USING WIKIS TO DEVELOP WRITING ACADEMIC SKILLS AMONG PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating the effect of using wikis to develop prospective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' academic writing performance. The eleven participants were third year German/French and English pre-service teachers at Plovdiv University. Students, divided in five groups, designed a wikispace and worked together for fourteen weeks (two hours a week) in order to produce four pieces of academic writing. The student's members of five groups worked through editing and revision on web pages until the team got final papers of four written pieces and submitted that to the tutor for evaluation. In this study the used instruments included: writing essay pre- and post-test and self-report questionnaire. The data analysis indicate that using the wiki for writing activities made students pay close attention to grammatical correctness and structural coherence. About 73% of the students reported that writing on the wiki made them consider their audience. Their English essay writing mean score of the posttest was higher than that of the pretest. These results revealed the effectiveness of using wikis in developing prospective EFL pre-service teachers' writing performance.
Keywords: Wikis, English for Academic Purposes, EFL writing, Collaborative writing

Introduction

Writing skill, includes Writing for Academic Purposes (WAP), allows us to communicate messages with clarity and ease to a far larger audience. It seems that the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) makes language teaching more progressive and can meet individual learning needs. Educators recognize that utilizing computer technology can be convenient to create both independent and collaborative learning environments and provide students with language experiences as they move through the various stages of second language acquisition (Kung, 2002).

A wiki is a collaborative website that many people can work on or edit. Wikis are defined as interlinked web pages applied to store and modify information. Each page possesses the capacity to store information and to be easily viewed, edited, and commented on by other users of a web browser. Neumann and Hood (2009) described "course evaluations by students and the assessment of learning outcomes through wiki demonstrated this as an area in need of improvement for both student learning and engagement" (p.383). The wiki requires the creation of knowledge by editing web pages which is consistent with the constructivist approach (Ebner et al., 2008).

There has been a great deal of English Academic Purposes (EAP) research into the need analysis of the discourse, literacies and study skills aiming at operating in various target language contexts (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998; Jordan, 1997). In the meantime, the development of new technologies has resulted in the emergence of new kinds of academic genres and discourses, but the impact of these developments on EAP has been given relatively little attention (Swales, 2004). Therefore, there is a real necessity for further research in this aspect as information and communication technologies keep evolving.

In educational systems throughout the world many of the students are proficient enough so the internet users as Prensky (2001) states that they make daily use of software such as social networking, blogs, wikies, podcasts and vodcasts and social bookmarking. The idea that lies behind the social web is in line with current collaborative paradigms in FL learning that rely on mutual building communities of practice. Myers (2010) points out that the discourse of wikis and blogs shows what makes them individual tools and genres and what effect this web tools have on language learning. These new online applications have received little attention in more specific contexts of EAP.

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One question remains such as in the field of EAP how can we challenge learner collaboration?

It seems that the more recent social web application offers a greater potential for empowering learners to create online content in a collaborative ways. This study focuses on the use of wikis in the course of Academic Writing in English of at Plovdiv University. It aims are: to depict how the course wiki was applied to teach writing for academic purposes, to analyse what impact the wiki had on writer-reader relationship, and its effect on development of students' academic writing skills.

2. Literature review: wiki, EAP, collaborative writing and peer feedback

The name 'wiki' derives from the Hawaiian word meaning 'quick'. The wiki has been defined as "a website or database developed collaboratively by a community of users, allowing any user to add and edit content" (Stevenson, 2010). Its basic features include creating and editing texts, linking different pages through hyperlinks, inserting images and links to other sites, tracking changes and comparing different versions of the text. Most wiki engines are open source (e.g. PmWiki, Wikispaces, TikiWiki). Undoubtedly, the most well-known and extensive example of the wiki is Wikipedia - the largest on-line encyclopaedia that allows any visitors to insert or edit its entries.In the context of EAP, this software can be used for collectively producing, organising and sustaining textual, visual, and auditory resources, thus creating an environment that relies on learner interdependence. From the sociocultural point of view, the wiki holds the potential for advancing and realizing a collective zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Second language acquisition theory also established and emphasized a major role of student-student interactions in language courses (Liu and Hansen, 2002). The above-mentioned theories justify the fact that an increasing number of course instructors introduce Web 2.0 collaborative tools, such as wikis, to improve and correspondingly facilitate the language learning process in their classes.

