

## Building Bridges with Language

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### Abstract

*The development of Web 2.0 has led to the appearance of collaborative writing tools, including wikis and blogs. Wikis are particularly adept to collaboration among groups of users, as all members can edit content at any time as well as comment peer work on every page. This paper aims to describe and analyze the application and use of collaborative tools, namely a wiki and, at a later stage, Google docs, within a virtual exchange project between students attending a Portuguese and an Iranian university. The project entitled Building Bridges with Language has a threefold objective: raise awareness to differences and similarities between cultures and perspectives on life among university students in several countries and thus promote tolerance; enhance not only student writing and speaking skills but also their autonomy in the use of English language; and, finally, develop students' critical thinking towards learning. In group, students are required to create products using online tools such as @Voicethread or Microsoft Photostory. These products are then shared with their foreign counterparts. Based on the information provided by the students' audiovisual projects and on virtual interaction, Portuguese and Iranian students write articles which will be published on an online magazine created for the project. Through the wiki and Google docs, educators are able to monitor the students' learning progress and, simultaneously, students become consciously and actively a part of the evaluation process.*

### 1. Introduction

In today's world, knowing foreign languages, and in particular English, is no longer simply an advantage but a requirement for personal, academic and professional growth. This premise led Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (UAL), a private university in Lisbon, Portugal, to introduce English as a compulsory course unit in its Undergraduate degrees.

As learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), our students do not usually have the opportunity to "access the authentic use of the target language outside the classroom" (Ozverir & Herrington, 1423), a possibility which not only fosters learning but also increases interest in the language. The project expounded in this paper provided that real context activity for students attending the first year of the Undergraduate degree in Communication at UAL: creating an online magazine where they would publish articles on a common theme - life in Iran.

Though the work was based on the production and exchange of information between groups of Portuguese and Iranian students, this paper focuses on the activities of the Portuguese students only, as well as on their perception of the impact the project had on their learning experience.

### 2. Wiki as a collaborative learning

Web 2.0 tools and social networking technologies allow students to connect and collaborate in spite of being physically apart: they may exchange information and ideas, share photos or videos and generate content.

One of these tools, the wiki, is a webpage which, like a blog, allows writing, uploading and editing content to all those who are given access to it, thus facilitating collaborative work while not requiring

knowledge of HTML programming. Leuf and Cunningham (2001: 14), creators of the original wiki concept, described it as "a freely expandable collection of interlinked webpages, a hypertext system for storing and modifying information – a database, where each page is easily edited by any user with a forms-capable Web browser client". Several researchers have used wikis to support learning (Grant, 2006; Forte & Bruckman, 2007; Aharony, 2008) and have concluded that this could be a useful tool for continuous discussion, for collecting and sharing resources as well as for exchanging and sharing of information and content, both at secondary school and university levels.

Building Bridges with Language was a student-centred project aimed to promote collaboration among all those involved and foster student autonomy. This was achieved through the activities proposed and the use of ICT, since "technologies that shift control from the teacher to the student have been understood as having a positive effect on learning" (Forte, 34).

The wiki was the option in terms of collaborative tool as it allows students to 1) share their texts, photos and/or videos as well as edit the content and 2) comment on their colleagues' work. Unfortunately, the wiki was not available to the Iranian students (the site was not accessible as a result of the country's restrictions to Internet use). Thus, besides placing their products on the class wiki, the Portuguese students also made them available on ©Google docs, a tool chosen due to its similarities with the wiki and its accessibility in Iran.

### 3. The project - Building Bridges with Language

This project, which involved students attending the first year of the Undergraduate degree in Communication at UAL, Portugal, and students attending several Undergraduate degrees at Islamic Azad University, Saveh Branch, Saveh, Iran, had three main objectives:

- raise awareness to differences and similarities between cultures and perspectives on life among university students in several countries and thus promote tolerance;
- enhance student writing and speaking skills as well as their autonomy in the use of English language;
- develop students' critical thinking towards learning.

