

Jarosław Krajka
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University,
Lublin, Poland

**Teaching Writing Online –
The Implementation of Wikis as Online Environments
for Collaborative Writing Instruction**

ABSTRACT

The paper presents an overview of a pilot study aiming at developing university students' writing competence with the use of wiki as an authoring environment for Task-Based Language Teaching. Wiki was used to design pre-task, task and post-task sequences which were implemented in varied modes of work when teaching English to a group of intermediate students at the Department of German Studies, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland.

Keywords: wiki, writing online, collaboration

1. Introduction

The emergence of such Web 2.0 collaboration tools as wikis and online word processors has opened up interesting opportunities for classroom instruction, with easy access and versatile uses. It is especially the teaching of writing that can significantly benefit from the task-based instruction implemented in the computer-mediated environment. The blend of face-to-face and distance, off-line and online, in-class and out-of-class tasks, all authored within a wiki or a word processor, will result in increased student awareness of the Web 2.0 publishing tools and their greater maturity as writers.

Teaching Writing Online – The Implementation of Wikis ...

The aim of the present paper is to discuss the applicability of task-based writing instruction mediated via wikis. To meet that aim, task-based lesson sequences were designed for two separate groups of university students of English. The chapter opens up with a detailed discussion of wikis and continues to the presentation of the research study into the use of selected Web 2.0 collaboration tools as authoring environments for foreign language writing instruction.

2. Wikis as Web 2.0 collaborative environments

With a strong focus on using the language for communication and negotiation of meaning in contemporary language teaching, the need for more and more versatile communication tools enabling teacher-student and student-student collaboration has become obvious. One such example are wikis, second-generation online collaborative environments (Godwin-Jones, 2003), a freely expandable collection of interlinked webpages (Leuf and Cunningham, 2001) generated with text, images, sound and similar media objects as well as hyperlinks to internal and external resources (Kolbitsch and Maurer, 2006).

Owing to such features as browser-based access, immediate content posting, RSS feeds or email alerts notifications about the new content, low graphic use and modular construction (Schwartz *et al.*, 2004), lack of prior chronological ordering (Lamb, 2004), easy setup and editing (Kilickaya, 2008), wikis are claimed to promote collaboration among students. The potential drawbacks of the tool may include graphical minimalism, 'wiki vandalism' resulting in students purposefully destroying others' wikis or disorganised, chaotic structure of wiki-based student products.

Recent studies investigated emerging technological developments in computer-mediated communication such as wikis, blogs and podcasting (Thorne and Payne, 2005), even though the researchers' interest in wikis is much less pronounced than in the other two spheres (as indicated in state-of-the-art research collections such as Thomas, 2009).

Ahern (2008) puts forward wikis as one of the many tools that would create authentic experiences for the student to cognitively engage the content by actively trying to make sense and integrate the experience. With wikis as a collaborative environment, Ahern's argument goes, students incorporate content into their cognitive repertoire. Finkbeiner and Knierim (2008), on the other hand, used a wiki for peer editing and feedback in the process of development of strategic competence following the ABCs Model of Intercultural Understanding and Communication, finding it effective due to its simplicity and reliability of operation.

In terms of the learning environment, for Shucart *et al.* (2008), a wiki was an important element of a dedicated browser-based CALL lab, tailored to textbooks and needs of students using it. The incorporation of cutting-edge Web 2.0 innovations, including wikis, all integrated in the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment, made openings for tailoring language instruction to provide conditions for more effective autonomous learning.

Emigh and Herring's (2005) research suggests that wikis are a desirable learning environment, given that students are presented with the purposes of a wiki-writing activity and, where appropriate, peer and expert-editing protocols are carefully structured to match desired learning outcomes and final writing products. Elia (2009) used a wiki as an environment to involve learners in the creation of a Webglish dictionary (dictionary of current Internet jargon), to familiarize students with the new linguistic trends and expand their virtual lexicon knowledge. Lund and Smordal (2006) aimed to foster collective learning through the use of a wiki, concluding that "working with wikis involves an epistemological shift, from individually acquired to collectively created knowledge" (p. 44).

The specific writing tasks that are enabled by wikis to be implemented in a computer-assisted language classroom are brainstorming (Challborn and Reimann, 2005), writing real Wikipedia entries with peer review (Carvin, 2007), student journaling (Higdon, 2005, Kilickaya, 2008), constructing personal portfolios (Higdon, 2005), collaborative creation of a mini-dictionary or a glossary of

Teaching Writing Online – The Implementation of Wikis ...

specialist terms (Elia, 2009), writing a collaborative story (Sharma and Barrett, 2007; Kilickaya, 2008), supplying scaffolding and feedback in writing activities (Franklin and van Harmelen, 2007).

