Virtual Classroom Management and Communicative Writing Pedagogy

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Abstract

Writing, essentially a social act, is concerned with cognition and is allied to context. Most writing takes the form of dialogue and it is out of dialogic processes that language acquisition takes place. Writers and readers convene in the cognitive and social space that is at the heart of a discourse community. The social aspects of writing are diminished when there is a restriction on the social space where readers and writers come together. This is exemplified by the state of affairs in certain classrooms where writing, reading and responding are undertaken in a solitary manner. The use of computers to teach writing can enliven social exchange by engendering new social structures. In particular, collaboration between writers is prompted by the use of word processors. When the teaching of writing takes place in a computer lab, teachers often structure activities in a qualitatively different manner. In turn this has an influence on student writing. This paper reports on our experience of teaching an in-sessional course in Academic Writing to L2 students at the University of Luton.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the teaching of the *Academic English and Study Skills* modules at the University of Luton. These modules are optional first year courses for foreign students who are studying for a degree at Luton University. Foreign students who are studying in what is not their first language need help with their English. However since they already have the difficulty of studying in what is not their first language, it was decided that English language support should not increase their work load. These modules, therefore, form part of the modular credit scheme which means that students who attend them obtain credit towards their degree. Students attend one 3 hour session per week, which takes place in a computer lab.

Writing, essentially a social act, is concerned with cognition and is allied to context. Most writing takes the form of dialogue and it is out of dialogic processes that language acquisition takes place. Writers and readers convene in the cognitive and social space that is at the heart of a discourse community (see Figure 1). The social aspects of writing are diminished when there is a restriction on the social space where readers and writers come together. This is exemplified by the state of affairs in certain classrooms where writing, reading and responding are undertaken in a solitary manner.

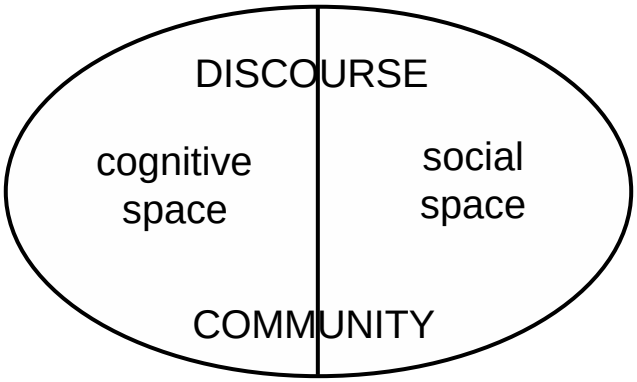

Figure 1

2. Computers & Learning to Write

Students need to be able to write in the environments in which they will have to study and work in later life. Students need preparation for research and writing demands that later curricula will place on them. Writers today use computers, whether they are writing academic papers, resumes or company reports. Teaching students to write in an environment without computers is not teaching them what they need to know. Technology is in a constant state of flux and it is necessary for pedagogy to keep up with it.

Computers are a tool that can facilitate the strategies and activities that are helpful to the teaching of writing. The question of what computers add to the teaching of writing is not ultimately an argument about technology. It is an argument about how we teach writing. Research in the 1980s seemed to suggest that use of the word-processor in itself does not necessarily lead to better student essays (Cross & Curey 1984; Teichman & Poris 1989). However the use of computers has forced teachers to change their pedagogy. And as new teaching techniques are evolved around the new technology, then there are consequences for language acquisition, student

motivation and attitudes to writing, the writing process and ultimately better essays.

The use of computers to teach writing can enliven social exchange by engendering new social structures. In particular, collaboration between writers is prompted by the use of word processors (see Figure 2).

