

Using Wikis To Develop Summary Writing Abilities Of Students In An EFL Class

Saovapa Wichadee, Bangkok University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

The research studied and compared students' English summary writing ability before and after they were taught through wiki, a powerful tool, promoting collaborative learning environments among students. The research design is a kind of one group pre-test post-test. The target group was 35 students who enrolled in EN 111 course (Fundamental English I) in the first semester of the academic year 2010 at Bangkok University. Students in groups of four or five designed a wikispace and worked together for eight weeks in order to produce five pieces of summary written work. The members in each group worked through editing and revision on web pages until the team got a final paper and submitted that to the teacher for evaluation. The instruments used in this study included (1) summary writing tests, (2) a questionnaire surveying their attitudes toward this instruction, and (3) a reflection on cooperative learning through wikis. The results revealed that after the students were taught through wikis pages, their English summary writing mean score of the posttest was higher than that of the pretest and they had positive attitudes towards this learning. Regarding cooperative learning experience, most students thought that this is a new experience to work with the members on-line. They worked very hard; it took many times to read and reread the members' postings in order to add new information.

Keywords: online learning; web-based instruction; wikis

1. INTRODUCTION

Good technological skill is one desirable characteristic Thai graduates are to possess due to Thailand Qualifications Framework for higher education. They need to be able to make effective use of information and communications technology in analyzing issues and obtaining information, and in making presentations. Therefore, many types of on-line learning such as discussion forums, synchronous CMC, and emails are more introduced to foreign language teaching. There is an obvious support from most educational institutions on the use of computer technology as a medium and tool for language learning. Many institutions have attempted to incorporate online reading materials and activities in their second or foreign language curricula. In recent years, wikis have been increasingly integrated into second language (L2) instruction to promote active learning because they can accommodate the collaborative discussion of ideas well.

Wikis are collective websites where a large number of participants are allowed to create or modify pages using their Web browser. The wiki students can share multimedia presentations about what they perceive. This concept is in accordance with what Godwin-Jones (2003) states, "Wikis are intensely collaborative. Such a system only works with users serious about collaborating and willing to follow the group conventions and practices." Such responsibility is representative of characteristics associated with autonomy among language learners. The final product is the work of several students. Therefore, collaboration is necessity as they have to learn from each other. While working together, students generate online materials that reflect what they have learned and show connections between their prior knowledge, the course content, and their personal experiences. Matthew & Felvagi (2008) indicates the impact of wikis on students' learning that as students contribute to the wiki pages, their reflections on the process and their interview comments reveal that they spent time reading and rereading the pages. Reading and rereading the wiki pages resulted in students building on each others' work. Unlike individual writing assignments, posting to the wiki pages required students to be cognizant of their peers' contributions. By doing this, the role of the teacher has been changed to be a facilitator. According to Weimer (2002), the teacher guides and facilitates

learning, empowering students to discover knowledge and learn from each other in a controlled learning environment.

To facilitate language learning, wikis can be used to get students engaged in collaborative writing. Mackey (2007) believes that this kind of learning builds online communities where students work together to achieve common goals and objectives related to the assignments. Each group will produce shared knowledge that benefits everyone. The advantages of wikis are when structured for collaborative coursework, they promote peer interaction and facilitate the sharing and distribution of knowledge and expertise amongst a group of learners (Lipponen, 2002). The exercise becomes a meaningful task that cannot be done by a single student; it has to be done by many students working together. In classrooms, students may not have time to read and build on each other's work; however, in collaborative online environments, they are given this opportunity (Hewitt & Scardamalia, 1998).

There are many researchers conducting the studies to investigate how web-based tools could help develop their students in terms of cooperative skill and language proficiency. Apart from chat rooms, learning logs, and on-line learning, wikis are a kind of web-facilitated instruction which was most employed in many language teaching in recent years. Many studies investigated wikis effectiveness in language improvement. For example, Mak & Coniam (2008) examined authentic writing through the use of wikis by Year 7 ESL learners in a secondary school in Hong Kong. The wikis were used as a collaborative writing platform to produce-with minimal input and support from their teachers-wiki content that describes the different facilities and features of their school. Over a period of two months, as an integral part of their ESL homework, groups of students designed and put together, through a series of successive drafts, a description of their secondary school which they had joined from primary school a few months previously. After an initial overview of how wikis function in terms of editing and revision, the paper describes the process one group of learners went through. Samples are provided of the students' intermediate and final drafts, as well as snapshots of the amount and the types of writing produced at each stage. The students' final draft became a printed brochure of their "new" school to be distributed to parents. In the light of this real "outcome", the paper discusses the place of authentic writing, situated within the domains of creativity and task-based learning, in a school's ESL programme.

