

Engaging students by using wikis as an online constructive tool to teach writing skills to intermediate learners of Russian

Abstract

The paper addresses the way in which wikis can improve students' engagement by strengthening their writing skills and encouraging autonomous learning, thus increasing effectiveness of the learning process. The paper is the product of research comparing the ability of intermediate-level learners' ability to write in Russian before and after they used wikis, a powerful tool for promoting collaborative learning environment. A group of students learning Russian at Regent's University London worked together for four weeks in order to produce six pieces of collective work based on the topics covered in class, three before they used wikis and three while using this VLE tool. The instruments used in this research include (1) a questionnaire surveying the students' attitude toward wikis and (2) a reflection on cooperative learning through wikis and on the obstacles to gaining full advantage from the use of wikis. The results revealed that after starting using wikis, the students' assessment scores of writing got higher than that of their writing before using wikis and that they developed positive attitude towards this cooperative learning environment. Besides, students who participated in the questionnaire thought, after using wikis, that it was a new experience which contributed to the improvement of their Russian writing skills. So in order to conceptualise the results of using wikis as a collaborative tool to improve writing skills of the intermediate level learners of Russian the paper examines the intended learning outcomes for languages at the Intermediate Level module, highlights the gap between these outcomes and the students' actual achievement and suggests possible reasons for underperformance. The author also shares her experience of using wikis in teaching Russian at the intermediate level at Regent's University London, analyses students' attitude to this VLE tool and addresses the question as to why wikis have not, so far, produced the desired result.

Keywords: constructivism in teaching, learning, a teacher-centred approach, a learner-centred approach, collaborative learning, wiki as a communication, collaboration tool

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Introduction

Using wikis for teaching Russian at intermediate level at Regent's University London can improve students' participation by strengthening their writing skills and encouraging their autonomous learning. As an effective and easily accessible tool for constructive learning, wikis allow users to construct their own knowledge, engage in collaborative learning, and strengthen their cognitive skills. While working together, students learn from each other and create online materials that demonstrate what they have learned and show connection between their prior knowledge, the course content and the intended learning outcomes. The research conducted compares students' writing score before they used wikis and that of their writing after they started using this VLE tool. Their writing was evaluated by using specified writing criteria for content, coherence and cohesion, grammar and vocabulary, and results indicated that when using wikis students have more chances to improve their writing because wikis collaboration allows them to work at their own pace, make corrections and see other students' work. Students also agreed that wikis helped them learn new vocabulary and grammar. Thus one of the objectives of this study has been to investigate whether using collaborative on-line wikis resulted in improved writing skills as compared to those acquired by students before using wikis. Another objective has been to discover students' attitude towards wikis and to see whether they considered these online collaborative activities as an effective way of learning. The last objective has been to investigate the obstacles on the

way of achieving the desired result of improving students' writing through wikis.

Method of research

A group of intermediate level students of Russian (10 students all together) participated in this study. The study compared their writing scores before and after using wikis employing specified criteria for content, coherence & cohesion, grammar and vocabulary. The score was calculated out of 100%. The task was to write 6 essays on the topics covered in class. Their essay topics before using wikis were "Tourism in Russia", "Education in Russia", "Russian food" and their topics while using wikis were "Geography of Russia", "Christmas and the New Year celebrations in Russia" and "Press in Russia".

Two instruments used

Two instruments were used: (1) a questionnaire surveying the students' attitude toward wikis and (2) a reflection on cooperative learning through wikis and on the obstacles to gaining full advantage from the use of wikis.