Collaborative writing is fairly complex phenomenon, and there are different definitions of collaborative writing. For the purpose of our research, collaborative writing is defined as the process of composing a text by a particular student discourse community. Many researchers, such as Bruffee (1973) and LeFevre (1987), support a view of collaborative writing as a more effective learning approach, particularly nowadays, when new technologies offer a plethora of free collaborative tools to current generation of students "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). More and more course instructors of EAP are realizing that wikis are the most functional Web 2.0 tools available for collaborative online writing (Richardson, 2006).

Collaborative writing usually involves peer revision. Peer feedback can be found in various forms, such as corrections, opinions, suggestions, ideas to each other (Lin et al., 2001). In a wiki context, peer feedback is defined as a phenomenon where students work collectively, by co-revising their texts through editing and redrafting (Lin and Chien, 2009).

Therefore, a wiki provides a platform for collaborative writing. Wikipedia, the largest wiki project, is often frowned upon in academic circles, largely due to its alleged bias and lack of credibility, reminiscent of the earlier perception of the web (Slaouti, 2002). Nevertheless, the scale of the project makes it unique, and, whether we as teachers like it or not, many students use it in their studies. As Dalby (2007) puts it: "Wikipedia contains nonsense alongside the sense; it contains propaganda and error alongside the facts. It's fiercely up to date, except when it isn't. Wikipedia is an encyclopedia for the world as it is". Thanks to the success of the Wikipedia project, an overwhelming majority of people in academic life are familiar with the wiki software, including its major functions and the layout of a typical wiki page (article, discussion, edit, and history), which is different from traditional html websites. In fact, the Wikipedia article can be considered one of the new academic genres (Myers, 2010), but this question will remain outside the scope of our discussion. What is of interest for our purposes is the democratic nature of the Wikipedia and the collaborative philosophy behind it. If any reader can become a writer of the same text, does writing

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become more reader-oriented? In other words, does a wiki provide a more natural environment for reader-oriented writing?

According to Thompson (2001), writing in EAP is seen as a social activity dependent on the relationship between the writer, the reader, and the social context. Hyland (2002) refers to reader-oriented approaches to teaching and researching writing, including writing as social interaction, writing as social construction, and writing as power and ideology. The first two perspectives are particularly relevant here, since they lay emphasis on the writer-reader relationship and the notion of the writer as a member of a given discourse community. Although Hyland describes the interactionists and the constructivists as opposing schools, the former working from individuals to groups and the latter proceeding from social groups to individuals, in practice, these two approaches seem to be complementary. This way, we can perceive writing as a cyclical process in which writers simultaneously shape their discourse to involve the reader and are influenced by the reader's expectations resulting from community practices.

A convergence of the reader with the reader-in-the-text creates involvement which is perceived as "a crucial step in most types of argumentative, persuasive text, including academic papers and assignments; and collaboration is central form of involvement" (Thompson, 2001). This idea ties in with the philosophy behind collaborative writing on the course wiki, echoing Bakhtin's (1986) views on the dialogic nature of language use and sociocultural and constructivist approaches in education which rely on learner collaboration and dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978).

In any collaborative work, group participation is an essential component. Wikis' editable features allow multiple-editors to any work posted on the site. The group members become both readers and writers of the work in progress. Each group member can build on the others' contributions through their individual contributions. Wikis record each group members' contribution which will be evident through the History function on each wiki page. Teachers can monitor each student's contribution to the group work as well as the group's progress by using this facility too. Feedback and comments can also be provided on the wiki page itself to facilitate the group's writing progress.

3. Methodology
3.1. Research Questions
Based on the aim of the study the following research questions were formulated.

- Does writing on the wiki make students pay attention to structural organisation and grammatical correctness, and make made them consider their audience?
- Will there be an improvement in the students' performance in the essay writing test?

3.2. Background to the study
The present study was conducted in the second semester at the University of Plovdiv and is based on the material collected from the fourteen-weeks course in English (two hours a week) called "Academic Writing" for BA students pre-service teachers. The students are (eight women and 3 men with ages ranged between 20-21) learning EFL at upper intermediate level of proficiency.

