.

Week 1: The participants completed a 20-item needs analysis (Appendix A) and created a user name and password for *iWRITE*, after which the learners had unrestricted access to the system.

Week 2: Following a brief introduction to *iWRITE*, the participants completed an activity aimed at helping them familiarize themselves with the program. Initial perceptions of the potential of the online resource for improving their writing were obtained through a postactivity journal (Journal 1). An out-of-class semistructured interview was employed to clarify journal and needs analysis responses, to assess the participants’ understanding of *iWRITE*, and to gauge learner motivation.

Week 3: Participants received a marked-up paper (see Figure 1) and identified and analyzed their most common mistakes using *iWRITE*. Posttask feedback was elicited through a feedback form.

Week 4: In preparation for an upcoming peer-editing session, participants used *iWRITE* to analyze essays they were assigned to peer edit that were written by learners from the same L1 background as the participants. The perceived relevance and usefulness of the activity was assessed through a feedback form. At the end of week 4, the second interview was conducted.

Weeks 5-8: Students completed regular in-class activities in which the participants had access to *iWRITE* but were not required to use it.

Week 8: Interview 3 was held.
Week 2-8: All participants had 24/7 access to iWRITE and their use of iWRITE was tracked and stored in the database for later retrieval.

Figure 1
Segment of a Marked-up Essay

Analysis

The analyses employed to address each research question are as follows. In order to illuminate the participants’ general attitude towards the use of computers, the Internet, and iWRITE and to gauge student motivation level throughout the semester, descriptive statistics for the responses to the survey questions targeting this research question were used for yes/no-type questions. Short-answer responses to surveys and interview questions were coded thematically by the researcher by identifying utterances that revealed motivational or attitudinal characteristics.

Grammatical awareness of the participants was assessed qualitatively through their indication of this awareness in the journals, surveys, and semistructured interviews. For example, participants mentioning their own errors using linguistic metalanguage (e.g., identification of syntactic problems using terms like determiner or tense consistency) as well as their being able to suggest solutions to grammatical problems using such terminology was treated as one indicator of grammatical awareness.

The changes in grammatical accuracy (syntactic and lexical correctness) was assessed through error counts. Descriptive statistics were used to determine differences in the number of grammatical errors among the participants in three essay assignments: papers 1, 2, and 5. Frequency counts of (major) mistakes were conducted and persistent errors across all the essays were highlighted. Only the errors on which both the classroom teacher and the researcher agreed were counted.

Participants’ use of the resource was determined through an analysis of computer logs conducted by querying the database in which user data was stored. The results of the analysis revealed paths through the resource as well as the amount of time the participants remained logged on to the resource, which can also reveal motivational patterns, for example.

RESULTS

Overall, positive findings were obtained concerning learners’ attitudes and grammatical awareness, and there was some indication of improvement in grammatical accuracy. Research questions 1-3 are discussed in turn.
Attitudes towards iWRITE

The general attitude towards the program and towards using the computer/Internet as a learning resource was positive (see Table 1). On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating “not comfortable at all” and 5 indicating “very comfortable,” the participants felt somewhat comfortable using computers in general (mean 3.6, SD 1.2) and using the Internet for general purposes (mean 3.9, SD 1.1). The participants felt slightly more comfortable using online resources to help them with improving their English (mean 4.1, SD 1.1), and nine of the twelve had used technology (computers or the Internet) before as a language learning resource; accessing authentic materials (e.g., news and TV) and resource materials (dictionaries, thesauri, and grammar help) was the most frequently cited.

Table 1
Learner Responses to the Initial Needs Analysis

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Note: Q1-14 = question numbers on the needs analysis (Appendix A); . indicates missing data.
Q5: How do you feel about using computers in general?
Q6: How do you feel about using the Internet in general?
Q7: In general, how comfortable do you feel using Microsoft Word?
Q8: If asked to create a new document within MS Word, to save it, and to send it as an attachment to your instructor, how would you feel?
Q9: How comfortable do you feel with using online resources that are aimed at helping you improve your English?
Q10: How comfortable are you with working independently?
Q11: Have you used the computer or the Internet to help you with your study of English?
Q14: Do you think that the use of computers and the Internet can help you improve your writing? (1 = yes, 0 = no)