Promoting the contact between the students of the countries involved, together with the emphasis on pair and group work and on collaborative design and creation of products (©Voicethread presentation and magazine article) would contribute to meeting the first objective. We believed that by making students responsible for the selection, organization and creation of those products, though there was constant support by the teachers, our second objective would be attained. The autonomy and responsibility granted to the students would then foster their critical thinking. Moreover, a questionnaire would be applied on their perception of their learning experience, which would also help them reflect on the possible impact the activities carried out within the assignment had on their learning.

As a pre-project activity, a placement test was given to ensure that communication among stakeholders was not impaired by lack of linguistic competence of some of the students involved (the minimum level was A.2.). In the case of the undergraduate degree in Communication, students' level of English varied but was overall pre-intermediate/intermediate, so the whole class was included in the project.

Initially, the Communication class encompassed 43 students, who were divided into 14 groups of 3 students. In the end of the semester, there were only 35 students divided into 10 groups. All resources were made available on the e-learning platform (Moodle) in the course unit's page, including a link to the wiki, instructions on how to use tools such as ©Photostory or ©Voicethread as well as interactive exercises, video/audio presentations on grammar or vocabulary issues, among others.

### 3.1 Overview of Assigned Wiki Activities

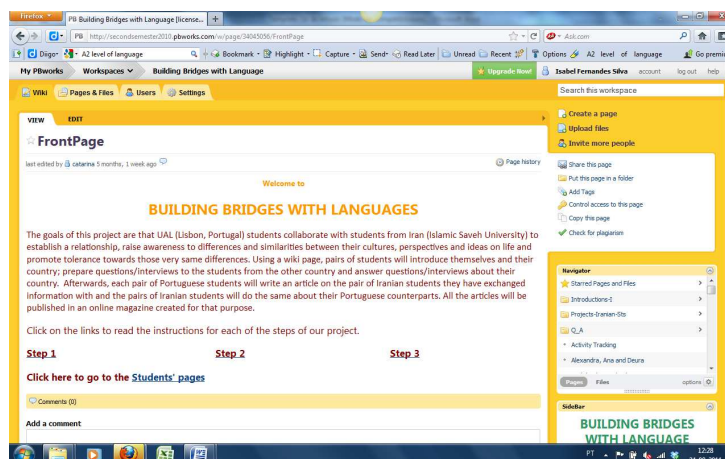


Figure 1. Project wiki <http://secondsemester2010.pbworks.com/w/page/34045056/FrontPage>

Building Bridges with Language involved 3 main steps: designing and creating the presentation about one's country and an individual introduction; reading/watching the foreign students presentations and devise questions deemed important to, in step 3, write the article on life in Iran. In step 2 the students also had to answer the Iranian students' questions about Portugal and/or themselves.

In Step 1, though students were given guidelines to complete the tasks, they had to, either in group or individually, research, select and organize the information for the presentations. The focus on student generated content was crucial at this stage as one of the objectives was to promote autonomy and critical thinking; the emphasis on collaboration fostered exchange of ideas, knowledge building and tolerance.

#### Step 1 – Presentations

In class, the students discussed what items they believed a foreigner would like to know about Portugal. A list was written on the board of all the suggested topics, after which the groups chose the topic for their presentation. The themes included academic life in Portugal, the country's beaches, night life in Lisbon and more traditional issues such as religion or employment perspectives for university graduates. The tool used for this presentation was ©Voicethread – a storytelling application that allows students to combine image and narration, i.e., they can upload images and/or photos and record their comments and ideas about each image/photo directly on the presentation.

A second presentation was also required of individual students, for which they had to use a different tool: MS Photostory – another storytelling tool that allows students to combine images/photos, narration and music. Once again, it was the students' responsibility to select the information, organize the photos and write and record the text. Therefore, each ©Photostory is different – some describe the student's daily routine, others his or her hobbies, others his or her life story.