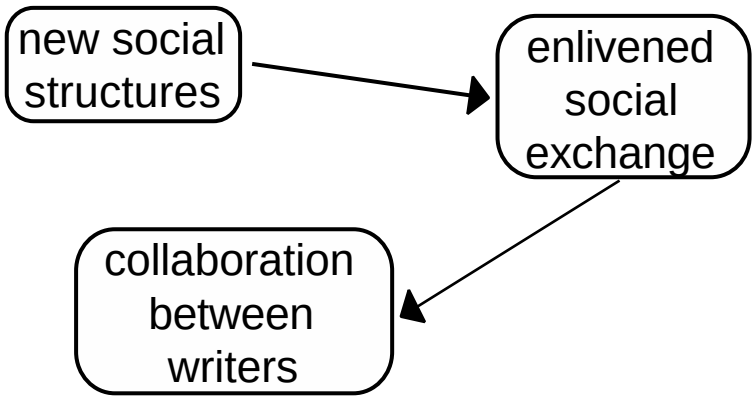

Figure 2

When the teaching of writing takes place in a computer lab, teachers often structure activities in a qualitatively different manner. In turn this has an influence on student writing (see Figura 3).

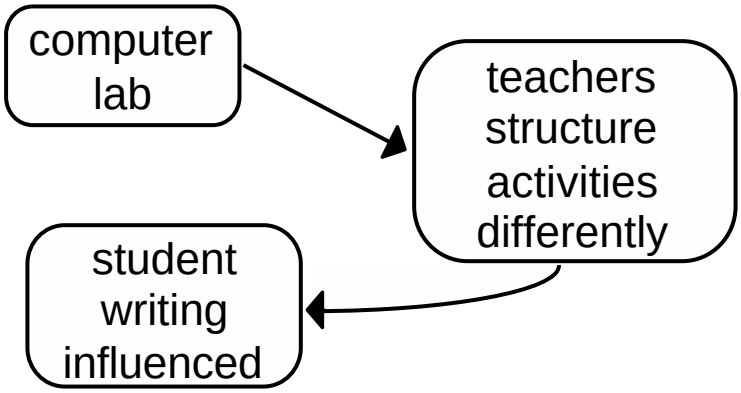

Figure 3

3. Communication in Cyberspace

The term ‘cyberspace’ was first coined by William Gibson in his fantasy novel *Neuromancer* to describe the "world" of computers, and the society that gathers around them. Nowadays it has come to mean notional "information-space" loaded with visual cues and navigable with brain-computer interfaces called "cyberspace decks". Through a system of networked computers students and their teacher are able to communicate in cyberspace this communication is referred to as computer mediated discourse (see Figure 4).

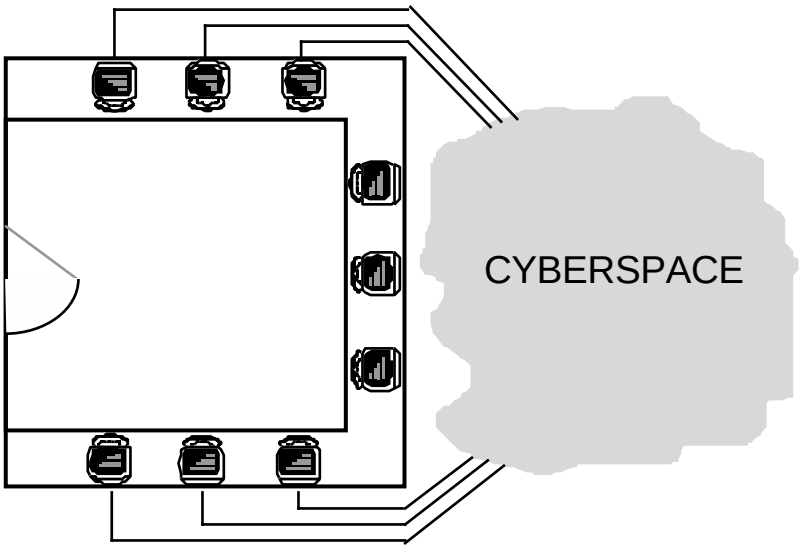

Figure 4

The virtual classroom is the area in which computer mediated discourse takes place between class members. Virtual classroom management involves, amongst other things, the maintenance of links not only between human participants but also between human participants and androids. Androids include such automata as the on-line library catalogue, help files and on-line dictionaries (See Figure 5).