Student comments\(^1\) such as the following two were indicative of the participants positive attitude towards iWRITE:
I really like using iWRITE. I hope I can continue using it after this class. I know in the next two years I will have to write a lot of papers and I would like to use iWRITE to help me. Usually, when checking my papers I look at solutions and they have all the grammar and everything there. Then, I can know what my errors are. (12, I2)

The first day we used iWRITE I had no idea what was going on with the program. But, now we use it about 2 times a week, and I think that's helped. I am more familiar with the program now. It has also helped because we do vocabulary every Wednesday and I can look it up in iWRITE. I think the solutions part of the program is the most useful to me because it explains how to use it. (03, I2)

One participant expressed initial confusion about whose essays were included in iWRITE, thinking that his own essay would be used and graded automatically by the system, but this confusion was quickly resolved, and the learner expressed being comfortable with the program.

I think it would be exciting to see my own essay on iWRITE. Originally I thought [my teacher] just put our essay into the computer and iWRITE just corrected it automatically, but now I understand. I think I am more comfortable now using iWRITE. (01, I2)

In addition, the learners were moderately well motivated. On a 10-point scale, with 10 representing a very high level of motivation for taking the class, the mean response was 6.8 (SD 1.9), which indicated some motivation for taking the class. Interestingly, all learners had a positive attitude towards the use of computers and the Internet to improve their writing (all 12 students indicated that they thought computers could help them with their writing).

Overall, the learners exhibited a generally positive attitude towards the course and the use of technology as part of the course. The responses of the learners to a journal after completing a scavenger-hunt-like activity introducing them to iWRITE (see Table 2) indicated that they enjoyed the in-class activity introducing them to the resource (mean 7.87, SD 1.46) and that they found the activity to be instructionally useful (mean 7.75, SD 1.67). All nine participants stated that they were going to use the resource outside of class as well, though for different reasons, including the use of iWRITE to help them with their writing and their grammar.

When asked what they liked most about the online resource after their first experience with it, the participants stated that they felt that the marking, the link to a concordance, the solution section, and the wealth of examples were strong points. One student exemplified the overall positive attitude during the first interview by saying,

I particularly like the marking component of the program. I love it! It feels like my tutor is sitting beside me. (12, I1)
Table 2
Learner Responses After Completion of the Introductory $iWRITE$ Activity (Journal 1)

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Note: . = missing data,
Q1: How much did you enjoy the in-class activity using $iWRITE$?
Q2: How difficult was it to complete the task (answering the 12 questions)?
Q3: Overall, how useful do you think the task was?
Q4: How comfortable were you with using the resource during the task on Monday (during class)?
Q5: How comfortable are you now with using the resource $iWRITE$?
Q6: Do you think you will use $iWRITE$ outside of class? (1 = yes, 0 = no)

Throughout the semester, the interviews revealed that the motivation level of the students either remained the same or increased. One student (01, I3) thought that his biggest improvement was that he now felt generally much more comfortable in English. When asked for general thoughts about $iWRITE$ during the third interview, all participants were very positive, as illustrated by the following two comments:

I think $iWRITE$ is a website which provide[s] people some chance to know what is usually happening non-native learners of English. Let people realize what would happen to themselves and how to improve it. (05, I3)

I think it’s just like a dictionary, a reference. Like an online tutor. I will use the program after I am done with this class. I definitely will use it. (12, I3)

The overall results revealed that the learners’ attitude towards $iWRITE$ in terms of its perceived potential to help them with their writing was quite positive. Their attitude and willingness to give the resource a try was also supported by an analysis of the computer logs. This analysis showed that learners accessed $iWRITE$ an average of 8 times (SD 3.91) and that they remained logged on for an average of 29 minutes. This suggests that the resource was used during class as well as
outside of class. The Essays section was the most popular section in the system, followed by the Solution section, the Concordancing option, and the Marking section. The Additional Information section was accessed only when it was required as part of an in-class activity. Usage declined after week 4 of the semester, which was most likely due to *iWRITE* no longer being a part of the class.

**Increased Grammatical Awareness**

The results of the survey and the interviews showed that learners seemed to be more aware of their own errors. Evidence of error awareness, the first stage en route to higher proficiency, is evident in the comments of the following three students, who were able to correctly identify their most problematic syntactic deficiencies:

- My 3 most common errors were determiners, wrong word choice, and missing word. (12, I2)
- Now I try to see what I have left out like articles and other things. I just try to look for the mistakes I know I make. (03, I2)
- I check the solution part and usually I am missing an article. I also look at the examples on *iWRITE*. Also, when I look at essays written by other Japanese students I can see some of the same mistakes that I make in their essays so it helps me to recognize my errors. (07, I2)

Several student comments also hinted at the fact that the approach taken in this study may have also led to greater awareness of strategic competence in terms of how to approach (peer) editing essays.

