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# Internet Resources: Optimization of Second Language Writing Skills Mastering during COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic forced the entire world community to reconsider its educational learning strategies. Modern Information and Communication Technologies have provided the mastery of writing skills by philology students during distance learning. Writing skills are acquired in writing texts of different genres: primary, written without the resource literature, and secondary, written by students based on primary sources. Interactive activities based on Internet resources enabled creating a virtual learning environment for mastering the second language written communication. This study analyzes various interactive activities on the Internet and suggests division into two groups: educational and controlling interactive activities. The study aims to define the effectiveness and methodological characteristics of the interactive activities to optimize the writing skills mastering during lockdowns. It presents the stages of text writing for users of the A2 language level. The paper gives examples of interactive activities based on communicative situations that teach to write a text at a sentence, paragraph, and text level. It also determines their goal, techniques, ways of control, and benefits of using such exercises for self-study of writing skills. The study concludes with recommendations of using communicative cases and activities to improve mastering written communication.

*Keywords*: Information and Communication Technologies, interactive activities, second language, self-study, virtual learning environment, writing skills

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#### Introduction

The spread of international contacts between European countries and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially the Internet, in education determine the need for students of higher educational institutions to master writing skills. In addition, the implementation of the Council of Europe's recommendations on the second language (L2) teaching and learning requires thorough training of philology students' mastery of written expression of ideas.

The well-established educational process in distance learning, caused by the epidemiological situation in the world due to COVID-19, is provided by particular components. These components include educational and methodological complex, feedback between teachers and students in the context of their cooperation, motivation as one of the driving forces in mastering foreign intercultural communication, and individualization, distinguishing independent learning as an individual process.

The problem of mastering L2 writing skills, caused by insufficient classroom time, needs to be addressed. The vast majority of writing skills training occurs at the independent mastery of L2 writing skills. In addition, the global pandemic associated with the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) also brings students and teachers' attention to the question of practical L2 writing skills mastering, which is an essential means of communication via the online social networks, such as Facebook, Skype, Google Meet, and WhatsApp, etc.

Under the requirements of European recommendations, philology students should develop skills in writing different genres of texts. They need to learn to write both primary and secondary texts. Primary texts include texts that students can write not using any other resource literature — for example, essays, messages, abstracts, electronic, handwritten, official, and private letters, etc. Secondary texts include texts that students can write based on primary sources — for example, summary, abstract, resume, scientific statement, report, etc.

It is worth noticing that the use of ICT, including interactive activities as their elements, partially optimizes and improves the learning activities of students to master writing skills independently. Information technologies, viewed in this way, mean Internet services thanks to which the user/learner has quick access to online resources and learning materials that do not require additional teaching aids and expenditures. Interactive activities refer to online learning material as one of the Internet resources that allows modeling L2 learning environment and forming L2 skills during distance learning.

This article aims to consider the basic features of using Internet resources, interactive activities in particular, for developing L2 writing skills of philology students of higher educational institutions. Examining this issue requires answering the following research questions:

- 1. What improves the self-study of L2 learners using interactive activities on online platforms?
- 2. What is the best way to optimize writing skills training through the ICT?
- 3. What can help to intensify the educational process of mastering L2 communication during the pandemic?

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#### Literature Review

ICT continuously dominate all spheres of human life, including education. The acquisition of L2 writing skills optimization in the self-study context during the COVID-19 pandemic requires reconsidering of L2 learners' needs in terms of both present situation and target situation analysis of real-world and pedagogic tasks (Hyland, 2003). Online corpora constitute the source of content, language data, and language learning materials. At the same time, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) resources may serve as tools for developing the writing skills of L2 learners.

CALL tools for L2 writing include word processors used as spellcheckers, thesaurus, and concordances. For similar purposes, teachers may use search engines, such as *Google*, for example, to check doubtful phrases composed by learners (Conroy, 2010). Pennigton (1996) stated the following benefits of using word processors: making writing more manageable, extensive, and effective. Stapleton and Radia (2010) described Add-in tools used by L2 learners and teachers for different purposes: MS Word toolbar program *Check My Words* to check spelling and collocations; *Mark My Words* for teachers to insert 'resource-rich comments'; online text analyzers to evaluate text on average sentence length, 'hard words' usage, and lexical density. According to Stapleton and Radia (2010), the tools mentioned above "not only give independence to the L2 writer, but they also eliminate some of the more tedious tasks of teachers and editors at all levels of writing ability" (p. 180). For example, teachers can redirect their attention to the paragraph organization and text content instead of spelling and grammatical errors.

