The Importance of Wikis in Foreign Language Learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, teachers across disciplines are harnessing the power of technology to enhance students' learning. Research has been and is continuously being, conducted and theories are continuously being updated to provide new insights into how technological tools such as the internet, blogs, wikis, smart boards, can enhance learning outcomes within classrooms.

Teachers have a responsibility to continue to adapt their teaching practices and methodologies to best suit the context they and their students are in. In the digital age, this includes staying informed about the field of technology and ways it can be used to enhance learning. For instance, as a foreign language teacher, who teaches at a college of applied sciences, I have found that technology can play an extremely important role in enhancing students' learning. However, I recognize that the way I choose to bring technology into my classroom needs to be informed by research, theory and my critical reflections on current research and theory that centers around technology and learning.

In my pursuit to deepen my knowledge about technology and learning, especially within the foreign language learning space, I have recognized that several studies and research papers focus on the role of wikis. Leuf and Cunningham, 2001, as cited in Li (2012), define wikis as "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." In other words, a wiki is a website with built-in software that allows any user to freely edit information on the website. Wikis can either be used by closed communities and organizations, where individuals need a login credential or password to engage with the wiki, or can be on public forums, such as Wikipedia where anyone using the internet can contribute. To gain a deeper perspective of how wikis impact learning, it is useful to briefly consider some of the main features of wikis. Warschauer & Grimes (2007), as cited in Reinhart (2019) suggest that wikis are unique from blogs and social media as they encourage a collaborative authorship model, where a group of people are all authors of a piece. The collaborative authorship is enabled by three options in the wiki. These are the 'edit' option, which allows users to edit text, the 'discuss' option which allows users to discuss information on the wiki in a thread of comments, and the 'history' option which allows users to see revisions that have been made in the wiki. In addition to this, many wikis include links and hyperlinks which connect to other wikis in the wiki community as

well as links to external resources. It is the collaborative form of the wiki that makes it useful within a foreign language learning environment (Kennedy and Miceli, 2013). Accordingly Kennedy and Miceli (2013) wikis "provide an open, collaborative and virtual space...allowing students to not only share information but select and transform it, thereby promoting and supporting active engagement, a spirit of collaboration and knowledge development."

In traditional educational contexts, teachers have often discouraged students from using wikis as a source of information. The nature of wikis allows for any users to edit information on the page, thereby often calling into question the validity of the information. However, as a teacher, it is important for me to consider how traditional perspectives can be altered in the face of new research. In this case, I conduct a literature review to explore how using wikis within a foreign language learning community affects students' learning. This paper also considers how findings from the literature review can be brought into my teaching context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the process of this literature review, a variety of articles and studies were considered. Participants in this range of studies were mainly students in high school or universities. In many of these studies, teachers and researchers asked students to use closed wikis (only accessible to the student group) to engage in collaborative writing. Kennedy and Miceli (2013) argue that using wikis provides students two main language learning opportunities; one that they allow students to draw upon both their and their peers' knowledge and work together to solve linguistic problems when creating a text. Secondly, wikis allow students a context to learn and share information without time and space constraints.

This is supported by several research studies. For instance, deHaan et al. (2013) conducted a study on university-level English speakers learning Japanese, asking them to prepare transcripts of spoken role plays and use wikis to collaboratively record and discuss these spoken role plays. They found that the students recognized the value of the wiki and that their grammar, vocabulary and confidence in the language had increased after the project. Similarity Turgut (2009) directed university-level students to use wikis collaboratively to edit and comment on each other's essays. Turgut found that these tasks enhanced students' confidence and creativity in writing in the language they were learning.

A literature review also highlights the fact that the way that students are directed to use wikis and the kind of tasks they are assigned to may impact their performance and learning. Reinhart (2019) suggests that the type of tasks assigned to students using wikis may impact the way they learn. Students tend to make more corrections, both in their own and their peers' works when tasks were argumentative. They made fewer form-related corrections in informative tasks. This suggests that when students are involved with presenting an argument, rather than factual information, they are more invested in ensuring the use of language in their own and their peers' arguments is correct, potentially to ensure the argument has a maximum impact.