Students were encouraged to improve and comment each others' work, even in linguistic terms, while teachers offered constant support and assistance as they monitored the work being produced.

#### Step 2 – Interviews

At this point, both the Portuguese and the Iranian students had made their group and individual presentations available to their foreign counterparts by placing their products on the wiki and on Google docs.

Based on the information provided by the Iranian students, the Portuguese students posted a list of questions requiring further information on Iran, which they considered important to write their articles.

These activities were especially designed for the Communication students, thus providing the authentic experience which they do not usually have access to and which we deemed would have a greater impact on their learning experience.

### Step 3 – Magazine

Students wrote one-page articles on Iran based on three main sources– the materials produced by the Iranian students, the information gathered through their interviews and data available on the Internet. The articles were written collectively in class, reviewed by peers in class and by the teacher.

Finally, a group of students volunteered to design to front and back cover of the magazine while others volunteered to organize the sequence of articles and their layout. The final product – an online magazine called Building Bridges with Language – is therefore a collaborative product based on a real context activity, providing the authentic experience EFL learners and bridging “the gap between real world and classroom tasks” (Ozverir & Herrington, 1427).

## 4. Discussion

On implementing the project, we were faced with our biggest challenge – the difference in Internet accessibility, which resulted in the Iranian students being unable to access the wiki from their university computer labs as well as not being allowed to use tools such as ©Voicethread or ©Photostory for their own presentations. The solution found was to create a Google email address where they could send/upload their products to using ©Google docs. This implied supplementary work, since the video presentations and other assignments had already been placed on the wiki. Moreover, one of the designed activities (commenting on each others’ work) had to be cancelled, while some of the longer ©Photostories, which had to be uploaded to [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and them made available on the wiki, were never accessible to the Iranian students.

In order to understand the impact this project had on the students’ learning experience, a questionnaire was given at the end of the semester. Using a Lickert scale, students were asked to express their (dis)agreement on the activities they believed were most useful in terms of their learning and, as made evident in the chart below, the project was considered one of the most important activities (17,9% completely agreed and 50% agreed), alongside with the interactive exercise (21,4% completely agreed, 60,7% agreed) and the (MSPowerpoint) presentations (3,6% completely agreed and 53,6% agreed) available on the elearning platform.

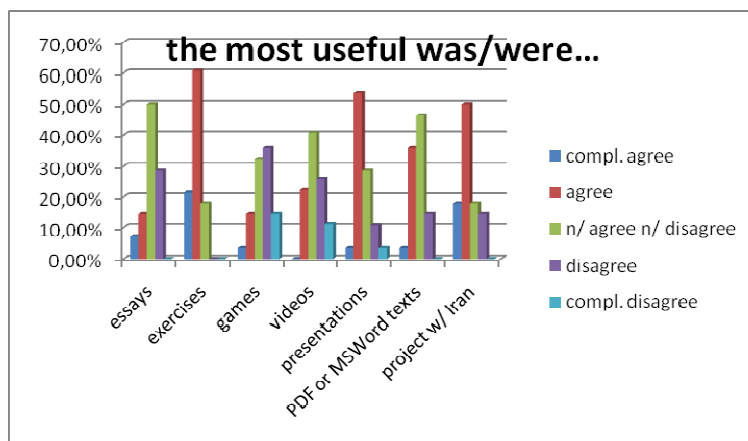


Figure 2. Chart evidencing which activities the Portuguese students found more relevant for their learning experience.

## 5. Looking forward

Building Bridges with Language was developed in the second semester of 2010/2011 (mid February to early June 2011) and it is currently being revised and redesigned so as to be implemented in the academic year of 2011/2012. Moreover, the inclusion of more than one class of Portuguese students and of other foreign universities is under consideration. We believe this is an experience which can boost students' learning experience and present an opportunity for bringing the real world into our English classroom(s).

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