Similarly, Lee (2010) used wikis with 35 university students at the beginning level who contributed to wiki pages over a period of 14 weeks. The affordances and constraints of using wikis for collaborative writing were drawn from data triangulation: group wiki pages, student surveys, and final interviews. The results show that creating wikis had a positive impact on the development of students' writing skills through collaborative engagement. Scaffolding through peer feedback played a crucial role in the L2 writing process through which students not only helped each other organize the content but also made error corrections for language accuracy. In addition, the results indicate that task type affected the amount of writing produced by each group.

Two studies were conducted to compare wikis with other learning tools. The first research study compared online wikis collaboration with more conventional face-to-face group collaboration in report writing (Colye, 2007). Following completion of the reports, professional subject matter experts rated the quality of the reports according to specified content and format criteria. Results indicated there was no difference in the quality of reports related to the method of collaboration, suggesting that wikis are an effective collaboration method; face-to-face collaboration is more efficient in terms of communication among group members and is sometimes preferred because it is familiar; wikis collaboration allowed students to work at their own pace and to easily see the work of other group members; students adapted wikis capabilities to their previous methods of group work; and there was not a significant difference in students' experiences of learning and community between the two methods. Chen (2008) examined the effectiveness of applying wikis in terms of students' learning outcomes, investigated the changes regarding students' attitude towards language learning, and explored the communication channels in wikis that facilitate students' interaction in the e-learning environment as well as students' experience of using wikis. Results showed that there existed statistically significant difference between the group with and without wikis, which means the group applying wikis performed better in listening and reading abilities. When compared with the non-wiki group, the wiki group had a more favorable attitude towards the class, their English ability improvement, and cooperative learning. Moreover, the students agreed that wikis helped them complete their assignment. They felt comfortable in the wiki environment, and it was easy for them to use wikis.

At Bangkok University, undergraduate students in the nine faculties: Humanities, Business Administration, Accounting, Communication Arts, Fine and Applied Arts, Sciences and Technology, Laws, Economics, and Engineering, are required to take at least three English courses. Each course consists of four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is found that most students always get low scores in the writing tests, especially in their summaries. Summarization skill is considered important in higher education level because students have to condense information from journals, textbooks and other bibliographical sources in their own field of study. Even if the ability to summarize information is an essential skill, the summaries written by the students were of poor quality. The majority of the sentences they wrote were grammatically incorrect, and the students had difficulty determining which information was relevant and necessary for inclusion in their summaries. As well, students included copied text in many of the sentences they wrote. Finding new techniques to enhance students' learning abilities and motivation was necessary. Among various teaching techniques, educational technology is considered a new alternative to create interesting and active learning. It would be great if an English course at Bangkok University introduced students to wiki technology. So, the researcher decided to employ this learning tool with one group of students enrolled in EN 111 to make this class more challenging. Therefore, one of the objectives in this study was to explore whether collaborative on-line wikis resulted in the improved summary writing abilities of an entire class. In order to determine whether the pre- to post-test performance improvement was due to the online instruction, a one-group pretest posttest design was used. Another objective of this study was to find out the participants' attitudes toward instruction through wikis; the result would reveal whether students perceived the online collaborative activities as effective or satisfactory ways of learning. The last objective was to investigate the obstacles from the students' point of view.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

This study employed one group pre-test post-test design. The population was 5,223 first-year students enrolled in Fundamental English course in the first semester of 2010 academic year. There were 135 sections altogether. Since students were already assigned to their sections, the cluster sampling was employed to get one section. So, there were 35 students from one section participating in this study.

2.2 Instruments

The impact on students' learning was evidenced by three instruments including two summary writing tests, a questionnaire surveying their attitudes towards the instruction and a reflection on obstacles while learning through wikis.

