USING WIKI-BASED PEER-CORRECTION TO DEVELOP WRITING SKILLS OF BRAZILIAN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a creative way of enabling learners to profit from writing, which is peer-correction through wikis. Learners are empowered with technological tools as a means of promoting a student-centred approach, which contributes to their being less dependent of the teacher, fostering an autonomous learning. Data was collected and analyzed by means of qualitative and quantitative methods. The aim of these analyses is primarily to determine whether students' writing skill will be improved if collaborative learning strategies are applied into the digital context, namely through wikis. Findings show that an increasing interest in belonging to an online community emerges from students altogether with higher degrees of motivation. Apart from maximizing opportunities related to writing, learners accurately developed their social skills in the sense that they cooperated instead of competing. The results also suggest that wikis provide learners with many benefits in developing their writing skills.

Keywords: wiki, peer-correction, collaborative learning, Brazil

Özet

Bu makalenin konusu öğrencilerin yazma becerisinden faydalanmalarını sağlayan wikis yoluyla gerçekleştirilen birbirini düzeltme yöntemini kapsamaktadır. Öğrenciler öğrenci merkezli bir yaklaşımı destekleyen teknolojik araçlarla güçlenirlerken bu, daha az öğretmen bağımlı olmalarına katkıda bulunur ve bağımsız öğrenmelerini kuvvetlendirir. Veriler niteliksel ve niceliksel yöntemlerle toplamış ve analiz edilmiştir. Bu analizlerin öncelikli amacı öğrencilerin yazma becerilerinin işbirlikçi öğrenme stratejilerinin dijital ortamda uygulanmasıyla, yani wikis yoluyla, gelşip gelişmediğini belirlemektir. Bulgular öğrencilerin tamamında herhangi bir sanal topluluğa ait olmaya yönelik ilginin yüksek seviyedeki bir öz güvenle birlikte ortaya çıktığını göstermektedir. Yazma becerisiyle alakalı fırsatları geliştirmesi dışında, öğrenciler yarışmaktan ziyade işbirliği içinde olduklarından dolayı sosyal becerilerini de tam olarak geliştirmişlerdir. Sonuçlar ayrıca wikisin, öğrencilerin yazma becerilerini geliştirmede pek çok fayda sağladığını göstermiştir.

Anahtar sözcükler: wiki, eşli düzeltme, işbirlikli öğrenme, Brezilya

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000: 164), cooperative or collaborative learning essentially involves students learning from each other in groups. However, it is not the group configuration that makes cooperative learning distinctive; it is the *way* that students and teachers work together that makes it a challenging and unique learning experience. Students benefit from the givens of the socio-cultural approach to teaching and learning as it is through the promotion of interaction with peers and teachers that new meaning is constructed and conveyed. Vygotsky's (1978: 57) work has shown us that cooperative interaction allowed

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students to progress. As Johnson (1994: 4) suggests, cooperative learning can be described as a process with the following qualities:

> Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes beneficial to themselves and all other group member. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups through which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. It may be contrasted with competitive learning in which students work against each other to achieve an academic goal such as a grade of "A".

The literature reviewed indicates that when learning is centered on cooperation or collaboration individuals seek outcomes beneficial to themselves and all other group members (Johnson, D., Johnson, R. & Holubec, E.,1994; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). A similar dimension of language learning belief is applied to writing development: process approach (Thornbury, 2006). The link between the aforementioned learning beliefs and social-cultural constructs (Vygotsky, 1978) is also established. Since the idea of collaborative learning empowers our teaching context, we are interested in the creative process of the writing, which is achieved in groups.

Contemporary society is viewed as liquid modernity (Bauman, 2001) which underlines the instability of numerous conflicting relationships and moral values of our times. The metaphor of liquidity can be applied to the field of education as well, more specifically when the place or writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is concerned. Contemporary theory argues that students should understand writing as a process of constant fluidity. In this sense, it is necessary to raise students' awareness on the constant change expected from their language learning skills. The answer to this intriguing position lies in a useful tool employed by Information and Communication Technology (ICT) experts called: *wiki*. Students profit a great deal by peer-correction and *wikis* enable them to do so in an exciting and stimulating environment. At first, a *wiki* seems similar to a *blog*, but it actually allows users to edit the organisation of contributions in addition to the content itself. Having students freely edit any page in a website promotes cooperative learning, which allows a community of learners to be able to teach each other something in a learner-centred fashion. The need to integrate technology to the educational field urges in our days and so does the adoption of cooperative learning strategies in order to make apprenticeship meaningful.