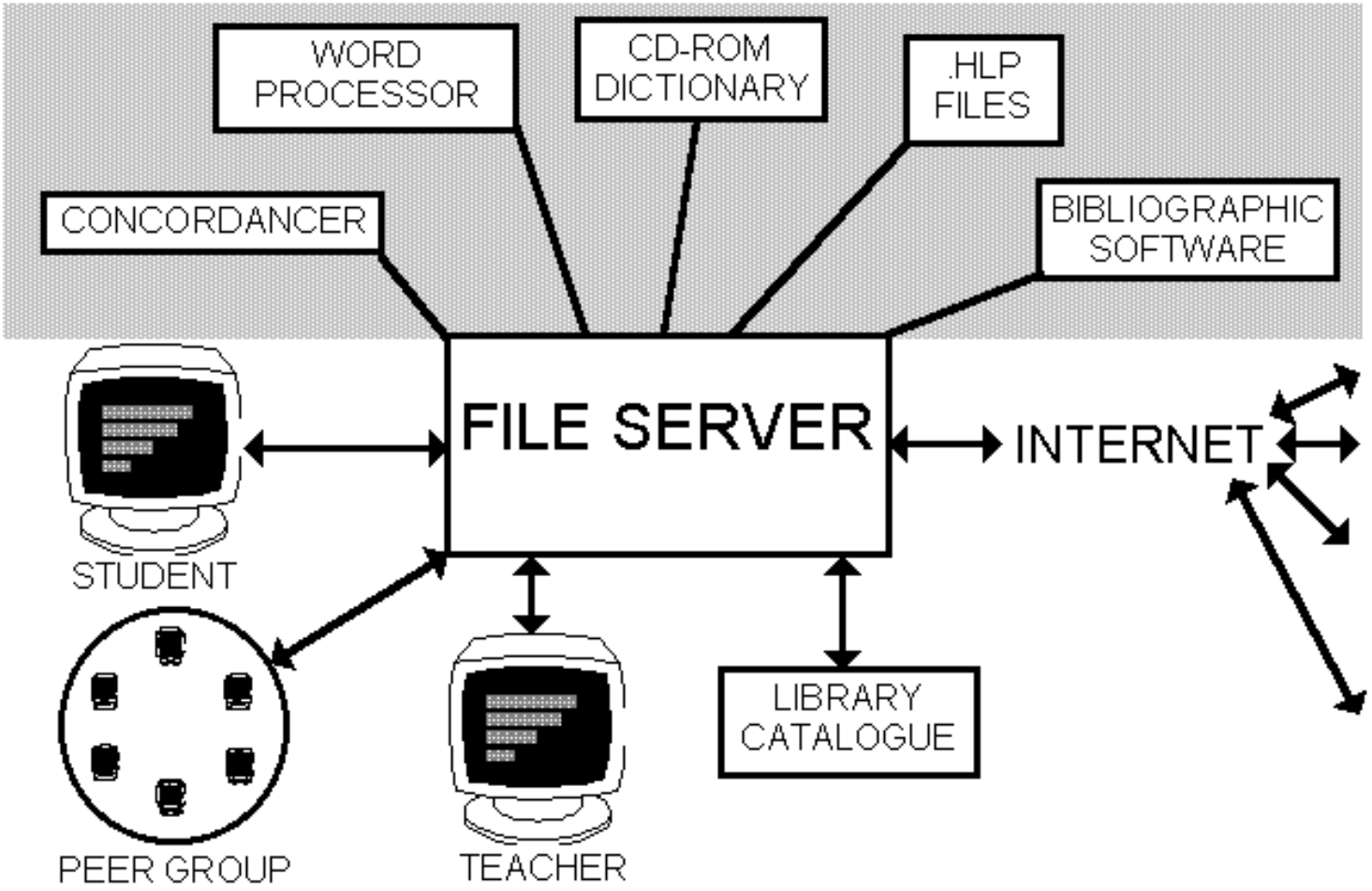
WORD PROCESSOR
CD-ROM DICTIONARY
.HLP FILES
CONCORDANCER
BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOFTWARE
FILE SERVER
INTERNET
STUDENT
PEER GROUP
TEACHER
LIBRARY CATALOGUE