- When I peer-edit I look at paragraph level, sentence level, word level now. (14, I2)

However, as indicated by the following comment, part of becoming more aware of errors includes the realization that the overall process is not an easy task.

- When I revised my partners essay I used *iWRITE* to help. We did it in class but I also did it outside of class. I think it helped, but I still think it’s really hard to detect errors on my own. (11, I2)

Still, as is evident from the quotes below, the learners viewed *iWRITE* as a resource that could help them improve their writing. One student, for example, used the errors codes to chart his progress.

- For the second assignment I wrote it [the error code] down first, and then if I found a mistake, I would make note of it [an instance of the mistake] in MS Word. So I am kind of tracking my own progress in Word. (07, I2)

More evidence of increased strategic competence surfaced during the second interview, when the participants were asked what they had done after discovering their frequent mistakes. Awareness and knowledge of their errors resulted not only in a more careful approach, but also in a more methodical approach. It be-
came clear that the participants used the information available in \textit{iWRITE} for very specific tasks, that is, for comparing error types to ones that had been marked in \textit{iWRITE} or for comparing the essays available in \textit{iWRITE} with their own productions.

Now, I try to remember that these are my most frequent errors when writing a paper so I look for these mistakes. When I type a new paper I use my old paper to compare it and see if I made some of the same mistakes. (12, I2)

For essay 2 I tried to concentrate on these problems. I want to do better on my next essay. After I do free writing I look at \textit{iWRITE} and compare my writing to the examples. (01, I2)

Now, before I hand in the essay I check for those 3 errors since I know that I make them more frequently. To check them, I just read it by myself and I can usually tell if something sounds wrong. Sometimes I will go through my essay and only concentrate on one error like articles, but not always. (07, I2)

An additional reason for using \textit{iWRITE} was to prepare learners for peer editing, a crucial part of the process-writing approach. Overall, the response as to whether they found an \textit{iWRITE} activity designed for peer-editing preparation helpful was positive, as the two comments below illustrate.

Yes, I think the activity helped me to prepare for peer editing. I tried to find errors in determiners because I know people from China and Korea often have problems with determiners. (14, I2)

Yes, I think this activity prepared me for the peer-edit task. I read essays written by people from my country and then when I did the peer-edit I would concentrate specifically on those mistakes that are commonly made by them. (07, I2, q 4b)

However, the activity was not universally praised by all learners. In fact, two students were not as enthusiastic and did not perceive the activity to be helpful.

I used \textit{iWRITE} when doing my peer editing task. I don’t think it really helped to do this activity before our peer edit. (03, I2, q 4b)

I don’t think it really helped me that much. I think peer reviews are helpful, but maybe it could be made better. (01, I2, q 4b)

Overall, the comments of the learners during the interviews and on the reflective journals showed evidence of greater awareness of personal grammatical shortcomings. Whether this awareness translated into greater grammatical accuracy is discussed next.

\textit{Grammatical Accuracy}

To answer the third research question, students’ grammatical accuracy, the number of syntactic and lexical errors on the three essay assignments (papers 1, 2 and 5) were examined (see Table 3). (Only unanimously agreed upon errors were
included in the analysis.) Comparison of the number of errors made in paper 1 to that in paper 2 showed that overall the participants made fewer mistakes. The average number of errors decreased from 35.5 (6.0 %) on the first paper to 14.9 (2.4%) on the second paper. While there was a slight increase to 18.7 (4.2%) errors on paper 5, the standard deviation decreased consistently across all papers (13.95 on the first paper, 9.09 on the second paper, and 6.08 on the third paper) indicating that the learner performance was becoming more homogeneous.