The course is a component of a teacher training programme. The aim of "Academic Writing" course is to develop the participants' academic writing skills in order to prepare them for further studies in the English department.

The course is covering a range of written and spoken genres (argumentative texts, academic report, summaries and oral presentations). The course is also designed to improve the students' overall language proficiency, as well as a strong emphasis is also placed on the acquisition of general academic vocabulary and the development of formal writing skills. Each student, throughout the course, is required to submit four written assignments, including an argumentative text, a summary of a formal report, and a special genre project based on each student's choice and needs and some of these written assignments involved publishing on the course wiki.

With the purpose of students to learn about the main genres of academic writing, and, at the same time, fostering peer collaboration through brain-storming, drafting and peer review, we adopted genre-process approach (Tribble, 1996).

The course wiki (powered by MediaWiki) provided a platform for carrying out writing tasks and assignments focusing on three major topics: paragraph structure, coherence, and argumentation. The students participated in the choice of topics (suggested by the instructor) focusing on paragraph structure and coherence. The structure and the usage of wiki and chat-rooms were carefully explained by the course teacher. The students were divided into five groups and separate pages of wiki were created for each topic, accordingly. Each student in a group had to come up with a topic sentence on one of the aspects of the major topic. The students write different topic sentences and then each student writes a paragraph. They post it on the appropriate wiki page so as to create a coherent text together with other students working on the same topic. Then each student decides where to place the paragraph, what kind of linking expressions to use, and how to adapt the paragraph to the rest of the text. In this task, students were advised to employ 'interactive' resources (Thompson, 2001) such as transitions and frame markers. The students could use the discussion page of the wiki which could be used for coordinating the content and structure of a given text. The teacher advised them that they could just edit other texts straightaway on the wiki, or they could use the chat-room to discuss any possible changes with the specific authors of texts. If students were not pleased with the revisions that had been made to their texts, they could negotiate that in the chat-room. The course instructor left some leeway for each student to decide on the form of their participation on the wiki and chat-rooms. In the space of four weeks they collaboratively create text in the course and varied it in terms of coherence and overall organisation. After that the students in various groups read and analysed in class the products of different groups and suggested further improvement and revision on the wiki. In this assignment, the wiki was used for collaborative writing and editing of texts on general topics. To see the stages in the creation of the texts and to trace each student's contribution it was made possible by the history tool. By the end every student of the groups was provided with an assessment sheet.

In the next wiki task, writing of an argumentative essays, the MediaWiki platform proved to be very suitable, since it offers instant access to the text and tracks any changes. The students write essays on the wiki pages and post their contributions on the wiki pages. After that the students read and discuss each other's texts in class, following the guidelines for peer review and write comments concerning the structure, content and, if possible, correctness on the discussion page associated with each topic. Each article page serves as a platform for individual, process-oriented writing and editing, whereas peer comments and feedback are posted on the discussion pages. By the end every student of the groups was provided with an assessment sheet.

3.3. Instruments

The instruments used in this study were: 1) pre- and post-test essay and 2) self-report questionnaire.

First, the English essays writing tests designed in parallel form were administered as pre-test and post-test. One was the first-week explanatory essay titled "Why I Chose Trip to Another Country" the other was the final-week argumentative essay that each student chose a topic. The Grading Rubric Form designed by the teacher utilized to assess students' essays. The criteria of Grading Rubric Form consisted of four items: thesis/focus/main idea (30% of the grade), organization (30% of the grade), development (30% of the grade), and syntax/diction/mechanics/MLA style (10% of the grade). Based on the teacher's writing assessment criteria, levels and grades of essays of EFL students would be evaluated with an overall consideration of writing skills encompassing content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. The items of the tests were constructed, verified for content validity by three experts and piloted with one class in the previous semester.

Second, as described beforehand, the students used the wiki for carrying out different writing assignments. They were informed about the study and consented to fill in a self-report questionnaire

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at the end of the course. This questionnaire (Kuteeva, 2011) was adapted version for the present investigation (see Figure 1).