Many scholars have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of online language learning; among them are Díez-Prados and Cabrejas-Peñuelas (2018), McLuhan (2012), Pennington (2003), Stapleton and Radia (2010), Warschauer (2001), Yang (2015), and many more. McLuhan (2012) defined the following advantages of online learning: access, flexibility, response, repeatability, durability, modality, specificity, and cost. Describing technology-based teaching aids, such as thesaurus-like databases (e.g., *WordNet*) and online writing systems (e.g., *Pagai, Writing roadmap, Noodletools*), Yang (2015) highlighted the importance of multimodal learning. This idea is supported by the fact that reading information serves as background knowledge for writing a text in the ICT world represented by a variety of multimodal texts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2004).

According to Warschauer (2001), Internet resources may enhance English language learning within the communicative principles of meaningful interaction. To activate learners' communicative skills, Lekawael (2017) offered the following apps to assist L2 learners in mastering writing skills: (1) Dictionary and Thesaurus; (2) note-taking apps; (3) brainstorming and outlining apps (Lekawael, 2017). Lekawael stated that these tools ensure Self-Assessed Language Learning by providing autonomy, encouraging the learners to do things their way, reflecting on the work critically, and assuming greater responsibility towards their learning.

Blogging represents another sphere of online language learning tools application for L2 writing skills development. Wani (2018) characterized blogging regarding its distinctive features "such as accessibility, easy usage, ubiquity, fearless environs, unlimited space, informal format, collaborative nature, etc." (p. 1346). Advantages of using blogging in the process of L2 writing skills acquisition appeared in the research papers by Abu Baker (2009), Campbell (2003),

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Pennigton (2003), Wampfler (2020), Yang (2007) and more. According to Pennigton (2003), online writing cultivates a better sense of audience. Campbell (2003) suggested that L2 learners may benefit by co-producing ideas and sharing information through blogging. Moreover, Abu Baker (2009) found that blogging motivates students to enhance their writing. Yang (2007) proved that the application of blogging in instructions enhances feedback between students and teachers. Furthermore, disadvantages of blogging were also studied by Blackstone, Spiri, and Naganuma (2007) and Blackmore-Squires (2010).

Various methods of teaching writing skills have been considered and presented in the methodology of L2 teaching and learning. For example, Krivchikova (2005) described interactive learning writing skills; Sereda (2006) came up with the idea of teaching to communicate in writing by email; Svyrydjuk (2007) examined the issue of learning writing skills using a distance course. Considering the development of information technologies, writing skills formation can occur due to these technologies, especially interactive activities through Internet resources.

As for the strategy applied in teaching writing in the context of online language learning, Yang (2015) described the following strategies that ESL teachers might take into consideration: (1) to encourage multimodal learning; (2) to cultivate students' autonomy; (3) to consolidate fundamental writing skills; (4) to engage brainstorming, such as mind map building, in teaching English writing; (5) to search for more effective ways of dealing with errors in students' writing by applying the moderate approach, focusing on ideas, and looking for error patterns, and more.

Undoubtedly, learning activities are the priority in skill formation and improvement in any L2 communicative activity. They must equally meet modern requirements for L2 teaching and learning in the traditional and virtual learning environments. The main criterion for interactive activities seems to be the one formulated by Sklyarenko (1999): the main factor of interactive activities is the communicative focus on implementing speech actions. The conducted didactic and methodological analysis of interactive activities on the Internet shows that such activities have slightly different characteristics and impact on L2 teaching and learning, in general, and teaching writing skills, in particular.

Despite the numerous research papers on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning and using CALL tools in L2 lessons, little attention seems to be paid to developing the system of interactive activities and their methodological recommendations. The following sections of this article describe an attempt at methodological analysis of interactive activities available online.

## Methods

Many researchers in the field of methodology in their papers highlighted the necessity to acquire writing skills. The theoretical ground of this article is based on the content analysis of the secondary data that includes the study conducted by Gehring (2018), Krivchikova (2005), Lekawael (2017), Mazunova (2005), Sereda (2006), Sviridyuk (2007), Stapleton and Radia (2010), Patievich (2018), Yang (2015) and others. They prove how important the forming of students' writing skills is as a component of intercultural communicative competence.

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## **Participants**

This paper presents the results of qualitative research with no primary participants involved.

#### **Instruments**

The empirical research method and the content analysis of the secondary data served as the basis of this study.