Table 3
Error Count on the Three Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Paper 1</th>
<th>Paper 2</th>
<th>Paper 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of errors</td>
<td>Word count</td>
<td>Error percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>5,393</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>35.56</td>
<td>599.22</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>13.95</td>
<td>52.44</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fewer mistakes learners made on the second paper may have been due to the fact that they worked intensively on this paper using *iWRITE* and in preparation for peer editing. Further, they may still have had their problems on the first paper in mind, as the following comments suggest:

For essay 2 I tried to concentrate on these problems. (01, I2, q 3d)

Now, I try to remember that these are my most frequent errors when writing a paper so I look for these mistakes. (12, I2, q 3d)

While inferential statistics are not appropriate in light of the small number of participants, the descriptive statistics in Table 3 reveal clear and promising differences. Additional studies and a larger number of learners are necessary to reach conclusive results to shed further light on the effectiveness of this approach.

Second, the effect of using *iWRITE* was evaluated by investigating how often the participants used the resource. When looking at frequent users, that is, users who accessed *iWRITE* at least 8 times, the reduction in the percentage of errors committed in the second paper compared to the first paper is larger than that for less frequent users (see Table 4). Thus, accessing *iWRITE* and engaging in error
correction procedures appears to have a positive effect on reducing the number of errors committed in the second paper.

Table 4:
Error Percentage on Papers 1, 2, and 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner ID</th>
<th>Paper 1</th>
<th>Paper 2</th>
<th>Paper 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less frequent users</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More frequent users</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequent errors learners committed were those involving determiners (e.g., missing or incorrect articles), verb forms (e.g., incorrect past tense form of an irregular verb), part of speech (adjectival instead of adverbal forms), plurals (e.g., using noncount nouns as countable nouns), prepositions (missing or wrong prepositions), missing words, and verb usage (e.g., inappropriate use of verbs) problems (see Table 5). Other, less frequent errors included wrong word choice, transitions, and sentence fragments. Of the more frequent mistakes, only the average of determiner problems and verb form errors continue to decrease from paper 2 to paper 5. For all other errors (plural, part of speech, prepositions, missing words, and verb usage), the number of errors committed increased between the second and the fifth paper. The implications of these results may be indicative of how focused work on specific persistent errors (determiner and verb form errors) can have an effect on student writing. This is particularly interesting in light of the different essay assignments; the first two papers were written outside of the classroom as homework assignments, and the fifth paper was written under a time constraint as an in-class essay.

While for many of the recurrent errors, the difference in performance was not statistically significant, it is noteworthy that for the errors in verb forms, those learners who accessed iWRITE more frequently had fewer mistakes in that category. The results also suggest that for persistent errors such as determiner errors and verb form errors, consistent and frequent interaction with a resource like iWRITE may help. The number of errors in those two categories decreased even from the second to the fifth paper, which is even more remarkable when considering that, unlike the first two papers, it was an in-class essay.
DISCUSSION

The participants’ responses to the surveys and their comments during the semistructured interviews revealed their positive attitude towards using computers and technology in general and iWRITE in particular as a means of improving their English. Additionally, receiving essays marked up with Word’s Track Changes feature electronically was not perceived to be problematic.

Crucial for the successful implementation of curricular innovation and technology integration is that learners (a) know how to use the resource and (b) perceive it to be useful. Both were accomplished through explicit accompanying worksheets and repeated in-class illustrations. Initial exposure to iWRITE was facilitated through an exploratory task aimed at helping learners understand and use the components of the resource. Thus, the cyclical approach advocated by Hubbard (2004) proved to be very useful.

This study did not aim to compare a CALL-based approach to a non-CALL approach. Rather, the study aimed at exploring how carefully designed online resources (like iWRITE) can help NNSs of English by raising their grammatical awareness while retaining a positive attitude. Any resource, online or otherwise, that gets learners to repeatedly engage in an exploratory fashion and helps them learn voluntarily outside of class can play a fundamental role in overall student learning. For this to happen, curricular integration and a cyclical approach is essential. The curricular integration of iWRITE relied on teacher cooperation in that it was perceived as ideal (for the purposes of remaining in an online/electronic format and for record keeping) that the papers be scored using Word’s Track Changes feature and then sent to the learners as email attachments. For all participants, receiving the feedback on their papers electronically and marked up using the Track Changes feature was novel. The participants’ reactions were overwhelmingly positive. One student commented that he felt that this new way was “very specific” (11, I2), that he liked it and, more importantly, that he “could understand it” (14, I2). Another student, after expressing initial hesitation, came to appreciate the system.
The errors codes were a little difficult at first, but I feel more comfortable with them now… but I had a lot of mistakes and it was kind of crowded and hard to see what all was wrong. (07, I2)

This comment illustrates the importance of learner guidance during curricular integration, which was accomplished through close cooperation between the researcher/developer of iWRITE and the classroom teacher and also through the use of worksheets for the learners. This aspect of curricular integration, especially on the side of the teacher, is subject to continuing investigation.