Taken into account a wide variety of applications of wikis as promoted by the authors given above, it was interesting to design a study to use a wiki as an authoring environment for focus-on-form task-based instruction, to verify the applicability of the tool and see its effect on students' willingness to write in a foreign language. The present study replicates another work (Krajka, forthcoming), which was set up in the context of online word processors as collaborative writing environments.

3. The study

3.1. The aim of the research

On the instructional level, the major objective of the study was to verify the applicability of the collaborative aspect of task-based approach to writing instruction. Wikis as Web 2.0 collaborative environments for writing instruction were investigated, as well as the approach to teaching writing as a collaborative experience.

Therefore, the specific research questions in the study were as follows:

1. Will focus-on-form writing tasks get added value from the application of selected Web 2.0 collaborative tools?
2. What are students' attitudes to learning writing in collaboration?
3. To what extent are wikis conducive for online collaboration?

3.2. The participants and the setting

The study encompassed two groups of intermediate students, 20 and 22 students respectively, at the Department of German Studies, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. Both groups were roughly parallel in terms of language proficiency. Each week a 20-minute slot was allotted exclusively to writing instruction, while the remaining part of the class was conducted by the regular teacher and

focused on the remaining language skills. One group participated in instruction assisted by online word processor (Krajka, forthcoming), while the other used wiki as a learning environment.

The study took place in the Internet lab of the Faculty of Humanities, which was equipped with 18 state-of-the-art workstations, a networked printer, a teacher computer connected to the LCD projector and broadband Internet connection. A dedicated Moodle space at the Virtual Campus of MCSU Applied Linguistics was used to publish sample materials as input for in-class analysis, as well as practical tasks for collaborative work. Students were set up dedicated email accounts connected with the Moodle accounts, provided with all login IDs and passwords on the first meeting.

3.3. Design and procedure

Out of the whole array of Web 2.0 collaboration tools, wikis had been selected to design a pre-task, task and language focus sequence (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2006) that would be implemented in varied modes of work (face-to-face in-class, groupwork out-of-class, self-study out-of-class). The rationale behind the selection of wikis was that they are apparently simplistic in nature, thus offering potential for lower-level language classes. The study used the wiki embedded in the Moodle platform to prevent unwanted users and possible 'wiki vandalism'.

The present study was executed within the framework of action research (Wallace, 2002), a systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvements of some aspects of professional practice. Since this particular research method is generally perceived as a way in which teachers can solve professional problems and improve their practice through reflection-on-action, it seemed appropriate for the tertiary foreign language teaching context with elements of ESP. The data collection procedures involved a diagnostic writing test, informal interviews investigating learners' needs, coursebook analysis, in-class observation and student attitude questionnaires.

The research process started with diagnosing learners' needs from multifold perspectives, together with analysis of the pre-test and the

Teaching Writing Online – The Implementation of Wikis ...

coursebook to arrive at the approximated language level of learners. Following this, the teaching program was centred around on the genre of the letter (both formal and informal), and 20-minute wiki-based teaching units were designed. Together with the genre, wiki-based activities used a set of situations connected with a university summer school (applying for, enquiring, complaining about, clarifying details – after Norris *et al.*, 1998), as well as different forms of letters (a letter of application for a course enrolment, an informal letter requesting further information, a letter telling a story, a letter of application) and matched with language tasks providing necessary focus on form (Long, 1997; Ellis, 2003).

3.4. The presentation and discussion of results

The study commenced with investigating students' technical conditions, computer skills, attitude towards the Internet, use of the Web, as well as awareness of wikis as collaboration tools. All students reported having a networked computer with a printer at home, with most spending between 1 and 3 hours every day online. Students' familiarity with some of the online tools selected for the study varied: instant messaging and Wikipedia consultation proved most widespread, while creating and storing documents online was reported very rarely. Students reported wide reading of Wikipedia articles while never commenting nor changing them, as well as using Microsoft Word to create documents while never composing documents online.

The major focus of the present study was to try to investigate whether focus-on-form writing tasks would get added value from the application of wikis. Authoring focus-on-form tasks in this environment allowed to move the instruction beyond the confines of the classroom, extending learners' exposure to the target language. This was evidenced by the analysis of Moodle logs as well as the final products, which all indicated the use of the resources by particular students, and for that reason applying such a blended learning approach to task-based writing is quite plausible.

