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Sezgin Ballidag

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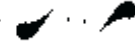
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## Using Wikis to Increase Writing Skills in Writing Classes

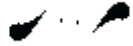
Sezgin Ballidag<sup>1</sup>



### Abstract

It's an undeniable fact that the majority of the teenagers today are keen on technology, and they tend to use it for various purposes. This research attempted to see how using a wiki page in a writing lesson could affect students' success. The research lasted for two months. Each week, students handed in an assignment, either as a hard copy or online. Data was collected using two different instruments. First of all, Pre and post questionnaires were applied in order to see the student's attitudes towards the use of internet for educational purposes specifically for writing lesson and peer edit. Besides this, the midterm results of the students, which served as a determiner for success, were analyzed by dependent samples t-test. Results showed that there was not a significant difference in the results of the two groups in terms of their grades, besides this, the percentage of the students who thought wiki was a valuable source for a writing class in the pre-questionnaire decreased in the post-questionnaire. That's to say, integrating a wiki into the writing classroom was of no help to increase students' writing skills.

**Keywords:** Collaborative learning, using Wikis for writing classes, peer-editing, constructivism.



<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Yildiz Technical University, School Of Foreign Languages. [sballidag@gmail.com](mailto:sballidag@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

Effective written communication is fundamental part of learning a foreign language, and it is a key factor in students' academic development. Learning to write is a long-term process and, in order to discover more effective ways to help students to be better writers in a foreign language, quite a lot of researches have been implemented on how to make students more motivated to write.

Developments in the writing curriculum during the past two decades have resulted in an increased emphasis on the process of composing and sharing a message with an audience, and of learning specific structural skills with this communicative context (Bos, 1988). With the increasing trend towards the use of technology in education, wiki pages provided a convenient place to hand in writing assignments and sharing them. This paper describes an attempt to see the effectiveness of using wikis for a writing class in an EFL classroom.

## **2. Literature Review**

According to social constructivism, students learn through collaboration, and peer review gives learners the ground to exchange their ideas. The type of approaches to peer review depends on the teachers' instructions; it might be open-ended, guided or directed (Rieber, 2006). In an open-ended review, students are seen as experts and teachers offer no or little guidance in how to review their peers' papers. They are assumed to know the assignment requirements. This approach is mainly used in advanced level classes. The other approach, guided peer review, as the name suggests, teachers guide reviewers with a list of general questions to consider while they are reviewing the papers. In the final approach, directed peer review, teachers give reviewers a complete checklist covering all assignment guidelines. This is best when students have limited experience in the subject and do not have enough writing skills. It is always good to have a checklist because; first, all papers are reviewed with the same criteria, second, you cannot miss any point, and last, it really helps weak learners working with strong learners.

There are different reasons for using peer review in writing classes in literature. Firstly, students like it. For example, in Eschenbach's (2001) study, there were 12 students in the class, and 11 of them liked the peer review sessions and they wanted to continue the same application. Students' reaction to the comments done by their peers are more positive than it is to their teachers (Rieber, 2006). When a teacher reads papers, he comments as "right" or "wrong". But when a peer reads the paper, he or she mostly comments about how the paper does or doesn't need the assignment guidelines, which leads to an improvement in the papers of both reviewer and reader.

Secondly, students write more carefully when they are communicating with peers and do better because of the peer pressure than when they are evaluated by their teachers. Students do not want to appear unintelligent to their peers, when they know their work will be read and commented on by another student during a peer review, they are successful to produce a more polished draft for review (Rieber 2006). In their research, Plutsky and Wilson (2004) also indicated students became better writers with the help of peer review.

Finally, peer feedback seems to lead a better academic achievement. In his research, Richer(1992) researched how college students benefitted from peer feedback in their writing classes. The results revealed that better grades were obtained from peer feedback group. They also showed lower writing anxiety (Stanley, 1992) and became to support each other more. Furthermore, one-to-one context may also encourage students to ask questions that they might be reluctant to ask in larger classes.

To prevent unevenness, Kerr (1995) suggests multiple reviewers or using anonymous pairs. This way the anxiety level of the students will be relatively low because they don't know whose papers they are reading. In the literature, one can conclude that the most important side of having anonymous peer review is that it provokes more critical feedback because they are relieved from social pressure. So they will be free of interpersonal factors (Bostock, 2000). According to Robinson (1999) and MacLeod (1999) being anonymous makes learners more critical of their peers. There is a nice study by Zhao (1998). In order to explore the effects of anonymous feedback, Zhao conducted two studies on first and second year students at a college. They reviewed journals in two conditions. In the first condition reviewers knew that authors would be given their information whereas in the other

condition, they were made sure that their names will be removed before authors receive their reviews. The results indicated that the grades assigned by ones whose names were anonymous to the authors were more critical than the ones who thought they would be identifiable to the authors. In spite of many benefits of anonymous peer review, it has some disadvantages in the literature, too. According to the research by Kerr & Bruun (1981), students showed better efforts when they are identified to authors. They did not really do their best because they were hiding from the crowd (Lu and Bol, 2007).

With the advances in technology over years, teachers and researchers have started to make use of technology in education, too. A wiki is a powerful online writing tool with revising and editing functions. They are great tools for learners, as Ben-Zvi (2007) also states, in that learners can reach the papers from different locations as long as they can go online. Therefore, it was hypothesized that students working on the wiki page would read and respond to papers in a shorter time. In the constructivist approach, students are actively involved in creating knowledge and Holzinger (2008) states that we create knowledge by editing a web page. Franco (2008) supports this idea adding that wikis enable students to create knowledge in a stimulating and exciting environment. Unlike the classroom, the students can enjoy the convenience of their own environment, which reduces the anxiety and stress that they could have in an actual classroom. Wikis give students a floor to integrate their knowledge and technology and share their ideas with public. Once they have posted their work, it will be available to everybody in their group.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Question & Hypothesis**

This research is looking for answers to following question;

Research Question: Does using wikis with the help of peer feedback in writing classes increase students' grades?