With a view to understanding the purpose of using wikis to foster cooperation in writing, a distinction should be made between product writing and process writing. Thornbury (2006: 249) characterises both means of writing:

> ....This approach is called a *product approach* to the teaching of writing, since the focus is exclusively on producing a text (the product) that reproduces the model. By contrast, a *process approach* argues that writers do not in fact start with a clear idea of the finished product. Rather, the text emerges out of a creative process. This process includes: *planning* (*generating ideas*, *goal setting* and *organising*), *drafting* and *re-drafting; reviewing*, including *editing* and *proofreading,* and, finally, *"publishing"*. Advocates of a process approach argue for a more organic sequence of classroom activities, beginning with the brainstorming of ideas, writing preliminary drafts, comparing drafts, re-drafting, and *conferencing,* that is, talking through their draft with the teacher, in order to fine-tune their ideas.

Literature shows that drawing an analogy between online collaboration activity provided by wikis and the overall writing development of EFL learners needs careful scrutiny since few

studies have touched upon this newly evolving learning opportunity in this field. Thus, this paper aims at articulating the relationship between collaborative learning and the employment of wikis by inquiring the relevance of using a wiki with the purpose of peer-correction and students' development of writing. With regard to the literature review, I tried to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do learners develop their writing skills if cooperative learning strategies were applied into the digital context, namely through wikis?
2. How do learners of English evaluate the process of collaborating in the digital environment to improve their writing skills?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study examined the production and interaction of learners of English as a Foreign Language in a private wiki. This wiki has been designed to meet the needs of digital learners who spend most of the time connected to the Internet. Constructs underlying the principles of collaborative learning, process approach to writing and social-cultural approach have been prioritized to interpret both students' participation on wikis and responses from the online questionnaire conducted.

2.1. Participants

Profile of the participants is given in table 1. The participants involved in the research are eighteen students from a private language school located in Brazil. They are young teenagers whose ages range from thirteen to seventeen. Most of them are learning English with a view to enriching their curriculum and broadening the possibilities of job prospects. Typical of their average age, they are interested in meeting friends, listening to music and surfing the internet. This low-intermediate group is quite heterogeneous as far as their proficiency is concerned. When it comes to writing, some students have a better command of the language while others need to improve this skill in terms of accuracy.

Table 1: Profile of the participants

		Frequencies (f)	*Percentages (%)*
Gender	male	7	**38.9**
	female	11	**61.1**
Age	13	4	**22.2**
	14	5	**27.8**
	15	5	**27.8**
	16	3	**16.7**
	17	1	**5.5**
Time exposed to English	2 years	14	**77.8**
	more than 2 yrs	4	**22.2**
Attitude towards English	positive	14	**77.8**
	negative	4	**22.2**
Days connected	7-6 days/week	7	**38.9**
	5-3 days/week	5	**27.8**
	2-1 days/week	6	**33.3**

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Students were administered an anonymous survey. Data gathered in this article came from the writings and comments [see appendix] students posted on a private wiki. Besides, each

student answered an online questionnaire which helped the research to draw conclusions from the application of peer-correction through wikis.

The questionnaire prepared by the researcher was taken as the core data collection instrument. The questionnaire – composed of eight multiple-choice questions – suited to students' level of English. The students were given clear instructions about the questions and their mother tongue, Portuguese, was used whenever necessary. The instructions were conducted asynchronously, via email most of the time.

The students answered the online questionnaire at home during their vocational period at the 1st and 2nd weeks of January 2008. In addition, with the aim of not interfering on students' preferences and obtaining unbiased feedback from them, I decided to carry out the questionnaire just a month after the end of the semester. In doing so, students would not feel the need to please their teacher or come up with unreal responses.