The post-study questionnaire aimed also at gathering data to answer research question 2, namely the participants' attitudes to writing in collaboration. Even though in general students had not written in collaboration before, but only participated in error correction tasks and peer editing, they expressed their generally positive attitude to collaborative writing, liking the fact that a part of the job is done by a collaborator (80.2%) and that they can learn from their peers (20.1%).

The third research question concerned the extent to which wikis as electronic environments are conducive to online collaboration. Wikis were perceived as easy to use by over 75% of the students, however, only few found the in-class explanation of how to use them sufficient for subsequent individual work. As the most important problem the participants enumerated lack of help, while insufficient formatting options, English-only interface and account logging problems were perceived as rather marginal. From the instructional viewpoint, the applicability of wikis was only partially successful – even though students could, generally, collaborate on documents to produce final versions of focus-on-form tasks, the in-built Moodle's wiki proved to be rather cumbersome, with too small editing screen, occasional page coding problems resulting in blank or disappearing pages, finally, not fully functional page history retrieval. For that matter, evaluation of wiki farms such as PBworks, Wikia or Wikispaces would be needed to reflect on an external wiki solution for future studies of this kind.

4. Implementation guidelines for the future

The study showed the need for supplementing communicative interaction by instruction that focuses on form and raises awareness of functional, grammatical and lexical issues (Rosell-Aguilar, 2005). In terms of a Task-Based collaborative classroom, Willis's (2000) notion of varying levels of teacher control, ranging from monitoring and encouraging communication (Task), managing interaction (Report) to orchestrating practice of new words, phrases and patterns (Language

Teaching Writing Online – The Implementation of Wikis ...

Focus), proved to be highly important in a technology-mediated collaborative environment.

As for the types of task, it was interesting to observe collaborative rather than competitive, two-way convergent tasks (Richards and Rodgers, 2001), which seemed highly adequate in terms of building language awareness and providing focus on form. The implementation of Task-Based activities regarded interaction patterns, apart from goal/outcome, pre-task preparation time, interaction patterns and post-task activities, as vital parameters for task adaptation (Willis, 2006). As indicated by the study, collaborative task-based writing can particularly benefit from manipulating with interaction patterns and student roles, all facilitated by the collaborative technology used in the study.

The study was designed to occupy 20-minute face-to-face slots during a longer period of 6 weeks, in order to maximise students' exposure to the online learning environment and enable more systematic coverage of writing genres and processes. However, for logistical reasons, the slots proved to be much too short. Making students organised after the regular class, managing computers, logging to Moodle, retrieving URLs, logins and passwords, all took up much of the slot's time, necessitating relegating some of the tasks for out-class work. It might be more effective to have 3 longer face-to-face sessions instead, for instance every second week, while continuing task-based collaborative writing in the distance learning mode.

5. Conclusion

The applicability of Task-Based Language Teaching in collaborative writing instruction at the tertiary level as exemplified in the present study does not need to be justified. Even though the awareness of benefits of collaborative writing has to be established among students, but once it is, this particular approach is a useful device for teaching writing.

The application of wikis as Web 2.0 tools facilitating collaboration and publishing has helped to reflect upon the process of teaching language skills in the TBLT framework. As indicated by the study, the collaborative functions of the tool enabled such writing tasks as story completion, focused editing, peer revision, structural multiple-choice selection. Thus, wiki has interesting potential for balancing process and product approaches (Raimes, 1991; Bruton, 2005) and providing necessary focus on form.

References

- Ahern, T.C. 2008. CMC for language acquisition. In F. Zhang and B. Barber (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Computer-enhanced Language Acquisition and Learning*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, pp. 295-306.
- Bruton, A. 2005. Process Writing and Communicative-Task-Based-Instruction: Many Common Features, but More Common Limitations? In: *TESL-EJ* 9/3, 1-31. <http://tesl-ej.org/ej35/a2.pdf>.
- Carvin, A. 2007. Identifying best practices for student Wikipedia projects. In: *Learning.now*, 10, (2007), http://www.pbs.org/teachers/learning.now/2007/10/identifying_best_practices_for.html (accessed 14 July 2009).
- Challborn, C. / Reimann, T. 2005. Wiki products: a comparison. In: *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 6, (2), <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/229/312> (accessed 14 July 2009).
- Elia, A. 2009. Can a collaborative WiKi Weblish Dictionary project help academic writing of ICT language learners? In: I. González-Pueyo, C. Foz Gil, M. Jaime Siso and M. José Luzón Marco (eds.), *Teaching Academic and Professional English Online*. Bern: Peter Lang, pp. 153-180.
- Ellis, R. 2003. *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. 2006. The Methodology of Task-Based Teaching. In: *Asian EFL Journal* 8/3, 19-45.
- Finkbeiner, C. / Knierim, M. 2008. Developing L2 strategic competence online. In: F. Zhang and B. Barber (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Computer-enhanced Language Acquisition and Learning*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, pp. 377-402.
- Franklin, T. / van Harmelen, M. 2007. Web 2.0 for content for learning and teaching in higher education. In: *Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)* report,

Teaching Writing Online – The Implementation of Wikis ...