Figura 5

On-line communication in cyberspace focuses on the written form. Discussion is still possible; use of shared first language is still possible. However extra-linguistic and paralinguistic features are not communicated via the digital word. In class, facial expression, body language and tone of voice all contribute to the act of communication. On-line the only message is the text. This narrow expressive range brings about a focus on simple, clear and effective writing. The medium can foster a surprisingly close relationship between teacher and student. A detailed written comment somehow carries more authority and impact than spoken words. Students, eager to initiate a real dialogue, sharpen their writing skills still further as they argue their points. Successful computer communication demands a great deal of empathy between writer and reader. The writer is forced to put him/herself in the reader's place and anticipate what s/he needs.

The medium is particularly adapted to the teaching of argumentation. Students post a claim plus three reasons, each backed by evidence, plus a brief rebuttal of major counter arguments. This elicits a powerful response from their peers, who pound the keyboards to argue specific points. The resulting position papers benefit from these on-line arguments by demonstrating far more rhetorical sensitivity, fewer broad generalities and a strong sense of arguing with reasons plus proof. One might argue that this experience could be duplicated by class discussion. Only partially so. Not only is the on-line debate a writing experience, but the entire discussion can be printed out or saved onto disk.

Social dynamics are a key factor of learning. Students can respond solely to the teacher, verbally to each other round a table or respond on screen to other students logged into the class and who may or may not be in the same room (see Figure 6). Cyberspace is a redefined social space which effects the act of writing. When students meet in cyberspace, two things

occur. Firstly there is social integration in which students build social connections. Secondly there is academic integration in which students come to see writing instrumentally, as something that can do something for them. Both these forms of integration are crucial to our students learning. It is ironic that there may be more social interaction taking place among physically dispersed students who are connected electronically than there may be among students who are sitting next to one another in a teacher centred classroom.

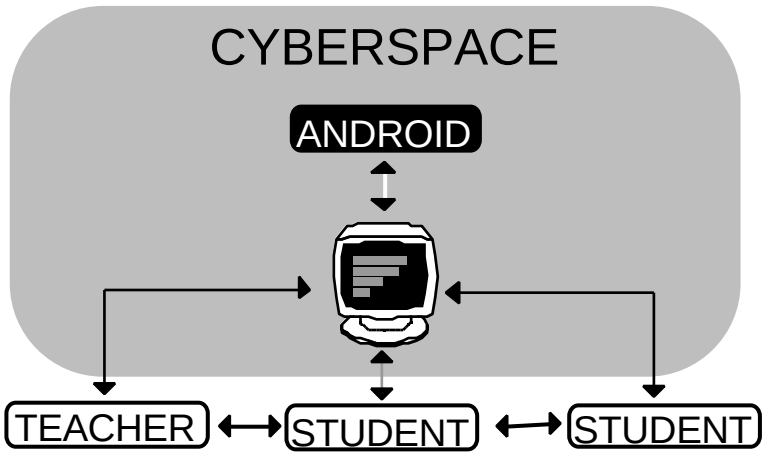

Figure 6

Teachers who have taught classes in this manner often report that the type of interaction which takes place on-line encourages more activity on the part of the student, which is difficult to achieve in a more traditional setting. Moreover computer discussion makes it difficult for a few students to dominate the debate and, thus, opportunity is increased for all students to have a voice.

4. Collaborative Writing

Knowledge is considered by some to be more of a social construct than an absolute. In other words it is a product of society rather than something with existence outside us. From this viewpoint, collaborative learning is useful because students are thus able to talk their way into writing and thereby learn the academic discourse necessary for membership in the academic community. When students work with each other sharing their expertise, teaching is in the background and learning is in the foreground. Learning to work in a group is a transferable skill that students take with them when they leave the writing class.

It has often been noted that computer writing labs help to make writing a communal experience, increase the frequency of students' collaborative writing efforts and influence the content, form and structure of their collaborative exchanges (Bernhardt & Appleby 1985; Hermann 1985; Sadler and Greene 1986; Selfe & Wahlstrom 1988). When students share a computer in order to collaborate on a writing project they are able to use both speech and writing. They are able to discuss their written composition in either the target language or their shared first language.

