

MEDICAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TO USING WIKIS IN CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

Digital tools have become prevalent in learning institutions across the world. In the field of foreign language teaching, research and studies have identified that wikis can play a particularly powerful role in improving students' language skills. This paper examines the role of wikis in improving students' written language skills and considers the importance of collaborative authorship in improving these skills. It concludes with practical strategies to bring wikis into classrooms to support students as they improve their writing skills.

Introduction

In today's classroom, it is essential for teachers to use contextual tools in order to help students learn. Teachers across the world recognise that in the 21st century, one of the most powerful tools they can use is technology. Technology is utilised to benefit student outcomes in a variety of different ways across age groups and subject areas. As a foreign language teacher at a vocational college, I utilise technology to help my students develop their capacity to speak, read, write and understand foreign languages. Indeed, many foreign language teachers and researchers around the world recognise the importance of using technology to improve learning outcomes in foreign language classrooms.

Özdemir and Aydın (2015) argue that language learning is both receptive and productive. They explain that receptive skills are the ability to listen and read in a foreign language while productive skills are linking and writing as learners need to produce something to communicate their meaning. In my efforts to improve my teaching practice, I regularly conduct literature reviews to familiarise myself with developments in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. As my focus is on holistic learning, I consider how each development and research finding can benefit a particular language skill and how I can bring these findings into my classroom. While building on their capacity to speak and understand a foreign language will help my students navigate practical experiences with the language, I also recognise the immense importance of writing and reading in the foreign language. Building on these skills will help students at higher education institutions navigate academic tasks and produce texts that deepen their understanding of the language. In this paper, I consider how I can build on my students' writing skills.

In the past decade, a literature review has shown that wikis can be an excellent tool to assist students to develop their writing skills. Wikis are a collection of interlinked web pages which can be freely edited by any user. They allow for a collaborative authorship model, where users can contribute to a text together, edit the text and have a discussion in the thread of comments on the page. When used within a classroom setting, this encourages collaboration, increases students motivation and ultimately improves their writing skill.

In this paper, I focus on the role of wikis in supporting students to improve their writing skills in a foreign language. I explore relevant literature and research findings centered around this topic and consider how these findings can be used within my teaching practice.

Literature Review

Kuteeva (2011) found that wikis encourage students to pay attention to structure and grammatical coherence. This finding was also seen in a study conducted by Alshumaimeri (2011), who found that students who used wikis while learning English as a Second Language improved their writing quality.

It has been noted that wikis are particularly recognised for their collaborative value - "using a wiki, students can experience writing as a social process" (Alshumaimeri, 2011, p.757). Researchers have found that the

ability to collaborate improves students' writing performance. For instance, Xiao and Lucking (2008) conducted a study where students' peers assessed their writing. Each student had to write a 1000 word article and posted them online to a shared Wikibook. There were then two rounds of peer assessment, where peers suggested edits to their peers' articles. At the end of the study, the researchers assessed the impact on students writing. They found that the students writing performance had improved and that students had increased motivation and satisfaction in the collaborative process of the wiki. In another study, Storch (2005) analysed texts written by pairs of students to texts that had been written by individual students. The analysis found that while the texts produced by pairs were shorter in length, they had better organisation, used a wider range of vocabulary and used more complex sentence structures. The study also highlighted some limitations with using collaborative writing. Some students were hesitant to point out mistakes that their partner may have made while other students said the collaborative nature made it harder to concentrate on the task. However, these limitations can be addressed by mentoring from the teacher.

The findings of these studies support Vygotsky's theory of collaborative learning. Chao and Lo (2009) detail this connection, explaining that Vygotsky (1978) stressed that in order for students to learn, they should interact with others who serve as mediators to assist the learner build on their knowledge. Through using wikis, peers correct and contribute to shared texts, assisting each other to learn. The collaborative nature of wikis, therefore, are an important factor in contributing to an improvement of writing skills. This is aligned with a current trend in learning English as a Second Language (ESL) which advocates for the idea that learners learn a foreign language better when participating in a joint rather than individual activity (Wang, 2014). This is supported by findings presented by Elola and Oskoz (2010), who found that when students engaged in collaborative writing using wikis, their writing skills improved as compared to when they engaged in individual writing.