4. Findings

The results of the questionnaire section dealing with different aspects of writing on the wiki are presented in Figure 1 and 2.

The date of questionnaire show different variables relating to different aspects of the writing process that students evaluate by examining a potential reader, choosing dictionaries, verifying spelling, grammar and syntax, and a common textual organization (Figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Mean scores of students' self-report questionnaire on the use of the wiki

Writing the wikis has led students to pay serious attention to the formal aspects of writing, both in terms of grammar and structure. Check spelling and grammar represent the highest average scores (3.9 and 4, respectively). Most students state that they have carefully checked their texts for spelling and grammar - 81.8% and 72.8%, respectively, before publishing them in wikis.

Figure 2. Proportional distribution of students' responses on a Likert scale of 5 (n = 11)

The choice of vocabulary, the official lexicon, and the special terms are similar (averaging 3.2 Figure 1). The results also show that writing on wikis has little impact on students' attitudes towards presenting arguments and ideas.

The data from the measured variables, sentence verification and paragraph structure, show high values namely - 3.9 and 3.8, respectively (Figure 1). The vast majority of respondents (72.7%) agreed that writing the wikit makes them pay more attention to the paragraphs (Figure 2).

The data show (questionnaire) that more than 72.6% of the respondents agreed that writing on the wiki made them think about the reader of their texts, and 54.5% of them tried to adapt their writing to the reader (Figure 2).

The results on the comparison of two essays (pre- and post-test) are illustrated in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of first and final draft of the essays average scores (n=11)

As illustrated above, all students made great progress in writing. The average grades on the first and second essays were 77.5 and 94.6 respectively. The amount of progress reached at 17.1%. This result obviously confirmed that the writing instruction using a wiki positively affected the learning outcomes by promoting students' competence to write English essays.

Discussion

The results of questionnaire show that most students agree that they have reviewed their texts for grammar and spelling before publishing them in the wiki. These data are in connection with Kuteeva's findings which reveal that writing on the wiki made students pay close attention to grammatical accuracy and structural coherence (Kuteeva, 2011). We assume this fact is due to the strong accent on the education aspects of WAP in the whole world. He goes on to be basic element of the literacy and language learning in schools and serves as base for most international exams with the purpose to enter in English high education. Although that grammar accuracy varied between students, in this study, apart from that mutual written texts were of excellent quality since some students corrected the peer errors, as seen by the history function. This fact gives support for individual reports of learners in the aspect of grammar and spelling.

The first two topics were taught in class, and collaborative text writing aimed to focus on the structure of the paragraph, the consistency and the use of transient and frame markers. This is probably the reason why the majority of respondents agreed that writing the wiki makes them pay more attention to the paragraphs we associate with and the higher average values of the variable verifying the sentence and the structure of the paragraphs.

Neutral average scores were reported for the variable vocabulary selection. The reported values were similar to both the official lexicon and the special terms. These results are linked to the different topics students have to write on during the course. Writing on a wiki, however, does not significantly influence students' attitudes towards presenting arguments and ideas. Consequently, we can conclude that writing on wikis has a positive impact on students' attention on the formal aspects of writing, both in micro- (spelling, grammar) and in macro (sentence and paragraph structure).

The results show that the main features of reader-oriented writing included the use of transition and frame markers, clear paragraph structure and text organisation patterns. Thus, more than half of the respondents agreed that writing on the wiki made them think about the reader of their texts, and 54.5% of them tried to adapt their writing to the reader.

The results on the comparison of two essays (pre- and post-test) show the amount of progress reached at 17.1% in favor of the post-test. This significant result is due to using wikis in writing as they enabled the learners to have the responsibility for their own learning. The students made decisions about the choice of the topic and collaborated as they wrote by using wikis. Moreover, Wikis are easy to learn, use, and stimulate the students' creativity and motivation for writing. Wikis also worked as organizational tools for synthesizing ideas and group reflection. Due to these reasons, the students developed their writing performance on the post-test. This finding supports findings revealed in previous studies which investigated the effect of using wikis in writing classrooms and revealed their usefulness in developing learners' academic writing (Forte and Bruckman, 2006; Lundin, 2008; Mak and Coniam, 2008).

