



Wikis in Integrating the Study of Culture and English Language Learning

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Abstract

New approaches to creating web content and such informational tools as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, etc. have much to offer to language education.

One of the widely used tools is wikis. As a piece of server software that allows groups of users to freely create and edit web page content, wikis are especially suitable for content and language integrated courses which involve many reading and writing activities. The addition of wikis to a face-to-face CLIL course may encourage deeper engagement with the course material and with other course members, as well as encouraging more connection between class sessions.

The use of wikis was incorporated in the teaching of English at Tambov State Technical University within the course in English and Culture. The course is dual-focused: it integrates the improvement of students' English language communication skills with equipping them with the knowledge about British and American cultural landscape. The paper discusses new educational opportunities that using a wiki has given course instructors and analyses the results of students' surveys about the implementation of ICT tools.

1. Introduction

Technology has long become an indispensable part of educational process and it would be difficult to imagine a modern classroom without the use of various devices and technologies. The beginning of the 21st century has seen a rise of new informational tools known as Web 2.0 technologies. This term is used to describe such websites that allow users to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to websites where people are limited to the passive viewing of content. Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, etc. These new approaches to creating web content have much to offer to educators, and such opportunities were quickly recognised by many members of educational community, including language teachers. Simon [1, 6] writes "... many Web 2.0 applications are powerful socialization and communication tools. As such, they will have an incredible educational potential for foreign language instruction".

2. Wiki as an educational tool

One of the tools widely used in education is wikis. Simply put, wiki is a piece of server software that allows groups of users to freely create and edit web page content. Wikis are well-suited to many types of educational uses in which joint production is desired, i.e. student collaborative projects. *Collaboration* is a feature that distinguishes wikis from other Web 2.0 technologies and, thus, makes them a natural fit for a language course. Craig [2] emphasises that there are three main areas in which the processes involved in language learning are closely aligned with Web 2.0 tools – language feedback, interaction, and contribution; language production; and language reception. Wikis may be used to develop learners' skills in any of these areas.

There are several reasons for using wikis in language teaching:

- They are simple to use and allow collaboration, independently of time and space, via easily accessible online spaces.

Craig cites "the ease of use and design" as one of the arguments for the use of wikis in the classroom [2].

- They offer authentic writing practice and allow students to be actively engaged in editing and updating texts.

The primary aim of a wiki is to allow users to freely create content and share it with others. Thus, students will need to research, evaluate and analyse information and write extensively in order to create a wiki. It can be a good alternative to traditional writing assignments. Besides, changing someone else's text implies having knowledge and a viewpoint about that text, and having confidence in that viewpoint strong enough to replace the original text with one's own version.

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- They teach students the skills of collaboration.

This tool can be used not only in a writing class but any class that requires students to work together and contribute to a group assignment or project.

- They present the student writers with a ready audience and critics.

Wikis can be utilized as a forum for group authoring and as a presentation tool where students can revise content. Writing for the audience increases responsibility for the quality of the results and it is likely that students will put more effort into their work as compared with an essay written “for the teacher’s eyes only”.

- They allow incorporating multimedia content.

The content is multimedia in nature and can include text, images, hyperlinks and videos [3]. Wikis are also browser-based, which allows users to access them from different platforms without the need for additional software.

- They promote digital literacy and creativity through design and development activities.

Although students do need some previous knowledge of creating and sharing content on the net, it cannot be considered of professional level. In fact, working on a wiki can be a way of developing students’ digital literacy skills.

- Wikis provide a safe social networking environment for the classroom.

Social networks engage users and encourage active communication and collaboration. However, such networks as Facebook offer too a broad range of topics, which can distract or even frighten not very advanced learners. In a wiki the newsfeed may be built around the work the class is doing, all of the discussion and activity can be tied directly to the goals and work of the class.

Educational uses of wikis include research project development, creating summaries, brainstorming, and building annotated bibliographies and classroom encyclopedias. Teachers use wikis to share teaching practices, publish course resources, create concept maps, and as an editing resource [4]. Some wikis are specifically dedicated to ICT use in language education, among these being *E-language*, developed by M. Pegrum from the University of Western Australia [5].

3. Implementing wikis in a CLIL course in English and Culture

Since creating a wiki basically involves working with content (texts) in a target language, they are perfectly suited for content and language integrated courses. Several dual-focused courses, which aim at developing students’ English-language communication skills and equipping them with the knowledge of subject content, are taught at Tambov State Technical University, one of them in English and Culture. It is delivered to the first-year students with International Studies minor. The primary objective of the course is to introduce learners to the cultural landscape of Britain and America, building up their intercultural competences and language skills.

Our experience shows that cultural themes are traditionally popular with the students, regardless whether they have science or humanities as their majors. Everyone has an opportunity to study an aspect of culture which interests them most. At the same time, it is an extremely important field, as no true communication can happen if the parties do not understand the cultural context. However, in non-linguistic programmes the emphasis is usually on the development of professionally relevant vocabulary and academic skills and students are not able to devote sufficient time to a comprehensive study of culture. The use of the so-called “blended”, ICT-supported learning enables participants to extend the actual time of interaction between the students and the English teacher and gives the opportunity to elaborate on issues of English-speaking culture. Thus, to ensure students receive extended practice in English along with learning about culture, it was decided to create a wiki www.brit-am-studies.wikispaces.com on which all participants would work over a semester.

The platform is free of charge and has assessment tools which give teachers the opportunity to measure student contribution and engagement in real-time. Several pages were created by the instructor of the course for students’ self-study and subsequent discussions in class, other pages were created by students themselves, and the task of the teacher was to review and help with editing the texts.