Many of the studies that have been conducted on the role of wikis in supporting the development of foreign language writing skills focus on general writing tasks. Marzec-Stawiarska (2014) recognised this and carried out a study that focused on the role of wikis in supporting the development of academic writing skills in a foreign language. Students in the study attended an academic writing lecture and were then assigned a task to correct a text on a wiki and then engage in a conversation with peers about the accuracy of the text. In doing so, they exercised the corrective and analytical skills students need in academic writing. The study found that students recognised the benefits of wikis in boosting their academic writing skills.

Most research studies focus on the impact that co-constructing the body of a wiki text has on students' writing skill. It is important to note that the discussion and comments section of wiki can also play a large role in improving writing. Nami and Marandi (2013) focus on this angle. In their study, they analysed students' responses to wiki posts in the discussion section of the wiki. They found that when contributing to the discussion thread, students paid specific attention to the form of their sentences and the vocabulary they chose. This shows that the students' commitment to writing high quality texts is not limited to formal articles that form to the body of the wiki, but rather are committed to maintaining a high quality of writing across the entire wiki.

In addition to improving the quality of writing - both general and academic, research finds that using wikis also improves students' attitude towards writing in a foreign language. For instance, Ducate, Anderson and Moreno (2011) reviewed the findings of three different studies conducted on students studying French, Spanish and German as a foreign language. The review concluded that all students' motivation to write in the language they were learning increased. With increased motivation comes increased writing production, which in turn leads to students practicing and improving their writing skills. Meanwhile, Nakamaru (2011) found that using wikis could improve students' attitudes towards writing; college students within her research study showed enhanced attitudes towards writing and collaboration after using wikis within the classroom. Similarly, Wang (2014) notes that Chen (2008) found that a group of students who used wikis to engage in collaborative writing noted had a more favourable attitude towards learning English as a foreign language as compared to students who had not engaged in collaborative learning through wikis.

It is important to note that a few studies suggest that there are some limitations to using wikis to improve students' writing performance. Coniam and Mak (2008) conducted a study on high school students in Hong Kong. They found that while students' motivation and amount of written content improved when they used wikis, some students' accuracy in writing in the language decreased. In addition, while student motivation improves when they use wikis within the classroom, some studies found that students had negative perceptions about the time management and work distribution (Ducate et al, 2011). As wikis are collaborative in nature, some studies have noted that students believe that work has been distributed and conducted unfairly, with some contributing more than others.

Raised Awareness and Possible Interventions

The literature review shows that wikis can greatly enhance students' writing skills. However, research also highlights the role of the teacher in ensuring that students benefit from wikis. For instance, Özdemi and Aydın (2015) argue that “teachers should use wikis and channel the potential of wikis into their teaching practices to motivate their students regarding writing activities” (p.2362).

In addition, it will be important to equip learners with the digital literacy skills they need to navigate and use wikis. By assisting students not just with the language development, but also the development of the students digital literacy skills, teachers will help build on students 21st century skills as well as their language skills. Ducate et al (2011) note that before beginning a wiki centred project, it is essential to train students to use the tools within the wiki including how to contribute and respond to feedback.

Indeed, Ducate et al (2011) present a variety of ways in which teachers can ensure that wikis are effectively used to improve writing within the foreign language classroom. This includes setting up projects and assessments with clear guidelines and instructions including information about how students will be assessed. This allows students to understand their roles within the wiki and know what their expectations are. In addition, they argue that it is important to show students how to critically assess and contribute to their peers' work in a way that is respectful and constructive. Finally, they add that tasks should be designed in a way that ensures they are truly collaborative and not simply a task which can be divided up and assigned to a different member of the group to carry out.

I will keep these guidelines in mind when designing my own tasks within my classroom. The literature review has shown that collaborative tasks are central to improving learning outcomes. In order to ensure that collaboration is supporting students, it may be necessary to design tasks that pair learners who have better writing skills with those who have weaker skills. In collaboration together, the stronger students can scaffold the weaker ones, improving the understanding and accuracy of both sets of students. Continuously reviewing and overseeing the collaborative project will also be important to ensure that students are supported both in their academic progress and with their digital skills.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that wikis can play a huge role in improving learners' foreign language writing skills. It has also highlighted the importance of collaboration when using wikis to best support learning. As a future research undertaking, it may be valuable to consider how collaborative learning in digital mediums can best be supported by teachers. In exploring this, I can use my knowledge of wikis and the benefit they have on writing to design more collaborative projects that can benefit my students.

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