Writing in the digital medium allows free manipulation of text. The writer is freed from the linear constraints of atomic paper and pen (Jones & Fortescue 1987: 49). Text may be continually altered. This motivates the student to revise and awareness of writing as a process is thus brought about (Bean 1983; Collier 1983; Daiute 1983). In the computer based writing class the procedure is as follows.

Collaborative writing usually follows the following process. Writer A produces an utterance and passes it to writer B. Writer B may then add to A's utterance by inserting something in the middle, adding something at

the end or preposing something at the beginning. B also has the option of deleting something from A's utterance or of moving elements around using Cut and Paste. The text is passed back to A and the process continues. Writing thus becomes a communicative rather than a solitary activity (see Figure 7).

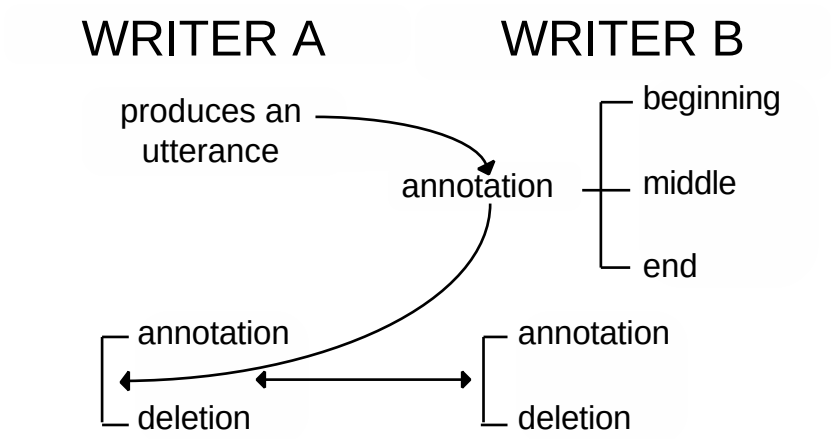

Figure 7

This process can be readily adapted to create classroom activities such as the following.

STAGE 1	Groups write drafts of a target paragraph.
STAGE 2	Overhead Projector connected to a computer. Whole class collaborate to create target paragraph.
STAGE 3	Students compare draft versions with whole class version.

Group tasks should have a specific outcome that will be presented to the whole class or the teacher. Projects can be set up so that different members of the group have different tasks. Then individual work is assembled collaboratively.

5. Peer Critiquing

Peer critiquing helps students to develop their rhetorical skills by making the whole critiquing process active rather than passive. It brings about awareness of writing as process. One approach is to have students critique each other's first draft for content and organization, and later proof read each other's second or third draft for form and mechanics. Recent research in America has shown that when students peer critique each others work, less credibility is given to the work of female students even by other female students. For this reason, we have adopted a system whereby students are given pseudonyms, such as 'Chris' or 'Nic', which can be of either gender. Students save their texts under their allotted pseudonyms and the texts are then exchanged in cyberspace for critiquing. The virtual classroom thus provides anonymity by which students not only become androgynous but also have their race, creed colour, etc. hidden. Shyer, more introverted students lose their inhibitions as they take on their new personas. The method works like this.

STAGE 1 Students save their texts on the central fileserver using a pseudonym given to them by the teacher.

STAGE 2 Students are then allotted another student's text to download from the server. Figure 8 shows the *Word 6 for Windows* dialog box via which students are able to access the texts of their peers.

