

The use of a wiki at a college in Hungary as a tool to enhance personal learning

Réka Asztalos¹

Abstract. Wikis have been extensively used in language teaching for collaborative writing. However, there are very few studies about wikis as holistic learning environments. To fill this niche, the present research project aimed to explore the potential of the wiki as a platform for knowledge building and personalized learning that may enhance lifelong learning and students' self-regulation. Individual learning paths were encouraged by the introduction of a personalized evaluation system, in which points were given for any task the students had completed. A further aim was to find out about students' perceived language development, their disposition towards the wiki and the evaluation system with the help of mid-course and end-of-course questionnaires. The participants of the study were 26 tourism BA students at a university in Budapest who used the wiki for all the three terms of their language course. Results show that the integration of a wiki in a professional English course in higher education is received positively by the students.

Keywords: wiki, personal learning, knowledge sharing, case study.

1. Introduction

As websites that can be freely edited by their users, wikis can further collaboration and knowledge sharing, as well as student-centred, self-directed and personalized learning. However, little research has been conducted on the use of wikis as holistic language learning environments serving multiple purposes. Most case studies have focused on wikis as platforms for collaborative writing investigating the writing process, the writing product, students' and teachers' perceptions of collaborative writing or the effect of tasks (e.g. Li, 2012).

1. Budapest Business School, College of Commerce, Language Department; Asztalos.Reka@kvifk.bgf.hu.

How to cite this article: Asztalos, R. (2014). The use of a wiki at a college in Hungary as a tool to enhance personal learning. In S. Jager, L. Bradley, E. J. Meima, & S. Thoušny (Eds), *CALL Design: Principles and Practice; Proceedings of the 2014 EUROCALL Conference, Groningen, The Netherlands* (pp. 18-22). Dublin: Research-publishing.net. doi:10.14705/rpnet.2014.000188

The use of wikis was evaluated positively by the students in studies that were conducted in English for specific purposes (ESP) courses in tertiary education. For example, [Kovacic, Bubas, and Zlatovic \(2008\)](#) used various online learning activities (e-tivities) in a university business English course, which were perceived to be efficient and useful by the students. Similarly, positive results were found by [Papadima-Sophocleous and Yerou \(2013\)](#), who investigated the perceived effect of using wikis in a course for English for Commerce, Finance and Shipping. They used the wiki for various purposes: students created and edited glossaries, gathered and organized homework, shared material, and created links and an electronic portfolio. Participants regarded the wiki as useful and promoting their learning in several areas. Furthermore, sociology students' perceptions of collaboration in the wiki in an ESP course were examined by [Zorko \(2009\)](#) in a problem-based blended learning environment. She found that the wiki enhanced certain types of collaboration, such as learning from each other and communicating with the teacher, but communicating with peers and co-constructing products were less successfully promoted.

This paper describes a reflective practice project which is part of this researcher's on-going PhD research project and explores the possibility of integrating a wiki into teaching professional English at a higher education institution in Hungary. The main purpose of using the wiki in this project was to motivate students, most of whom had been learning English for eight or more years and perceived their knowledge as sufficient for communication and felt tired of learning the same topics and structures again and again. The wiki was also intended to help them prepare for lifelong learning and experience knowledge sharing. A further aim was to provide tools for self-study and enhance self-regulated learning to compensate for the limited number of classes and the mixed levels of students (B1-C1).

2. Method

2.1. The project

In order to gain in-depth experience about the use of the wiki, a longitudinal case study was designed for three terms. To achieve the goals outlined in the introduction, a wiki was created on Wikispaces for two groups of tourism BA students ($N=26$) in 2012 to support and supplement the two 90-minute face-to-face classes per week for three academic terms. The wiki was first used in class in a computer room, where students were trained on how to use it. After that, students used it at home for assignments, supplementary tasks and individual study. To encourage lifelong learning, links to useful websites were collected that could be used for studying

English at any time in the future. These websites included online dictionaries, pages for practicing grammar, learning vocabulary and other resources. Knowledge sharing was realized within the group by uploading students' work on the wiki, where each group member could read them, comment on them and use them for studying. In order to enhance self-study and personalized learning, students were encouraged to use the wiki at home to meet their own needs and goals.