First, the English summary writing tests designed in parallel form were administered as pre-test and post-test. Both tests required the students to read three short articles and write a summary in about 3-5 sentences. Time allowed for both tests was 120 minutes. The items of the tests were constructed, verified for content validity by three experts and piloted with one class in the previous semester.

Second, to learn how well the instruction through wikis was accepted by the students and how it made an impact on their knowledge as well as their belief in their capabilities, a questionnaire containing 10 items with a choice of five rating scale responses for each was distributed to them after the posttest. This questionnaire was designed and piloted with 30 students in the summer class after they had participated in an 8-week pilot learning. Based on that feedback, the revisions had been made to prevent any misinterpretations.

The third instrument was a reflection on cooperative learning through wikis. All students were encouraged to post their experience of working with their peers on their wiki page at the end of the course.

2.3 Teaching and Learning Procedure

On the first two weeks, students were taught how to summarize the story in the classroom through "Mind Mapping" technique in order to find out the topic and important details. Next, students were asked to form a team of

4-5 members and constructed wikis pages within a safe password-protected environment for students to work together. Then they were assigned to read five articles from Chapter 1-5 in the textbook *Passages* (second edition) and write a summary of 3-5 sentences on wiki pages. Each group of students was responsible for the construction of knowledge. The process started with a member's posting his/her summary, followed by a revision by other members. Once any information was corrected, students needed to state reasons for changing it. Other than that, each member can give suggestions to their group through wiki pages. At the end of each task, the teacher gave the feedback or suggestions for writing improvement. Postings included five pieces of summaries from what they read in the textbook throughout the course (weeks 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11)

2.4 Data Analysis

Two teachers checked the summary writing tests using the same criteria. The writing scores were calculated for mean. The inter-rater reliability coefficients of the two teacher raters in pre-and post-test using Pearson Correlation were 0.92 and 0.95 respectively. Two scores from both raters were combined and divided by two to find out the mean score of each participant. The data obtained from the tests and the questionnaire surveying students' attitudes were analyzed quantitatively through descriptive statistics and dependent t-test. Regarding their written reflection, the data were grouped through content analysis, presented with frequency in table form.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

Research Question 1 - To what extent did the students improve their English summary writing abilities after learning through wikis pages in groups? This research question explored the effects of using wikis by examining the students' English summary writing scores.

To find out whether the students improved significantly in their writing abilities, the pre- and post-test mean scores were compared by using a paired samples t-test. The result indicated that the post-test mean score was obviously higher than that obtained from the pre-test at a significance level. (See Table 1)

Table 1 Mean Scores of the Pre-test and Post-test

	\bar{X}	S. D.	n	t	Sig
Pre-test	15.28	4.65	35	11.83	.000
Post-test	21.69	3.59	35		

Research Question 2 – What were their attitudes towards this learning method?

The students were asked to express their attitudes towards learning through wikis. Table 2 shows the overall attitude towards this learning method which was positive ($\bar{X} = 4.03$). When considering each items, it was found that the highest mean score was on no. 3 (This learning allowed me to see my peers' writing, so I can use it to improve my own work, $\bar{X} = 4.23$), followed by no.6 (This learning gave me more responsibility, $\bar{X} = 4.11$) and no. 5, 7 (Through this learning, the students help each other to learn and develop cooperative skill with other, $\bar{X} = 4.08$). However, the item that had the least mean score was no. 8 (This learning helps me to improve summary writing skill, $\bar{X} = 3.80$). The detailed information can be seen in Table 2.

Research Questions 3 – What did the students get in terms of cooperative learning through wikis?

As for qualitative data, the students were asked to express their feelings on working with the team members by posting them on their wikis pages. It was found that 16 out of 35 participants agreed that wiki was a new learning experience for them; they could work with the team members on-line surprisingly, while 12 out of 35 participants said that they worked very hard with the team members to get the best writing; it took many times to read and reread the postings in order to add new information. 10 students believed that the success came only from cooperation of the team members. Some of them stated that they turned to be more responsible because late posting could affect other members and work could not be done in time. Two students stated that computer was the cause of their late posting even though they wanted to help the group, but it's not convenient.