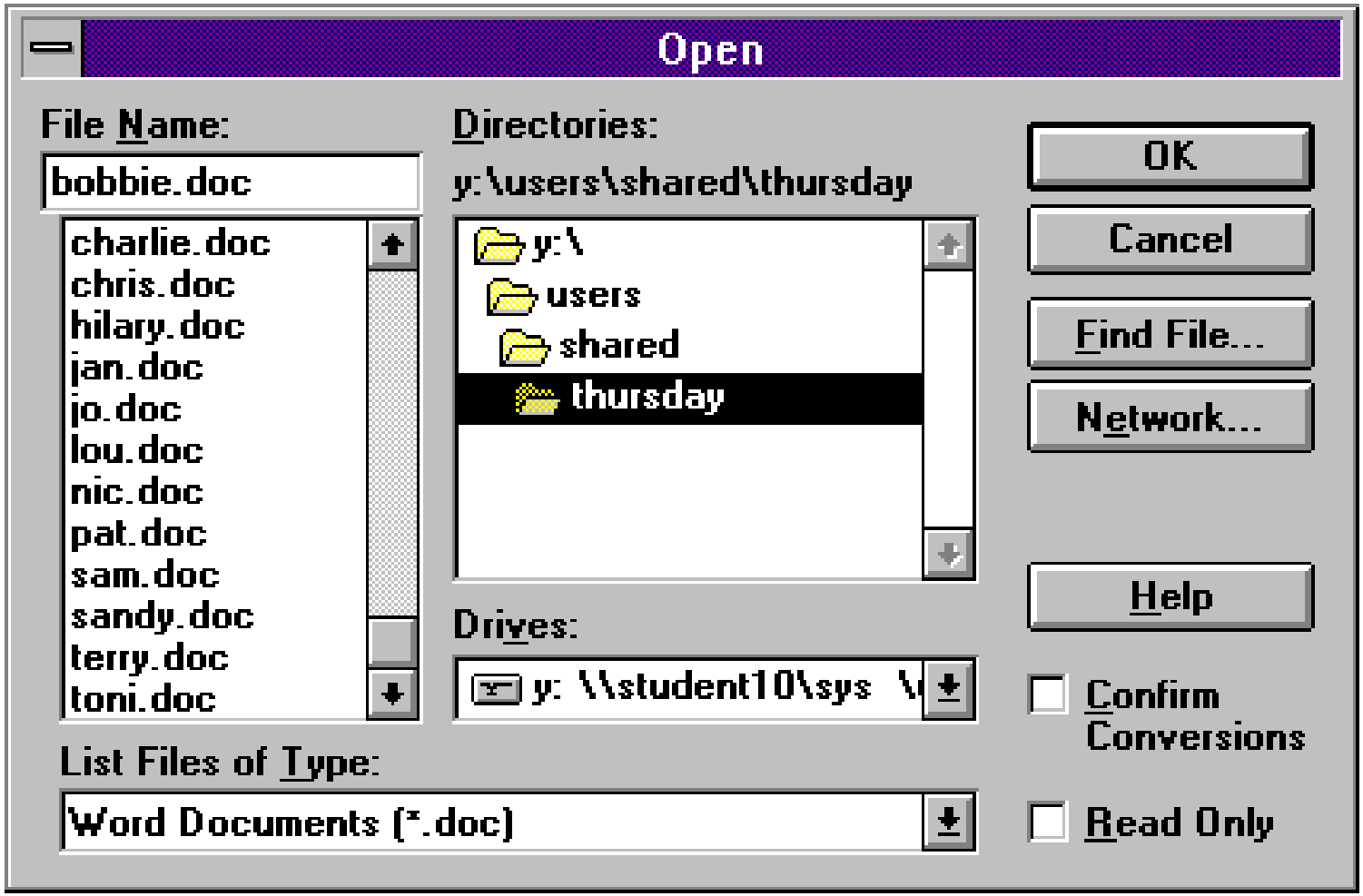
Open
File Name:
bobbie.doc
charlie.doc
chris.doc
hilary.doc
jan.doc
jo.doc
lou.doc
nic.doc
pat.doc
sam.doc
sandy.doc
terry.doc
toni.doc
Directories:
y:\users\shared\thursday
y:\
users
shared
thursday
Drives:
y: \\student10\sys
List Files of Type:
Word Documents (*.doc)
OK
Cancel
Find File...
Network...
Help
Confirm Conversions
Read Only

Figura 8

STAGE 3 Working from a feedback sheet prepared by the teacher, students write the answer to the questions about the text on screen in front of them by inserting revisions in that text done by turning on *Word 6*'s special revision marking facility. Revision marks help the critiquing process by showing the changes that have been made to a text since the last version. *Word* 6 uses special formatting, such as underlining, strikethrough characters and different colour to show edited text (see Figure 9).