Teaching and learning procedures

During the first two weeks students were asked to produce 3 essays employing a conventional face-to-face group work method while on the

second two weeks they were taught how to use wikis collectively and were asked to produce 3 essays using a collective wiki. The American jazz bassist and composer Charles Mingus once said: "Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity."¹

Thinking about "creativity" of wikis, two accepted approaches to learning—a traditional teacher-centred approach and a learner-centred constructivist approach—come to mind. Andrew G Holmes¹ writes in his article 'Constructivist approaches and radical constructivism² in teaching and learning in higher education undergraduate programmes' that in a teacher-centred approach, 'learners are regarded as 'empty vessels' that could be filled up with knowledge or the facts and truth or correct knowledge as presented by the teacher or the 'fountain of knowledge' Holmes.¹ On the other hand, as he further stresses, a learner-centred constructivist approach focuses 'on the learner as being an active participant in the learning process' Holmes.¹ Using wikis as an online constructive tool can facilitate the use of the main elements of constructive learning such as problem-based and collaborative learning, learner-centeredness, use of cognitive tools and interactivity as opposed to a traditional teacher-centred approach in which a learner is looked upon as a passive object capable only of absorbing ready-made information. It is because wikis as a component of Web 2.0:

- a) Allow users to compose content, to share information, and to comment on other users' work;
- b) Encourage communication and cooperation among their users;
- c) Are easy to use and open to everyone;
- d) Can be accessed synchronously and asynchronously from anywhere and at any time;
- e) Allow users to edit and improve their own and other participants' work at any time;
- f) As a writing tool help to strengthen cognitive skills such as logic, reasoning, self-reflection and reviewing.

However, before discussing the question of how using wikis can engage students by improving their writing skills, let's look at the intended learning outcomes for the intermediate level learners of Russian at Regent's University:

Knowledge and understanding

At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

1. A12: Be able to demonstrate knowledge of the social and cultural institutions of the country or countries where the foreign language is spoken, with particular focus on the region/city/university at which the student is planning to spend his or her Year Abroad.
2. A13: Have an elementary knowledge and understanding of grammatical, phonological and lexical structures of the chosen language, with emphasis on the way it is used in business contexts.

Cognitive skills

At the end of the module, learners will be expected to: B9. Critically analyse texts, data, assumptions and concepts.

Practical and professional skills

C13: Be able to use the target language with a limited degree of fluency as a medium for understanding, expression and communication in routine social and a number of business situations, employing fair receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) skills.

Key transferable skills

At the end of the module, learners will be expected to: D11. Have

enhanced their organizational skills and self-efficacy for/through the Study Period Abroad experience and work placements (if appropriate, the Placement Learning Project).

Unfortunately, some of the intermediate level students of Russian at Regent's University London typically struggle to demonstrate the above learning intended outcomes. Their cognitive skills - the ability to reason, form concepts, solve problems and come to conclusions are under-developed; this results in their taking a surface approach to learning as described by John Biggs³ and Catherine Tang in 'Teaching for Quality learning at University' with 'the intention to get the task out of the way with minimum trouble, while appearing to meet course requirements.'² Some examples of the students' surface approach to writing are: copying material from the internet and pasting it onto their wikis; learning their class essay off by heart, and then being unable to answer any question on its content. For example, a student who wrote an essay on the problem of illegal immigration to Russia from the former Soviet Republics when later asked what CIS was, replied 'Committee for Immigrants'. So it was clear that although he had used this acronym in his essay many times, he had not taken the trouble to find out what it stood for.

Let us now return to the basic principles of constructive learning, such as:

- a) problem-based, learner-centred and collaborative learning
- b) previous experience - based learning
- c) cognitive skills - based learning
- d) cognitive tools - facilitated learning

In order to see how using wikis can help to implement these principles and encourage a deep approach to learning thus resulting in a better students' engagement. Problem-based, learner-centred and collaborative learning can be encouraged by formulating the topic of the essay in such a way as to stimulate the learner's interest, involve their personal experience, and develop their cognitive skills. For example, the task for the essay 'Tourism in Russia' was formulated thus: 'You have just returned from Russia where you travelled extensively. Please advise your friend on what region or city of Russia he/she should visit and why you recommend these places to them'.

