

Peer-reviewing in an intercultural wiki environment - student interaction and reflections

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Abstract

The increase in the use of the web for learning purposes matches today's demands on language learners finding ways of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence. This paper reports a case study investigating an educational design in technical writing where non-native English speaking students collaborate with native English speaking students. In the exchange, the students work with peer review as a way of refining texts to develop discursive, linguistic, communicative as well as intercultural communicative competences. The results show some key insights into peer reviewing practice in web-based asynchronous environments where the students gradually get used to ways of giving and receiving feedback. There is a great variation in peer comments, displaying a high number of revision-oriented, elaborated formulations. Furthermore, the outcomes show that being engaged in an intercultural peer review exchange implies getting an insight into aspects of communication and dimensions of feedback from someone outside of one's own disciplinary field and from another culture. Some of the core issues of intercultural exchanges are related to skills in mastering expressions of other cultures than one's own and critical awareness.

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With increasing use of the web, activities taking place on the web for learning purposes are growing (cf. O'Dowd, 2007). One of the primary reasons is that Web 2.0 technology offers possibilities of collaboration in joint production of content such as text, images, and references, which can also be applied in education. However, implementing web-based technology into institutional contexts frequently entails transformation of its use. For instance, one way of modifying the wiki concept based on collaborative production is to apply it as a space for students where they present and refine writing assignments. The content in these assignments can then be shared and commented on by peers both in a local and in an intercultural global context.

Using the web for exchange interaction matches today's demands on language learners to develop both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Guth & Helm, 2010; Kramsch, 2008; Thorne, 2003). Apart from multilingual aspects, being engaged in such exchanges also implies that learners are exposed to a diversity of cultural norms and values, which might influence ways of communicating. It has been suggested that such exchanges support meaningful communication rather than focusing exclusively on language in "intercultural community building between geographically dispersed participants" (Thorne & Black, 2007, p. 138). Learning to

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master discursive expressions of cultures other than one's own is a core issue and an important aspect of learning in intercultural exchanges.

The interest in this study is student intercultural web-based peer review. Within language learning, peer review where students comment and discuss each other's texts as a source of feedback, has widely been applied in language education (cf. Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Research on peer review, also referred to as peer response interaction in the literature, in web-based environments is increasing (Chang, 2012; Dippold, 2009; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Ho & Savignon, 2007; Jin & Zhu, 2010; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). Using the web as a peer review environment implies taking part in active dialogic action where participants interact with others and take others' contributions into account, frequently with peers from other cultures (Guth & Helm, 2010). This study investigates multicultural peer review processes on a wiki and the student reflections on such a practice in an exchange between students at a university in Sweden and in the US.

1. Peer reviewing in an intercultural context

Within language learning practice and research, there have been discussions about the effects of peer reviewing and whether being engaged in peer commenting enhances student writing abilities (e.g., Berg, 1999; Liu & Carless, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Liu & Sadler, 2003; McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000) and the skill of being able to critically evaluate writing (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). In their overview of feedback in language learning, Ken Hyland and Fiona Hyland (2006) discussed the role of peers being able to give useful comments even though traditionally the teacher has been the one in charge of commenting. This particularly accounts for those trained in peer review; because in order for peer review to function, careful preparation is one of the essential components (Arnold, Ducate & Kost, 2009; Berg, 1999; Chang, 2012; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Min, 2006; Zhu, 1995). Concerning networked pedagogy and the use of wikis, Rebecca W. Lundin (2008) saw a notable shift in authority facilitating for students to set boundaries in interaction rather than only being guided by their teachers.

Hyland and Hyland (2006) pointed at the importance of considering Lev S. Vygotsky's (1978) construct of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggesting that "writing skills can emerge with the mediation and help of others" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 90). In this development zone, peers can share experiences around a common concept. Frequently the ZPD concept has been expanded to embrace achievement not only with someone more competent but also with equal peers with different competences (cf. Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). It has been suggested in studies by Richard Donato (1994) and Neomy Storch (2005) that in supporting each other, students can mutually expand their views of how their writing is understood. Also, from a global perspective, engaging in peer reviewing implies engaging in meetings with persons from diverse cultures.

Increasing globalization started a process of redefining culture to match the complexity of the modern world (Bhabha, 1994; Risager, 2007). In web-based intercultural exchanges, online environments are situated in a globalized context where language and culture are associated with more than just national identity (Helm & Guth, 2010). Even though this recognized notion of culture is widely adopted, the concept has been expanded to include discursive constructions of culture (Piller, 2007). In multicultural communication where English is frequently the lingua franca, learners will likely encounter "multilingual individuals who have grown up in a variety of national, supranational, and ethnic cultures" (Kramsch, 2006, p. 250).

For intercultural communication online, models of Intercultural Communicative Competences (ICC) have been adopted, embracing various online contexts (Dooly, 2011). Modifications of Michael Byram's (1997) influential model of ICC have been used in research involving exchange studies dealing with intercultural competence (e.g., Belz, 2007; Helm & Guth, 2010; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Liaw, 2006; O'Dowd, 2006). Francesca Helm and Sarah Guth (2010) suggested a framework of capturing online communication by expanding Byram's (1997) model, describing interrelated abilities in the three domains: new online literacies, ICC, and foreign language learning. Hence, in this framework, Byram's work on ICC connects to new online literacies and foreign language learning, thereby embracing skills of interpreting events from other cultures, with a willingness to explore and participate in online communities along with knowledge of processes of interaction and communicating online as well as cultural, literacy, and language awareness. Such an expansion of the concept of ICC suggests that the competences needed for online intercultural communication are multifaceted and involve a broad range of skills.

A common issue in studies of peer reviewing in online and web-based environments is linguistic accuracy (Arnold, Ducate, & Kost, 2009; Kessler, 2009; Kuteeva, 2011). In other words, error correction has been part of a great concern in

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