

Wiki Textbooks in Language Classroom

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Abstract

Being a practicing secondary school teacher as well as a textbook writer I have tried together with my good colleague Meeri Sild to come up with attractive solutions for language teaching by transforming our English language textbooks 'All the World is a Puzzle' into interactive material with lots of additional resources both for students and teachers.

The textbook series has three books and so there are also three Wikis where most of the textbook material is available online and all the tasks are interactive – students can fill them in and learn about their results at once. Students can also practice listening and watch additional videos, etc. In order to better acquire vocabulary, several vocabulary games have been added.

Wikis also enable interaction and collaboration between students and uploading of their own work (from essays to presentations).

All three textbooks are widely used all over Estonia.

What are the benefits of the wiki textbooks?

- *They are easy to compile and change.*
- *They are available to students wherever they are – even when they cannot attend classes.*
- *Students who need more practice than others have a possibility for that out of class time now – listen to texts, practice pronunciation/intonation, improve listening skills by listening to a text for as many times as they need, etc.*
- *Students also appreciate the fact that they can learn about their improved skills at once – through interactive tasks and games.*
- *Vocabulary games make it fun to acquire new words – students enjoy playing and competing.*

Links to outside resources make the textbook boundless – you can always show to students some interesting additional illustrative material about the topic at hand and this way help to build associations and links.

1. Introduction

I have picked wikis as a supplementary interactive part of my teaching materials because they are easy to compile and use – both for teachers as well as for students. Wiki environments enable interactive tasks, illustrative materials as well as collaboration.

The most widely known wikis are probably Wikipedia (the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit) and Wikiversity (a center for the creation of and use of free learning materials, and the provision of learning activities) but there are actually more than a dozen different wiki environments to choose from. I have been using pbworks only because I am used to it but every user should find out which of the wikis best suits their needs as, in addition to the benefits of interactive online materials, the wikis also make



collaboration simple and available even across long distances (which is especially good if you collaborate with a colleague or institution abroad).

My examples here are linked to an English language textbooks series widely used in Estonian secondary schools 'All the World's a Puzzle' by Merike Saar and Meeri Sild. I will also shortly describe the use of wikis for project work and collaboration.

2. Wikis for learning

The need for interactive materials comes straight from modern teaching methods which account for different learning styles and cater for different needs of our students. Blended learning and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) are the hot topics in Estonian National Curriculum for secondary schools and new trends in higher education where so many students work in addition to their studies. Therefore, concurrently with publishing the textbooks the authors of 'All the World's a Puzzle' created free and open educational resources and converted the study materials into interactive online tasks as well as added resources both for students and teachers. An example is available on: www.puzzleform10.pbworks.com

What can you find there? The electronic version of the textbook – in case you use an e-reader. Also, almost all the grammar and vocabulary tasks from the textbook have been made interactive – the students learn their score right after they have submitted the task and can retake the self-check tests until they have mastered the material. In addition to written (grammar) explanation in the textbook the wiki makes use of different media (videos, slideshows, etc) to illustrate aspects of grammar or topics under discussion. Vocabulary tasks provide different learning possibilities from vocabulary games (pelmanism, word race, etc) to self-tests.

What are the benefits of the wiki textbooks?

They are easy to compile and change (for any teacher or student). You only need to know how to copy and paste. So, for the beginners, a wiki might be a good place to select, organise and display material they would like to use with their students – everything is together in a single wiki and easy to access, use and change. Later, when you are confident enough, you might want to compile your own materials and tests and upload these. It is also easy to organise group work and joint editing of materials, ask students upload their presentations or essays, etc as well as ask other students to comment on their peers' material. So, the first benefit is orderly material which is easy to upload and access, change, comment on, etc.

Another benefit of a wiki is that it is available anywhere with an internet connection. So the students can use it even when they cannot (temporarily) attend classes or when they do not have the physical material (paper book, etc). Those students who are slower or need more revision can approach the material as many times as needed – especially listening tasks. Sometimes it is also necessary to listen to and read along with texts to practice pronunciation and intonation. There is usually not enough time in class to deal with these language aspects in detail – so a possibility to work on your own at home is a good chance to develop these skills.