1. How do you feel about writing?
2. When it comes to writing, which option do you prefer?
3. What's the best thing about using a wiki?
4. Is it time-consuming working with wikis?
5. How do you post on the wiki?
6. How do you feel about correction on the wiki?
7. If you don't like using the wiki, why do you prefer paper?
8. Do you use the Internet (such as online dictionaries, google, translators) to help you write?

Data was collected and analysis conducted using both qualitative and quantitative models. The aim of these analyses was primarily to determine whether students' writing skill will be improved if collaborative learning strategies were applied in wikis. Therefore, other issues are raised such as the level of motivation and the development of social skills. Tables contain the frequencies (f), i.e. the number of students who took part in the wiki, in the penultimate column; and the last column is devoted to the percentages (%).

2.3. Procedures

All the tasks and assignments have been slightly adapted from the students' coursebook and transferred to the wiki. Traditionally, students would hand in their responses on a piece of paper and the teacher would be in charge of the correction. Being the wiki a new medium of communication, however, students were granted the opportunity to co-construct knowledge and meaning in an innovative way with their peers – this was my main aim.

Students worked with wikis during a whole semester and coped with four distinct tasks. The expected outcomes include: students being more respectful to the deadlines, their being enthusiastic about commenting on their classmates' writings, achieve higher levels of motivation by raising their interest in writing and please digital learners.

3. FINDINGS

The first issue raised in the questionnaire is related to students' views on writing. Overall, their attitude towards writing was positive as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' views on writing

Statements	Frequencies (f)	Percentages (%)
I find writing exciting.	8	**44.4**
I am somehow interested in writing.	8	**44.4**
I find writing boring.	2	**11.1**

In relation to students' preference for the writing mode, as can be seen in Table 3, responses show that most students (61.1%) would rather write using a wiki than writing on paper. This finding shows that students have already accepted wikis as a newer mode of writing.

Table 3: Students' preference regarding the writing mode

Statements	Frequencies (f)	Percentages (%)
I prefer writing on paper.	7	**38.9**
I prefer writing using a wiki.	11	**61.1**

In terms of the reasons of students' acceptance of the use of wikis, although there are a great many reasons of working with wikis, most learners believe peer-correction is a differential aspect of wikis which makes it inviting. It is noticeable that 44.4% of the students claim that they prefer wikis because can spot and correct my mistakes.

Table 4: Students' thoughts on what the best feature of a wiki is

Statements	Frequencies (f)	Percentages (%)
I like it because my classmates can read my compositions, not only the teacher.	2	**11.1**
I like it because my classmates can spot and correct my mistakes.	8	**44.4**
I like it because I can comment on my classmates' compositions and also receive their comments.	3	**16.7**
I like it because I can personalise my composition by choosing the font, the colours and even insert pictures.	2	**11.1**
I like it because when I don't have any ideas about a topic, I read my classmates' writings as a springboard to write my own composition	3	**16.7**

As can be seen in table 5, contrary to the popular belief, an expressive number of students (66.7%) claim that it is not time-consuming working with wikis.

Table 5: Students' response to working with wikis being time-consuming

Statements	Frequencies (f)	Percentages (%)
It does take a long time.	1	**5.5**
It does not take much time.	12	**66.7**

It takes the same amount of time as writing on paper.	5	**27.8**

Table 6 shows how attached some students (38.9%) still are to traditional form of writing (paper based writing).

Table 6: Students' preferred mode of posting on a wiki

Statements	*Frequencies (f)*	*Percentages (%)*
I would rather write straight on the wiki.	6	**33.3**
First, I use a word processor (Microsoft Word, Notepad) and the I paste my text onto the wiki.	5	**27.8**
I still write on the paper and then I type my composition on the wiki.	7	**38.9**

The majority of learners (88.9%) reacted optimistically to peer-correction, mainly for appreciating the fact that wikis enable them to raise their awareness of the writing process.