2.2. The evaluation system

To promote individual learning, a personalized evaluation system was introduced in both groups in the second term. It was based on [Prievara's \(2013\)](#) model, designed for secondary school students in Budapest. At the beginning of the term, students had to assess their skills and decide which skills they would like to improve as well as lay down their immediate and long-term aims. They were encouraged to first select tasks freely for themselves from given sources, then from any source, which allowed them to tailor the tasks to their individual needs and learning styles. Each student had a page on the wiki which functioned as a portfolio where they could upload all the tasks they had carried out. Assessment was based on points students earned for any task they had completed depending on the length and difficulty, which were calculated into grades at the end of the term. Although this system was employed as a supplement to in-class work, where compulsory material was covered, points earned on the wiki could compensate for lower performance in class. The use of the wiki and the assessment system was evaluated quantitatively by pre- and post-questionnaires. Three areas were investigated: students' perceived language development, their disposition towards using the wiki in the project and in the future, and the evaluation of the personal assessment system.

3. Discussion

Results of the questionnaires administered in the second term and at the end of the three terms were compared to establish any differences between students' perceptions in the middle of and after the wiki project (Survey 1 and 2).

3.1. Students' perceived language development

Students had to indicate how much their English knowledge had improved during the second and the third term on a five-point scale. While in the first survey (S1) 35% of the students chose 4 or 5, indicating their perceived language development was *quite a lot* or *a lot* ($M=3.35$), in the second one (S2) it was higher, at 54% ($M=3.57$). The results were very similar for all the subskills and areas, apart from

the perceived development of their professional vocabulary, where the mean score was 4.3 in both terms. This could be caused by the fact that they had never studied that area before, and consequently progress could be perceived more easily.

3.2. Students' disposition towards the wiki

Similarly to previous research findings, most of the students had positive feelings towards the wiki. The results of the questionnaires show that 81% of the students found the wiki useful in both surveys, while in S1 35% thought it was interesting, in S2 the number increased to 42%. The number of students who thought using the wiki was easy almost doubled from 15% to 27% in the second survey. This relatively low number shows that even today's students who are considered digitally literate need training when a new tool is introduced to them for educational purposes. At the same time, the perceived difficulty in using the wiki did not prevent them from acknowledging its usefulness. The fact that the majority of the students think they will use the wiki in the future after completing the English course (77% yes, 19% maybe) shows that the use of the wiki has the potential to encourage the idea of lifelong learning. The areas where they plan to use it include exam preparation (88%), writing letters (85%), preparing for a job interview and writing a CV (38%), practising grammar (32%) and using online dictionaries (15%).

3.3. Students' disposition towards the evaluation system

When the evaluation system based on individually selected tasks was introduced in the second term, students found it very difficult to understand it and adapt to it. The freedom of choice made them incapable of making decisions. Thus, several sources were presented to them where they could find tasks for practice and it was suggested that they should choose exercises which could improve their weaknesses. However, in the first survey only 19% of the students claimed they had chosen *tasks to improve their weaknesses*, while 65% selected *interesting* and 42% *useful tasks*. In the second survey the proportions changed significantly; only 46% of students chose *interesting tasks*, whereas 35% preferred *tasks to improve their weaknesses*. The usefulness of tasks still seemed to be important (46%) and a new category emerged; *tasks for exam preparation* (27%), which can probably be explained by the fact that the students had to take a B2 level professional language exam after the third term. Regarding the assessment system, the majority of students considered it useful in both surveys (65% and 69%) and would recommend it for other groups (69% and 73%). While in the first survey 58% thought it was fair, in the second one it rose to 73%. At the same time, the percentage of students who found the system complicated decreased from 19% to 4%.

4. Conclusions

Concerning pedagogical implications, the findings suggest that the integration of a wiki in a professional English course in higher education can motivate students and enhance personal learning, which can lead to more intensive language development. The finding that students' perceived language development increased, while their disposition towards the wiki and the personalized evaluation system became more positive by the end of the project suggests that the successful implementation of a new tool not only needs utmost care and planning but also a considerable amount of time. Further research with a modified course design based on the results of the study should be carried out in the future to explore the adaptability of this methodology for other groups at the college.

References

- Kovacic, A., Bubas, G., & Zlatovic, M. (2008). E-tivities with a wiki: Innovative teaching of English as a foreign language. *Paper presented at the 14th congress of the European University Information Systems Organisation (EUNIS), Aarhus, Denmark.*
- Li, M. (2012). Use of wikis in second/foreign language classes: A literature review. *CALL-EJ Online, 13*(1), 17-35.
- Papadima-Sophocleous, S., & Yerou, C. (2013). Using wikis in an English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) context: university students' perceptions and reflections. *Teaching English with Technology, 13*(2), 23-54.
- Prievara, T. (2013). 21. századi pedagógia a gyakorlatban [21st century pedagogy in practice]. In D. Lévai & J. Szekszárdi (Eds), *Digitális pedagógus konferencia konferenciakötet* (pp. 17-22). Budapest: ELTE PPK.
- Zorko, V. (2009). Factors affecting the way students collaborate in a wiki for English language learning. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 25*(5), 645-665.