Another time-consuming but often also boring and difficult task in language classes is mastering new vocabulary. Again, the use of different language games and interactive tasks helps make this task interesting and fun. You can insert vocabulary quizzes or self-tests into any wiki. Students enjoy playing and competing without realising that it is actually hard work. In our busy world the students also appreciate the fact that they can learn about their improved skills at once – through interactive tasks and games. You can also insert video clips and mind maps, etc which enliven the whole learning process. Links to outside resources actually make the textbook boundless – you can always show to



students some interesting additional illustrative material about the topic at hand and this way help to build associations and links.

3. Wikis for collaboration

Wikis also provide good opportunities for collaborative material development as they enable simultaneous editing of different pages of the same wiki. There are two main ways how to make use of this possibility in teaching. First, each student can have their own page in your wiki and so all students can work at the same time (on their own page) but still access others' contribution without leaving the work space. Another possibility is that students work individually (from home) at different times and can edit the same material/page without the need to e-mail different versions of the same material (similar, e.g. to googledocs). So, if you want your students to write an article or an essay in class and make it accessible to other students for comments, they can do it simultaneously in the wiki environment and afterwards read and comment each others' work. If, on the contrary, they need to make a group presentation that takes longer (they will not sit in the same room but work from home at different times) – they can still work on the same presentation (despite the difference in time and distance). An example is available on: www.britishstudies.pbworks.com

What can you find there? First of all, presentations made by students for their British Studies course. The tasks for students have been different in different years. Sometimes the students had to find material and write a short overview of a topic and present it to peers in the form of a reading material and revision questions or tasks. This was done individually, i.e. each student had a topic of their own. At the end of the course, in order to revise the material, students made PowerPoint presentations in groups. The final task was for every student to comment on each others' presentation skills and material they had compiled.

Sometimes the students have had to present the material of their topic only in an individual PowerPoint presentation and then also their presentation skills have been assessed/commented on.

In addition to the material compiled by students the teacher / lecturer can also upload their own instructions and material, or co-operate with a colleague in material development, etc.

4. Wiki features

Collaboration also enables the use of wikis for international projects. The benefit of it (compared to web pages) is that anyone who has the access key can collaborate – upload information (text, pictures, links, etc) without the need to understand complicated codes.

This brings us to another benefit of a wiki – you can always password protect the environment so that only people who are members of the workspace have the right to either read or edit it. There are five different levels of a wikispace users – readers, writers, editors, administrators and owners. So, if you decide to create a wikispace you get to choose whether to make it public for everybody or only for those invited to use it. You can also give different rights to different users – maybe a colleague you work with can also be an editor / administrator and the students might have the rights of readers or/and writers (if you want them to upload their work as well). All the users have the right to read the uploaded material and comment on it. Even people who do not have an e-mail address can become members (they get the so called classroom account).

Advanced features (which, unfortunately, are not all free) also enable different security setting (e.g. page level access, etc) but free features include different templates, activity tracking, plagiarism checker, and so on. Pbworks also has lots of online help –video tours, online courses, free webinars, constant updates, teaching materials, etc. A new Projects feature was launched just in September



2011 for educational wikis – this should make classroom project work especially attractive and easy to use.

5. Conclusion

All in all, it should be said that using wikis with my students has helped to make teaching more interesting – both for myself as well as for my students. Their feedback has been very positive and encouraging. They especially like the possibility to listen to and follow different grammar explanations, do listening tasks, practice intonation, play vocabulary games and try out quizzes on English speaking countries. As for a teacher, I find that the wikis have helped make instruction more suitable for students with different learning styles and levels (fast/slow students), made it possible to use more group work and peer assessment – which in turn have lead to better student outcomes, especially in writing skills. It seems that students are especially concerned when their work is made accessible to other students so they tend to put more effort into their assignments. So I am satisfied and encourage other teachers and lecturers to make use of the teaching possibilities wikis offer.