The study also found that learners exhibited greater awareness not only of grammar in general, but also of their own mistakes. Particularly interesting is the frequency and confidence with which the participants were able to talk about their problems with specific grammar points during the semistructured interviews and in written journal/feedback requests.

As far as increased syntactic/lexical accuracy is concerned, the results indicated a reduction in errors (particularly persistent errors) for frequent users of iWRITE. Clearly, the results of this study need to be interpreted cautiously in light of the relatively small number of participants and in light of the lack of control over what students did outside of class to improve their writing. However, being able to watch an instructor annotate an essay and being able to view essays of the same L1 initially unmarked and subsequently marked up for various mistakes appeals to students and may well benefit them in their quest to become better writers and more proficient users of English overall.

The limitations of the study are related to the actual use of iWRITE and the inability of the resource to accommodate all student wishes. Despite careful planning, the use of iWRITE was expanded to act as a dictionary/thesaurus replacement rather than an informant on issues dealing with grammatical accuracy. One learner said he frequently used iWRITE’s concordancing function.

I use iWRITE when I don’t know how to use a word. (12, I2, q 2b)

One participant pointed out that it was not possible to search it in a way that provides access to a list of specific questions regarding errors, which he perceived as a limitation. Another student expressed his hope that iWRITE would include his own essay.

I think it would be exciting to see my own essay on iWRITE. (01, I2, q5)

The results of this study, which need to be interpreted in light of the limitations of the research environment, reveals that the construction of interactive, multimodal, web-based resources based on learner models holds promise for intermediate-level NNSs. In this example, the use of iWRITE actually encouraged pedagogic innovation in that the teacher marked up the essays electronically and stated that she marked more errors than she typically would. Learners in this study found this to be helpful due to the specificity of the comments and the ability to look at examples of similar errors committed by other learners from the same L1 background. Thus, in this instance, technology was the driving force behind pedagogic innovation.
While this study does not provide a definitive answer to the utility of resources like *iWRITE*, it does encourage additional studies with larger subject populations. Additionally, other ways of integrating electronic resources like *iWRITE* into classes need to be explored, for example, in teacher-training programs. After all, use and adoption of electronic resources by teachers is crucial for the integration of, and research on, such resources. Research is currently under way to explore these factors as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Brenda Daisy for allowing me to observe her classroom and for her astute observations regarding the usefulness of *iWRITE*, Dave Fisher, who programmed *iWRITE*, which was funded in part by a Faculty Development Grant from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and Carol Chapelle for her insightful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

NOTES

1 For all verbatim comments quoted from the participants, the subject’s ID number is given (e.g., 03) followed by the source of the utterance: Interview 1, 2, or 3 (i.e., I1, I2, I3).

2 While the results of inferential statistics were statistically significant, the number of learners involved in the study does not warrant the reporting of these figures. Consequently, only descriptive statistics are reported.

REFERENCES


Volker Hegelheimer


APPENDIX A
Needs Analysis

Directions: This questionnaire designed to help you reflect on your writing strengths and needs and to help you and your teacher find the best approach to helping you improve. Please answer all of the following 20 questions to the best of your abilities.

Name: __________________________ How long have you been in the U.S.? ____________

Nationality: ________________________ TOEFL score: ________________________

Native language(s): __________________ TWE score: ________________________

Other languages: ____________________

1. Rank the following in order from what you do best (1) to what you do least well (7)
   a) ___ Writing in-class exams
   b) ___ Using the library to find research on a topic
   c) ___ Using the internet to find research on a topic
   d) ___ Getting ideas for writing assignments (deciding what to write about)
   e) ___ Expressing my ideas/asking questions in class
   f) ___ Producing writing that has correct grammar
   g) ___ Expressing what I really want to say with the vocabulary I have

2. If I could spend a Saturday afternoon in any of the following ways, I would choose: (circle one choice)
   a) going to a movie
   b) participating in an active sport
   c) watching a game being played
   d) talking with friends and eating a good meal
   e) studying my favorite subject
   f) doing something on the computer

3. Mark the following True (T) or False (F):
   a) T  F I spend a lot of time speaking English to friends, roommates, or classmates.
   b) T  F I like to write in my native language.
   c) T  F I like to write in English.
   d) T  F I like to read for pleasure in my native language.
   e) T  F I like to read for pleasure in English.
   f) T  F I feel comfortable using the computer to produce class work, send email, etc.
   g) T  F I write at least one email daily in English.