Hypothesis: Using wikis with the help of peer feedback in the writing class will increase students' grades.

### **2.2 Research Context and Participants**

This research was conducted in a preparatory class at a state university. The medium of instruction at the university is %30 English. There are total 14 classes in the department. The classrooms are composed of students with different majors. As the instructor of the writing lesson, the researcher was a participant observer in the class. The student sample was composed of 24 elementary level students, 17 boys and 7 girls aged between 17- 20. The first languages of all the students are Turkish. They studied English for total 25 hours a week, and 5 hours of which are devoted to the writing class. The material used for the classroom is Weaving it Together 1. During one semester, students are expected to be able to learn how to compose a paragraph.

### **2.3 Data collection**

Closed Pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaires with multiple choice items were applied to see how students thought about peer editing and using a wiki page for educational purposes at the outset and the end of the research. Field notes were taken while the students were on task. Finally, students' work and the peers' comments on the wiki pages were read and given feedback by the teacher. In order to see the progress, two exams, which were seen an indicator of the success, were given to the students.

### **2.4 Procedures**

At the beginning of the term, students were informed about the research and volunteer students who would be handing in and editing their homework online were asked, and eight people volunteered. The experiment started on the second week. During classroom time, both group had the same instruction. When they needed to write, the classical group wrote at home and brought their papers into the class. Having been edited by their peers, the papers were collected and given feedback by the teacher. During peer editing section which lasted about 10 minutes, the online group were allowed to leave the classroom. The classical group were observed by the teacher while they were on task. The online

group, on the other hand, were expected to upload their first drafts online, and those papers were edited by peers online by following the same peer editing checklists in threads. Then students, after doing any corrections they wanted to do, uploaded the final version of the paper. Finally, those papers were given feedback by the teacher on the same wiki page. With both groups, students did not use their actual names on their papers or on the wiki page they were using in order to see how anonymity would work within this research setting.

## 2.5 Analysis

To analyze the data, a dependent t-test was used. The results of the students working online from the first quiz were compared with the results of the second one to see how much difference posting homework to a wiki page made on students' learning, and thus on their grades.

### Results

The data was analyzed by using the **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)** and are presented below.

**Table 1: First Midterm Statistics**

	Mean	N	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Online Group	11,87	8	2,41	0,85
Classical Group	10,52	17	4,38	1,06

**Table 2: Second Midterm Statistics**

	Mean	N	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Online Group	11,57	7	2,14	0,81
Classical Group	9,94	18	5,11	1,20

**Table 1** and **Table 2** above shows the students' results from two midterm exams after the research started. As it was shown in the **Table 1** and **Table 2**, **the means** for both the online group and the classical group was lower in the second midterm.

**Table 3: Dependent Samples T-test**

	t	df	sig. (2 tailed)
Midterm Results	0,513	29,88	0,623

Sig.=0,05

The results of the dependent t-test showed that there was not a significant difference ( $p=0,623 > p=0,05$ ) between the exam grades of the two groups. Therefore, the participants did not benefit from using a wiki page to improve their writing skills in writing classes.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this research, the researcher tried to see how effective peer editing with the help of a wiki page is for a preparatory writing class at a state university in Turkey. In reference to the research question, if we look at the results obtained from midterms (Tables 1 and 2), it is hard to say that posting homework and peer editing online was of a significant help, as it was thought to be at the beginning of the research. Talking about the average, it may not seem that the class advanced so much; however if we take individual students into account, we can see that improvement may be more than 5 points for

some students. Just like (Allaei & Connor, 1990) claimed in their paper, there were mixed degrees of success in this research, too. Similar to what they found out in their study, weaker students in this classroom had difficulty in spotting the mistakes even though they were asked to do a directed review. Out of 8 students; only 2 improved their grades, 2 have shown no difference and 4 students received worse grades in the second midterm. This result is actually consistent with the post questionnaire results. Although %70 of the students initially thought that it was a good idea to hand in assignments online, it was only %30 in the post questionnaire. Unlike what Robinson (1999) and Macleod (1999) found out, anonymity did not work in this class since they did not want to proceed without knowing whose papers they were reading and who was reading theirs both in the lesson and online.

### 5.1 Implications

We tend to think that technology is of great help in education in all cases, and do our best to integrate it into our classes, yet this research showed that it is not always beneficial. Unlike what Ben-Zvi (2007) states, students did not enjoy the freedom of being able to reach their papers or read their friends papers wherever they are. The results of this research revealed that although students seemed enthusiastic towards using online sources in their writing class at the outset, they lost interest and started to find it tiresome, therefore they did not benefit from it at the desired level. That's to say, as long as students are provided with correct instruction and given a chance to exchange ideas in the classroom, teachers should not be in search of ways to make use of wiki pages in their writing classes.

### 5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Obviously this research is limited by its small sample size. Only 24 students participated in the research, so a larger sample may give better data to rely on. Another limitation of this study is the level of the students who took part in the research. For this study, the participants were chosen from an elementary class, therefore, another study with participants from higher levels may reveal different results. In addition to the limitations above, this research was conducted within one classroom composed of two groups; that's two different applications within one group, which made the online writers think that they were putting more effort than their classmates, so they got bored and lost interest. Therefore; this research may be repeated with two different classes having a different application in each.

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