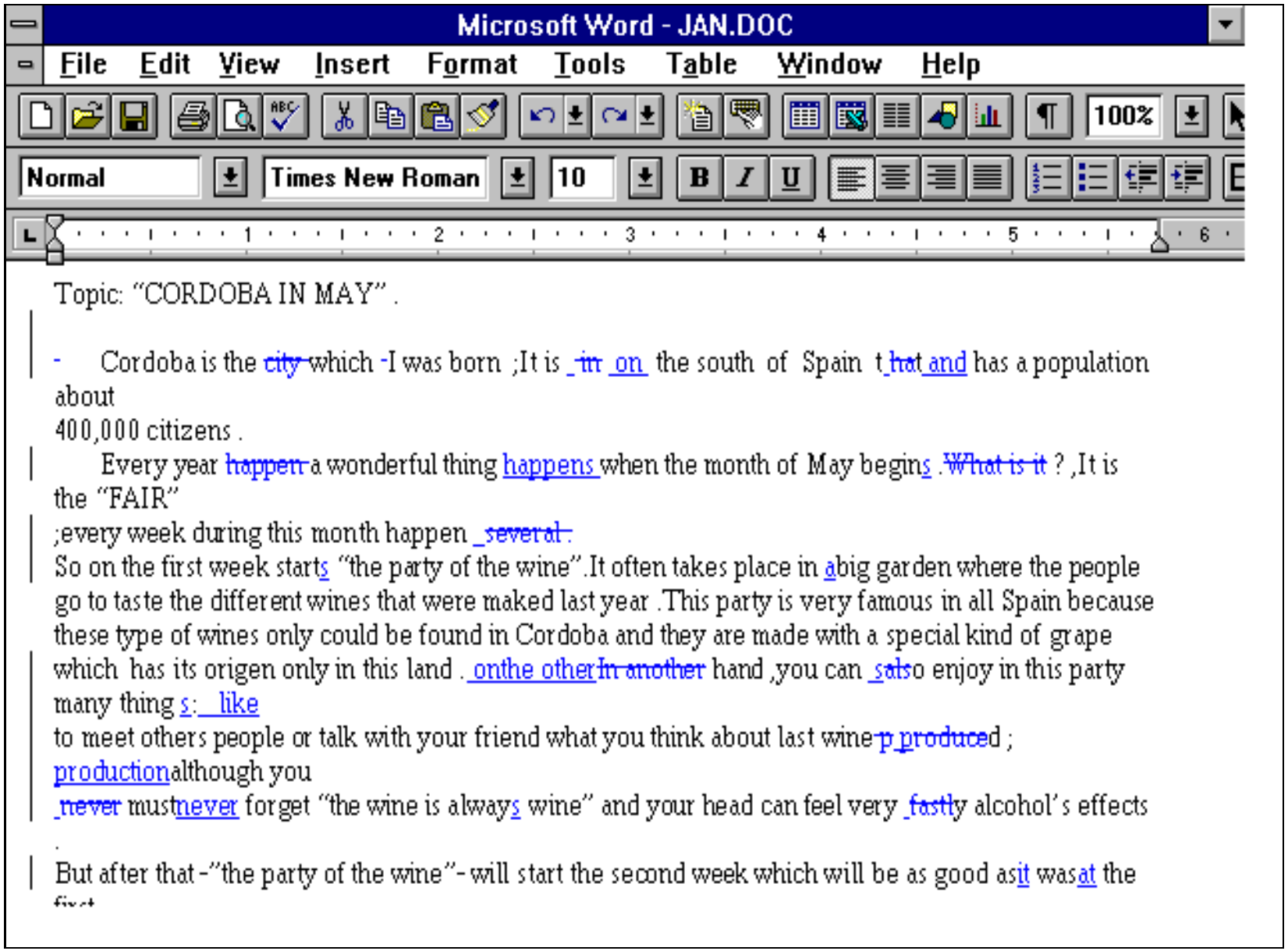
Microsoft Word - JAN.DOC
File Edit View Insert Format Tools Table Window Help
100%
Normal
Times New Roman
10
Topic: "CORDOBA IN MAY" .
- Cordoba is the city which -I was born ;It is in on the south of Spain that and has a population about
400,000 citizens .
Every year happen a wonderful thing happens when the month of May begins .What is it ? ,It is the "FAIR"
;every week during this month happen several.
So on the first week starts "the party of the wine".It often takes place in abig garden where the people go to taste the different wines that were maked last year .This party is very famous in all Spain because these type of wines only could be found in Cordoba and they are made with a special kind of grape which has its origen only in this land . onthe other In another hand ,you can also enjoy in this party many things: like
to meet others people or talk with your friend what you think about last wine p produced ; productionalthough you
never mustnever forget "the wine is always wine" and your head can feel very fastly alcohol's effects
.
But after that -"the party of the wine"- will start the second week which will be as good asit wasat the