It is also important to encourage students to use various cognitive tools. In his article 'Technology as cognitive tools: learners as designers', Jonassen DH⁴ writes: 'Cognitive tools are both mental and computational devices that support, guide, and extend the thinking processes of their users.'³

In their work with wikis students are encouraged to:

- a) Use various search engines such as Google, Bing, Yahoo!, Alta-Vista, Yandex, Rambler etc.
- b) Participate in class discussions of their preparation for writing an essay;
- c) Work in pairs to identify mistakes in each other's essays and to make corrections;
- d) Write peer feedbacks on each other's work.

The study results:

Question 1: To what extent did the students writing skills in Russian improved though wikis as compared with their pre-wikis writing skills? The answer to this question is demonstrated in Table 1.

Question 2:

What was the students' attitude towards wikis before and after they used them? Table 2 shows responses of three randomly chosen students before they used wikis and Table 3 shows the responses of the same students after they used wikis.

²Biggs J, Tang C. Teaching for Quality Learning at University , 4th edition, Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 2011.

³Jonassen DH. Technology as cognitive tools: learners as designers, 1994.

¹Charles Mingus in Lamb B. Wide Spaces: Wikis, Ready or Not, 2004.

Table 1 Students' writing scores before and after using wikis

Writing scores of 10 participating students	Essay 1 before using wikis	Essay 1 while using wikis	Essay 2 before using wikis	Essay 2 while using wikis	Essay 3 before using wikis	Essay 3 while using wikis
Student 1	56%	64%	54%	58%	57%	64%
Student 2	71%	71%	68%	72%	70%	73%
Student 3	65%	67%	63%	68%	65%	72%
Student 4	43%	51%	42%	49%	50%	52%
Student 5	51%	51%	50%	53%	52%	53%
Student 6	67%	68%	66%	66%	66%	69%
Student 7	73%	73%	71%	73%	70%	74%
Student 8	52%	54%	52%	54%	51%	59%
Student 9	48%	51%	49%	51%	48%	52%
Student 10	51%	51%	51%	55%	52%	54%

Table 2 Students' responses to wikis before they started using them

Question	Students' Responses
Question 1: Do you think that wikis can help improve your writing skills?	<p>1. No, as I can do the same work on a piece of paper. It is easier!</p> <p>2. Maybe, but my grammar and spelling are weak. So wiki will not help me.</p> <p>3. No, and I don't want other students to see my work as they can copy and paste it which is plagiarism!</p>

Table 3 Students' responses to wikis after they have used them

Question	Students' Responses
Question 1: Did using wikis improve your writing skills?	<p>1. Yes, I see now that writing essays using my wiki helped me to improve my spelling and grammar with the help of online dictionaries. It was great!</p> <p>2. Yes, definitely! The best thing was that I could correct my work any time.</p> <p>3. Yes, it was useful for me as I managed to memorise quite a lot of the new vocabulary!</p>

Question 3:

What were the obstacles on the way of achieving the desired result of improving students' writing through using wikis?

In spite of the students' positive responses to using wikis, this work has not so far produced the desired results for the following reasons:

- Students' work with wikis was not part of the assessment, so students had no great incentive to produce good work;
- Because students' cognitive skills were still underdeveloped it prevented them from integrating and evaluating more complex information and data;
- Students continued to use a surface approach to learning as an easier path to take.
- Conclusion

In spite of the above, the research results have clearly demonstrate that wikis have a great potential for increasing students' engagement and improving their writing skills because they:

- Contribute to collaborative learning;
- Give students the incentive to construct their own knowledge;
- Help to strengthen their cognitive and writing skills;
- Develop students' autonomous learning.
- Allow students gain knowledge and improve spelling and grammar through on-line cooperation and discussion
- Prove to be an effective tool for improving writing as has been corroborated by the higher writing score

Taking the above said into account we are determined to continue using wikis as a powerful online constructive tool to improve students' writing.

As Lamb B⁵ points out in his article "Wide Spaces: Wikis, Ready or Not", "It is clear, that wikis and other emergent technologies are filling a gaping void in existing practice. Change is happening. What remains unknown is whether educators, institutions, and developers will join (or coexist with) the revolutionary forces or whether they'll stand their ground and simply be overrun". We can but hope then that the former option prevails.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of interest

None.

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