Revising writing in an online learning environment

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Abstract

The screen of the computer provides good practice for the writing process and functions as an exemplar for it since what is being written is not permanent in contrast to writing with pen on paper. The following research questions were addressed to explore the area and were investigated through the data: 1) Do students revise their writing globally or on the surface? 2) Do students co-operate or collaborate to edit their produced text? This paper will report the results from data taken from tertiary EFL students writing collaboratively and/ or co-operatively in a wiki to complete a task. This paper focuses on the revisions and editing university students did to their text while completing a group task in a wiki for the purposes of an upper-intermediate to advance English language course. The methodology that lies behind the research is grounded theory. The research conducted is qualitative and as such the data is collected from the wiki and the history pages which kept track of the students work in the wiki. An attempt is made to distinguish between superficial and global revisions the students performed. Emphasis is given to the frequency with which the students entered the wiki to edit, and the quality of the revisions to their work. From the data we can also draw conclusions as to whether the students collaborated or co-operated to edit their work. The discussion will round off with implications for future research and offer suggestions about how EFL students from the specific and similar contexts could be encouraged to revise in order to write better.

1. Introduction

The nature of the social tools of Web 2.0 allows people to be individuals but also be an "integral part of the collective whole." (Lomicka & Lord: 2009). Wikis are a Web 2.0 tool that offer the opportunity for students to develop their writing and editing skills. One of the most important features a wiki has is the affordance of collaboration in writing (Arnold et al.: 2009). The wiki as a tool helps educators to enhance collaborative writing and reinforce the writing process while at the same time promoting the feelings of ownership and giving students the opportunity to take pride in the artefact created (Educause: 2005). The writing process can be effective when instructors encourage learners to engage in the "recursive process" of writing by raising awareness both for surface and meaning revisions (Pennington: 1996, Davidson & Tomic: 1994). The screen of the computer provides good practice for the writing process and functions as an exemplar for it, since what is being written is not permanent in contrast to writing with pen on paper. Research in the writing process has shown that planning, writing and revising are very important steps in

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the writing process. In this paper revisions are accounted for based on the taxonomy introduced by Faigley and Witte (1981). They suggest two revision categories: Surface changes which refer to revisions that do not change the meaning of the text; and Meaning changes which involve revisions that alter the meaning of the text.

This paper focuses on the application of a wiki for an advanced English as Foreign Language (EFL) course in higher education to develop student writing and editing skills in EFL. Two research questions were formed to examine the context and the data collected through the history feature the wiki offers. Do students revise their writing on the surface or do they revise for meaning? Do the students co-operate or collaborate to edit?

2. Method

The data were collected from a wiki, which tertiary educations students used to complete a cultural awareness writing task. The methodology that underpins this research paper is grounded theory since the research questions were formed after the emergence of themes from the data. The data were collected from the wiki history pages which kept track of the students´ work.

3. Analysis

Thirty-three students participated in this project. The level of the students was B1 + based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages though the classes are mixed ability. Despite the fact that the participants were studying Computer Science, none of them had used a wiki before. The task itself related directly to in-class tasks and activities as it involved students in a writing task on the Civil Rights Movement in the USA. It allowed learners to be autonomous as they found information on their topic area on their own and they made their own decisions within their group on how to present the information. Moreover, it enhanced collaboration among learners as they worked in groups of three.

Analysis of the data illustrates that students focused more on surface changes rather than on meaning changes. This was not a surprise as it was the first time the students have written in an online learning environment and also they were not used to revising while writing. The frequency of revisions was taken into consideration because the students were encouraged to edit but at the same time they knew that the task would be assessed based on the information they added and not on the editing. Frequency shows how much time and effort the students invested in the wiki. The students focused more on surface revisions than on revisions for meaning. Most of the revisions related to spelling, grammar, and paraphrasing. Many revisions related to the format of the page for example change the font colour, the font size, formatting pictures etc. Meaning changes related mostly to the addition of new information in the wiki. One possible reason for the students focusing on surface revisions rather than on meaning revisions is that they were not trained to revise their work for meaning. The majority of the students did not have any experience in process-writing and the revision stage.

Furthermore, the researcher gained an insight into whether the students collaborated or co-operated to edit their work from the wiki archived pages. This area proved harder to identify from the wiki pages. There were three mainstream themes that emerged from the wiki pages. Firstly, in some cases, it was evident that students were working collaboratively on the same text/ page because they were all editing. Secondly, in some instances, students edited the texts others have inserted or their own text and others did little editing. Finally, some students edited only their own parts.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This small scale research project has implications for the EFL context. Awareness should be raised for the different types of revision and their application in EFL learning. The students should not only be trained to revise for meaning but also they should be encouraged to revise when they write. The wiki offers a great environment in which process-writing can flourish and through which student awareness on revisions can be raised.

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