#### **Procedures**

The didactic and methodological analysis of online interactive activities was conducted to select learning tools and online resources for developing writing skills in a virtual learning environment, which is vital due to the epidemiological situation in the world.

#### **Results**

Interactive activities are divided into two groups: educational interactive activities and controlling interactive activities based on their use and analysis.

#### Educational interactive activities

Here is an example of interactive online learning activity on the British Council website.



Figure 1. A Postcard from Scotland. British Council (n.d.)

The computer screen functions as an interactive whiteboard; L2 material is presented in images and L2 samples. On the left, there is a text (letter) with contracted verb forms. They are marked in green. Below the text, there is a brief grammatical reference on the use of verbs in the present tense. On the right, there is a language material, which helps the student learn how to use contracted verb forms. The student can study or revise L2 material with the help of detailed information going to the *Grammar* section. Thus, the educational interactive activity presents L2 material, encourages students to use a foreign language, responds to the student's answer, and manages the learning process.

## Controlling interactive activities

Controlling interactive activities are used to test and assess the acquired skills.

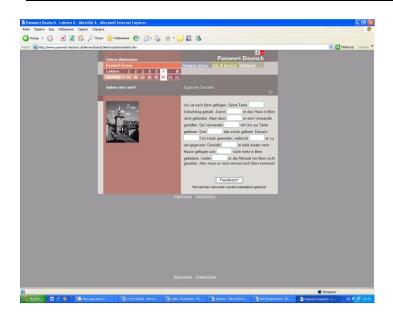


Figure 2. Password Deutsch. Sprachtipps24 (n.d.)

Figure two shows the computer screen that displays text with missing words. The student has to insert the words in the correct grammatical form. After completing this task, the student receives a "grade" as a percentage. Thus, the interactive activity only controls the studied L2 material. These exercises have the following didactic features: (a) they encourage learning activities; (b) respond to the answer; (c) evaluate the answer.

Consider the main methodological characteristics of interactive activities for teaching L2 in a virtual learning environment. (See Table one)

Table 1. Methodological features of exercises and interactive activities for L2 teaching in a virtual learning environment during an independent learning process

An exercise in a traditional context	An interactive activity in a virtual environment
1) printed material;	1) electronic material;
2) handwritten performing;	2) performing using the keyboard or "mouse";
3) lack of traditional L2 information;	3) presence of links to additional L2 information on the Internet;
4) lack of feedback from the exercise;	4) presence of feedback from the exercise through verbal or
	nonverbal means;
5) one correct answer;	5) presence of two answer options: affirmative and negative;
6) delayed control and evaluation of the teacher;	6) instant control and evaluation by the computer, as well as
	delayed control and evaluation by the teacher;
7) absence of authentic L2 environment;	7) presence of authentic L2 environment;
8) lack of communication;	8) communication with a virtual partner;
9) absence of a teacher;	9) virtual presence of a teacher (email, chat);
10) weakened motivation.	10) increasing motivation.

Table one shows that the interactive activities in a virtual learning environment have several advantages for individual mastering of writing skills through feedback between the student and the computer, as well as between the student and the teacher. Student's ability to use additional L2

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(theoretical or practical) information, quick control and assessment at a particular stage of learning to perform the exercise also plays an essential role in self-study. Another specific feature of using interactive activities in a virtual learning environment is that the student, being at the computer, can send his text to the communication partner of the country whose language he studies. So, the student has a natural communicative L2 environment.

Performing conditional and communicative activities in a virtual learning environment involves monitoring and evaluation using a computer. The student can observe his learning process through the answers provided by the exercise. These are usually verbal or nonverbal answers.

With the help of interactive language activities, students can learn language material. The interactive connection between the student and the activity is carried out, for example, through smiley faces, emoticons, or color. Feedback performs several functions that effectively contribute to the educational process, namely: educational, modeling, managing, controlling, optimizing, and evaluative. The use of interactive activities provides students with successful feedback with educational material. The use of interactive activities in distance learning due to the epidemiological situation in the world involves the implementation of the above functions.

Considering the above characteristics, the researchers can formulate the definition of an interactive activity in a virtual learning environment. Interactive activity in a virtual learning environment is an information product having interactive feedback with the student to develop skills in L2 communication.