Conclusion

The wiki software allows any reader to edit or comment on the text, registering any changes and tracing their history. This especially gives the writer-reader relationship a wholly new dimension, which is likely to gain more importance as new online genres and literacies develop. There is no doubt that educators throughout the world will continue to employ wikis, and all types of Web 2.0 technologies. Greater confidence and empirical evidence as to the benefits of such technologies will hopefully help students and teachers grow in their aptitudes and acceptance of creativity in learning.
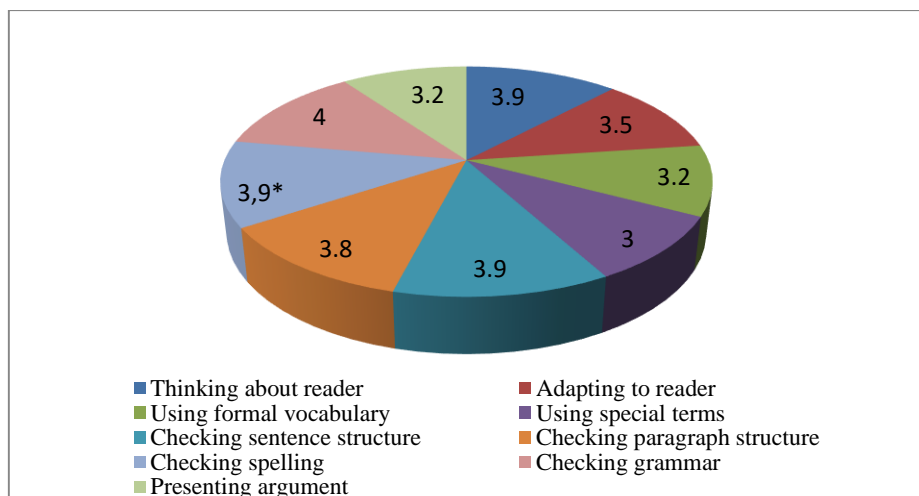
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Figures and tables

Figure 1. Mean scores of students' self-report questionnaire on the use of the wiki

* mean scores on a Likert scale of 5 (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)

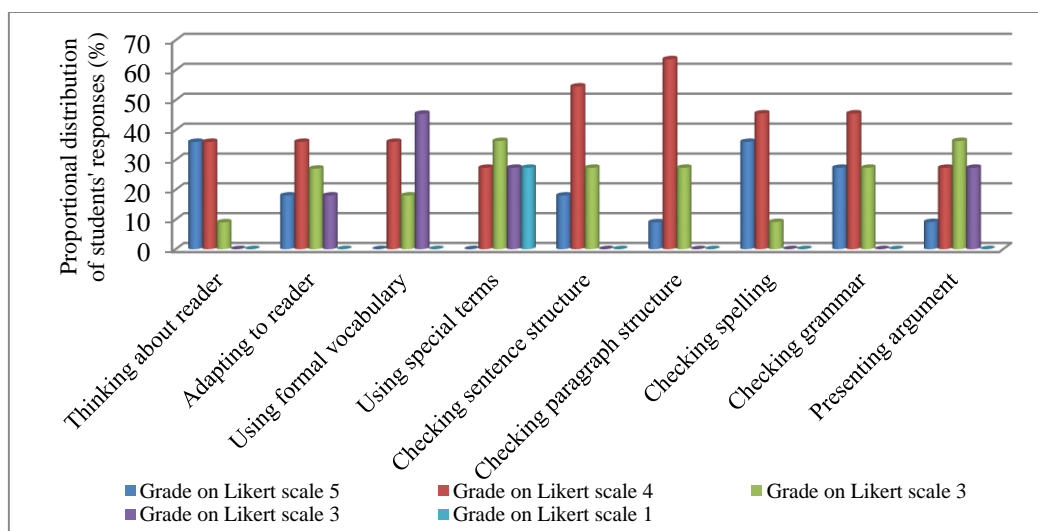**Figure 2**. Proportional distribution of students' responses on a Likert scale of 5 (n = 11)

Table 1. Comparison of first and final draft of the essays average scores (n=11)

Average Mark		
First draft of the essays	Final draft of the essays	Difference
77.5	94.6	17.1%