4. Choose the one statement that fits best:
   _____ Most of the time, I prefer to work alone on assignments
   _____ Most of the time, I enjoy working a partner
   _____ Most of the time, I prefer to work with a group
Volker Hegelheimer

**Directions:** For the following five question, please indicate your choice by circling one number per question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all comfortable</th>
<th>Somewhat uncomfortable</th>
<th>So so</th>
<th>Somewhat comfortable</th>
<th>Very comfortable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. How do you feel about using computers in general?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How do you feel about using the Internet in general?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In general, how comfortable do you feel using Microsoft Word?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. If asked to create a new document within MS Word, to save it, and to send it as an attachment to your instructor, how would you feel?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How comfortable do you feel with using online resources that are aimed at helping you improve your English?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How comfortable are you with working independently?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Directions:** For the following ten question, please respond as indicated

11. Have you used the computer or the Internet to help you with your study of English? □ YES □ NO
   If yes, briefly list the types of activities you have engaged in:

   If no, in which areas do you think a computer or the Internet might be helpful in your study of English?

12. How much time per week do you think you will be spending on activities related to this class (e.g., homework, writing, reading, studying) outside of class, i.e., in addition to the 5 hours of class time per week? ________ hours

13. How much time do you think you will be spending learning English outside of this class on activities that are unrelated to this class, such as meeting with friends with whom you speak English, or reading a newspaper or anything else in English? ________ hours

14. Do you think that the use of computers and the Internet can help you improve your writing? □ YES □ NO
15. Did you know that you would be required to take this class (English 101C)?

☐ YES  ☐ NO

16. On a scale from 1-10 (with 1 meaning not motivated at all and 10 indicating very much motivated), indicate your level of motivation for this class.

17. How long are you planning on staying in the U.S.? [check (√) one]

☐ less than 6 months  ☐ 6 months-1 year  ☐ 1-2 years  ☐ 2-4 years  ☐ more than 4 years

18. When it comes to your overall English proficiency, what do you think your strengths are? Please list them

19. When it comes to your overall English proficiency, please list areas you think you need to improve.

20. Take a minute to think about your writing ability in English. What do you think you know pretty well (strengths) and what do you think need to work on with regard to writing in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your strengths</th>
<th>Areas to work on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX B
Prompts for Papers 1, 2, and 5:

Paper 1: ESL Literacy Narrative
Assignment Sheet
By Name of teacher

The focus of this assignment is to identify and describe significant experiences that you have had that have shaped your attitudes toward using language and to relate these experiences to yourself as an ESL learner.

Audience and Purpose
During this unit, we will be discussing how society shapes the ways we use language. Remember that different cultures have different assumptions about what constitutes appropriate communication, and these assumptions often depend on the roles we take in different situations.
The purpose of this essay (and the unit) is to allow you a chance to raise your awareness of how social factors have influenced you as a learner of a second language. Furthermore, the essay gives you the opportunity to explore ways to improve your chances of academic success in light of this knowledge.

Planning and Drafting
Although the organization of your paper will depend on the material you choose to discuss, the following questions are organized by theme and may help generate ideas.

- Consider what your own culture values in terms of communication. Do you come from a culture that values direct or indirect communication? Does your culture value silence, and for whom? In what roles/situations do you communicate in different ways? Are there any situations in which certain individuals must speak first, or not at all?

- Which specific experiences with your parents and educational experiences (particularly with ESL) have shaped your attitudes toward learning a second or foreign language? Can you choose one or two that best illustrate your attitudes?

- Consider how your experiences have shaped you as a learner of ESL. What learning strategies do you seem to prefer, and why? What makes you uncomfortable? How does this relate to your past experiences?

- Finally, after having considered how your socialization affects your use of language, think of strategies that you can use to become an even more successful ESL learner. Why did you choose these strategies?