Table 2 Students' Attitudes towards Learning English through Wikis

Statement	\bar{X}	S.D.	meaning
1. This learning offered useful advice and suggestions from peers and teacher.	4.06	.48	positive
2. Suggestion or advice from peers/teacher enabled me to understand summary writing.	3.86	.73	positive
3. This learning allowed me to see my peers' writing, so I can use it to improve my own work.	4.23	.73	positive
4. This learning helped to save my time; we didn't need to meet in order to work together.	3.97	.71	positive
5. Through this learning, the students help each other to learn.	4.08	.89	positive
6. This learning gave me more responsibility.	4.11	.68	positive
7. This learning enabled me to develop cooperative skill with other.	4.08	.51	positive
8. This learning helped me to improve summary writing skill.	3.80	.76	positive
9. Working together through wiki web pages made learning more interesting.	4.06	.76	positive
10. I became prudent after learning by this way.	4.06	.48	positive
Total	4.03	.50	positive

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research finding indicates that wikis are effective learning tools that may contribute to the improvement of students' writing skill. It goes along with many previous studies (Chen, 2008; Mak & Coniam, 2008; Lee, 2010) and substantiates the principle of wikis learning that collaboration is necessity as they have to learn from each other. The significant improvement on the participants' score was due to the fact that students realized that their written work was read, reviewed, and corrected by all team members. Collaboration plays an important role; it encourages them to learn from others and write more carefully. Furthermore, the working process is systematic and becomes a means for reconsidering both content and organization. It helps the students to raise their awareness of creating a good summary. Obviously, this learning process encouraged the students to take responsibility for their own learning, improving motivation. Moreover, a positive opinion on this kind of learning ($\bar{X} = 4.03$) suggested that they accepted wikis. Most students agreed that seeing their peers' writing could improve their own work. They gained knowledge through discussion on-line. So, the more students worked together, the more they could improve themselves in writing. However, the result concerning reflection indicated that most of them had a favorable learning experience. There might be some possible confounding variables that could affect the students' improvement such as inconvenience of using computers and time limit. In spite of this obstacle, the effectiveness of wikis tool for writing improvement was justified by higher mean score. So, the findings of the study supported the use of wikis as part of English learning.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Assoc. Prof. Saovapa Wichadee is now working as a full-time teacher at the Language Institute, Bangkok University, Thailand. Her research interest includes teaching methodology in EFL, students' learning styles, and teacher self-development. She has experienced in writing many textbooks and instructional materials, such as Writing for Business Purposes, English for Art and Design, and Business Conversation.

REFERENCES

- Chen, Yu-ching. (2008). The effect of applying wikis in an English as a foreign language (EFL) class in Taiwan. Ph.D., University of Central Florida, 133 pages; AAT 3335337.
- Coyle, James E. (2007). Wikis in the college classroom: A comparative study of online and face-to-face group collaboration at a private liberal arts university. Kent State University, 273 pages; AAT 3263183.
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2003). Blogs and wikis: Environments for on-line collaboration. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(2), 12-16. Retrieved March 4, 2008 from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num2/emerging/default.html>
- Hewitt, J., & Scardamalia, M. (1998). Design principles for distributed knowledge building processes. *Educational Psychology Review*, 10(1), 75-96.
- Lee, Lina. (2010). Exploring wiki-mediated collaborative writing: A case study in an elementary Spanish course. *CALICO Journal*, January, 27(2), 260-276.

6. Lending, Diane. (2010). Using a wiki to collaborate on a study guide. *Journal of Information Systems Education*. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4041/is_201004/ai_n53506083/
7. Lipponen, L. (2002). Exploring foundations for computer-supported collaborative learning. In G. Stahl (Ed.), *Computer Support for Collaborative Learning: Foundations for a CSCL community*. Proceedings of the Computer-supported Collaborative Learning 2002 Conference (pp. 72-81). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
8. Mak, Barley, Coniam, David. (2008). Using wikis to enhance and develop writing skills among secondary school students in Hong Kong. *System : An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics*, 36 (3), 437-455.
9. Mackey, T. P. (2007). The social informatics of blog and wiki communities: Authoring communities of practice (CoPs). Retrieved July 2008 from <http://www.caisacsi.ca/search.asp?year=2007>
10. Matthew, Kathryn, & Felvegi, Emese. (2008). Wiki as a collaborative learning tool in a language arts methods class. *JRTE*, 42(1), 51-72.
11. Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.