Consider interactive activities that can be used in teaching writing texts at the initial stage of mastering L2 writing skills. According to methodological research, there are four main types of speech in linguistics: description, narration, reflection, and evaluation (Mazunova, 2006). Each type of speech can be an integral part of different genres of texts and prevail in them. Used psycholinguistic studies of the process of generating a written text suggest that teaching writing a text consists of four stages: (1) propaedeutic; (2) structural and semantic; (3) linguistic; and (4) editing (Mazunova, 2006). However, in a higher educational institution, the use of these stages may be different at different levels of education. For example, at level A1 you need to apply activities for all stages of teaching writing texts. At level C2 the propaedeutic stage will serve only to improve lexical and grammatical skills. Thus, the first stage, where students develop lexical and grammatical skills, will be effective and appropriate for the students at the initial level of mastering L2 communication. Usually, these are the students with the A1-A2 level of L2 proficiency.

The central unit of writing is a paragraph. Teaching writing a text is based on mastering and understanding the structural organization of the paragraph — introduction, body part, and conclusion — and options for paragraph development — illustration, comparison, contrast, definition. Written speech training should also include the use and combination of basic types of speech (Mazunova, 2006). Thus, the researchers aim to illustrate teaching writing paragraph-level texts using interactive activities based on *Learning Apps*, *WordWall*, and other learning platforms.

The following activities are examples of interactive activities for the development of the linguistic competence of philology students.

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## Activity 1. Data reception and reproduction (see Appendix A)

The activity *goal* is to develop the skills of using Present Perfect Simple and Present Perfect Continuous tenses. The *technique* of completing the exercise constitutes filling the gaps by typing in the necessary verb form. Indicating correct answers with green and wrong answers with red performs the *control* function.

The text is displayed on the computer screen; the learner needs to pay attention to the auxiliary verbs and verb forms for Present Perfect Simple and Present Perfect Continuous tenses. They need to type in the correct verb form in the gaps provided based on the verb given in brackets. The activity consists of twelve sentences with spaces and verbs in brackets. After completing the activity, the learner presses *Finish* to complete the exercise and check the results. The percentage of correct answers displayed on the screen and the verbs highlighted in green for correct answers or red for wrong answers confirm the grammatical correctness of the sentence. Consequently, it signals the proper use of auxiliary verbs for Present Perfect Simple or Present Perfect Continuous.

## Activity 2. Data reception and reproduction (see Appendix B)

The activity *goal* is to develop the skills of using adverbials. The *technique* of completing the exercise constitutes filling the gaps by typing in the sentence with the correct adverbial. Indicating correct answers with green and wrong answers with red performs the *control* function.

The activity checks the learner's ability to write sentences by choosing the correct verb form based on the suggested adverbial. The activity consists of fourteen sentences with spaces and adverbials used as prompts. After completing the activity, the learner presses *Done!* to check the results. The learner instantly receives notification whether they passed or failed with the number of points received. The correct sentences highlighted in green (or wrong in red) state the grammatical correctness of the sentences. As a result, the learner can check the proper use of adverbials in sentences by pressing *Show answers*, if necessary.

# Activity 3. Data reception, reproduction, and production (see Appendix C)

The activity *goal* is to develop skills in writing a short message. The *technique* of completing the exercise constitutes writing the short notice based on prompts. Indicating correct answers by the computer at the preparation stage and by the teacher at the final stage performs the *control* function.

The activity presents a text model for writing a short message that is the final goal of the activity. At the preparation stage, a learner reads the model text and fills in the missing words by typing them in the gaps provided. The activity consists of the coherent text of the message. The student must fill in the whole text before seeing the correct answers. After filling all the gaps, the learner presses *Check* and views the result marked by points from zero to five, and by pressing *Show solution*, a learner sees the correct answers next to the typed ones. The software also highlights learner's responses in colors: green for correct answers and red for wrong answers. At the final stage of the activity, the learner needs to write a short message and send it via email to the teacher or place a blog entry for a peer review by other learners.

## Activity 4. Data reception, reproduction, and production (see Appendix D)

The activity *goal* is to develop skills in writing an essay. The *technique* of completing the exercise constitutes writing a text based on the prompts. Indicating correct answers by the computer at the preparation stage and by the teacher/ peers at the final stage performs the *control* function.

The activity set consists of preparation tasks, text for reading, comprehension check, and tips for writing an essay. One of the interactive activities checks the learner's ability to use linking words. It consists of several sentences with gaps to be filled in with the necessary linking words. The choosing options are above the sentences at the top of the activity box. A learner needs to drag a linking word to the gap. After completing the exercise, the learner presses *Finish* and checks the results. The percentage of correct answers displayed in numbers over the activity box and the correct answers highlighted in green (or wrong in red) state the correctness of the sentence. The final stage of the activity is writing an essay about a recent trip. The learner may send the essay to the teacher or place it as a comment at the bottom of the web page for peer review.