The wiki also provided a safe social network for course participants, where they could share additional links to Internet resources on the topic of the classes, to comment on projects of their classmates. The wiki newsfeed was used by the teacher as a classroom management tool, to post home tasks, web-based activities and further learning resources. The requirement to weekly post comments and additions to the wiki pages ensured that students devoted enough time to independent study of English-language resources on the Internet, i.e., were in fact practicing English. For the teacher it gave an opportunity to more clearly assess the knowledge and skills of each student and to identify their characteristic errors. Thus, the wiki has become a collaborative knowledge community and a virtual classroom.



3. Students' perceptions of blended learning

To ensure the students benefit the most from a blended course, their initial level of preparedness and their expectations towards using a virtual classroom were assessed through a short survey. The survey concentrated on the students' access to the internet, their computers skills, previous experience in using computers for learning, and their expectations about how a blended course may impact on their learning experience and the instructional process. Fifteen students participated in the survey.

All participants admitted to access information on the web on a regular or daily basis, they were experienced in posting messages to a discussion forum and uploading files to a website. More than half of the participants (60%) have followed courses in which materials and resources have been delivered online before. So we could count on a high level of students' preparedness to take part in a blended learning experience.

However, their expectations towards blended learning were often different. While all the participants agreed that it increases collaboration and experience sharing among students, a small minority was not sure whether it would give them more flexibility in learning, and a third of the students neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement "A virtual classroom helps students to prepare well for class sessions." Most believed that blended learning provides for a greater variety of learning resources. The group was somewhat divided as per whether their study workload would increase. Also, based on the survey we understood that one of the major concerns for students was if their individual learning needs would be properly addressed in an online environment, and we tried to accommodate for that during the course. The results of this part of the survey are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' expectations towards blended learning (BL).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
BL supports ideas and experience sharing amongst students.				13	2
BL increases opportunities for discussion and debate outside class.			2	8	5
BL provides flexibility to learners.			3	9	3
A virtual classroom helps students to prepare well for class sessions.			5	8	2
BL increases the study workload for students.	1	7	3		4
BL increases interaction between individual students and the course instructor outside class.		2	3	8	1
BL helps the instructor to address individual learning needs.			6	9	
BL provides a wide variety of learning resources.			3	3	9

Also, at the end of the semester the students were asked to fill in a student satisfaction survey. The survey asked about some technical aspects of a blended mode of delivery, how they assessed their own participation in the course, their satisfaction with the interaction with the teacher and their classmates online and offline, and which online activities they preferred. As far as this last issue is concerned, students' answers are presented in a diagram in Fig.1 (the students could choose as many activities as they wanted).

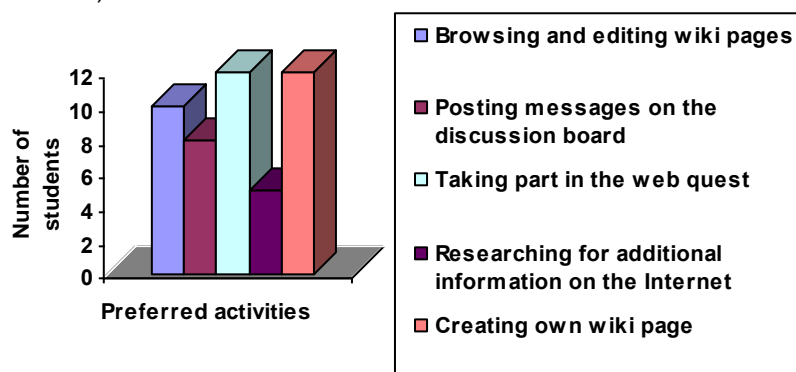


Fig. 1. Preferred online activities of the blended course participants



As we see, the most popular activities were creating their own wiki pages, editing the pages of others and participating in the web quest on the topic of the course. Taking part in forum discussions was also among the preferred activities. The participants were generally very active in such discussions, which correlates with their initial expectation that blended learning will increase their opportunities to interact outside class and their positive evaluation of the quality of interaction during the course: twelve out of 15 students were satisfied with their participation in the course and with the quality of interaction between all parties.

The majority (12 out of 15) mentioned that the blended course encouraged them to learn more independently, it kept them focused and alert during the course. All but one student agreed that the level of effort the course required was adequate, so their initial concerns that the workload would increase proved to be groundless. Also, almost everyone (13 out of 15) agreed that a blended learning course makes it more important for students to interact with the teacher during classroom hours. The importance of a teacher's role in a blended learning environment was further accentuated by participants choosing such areas as variety and availability of learning resources, clear communication of assignments, and correlation and complementary nature of online and in-class activities as priority features of their satisfaction with the blended learning experience.

Additionally, most students mentioned that working on a wiki and participating in a blended course did not require any special technical skills and all admitted that occasional technical problems did not adversely affect their understanding of the course.

4. Conclusion

Web 2.0 tools such as wikis significantly enhance language learning as they simulate, in a computer environment, the realisation of the first and the foremost function of the language – communication between individuals. Users are able to interact and share information, produce utterances, and practice in language reception. Collaboration being a distinct feature of wikis, they are invaluable in developing students' team-working skills. While working on a wiki students will extensively practice reading and writing in a foreign language, as well as develop digital literacy and creativity skills. Since it is usually set around a specific topic, working on a wiki can be logically integrated into CLIL courses. Our experience in building a wiki as part of the CLIL course in English and Culture has proven that the wiki helps increase the actual time students spend learning and practicing English, it makes the course more engaging, ensures interaction between course participants between class sessions and provides for a greater variety of learning resources. And it should be emphasized that, however exciting, a blended learning environment can be even more challenging and demanding in terms of pedagogy than a traditional classroom, requiring a teacher to address every learner's educational needs.

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