Table 7: Students' reaction to peer-correction on a wiki

Statements	*Frequencies (f)*	*Percentages (%)*
I like it because my classmates can spot what the mistakes are and this helps me understand why I have made such mistake.	11	**61.1**
I like it because I can compare the difference between before and after the comments or corrections.	5	**27.8**
I do not like it at all. I still prefer when the teacher corrects everything using a red pen.	2	**11.1**

It was also inquired why some students still rely on paper to produce pieces of text. Due to the fact that some students first write on the paper and then transfer their text to the wiki, they find traditional writing faster (57.1%).

Table 8: Students' who prefer traditional writing expose the reason to their choice

Statements	*Frequencies (f)*	*Percentages (%)*
I am more comfortable with traditional writing because it is faster.	4	**57.1**
I am more comfortable with traditional writing because it is more organised.	2	**28.6**
I am more comfortable with traditional writing because I do not have a good internet connection.	1	**14.3**

As can be seen in Table 9, although many students do not make use of the Internet during their writing processes, only 22.2% of learners do so when they work with wikis.

Table 9: The amount of time students use the Internet in the writing process

Statements	Frequencies (f)	Percentages (%)
I always use the Internet: either when writing on paper or using a wiki.	7	**38.9**
I only use the Internet when I work with wikis.	4	**22.2**
I never use the Internet.	7	**38.9**

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The increasing interest in belonging to an online community is the most insightful conclusion one reaches after having carried out this study. First, findings show that learners become less dependent of the teacher and share responsibility with their peers. In this digital context, they gain higher degrees of autonomy in the sense that they have to make choices while writing and providing feedback to their peers by trying out new ways of involving with the writing process.

Research questions were positively answered as a fundamental issue in learning was increasingly raised: motivation. From the moment students were thoroughly engrossed in contributing on the wiki, they became more responsible for their own learning. Fruitful outcomes derived from such experience: digital learners were also privileged in the process, students were punctual to the deadlines and students as a whole acquired a better command of writing strategies.

This study has important limitations. With regards to the fact that this study was carried out with a group of eighteen Brazilian students, applying these findings to any age group, gender or geographic context sounds risky and preposterous. Nevertheless, it is safe to state that wikis do represent a new generation of web-based tools for collaborative learning which should be considered if one intends to focus on process writing. Learners benefit, as argued, from the interaction among peers. What is more, wikis offer a meaningful context for students to move towards autonomous learning.

Needless to say teachers should first and foremost provide learners with various opportunities to engage them [learners] in the learning process. Thus, wikis have proved to be a key technological-enhanced tool to include digital learners. Based on the literature review, socio-cultural constructs show that wikis favour process writing and student-student interaction in the online environment.

As a teacher, I had a very positive feedback from my students in terms of level of motivation and interest. The students who used to produce well-written compositions on paper also succeeded when they posted writings on the wiki. What is more, the students with poorly developed writing skills were more aware of their mistakes because of peer-correction.

Apart from gaining cognitively, learners accurately developed their social skills in the sense that they cooperated instead of competing. This is the most gratifying achievement my

students had and a personal goal I was granted when I decided to embark on this fascinating digital experience.

We have come to notice a rapid increase in web-based tools used with an educational purpose, mainly *blogs*, *wikis* and *podcasts*. However, it is part of our role as teachers to make the right use of these potential applications and consider what benefits they will bring to our students.

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APPENDIX

In this section the samples will serve as a springboard for the crux of the discussion, i.e. how learners cooperatively contributed to the adjustment of their classmates' texts. Each sample is followed by a brief comment. The first text was written by a low-intermediate level teenager (student A) whose writing was peer-reviewed by another student (student B). The task was: *Write about the advantages and disadvantages of being famous*. Students were told they had to write about 120 words.

Original text written by student A

There are more advantages and some disvantages of being famous. I my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: have a lot of money, travelling a lot, spend time with others famous people, sometime they can go to events that others people can't go because they don't have money to pay tickets.

A good exemple of rich person is Prince William.

This is some advantages, but there are disadvantages too.

For exemple: The famous people don't have freedom,they have many problems and a formol life as weel as Madonna, her life is incontroled.