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/digitalrepositories/web2-content-learning-and-teaching.pdf> (accessed 14 July 2009).

- Godwin-Jones, B. 2003. Blogs and wikis: environments for on-line collaboration. In: *Language Learning & Technology*, 7, (2), 12-16.
- Higdon, J. 2005. Teaching, learning, and other uses for wikis in academia. In: *Campus Technology*, 15 November 2005, <http://campustechnology.com/Articles/2005/11/Teaching-Learning-and-Other-Uses-for-Wikis-in-Academia.aspx/> (accessed 14 July 2009).
- Kilickaya, F. 2008. PBwiki: Web 2.0 tool for collaboration. In: *Teaching English with Technology*, 8, (2), http://www.iatefl.org.pl/call/j_techie31.htm (accessed 14 July 2009).
- Kolbitsch, J. / Maurer, H. 2006. The transformation of the Web: how emerging communities shape the information we consume. In: *Journal of Universal Computer Science*, 12, (2), 187-213.
- Krajka, J. forthcoming. Web 2.0 Online Collaboration Tools as Environments for Task-Based Writing Instruction. Manuscript submitted for publication in *Research in the Teaching of English*.
- Lamb, B. 2004. Wide open spaces: wikis, ready or not. In: *EDUCAUSE Review*, 39, (5), 36-48.
- Leuf, B. / Cunningham, W. 2001. *The Wiki Way: Quick Collaboration on the Web*. Boston: Addison Wesley.
- Long, M. H. 1997. Focus on Form in Task-Based Language Teaching. Paper presented at Fourth Annual McGraw-Hill Satellite Teleconference, <http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/foreignlang/conf/first.htm>.
- Lund, A. / Smordal, O. 2006. Is there a space for the teacher in a wiki? In: *Proceedings of the 2006 International Symposium on Wikis (WikiSym '06)*, 37-46. Odense, Denmark: ACM Press, <http://www.wikisym.org/ws2006/proceedings/p37.pdf> (accessed 14 July 2009).
- Norris, J. / Brown, J. / Hudson, T. / Yoshioka, J. 1998. *Designing Second Language Performance Assessments*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Raimes, A. 1991. Out of the Woods: Emerging Traditions in the Teaching of Writing. In: *TESOL Quarterly* 25/3, 407-430.
- Richards, J. C. / Rodgers, T. S. 2001. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosell-Aguilar, F. 2005. Task Design for Audiographic Conferencing: Promoting Beginner Oral Interaction in Distance Language Learning. In: *Computer-Assisted Language Learning*, 18 (5), 417-442.
- Schwartz, L. / Clark, S. / Cossarin, M. / Rudolph, J. 2004. Educational wikis: features and selection criteria. In: *International Review of Research in Open and Distance*

- Learning*, 5, (1), <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/163/244> (accessed 14 July 2009).
- Sharma, P. / Barrett, B. 2007. *Blended Learning. Using Technology in and Beyond the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Limited.
- Shucart, S.A. / Mishina, T. / Takahashi, M. / Enokizono, T. 2008. The CALL lab as a facilitator for autonomous learning. In: F. Zhang and B. Barber (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Computer-enhanced Language Acquisition and Learning*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, pp. 483-496.
- Thomas, M. (ed.) 2009. *Handbook of Research on Web 2.0 and Second Language Learning*. Hershey, New York: Information Science Reference.
- Thorne, S. L. / Payne, J. S. 2005. Internet-mediated text and multi-modal expression in foreign language education. In: *CALPER Working Papers, No.5, June 2005, Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER), The Pennsylvania State University*, <http://calper.la.psu.edu/publication.php?page=wps5> (accessed 14 July 2009).
- Wallace, M. J. 2002. *Action Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Willis, J. 1996. A Flexible Framework for Task-based Learning. In: J. Willis / D. Willis (eds.), *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Heinemann, 52-62.
- Willis, J. 2000. A Holistic Approach to Task-based Course Design. In: *The Language Teacher* 24/2, <http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2000/02/willis>.
- Willis, J. 2006. Adapting Your Text Book for Task-Based Teaching. Presentation given at IATEFL 2006 conference, Harrogate, 9 April 2006.