Wikis and academic writing: Changing the writer–reader relationship

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Abstract

The development of information and communication technologies has resulted in the emergence of new kinds of academic genres and literacies. The more recent social web applications empower learners to create online content in a collaborative way. This paper focuses on the use of wikis in the course of Effective Communication in English. It aims to describe how the course wiki was used to teach writing for academic and professional purposes, and to analyse what impact using the wiki had on the writer–reader relationship. The case study employed several research techniques, including participant observation, text analysis and a self-report questionnaire. The texts published by students on the wiki were examined for reader-oriented features and interactional metadiscourse resources. The results indicate that using the wiki for writing activities made students pay close attention to grammatical correctness and structural coherence. Nearly 60% of the students reported that writing on the wiki made them consider their audience. The extent of the writer–reader interaction was further confirmed by a high use of engagement markers in the argumentative texts. Thus, writing on the wiki can contribute to raising awareness of the audience and to increasing the use of interpersonal metadiscourse.
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1. Introduction: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and information and communication technology (ICT)

EAP education in the digital age calls for new pedagogical paradigms which can help learners to develop new literacies and skills required for successful communication in academic and professional contexts. As witnessed by the popularity of sociocultural and constructivist approaches in language teaching, collaboration can play a vital role in helping learners to build knowledge and acquire skills that facilitate learners' integration into given discourse communities or specific communities of practice (Wenger, 2006). There has been a great deal of EAP research into the needs analysis of the discourse, literacies and skills required to operate in different target contexts (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Jordan, 1997). In the meantime, the development of new technologies has resulted in the emergence of new kinds of academic genres and discourses, but the impact of these developments on EAP has been given relatively little attention (Swales, 2004): Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002, p. 8) note that "the full implications of the communications revolution are not yet appar-

ent or completely understood, and we still have a long way to go before we can be sure we are using its potential most effectively in our teaching". There is therefore a real need for further research in this area, as information and communication technologies keep evolving.

Two studies in particular, Slaouti (2002) and Warschauer (2002), have pioneered research into online academic literacy. Drawing on the results of a survey conducted at the University of Manchester, Slaouti considers the impact of the web on academic study skills with reference to information processing, whereas Warschauer explores the question of how computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be used in academic writing courses. Both Slaouti and Warschauer focus on the earlier version of the web, which they view as "an enormous database, a world-wide library" (Slaouti, 2002, p. 112), characterised by a content-based, one-way interaction with the user. At the turn of the millennium, the web was still perceived as something to be used with caution; it was seen as "a resource that is a mix of standards and near anarchy . . . there is currently nothing prohibiting anyone publishing as and when they want" (Slaouti, 2002, p. 107). Since then, control over the publishing domain has been totally and irreversibly lost with the emergence of Web 2.0 the social or 'writable' web, which empowers the user to take an active role in the creation of content (O'Reilly, 2005). As Rupert Murdoch was moved to comment: "to find something comparable, you have to go back 500 years to the printing press, the birth of mass media . . .. Technology is shifting power away from the editors, the publishers, the establishment, the media elite. Now it's the people who are taking control" (as cited in Reiss, 2006). Today, in education systems throughout the developed world, many, although by no means all, of our students are competent internet users, "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) who make daily use of software such as social networking, blogs, wikis, podcasts, vodcasts, and social bookmarking. Fortunately, the philosophy behind the social web is in line with contemporary collaborative paradigms in education that rely on building communities of practice (Wenger, 2006). As far as general foreign language education is concerned, Kárpáti (2009) proposes a new educational paradigm for "social CALL" and provides a good overview of how different social web applications can be used by teachers and learners. Myers (2010) analyses the discourse of blogs and wikis, showing what makes them distinctive as genres and what impact these social web applications have on the language. However, except for a few studies (e.g. Murray, Hourigan, & Jeanneau, 2007), these new online tools have received little attention in the more specific context of EAP.

For Slaouti (2002, p. 120) "the WWW deserves to find its place within our teaching but not simply as a resource for project work". Yet fostering learning through online collaboration has proved to be no small task. In the early days of online education, including EAP, the web was primarily used for information retrieval, and the use of software, such as online fora or email, was often limited either to information exchange or to self-expression (e.g. Hanna & de Nooy, 2003; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003). Interaction among students was mainly 'one way', with scarce references to comments of other students. Thus, it emerged that clear structure and task design were indispensable in fostering learner interaction and collaboration (Kuteeva, 2007).

In the context of EAP, how can we move away from using online tools exclusively for retrieving or exchanging information, and begin to foster learner collaboration? It seems that the more recent social web applications offer a greater potential for empowering learners to create online content in a collaborative way. This paper focuses on the use of wikis in the course of Effective Communication in English at Stockholm University; it aims to describe how the course wiki was used to teach writing for academic and professional purposes, and to analyse what impact using the wiki had on the writer–reader relationship. Following Kern (2006), who points out a need for more qualitative research into the application of ICT to language learning, this study seeks to make its contribution by particularly focusing on EAP. The following sections set out a theoretical framework for the ensuing empirical study, focusing on the importance of writer–reader interaction in academic writing. Next, the background, method and results are presented and discussed in the light of relevant previous research.

2. Wikis and academic writing

A wiki has been defined as a "freely expandable collection of interlinked web pages, 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" (Leuf & Cunningham, 2001, p. 14). Its basic features include creating and editing texts, linking different pages through hyperlinks, inserting images and links to other sites, tracking changes and comparing different versions of the text. Most wiki engines are open source (e.g. Wikispaces, PmWiki, TWiki,