I don't like to be a famous people and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as weel.

In a traditional approach to writing, the teacher would "hunt" for mistakes and use a red pen to mark it. Instead, students are invited to read each other's text, make comments and corrections. At this stage, the teacher is just a mediator and does not interfere in the

correction. The teacher also encourages learners to take part by indicating where they can find certain mistakes or pinpoints the nature of the error, such as spelling, punctuation or word order. In this way, students not only develop their reading skills but also improve their writing skills by adopting important correction strategies.

The following is an "improved" version of the learner's text, in which most spelling mistakes have been corrected by the learner's peer (student B). The changes are presented in bold.

"Improved" version - corrected by student B

There are more advantages and some dis**ad**vantages of being famous. **In** my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: have a lot of money, travelling a lot, spend time with others famous people, sometime**s** they can go to events that others people can't go because they don't have money to pay tickets.

A good ex**a**mple of rich person is Prince William.

This is some advantages, but there are disadvantages too.

For ex**a**mple: The famous people don't have freedom, they have many problems and a form**a**l life as we**l**l as Madonna, her life is incontroled.

I don't like to be a famous **person** and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as we**l**l.

A very positive attribute of working with digital text is that you can make use of various features (colours, highlights, bold, italics, etc.) to facilitate the perception of what has changed. Besides, this clear evidence of correction makes students aware that they have a lot to profit from each other, not merely from the teacher. In other words, it is the interaction among peers through cooperation that enhances learning. This belief breaks completely a traditional pattern of learning, which regarded the teacher as the solely responsible for transmitting knowledge and conveying meaning. Alternatively, students are no longer seen as passive recipients, but are active participants in the co-construction of knowledge.

In the second improved version that follows, major shifts concerning cohesion and lexical problems can be noticed. This time, a third student (student C) was engaged in the writing process.

"Improved" version - corrected by student C

There are more advantages **than** ~~some~~ disadvantages of being famous. **In** my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: **they** have a lot of money, travel~~ling~~ a lot, spend time with other~~s~~ famous people~~,~~ **and** sometimes they can go to events that other~~s~~ people can't go because they don't have money to **buy** tickets.

A good example of **a** rich person is Prince William.

This **are** some advantages, but there are disadvantages too.

For example: The famous people don't have freedom, they have many problems and a formal life as well, like Madonna,. Her life is **uncontrollable**.

I **wouldn't** like to be a famous person and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as well.

The text is liquid, i.e. alive, thus allowing improvements. This fluidity is only made possible given the active participation of students. In opposition to product writing, everyone is involved in this process writing even if they simply read the pieces of writing and their changes over time. Each group member is encouraged to participate and leadership is "distributed".

Reading will help them avoid certain mistakes, become more aware of their weaknesses, value proofreading and, eventually, expand their lexis. As a consequence, when there is an incentive for peer-correction through *wikis* a responsibility and accountability for one another's learning is shared.

The following "improved" text is the last one and presents minor changes made by a fourth student (student D).

"Improved" version - corrected by student D

There are more advantages than some disadvantages of being famous. In my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: they have a lot of money, travelling a lot, spend time with others famous people, and sometimes they can go to events that others people can't ~~go~~ because they don't have money to buy **the** tickets.

A good example of a rich person is Prince William.

These are some advantages, but there are disadvantages too.

For example: ~~The~~ famous people don't have freedom, they have many problems and a formal life as well, like Madonna**.** Her life is uncontrollable.

I wouldn't like to be a famous person and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as well.

At last, student A is invited to rewrite her text with a critical eye for paragraphing. The teacher also allows her to customise the text.

Final text rewritten and customised by student A

There are more advantages than disadvantages of being famous. In my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: they have a lot of money, travel a lot, spend time with other famous people and sometimes they can go to events that other people can't because they don't have money to buy the tickets. A good example of a rich person is Prince William. These are some advantages, but there are disadvantages too. For example: famous people don't have

freedom, they have many problems and a formal life as well, like Madonna. Her life is uncontrollable. I wouldn't like to be a famous person and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as well. 🙄