Wiki-based collaborative writing activities in EFL classrooms: Exploring teachers' intervention in the collaborative process

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Abstract. This pilot study was designed to explore EFL teachers' and students' online interaction during wiki based collaborative writing activities. It aims to explore the collaborative behaviours that students engaged in and to what extent the teachers' intervention can promote students' collaboration. The study has a multiple qualitative case study design. Two EFL teachers and 18 of their secondary school students (aged 17-18 years) from a summer camp in Kuwait participated in a five-week-study. Data was collected from multiple resources, such as the wiki discussion page and history logs, and then triangulated with the teachers' and students' interviews. Variations were observed between the two teachers in terms of how they intervened in the students' online interactions at the organisational, socio-cognitive and socio-affective levels. At the wider levels, it appeared that the traditional classroom teaching and learning practices shaped the way in which the teachers interacted in the wiki. These practices seemed to influence the way in which the students collaborated together via the threaded mode and text mode. Some teachers' practices seemed to promote students' collaboration while others hindered it in various ways. It can be concluded that the mere presence of teachers can promote students' participation but does not necessarily assist collaboration.

Keywords: wikis, collaborative writing, computer mediated collaborative language learning, teacher role.

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1. Introduction

In a language learning context, collaborative writing is defined as "the joint production or the co-authoring of a text by two or more writers" (Storch, 2011, p. 275). For interaction to be called collaboration, it should involve a high degree of equality and mutuality in which dialogue is used to construct knowledge (Tan, Wigglesworth, & Storch, 2010). That is, students need to be equal contributors to the task and mutually discuss their ideas in order to construct knowledge.

Wikis are examples of second-generation web tools that facilitate collaborative writing activities. CALL researchers who are interested in the application of wikis have reported on the tool's potential benefits for developing writing and revision skills (Mak & Coniam, 2008) and generating collaborative behaviours in the process of constructing a text (Li & Zhu, 2011; Lund, 2008). However, further investigation into the effectiveness of the use of wikis in a language learning context is required to address the following gaps. First, the majority of studies have focused on adult language students at university levels, with only a limited amount of research being conducted in the school contexts (Lund, 2008; Mak & Coniam, 2008). Second, as far as the collaborative writing process is concerned, the majority of studies have examined student-student interaction, marginalising the role of teachers' participation in regulating students' collaboration. The effectiveness of the teachers' roles in regulating students' collaboration has been reported in Face-to-Face (FTF) and other online contexts (Mangenot & Nissen, 2006; Yoon & Kim, 2012). Third, to date, the majority of research has limited their analysis to either the wiki forum (threaded mode) or the wiki page (text mode). That is, researchers interested in analysing collaboration in the wiki have tended to analyse the discussions that occur between students without considering alterations to the text as additional indicators of collaboration. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to fill these gaps by addressing the following research questions:

- How do EFL teachers and students interact in online wiki based collaborative writing activities?
- What collaborative behaviours do students engage in while constructing their wiki text?
- How can teachers intervene in students' online wiki collaborative writing activities?

2. Method

A convenience sample, comprising of two 12-grade secondary school teachers and 18 of their Kuwaiti EFL students, studying at a summer camp in Kuwait, was

used in this study. The study duration was five weeks. Teachers and students in both classes were trained to use the wiki in a computer laboratory during the first week. They were then asked to engage in out-of-class wiki collaborative writing activities, and more specifically to design a poster about Kuwait. The collaborative writing activity was adapted from the students' textbook. The teachers were asked to engage with the students during this activity. Each class has its own private PB wiki space. Data was collected primarily from the wiki platform (i.e. discussion and history pages), and triangulated with two teachers' stimulated recall interviews and semi-structured interviews with the students.

To analyse the collaborative process and teachers' intervention, several frameworks were employed for the threaded mode and text mode. Mangenot and Nissen's (2006), Nguyen's (2011), and Curtis and Lawson's (2001) frameworks were used to analyse the online discussion. The frameworks classify collaboration and teachers' intervention into three categories: interaction at the organisational, socio-cognitive and socio-affective levels. To understand the interaction, principles of Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) (Herring, 2004) were considered for the online discussion. Furthermore, based on the timestamps of the discussion posts, the teachers' and students' writing behaviour were also considered from the page history. Where appropriate, the editing behaviour was matched with the discussion that took place. To classify editing behaviour, an adapted framework from Mak and Coniam's (2008) study was used.

3. Results and discussion

In both classes, the students appeared to be engaging in different collaborative behaviour at three collaborative levels and the teachers were intervening in the students' interactions at the three levels in different ways. The broader traditional FTF classroom practices seem to influence the way in which the teachers and students interacted in the wiki. The degree of students' participation was reasonable; however, the students directed most of their questions to the teachers. Furthermore, on occasion, the teachers themselves adopted a more authoritative role by posting instructions for the students and editing their texts rather than promoting collaborative behaviour among the students.

At the organisational level, teacher A had structured the activity from the outset and adopted a more directorial role, which appeared to help the students to comprehend how the wiki works. This approach seemed to enable them to collaborate effectively over planning their activity and managing their work autonomously. While the students were interacting online, the teacher monitored their processes, notified

inactive students of the need to contribute and encouraged the students to plan the work together. In contrast, teacher B left the wiki activity to the students and stepped back, without making any effort to organise the students' work. She was focusing on the final accomplishment, that is, the product rather than the process. On occasion, the online discussion data suggests that she was interrupting the students' planning and asking them to start writing directly.

At the socio-cognitive level, teacher A exhibited different online behaviours, apparently to promote student-student collaboration (S/S). She encouraged her students to collaborate not only using the text mode by editing each other's errors and modelling this behaviour, but also using the threaded mode by promoting students' discussion. She asked the students open questions about language and delayed giving her responses to the students' questions in order to stimulate their discussion. However, teacher B adopted a more authoritative role, which was limited to answering the students' questions, posting instructions and editing texts. The interaction in her embedded case exhibited a very structured pattern which was teacher initiation/student response or student initiation/teacher response. This limited the S/S collaboration as the students were reliant on the teacher rather than on each other.

At the socio-affective level, teacher A actively engaged in promoting and encouraging students to work together as well as appreciating their work as a group. Likewise, teacher B also posted socio-affective comments for the students; however, she appeared to encourage individuals rather than the group as a whole. In relation to this category, the students' interaction in both classes was rather limited, and they rarely showed a marked effort to engage in social talk or praise each other's work.

4. Conclusion

Although CALL researchers have called for teachers' intervention in the wiki environment to promote collaboration (Kessler, 2009), this study found that while the mere presence of the teacher could indeed promote participation, it does not necessarily enhance collaboration. Students may be more willing to participate because a teacher is present, but this does not mean that they will be mutually engaged with others. Furthermore, the teachers themselves may impede the collaborative process by transferring FTF traditional classroom practices to the wiki, which may consequently increase the teacher dependency among the students, such that the majority of the interaction becomes student/teacher rather than student/student.

The implications of this study affirm the role that teachers play in regulating students' online wiki collaboration. However, the study also highlights that teachers must not only be present in the wiki, but actively encourage dialogic interaction between the students themselves and try to align their practices regarding the wiki. From the sociocultural perspective, teachers should be aware of the degree of assistance needed by learners and to use language in a way that will encourage learners to move towards assuming greater responsibility for their online wiki learning.

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