Figura 9

STAGE 4 When all the students have finished critiquing, the files are saved and the students retrieve their original files from the server. The original author reviews the revision marks in his/her text and accepts, rejects or ignores each change.

When students are uncertain about the correctness of the revisions to their text they often ask the teacher to arbitrate. It is important not to simply give the student the 'correct' version. A teacher cannot always be available to support students. It is, therefore, vital that students learn how to find the 'correct' form on their own. In this situation, it is best to direct the student to obtain a concordance from an expert corpus so that the item in question may be compared with examples from authentic text. Let us suppose that a student has received the text in . S/he has doubts about the revision of "It is **in** the south of Spain" to "It is **on** the south of Spain". S/he uses *MicroConcord* concordancing software to obtain a concordance of 'the south' (see Figure 10). From this it can be seen that 'in the south' is the normal collocation for this usage. It can furthermore be observed from this concordance that native speakers of English sometimes spell 'south' beginning with a capital letter and sometimes beginning with a lower-case letter. (For further discussion on the use of concordancers in the foreign language class see Mills 1996.)

MicroConcord
Esc back
MicroConcord
Press F1
71/ 771 max.
39 MCB_APAR.ART
SW: in the south
SORT first 1R
case ignored
ern statelet differed from those in the South. McAllister (1980) desc
the South Africans have invaded in the south of the country, having
tside a village called Marjayoun in the south of the country which is
got a knife." At another party, in the South of France, a reefer is
sing, but would find land enough in the south of the county in prefer
s fighting an armed insurrection in the south-east of the country in
r's recommendation that a winter in the South of France would do him
ss conscious of it, predominated in the south of Ulster and still cor
ub (next to the biggest Tesco's) in the south of England, the Daily M
ts first days while honeymooning in the south of France. We had bicyc
finance to a virtual standstill. In the south of France hundreds of
ertain to turn up 275 miles away in the south of England today, write
in weekly. (p) `Most of them are in the south of England, which could
ssendi was born at Champtercier, in the south of France, in 1592. His
tly purchased a 10-acre property in the South of France, apparently
s a shortage of industrial sites in the South-east of England and rer
embe in central Africa and mbira in the south. (p) Three years ago a
y political support they enjoyed in the South. (p) The Roman catholic
to put an end to fishing methods in the South Pacific which were call
drift net fishing, particularly in the South Pacific, and help for

Figure 10

6. Conclusion

Our experience of teaching academic writing in a networked computer lab has identified a need to develop new approaches to the teaching of writing and especially in the field of virtual classroom management. The potential of computer cyberspace is that it enables the teacher to construct a virtual classroom that is a social environment specially tailored to the needs of academic writing pedagogy. The anonymity and androgyny that this environment provides leads to greater participation from the shyer and more introverted students. The liquid nature of electronic text facilitates the tasks of editing and redrafting and this in turn leads to increased awareness of writing as a process. Above all, the methods adopted at Luton ensure that writing is a truly communicative activity.

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