While it is seen that research and studies find that wikis can have a beneficial role in foreign language learning across age groups, it is also important to note some of the limitations that studies have found in connection to this topic. For one, Reinhart (2019) suggests that, when students maintain and contribute to wikis by writing in the foreign language they are learning, they pay more attention to meaning rather than forms. So, students who used wikis focused more on the content of what they were trying to communicate rather than grammatical and form-related accuracy. A specific study which evidences this is that of Arnold, Ducate, & Kost (2009) which surveyed 52 students learning German as a foreign language. They found that a majority of students using the wiki platform only edited their own work in order to correct meaning rather than form and left their peers' work unedited in both form and meaning. However, the study also found that groups of students who received more guidance from their teacher tended to make more form-related revisions to their work. This is a significant conclusion that teachers must consider when considering how to bring wikis into their own classroom settings.

Another common theme that has emerged from research that teachers should take note of is the impact that students' understanding of wikis can have on their learning. For instance, Reinhart (2019) notes that when Kennedy & Miceli (2013) used wikis as virtual learning environments for Australian students that were learning Italian as beginners, the students reported that while they appreciated the opportunity to impact with each other through the wiki, their motivation was reduced due to technical problems, a lack of understanding of how to use wikis, as well as a lack of teacher presence on the wiki forum.

Lee and Wang (2013) also highlighted some factors which may hinder the participation of students on wikis and subsequently limit their learning of the foreign language. Factors that hindered students' engagement with wikis included an uneven workload (where some students in the group were contributing more to the wikis than others), a lack of interactions between students on the wiki and a lack of respect that students had for each other's work. In addition to this, Ozkan (2014) suggests that wikis may cause discomfort amongst students because they feel upset when their work is edited or deleted by their peers or when their peers contribute more to the shared work than they do. Ozkan presents a solution to this, suggesting that teachers should continuously shuffle wiki groups in order to ensure that students get the chance to work with peers of differing ability and engagement levels. This finding once again points to the important role of the teacher in overseeing and facilitating the students' use of wikis.

Lee and Wang (2013) add that other challenges that students faced were technological in nature, such as not having continuous access to the technology needed to contribute to the wikis.Kennedy and Miceli (2013) report a similar finding; in a study conducted with beginner level Italian students they found that students were not as comfortable with navigating how to use wikis as they had expected. They added that they had hypothesised that students' would be able to transfer skills they adeptly used in social media into the wiki use. However, they found this not to be the case, concluding that while wikis offer a wide range of learning opportunities, it is the role of the language teacher to "convert those opportunities into actual learning benefits." (Kennedy and Miceli, 2013).

3. POSSIBLE REPOSITIONING

Kennedy and Miceli's concluding remarks are important for me, as a foreign language educator to consider. The literature review highlights that wikis can be extremely useful in foreign language learning classrooms. As an educator bringing wikis into my classroom, it will be important for me to, as Kennedy and Miceli suggest, capitalise on the collaborative opportunities that wikis offer. Much of the research reviewed has found that using wikis promote collaboration between students as they review and edit the wiki and leave comments on their peers' work. Indeed, collaboration is recognized as an integral 21st century skill in the workplace. Teachers across the world seek to build on their students' collaborative skills and wikis will provide me with a tool to do so.

However, while collaboration should be encouraged, the students' should not be left completely autonomous in maintaining the wiki as a student community. Lee and Wang (2013) suggested that students may lose motivation and thereby learn less if they feel that the workload between peers is uneven or if they feel that their peers' attitude to reviewing and editing their work is disrespectful. As a teacher, it will be important to closely oversee student groups managing wikis, ensuring each student is expected to contribute equally and that they follow respectul wiki etiquette. In the context of my classroom, it may be useful to encourage students to change their wiki groups every few weeks to ensure that a variety of learners are working together and learning from each other.

In designing the lesson plans, it will also be important to note the impact that the tasks that students are assigned will have on their learning. Research evidence shows that argumentative tasks invite more engagement from students as compared to informative tasks. Argumentative tasks should therefore be incorporated within the lessons that are centered around wikis; these have the added benefits of developing students' formal language skills and vocabulary.

4. INTERVENTIONS/CONCLUSION

Finally, the literature review shows that it is essential for teachers to guide students in the technical skills they need to establish and maintain wikis. Indeed, this is arguably the first task that the teacher must undertake as research shows that without digital skills, students will lack the motivation to use the wikis which will subsequently impact their learning. Therefore, it will be important for me to explore more studies and teaching methodologies that center around using and teaching the use of wikis effectively. It will be important then apply these findings in the context of foreign language teaching and then design a syllabus that supports the students' learning of how to use wikis and supports the language learning outcomes.

Therefore, this literature review has highlighted the usefulness of wikis, but has also suggested that further research must be conducted in order to effectively bring them as learning tool into classrooms. In further research, I will undertake a consideration of using wikis in the classroom in general and then contextualize it to my specific syllabus needs.

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