## Activity 5. Text production (see Appendix E)

The activity *goal* is to develop skills in writing a cohesive paragraph. The *technique* of completing the exercise constitutes writing a paragraph based on the prompts. The teacher (and, or a peer) performs the *control* function.

This activity illustrates a creative, productive activity that results in writing a paragraph to complete a story. The activity gives a learner the beginning and the ending of a story, and the learner needs to complete it with the middle part. The activity can be used to practice writing and boost creativity, which is an essential part of writing. The written piece can be published in a blog, added to the learner's portfolio, or be a creativity competition entry.

## **Discussion**

Research conducted by Lekawael (2017), Svyrydjuk (2007), and Warschauer (2001), to name a few, prove that computer technology, in general, and Internet technology, in particular, intensify writing skills learning as a form of communication at all stages of mastering L2 communication. Thanks to them, the opportunities for forming and improving L2 skills in writing various texts are expanding. Interactive activities based on online resources — for example, Learning Apps or WordWall learning platforms — can help create a virtual learning environment for students to master L2 communication, including written formulation and presentation of thoughts using L2. A virtual learning environment is an environment that provides students with teaching materials and encourages self-control and self-assessment of skills, as well as encourages students to communicate in L2 with a partner for communication or a teacher.

Specific conditions of distance learning determine an individual approach in choosing learning strategies. Individualization of the educational process is an integral factor in the efficient study of L2 material and communication. The personal trajectory of the student has ample opportunities to implement this factor of the pedagogical process. Online resources, including interactive online activities, make it possible to individualize the learning process, taking into

account the features of individuality in the set of its characteristics as an individual, subject, and personality. All these aspects are relevant in the context of distance learning.

Interactive activities described in the previous section exemplify the massive data available online to help L2 teachers and learners to improve and intensify writing skills mastering. Having analyzed the observation results of the benefits of online educational resources in the learning process, the researchers found that platforms, such as *Learning Apps* and *WordWall*, do not require special training for teachers and are easy to use. Methodological characteristics of interactive activities, compared to traditional exercises, are only a humble attempt to systematize the online activities scattered throughout the web and have their limitations. Further studies of this question will provide a better understanding of the issue and contribute to methodological guidance for L2 teachers and learners.

#### Conclusion

This paper aimed to define the effectiveness and methodological characteristics of the interactive activities and find ways to optimize the L2 writing skills mastering during lockdowns. Based on the literature review and the findings of this study, interactive online activities meet modern requirements for L2 teaching and learning. They allow organizing independent learning activities of students to master L2 writing skills.

The organization of L2 training with the help of interactive activities can compensate students for a small number of classroom hours for developing writing skills and stimulate the development of their independent learning skills during distance learning due to the spread of COVID-19.

The use of Internet resources, including interactive activities, significantly optimizes the independent learning process of students and partially eliminates the problems associated with self-mastery of L2 communication. The bases for successful learning are communicative cases and activities with the help of which students deal with the set tasks of the formation and improvement of writing skills. They perform tasks in a natural L2 environment, which gives the students access to authentic material. Authentic L2 material encourages acquaintance and study of linguistic and sociocultural features of writing texts.

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# **Appendices**

Appendix A: Activity 1. Communication activity for data reception and reproduction Interactive activity to develop linguistic competence on the usage of Present Perfect Simple and Present Perfect Continuous. Retrieved from:

https://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/grammar/intermediate-grammar/present-perfect-simple-continuous

Appendix B: Activity 2. Communication activity for data reception and reproduction Interactive activity to develop linguistic competence on the usage of adverbials. Retrieved from: https://www.englishexercises.org/makeagame/viewgame.asp?id=563#a

Appendix C: Activity 3. Communicative activities for text reception, reproduction, and production

Interactive activities to develop writing skills within the topic "Health. Going to the dentist". Retrieved from: https://www.esleschool.com/a2-dentist-appointment/

Appendix D: Activity 4. Communicative activities for text reception, reproduction, and production

*Interactive activities to develop writing skills within the topic "Travelling"*. Retrieved from: https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/writing/pre-intermediate-a2/my-last-holiday

Appendix E: *Activity 5. Communicative activity for text production Online activity to develop skills of writing a paragraph.* Retrieved from: http://esl.fis.edu/learners/writing/colors/green07.htm.

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