Some Evaluation Criteria
✓ Explains social/cultural values toward communication and includes relevant specific experiences that have shaped attitudes toward language/ESL learning
✓ Clearly relates how experiences and social factors influence personal use of language and ESL learning
✓ Includes specific strategies that you can use for improving awareness of how socialization can help or hinder academic success in ESL in the context of the US classroom
✓ Material is focused and organized into appropriate paragraphs
✓ Contains few errors in correctness
Paper 2: Description and Objective Data
Assignment Sheet
500-600 words
Due: 2 Rough Drafts, 7/7; Final Draft, 7/9

The focus of this assignment is to allow you to practice using descriptive details to support one main idea.

Audience and Purpose
For this essay, you will be describing a place using specific details. Throughout this unit, we will practice using appropriate and effective supporting details to develop descriptive paragraphs that center on one controlling idea. As you write this essay, your underlying goal should be to allow your readers to understand why this place holds importance or significance for you. Keep in mind that a successful descriptive essay will also allow readers to ‘see’ the place in their imaginations.

Planning and Drafting
You could choose to describe either a place in the US or a place from your own country. Both topics have advantages and disadvantages and will involve different strategies for engaging your audience. Regardless of the topic you choose, remember that you need to include specific details like the sights, sounds, and smells of that place.

An important part of this assignment is choosing a place that is meaningful to you personally—it could be your old room, your classroom in high school, your office, the garden behind your house, or your favorite coffee shop.

You will probably find it helpful to answer the self-analysis questions on Leki 120 when you finish writing your rough draft. Answer questions 1, 2 and 4. Additionally, answer this question: “Did you clearly show the significance of the place?”

Some Evaluation Criteria
✓ Main impression you want the reader to have about the place is stated in the thesis statement
✓ Reader can clearly understand why the place is significant to you
✓ Paper is well organized, with each paragraph unified around one controlling idea
✓ Paragraphs support main idea and are developed with specific, vivid examples
✓ Paper includes your personal experience and impressions
✓ Paper is free from distracting errors in correctness
Paper 5: Engl 101C Final Essay 8/7/03

The Context
Throughout the semester, you have practiced several skills that are necessary for effective academic writing. You are now asked to demonstrate your knowledge about certain conventions that are used in the US university setting. This essay will allow your instructor the chance to evaluate your abilities (including your improvement) in the areas of material, organization, expression, and correctness.

The Text
Your assignment is to do a summary and response to L. Robert Kohls’ “Culture Shock: Occupational Hazard of Overseas Living,” from his book Survival Kit for Overseas Living. Although you may want to find your own style of organization, you may find it useful to think of this as a three-paragraph essay.

1) Intro: Summary of Kohls using the techniques we have discussed. Your summary should not simply be a one-sentence summary, but should instead constitute one entire paragraph.
2) Body: Description of your experience with culture shock
3) Conclusion: Analysis of your experiences related to Kohls’ concepts.

You must include a proper MLA style citation (a bibliography entry) for this source. Normally, this entry comes on a separate page, but you may include this information at the end of your summary and response. Remember that this source is a book with one main author. You may refer to Leki 208 to find the proper way to write an entry for this type of source. Below is the information:

Author: L. Robert Kohls  Title of Book: Survival Kit for Overseas Living
Year: 2001  City: Yarmouth, ME  Publisher: Intercultural Press

The Writer
Your job is to make effective choices about the main idea, techniques, and example(s) you will use. Remember that you only have a set amount of time, so you will need to choose one controlling main idea. That main idea will appear in your thesis statement, so to help remind yourself of your focus, you may want to underline that one sentence. Remember that you are also a reader who is responding to Kohls’ ideas, so be aware of your perspective as you write.

The Audience
Assume that your audience is not familiar with the Kohls article, the concept of culture shock, or your reason for responding. In order to help determine the choices you will make, you may find it useful to define your audience specifically. Who are you writing for? Who cares about this topic? Perhaps your audience could be …

A group of students from your own country who plan to study abroad
A group of Americans who plan to study in your own country
A group of people back home, such as your parents or friends
American (or not) businesspeople who are currently working in a foreign country

Evaluation Criteria
- Correctly refers to author and title of work to be summarized
- Correctly introduces the concepts discussed in the work
- Quotes, paraphrases, and summarizes accurately without plagiarism
- Uses proper MLA format for both in-text citations and bibliography
- Contains a clear thesis statement
- Paragraphs have effective topic sentences and are tightly controlled around one idea
- Is relatively free of distracting errors in language use

AUTHOR’S BIODATA
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