NOW YOU CAN WRITE A WIKI!: USING WIKIS TO PROMOTE COLLABORATIVE WRITING IN ESL CLASSROOM

Nabilah Mhd Fauzi¹ and Melor Md Yunus²
Faculty of Education, National University of Malaysia (UKM)
¹gp05678@siswa.ukm.edu.my, ²melor@ukm.edu.my

ABSTRACT
Malaysia has embarked on an education reform, in which the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOE) has launched the Malaysia Education Blueprint to outline reform trajectories with which, students’ proficiency in English has become one of the key goals in it. This is due to the fact that English is a lingua franca and ensuring that every child will be at minimum bilingual henceforth, an aspiration. Thus, with the current rapid development of technology taking place alongside, it is high time for us to integrate technology into ESL classroom to maximise second language acquisition process. Wiki-writing is chosen as a method due to its popularity. Therefore, the aim of this conceptual paper is to discuss how Wikis can be used as a tool to promote collaborative writing in ESL classroom. Then, it will briefly discuss the comparison between the traditional writing approach with the suggested Wiki writing approach. An insight of the potential Wiki writing approach to teaching writing in Malaysian ESL classroom will be elaborated.

Keywords: Wiki, collaborative writing, ESL, ICT, Social Constructivism

INTRODUCTION
Over the past century, there has been a dramatic change in the teaching and learning of English skills. Writing for instance, a nonlinear “complex process” (Hedge, 2000) seems to pose challenging tasks for native, let alone non-native speakers than any other language skills. Much of the difficulties in writing stems from a number of constraints. When expressing an idea for instance, a writer is detached from the expressive possibilities and is required “to stay focused in order to produce a good piece of writing” (Yunus et. al, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, it is not surprising that many students will eventually perceive writing as an isolated and mundane activity. For this reason, a panacea to overcome these stereotypes is critical. With the benefit of hindsight, it is not difficult to see that in this rapid development of technology, ICT will become quintessential in facilitating the development of new skills (Spencer in Yunus, 2007). Sadly, however, according to BECTA in 1999, the teachers have been slow to utilise ICT in their teaching. They are hostile and reticent towards development or they simply do not have enough skills in it.

Following this advancement of technology, the proliferating use of social networking tools and the influence of Web 2.0 has spread like wildfire (Omar et. al, 2012). An example of a Web 2.0 is “Wiki”. When the word “Wiki” is uttered, there can only be one thing, Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia. One of the features that make Wikis stand out from any other websites is that they are free and editable, as well as, available for multiple users to access them – either to edit articles or simply to read them. This rise in Internet-based learning, as told by Fitzpatrick and Davis (2003); Forotos and Browne (2004) in Wen-Chuan Lin and Shu Ching Yang (2011), brings us to the idea of integrating information technology and English writing, else known as, Computer-assisted language learning (CALL).

Today, collaborative writing is no longer confined in the brick-and-mortar environment. It is particularly effective in an online environment and may be more effective online than onsite. Working online gives students to reflect and piece together their writing into a formal final product. For this, Wikis hold an immense potential of becoming an avenue for collaborative learning to take place. This, in return, could be beneficial not only to students but also shed useful insights to other stakeholders especially language practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW
WHY A WIKI?
Both studies done by Matthew et al. (2009) Lund and Williams (2014) whereby the latter did their studies in the University of Oxford had agreed that one of their reasons to use Wiki than the rest of the Web 2.0 sites is because it is one of the most popular emerging technologies. Despite its popularity, it is noted that although the majority of students spend considerable amount of time online, they spend little time to use Wikis and blogs (Jones and Cross, 2009). Kuteeva’s account (2011) of using a Wiki to build awareness of the writer and reader relationship notes that using the wiki for writing activities make students pay close attention to grammatical correctness and structural coherence, with 60% of the students report that writing on Wiki will make them consider their audience.
From a technical point of view, Wikis are practical. Users do not need any specific software to create a Wiki. A web browser would suffice. Wiki users do not need to acquire advanced technical skills to create a Wiki. It even has a sandbox page whereby users can experiment and practice before deciding on publishing a Wiki. Wikis provide teachers with potentially significant opportunities for creating socially engaged tasks that require active student participation and collaboration, instead of passive and behaviorist knowledge.

Over the last decade, technology has had a massive impact in L2 classrooms and writing instruction now makes considerable use of computer technologies. There are some teachers who welcome these developments enthusiastically, seeing the integration of new technology-based pedagogies as a means of enlivening instruction, improving students’ writing skills, and facilitating collaboration and interaction both within and beyond the classroom. Others have been more cautious, regarding this expansion as a threat to essentially human interactions on which teaching is based (Hyland, 2008). They are so used to the normal teacher-centred class whereby the teachers lead the class rather than having teachers as moderators. Like the saying goes, “old habits die hard”.

Wiki offers asynchronous writing environment to students whereby proponents such as Hyland highlighted that it “is time-delayed communication” (2008, p. 156) and does not require user participation at the same time (Omar et al, 2012). Its main advantage for L2 teachers is that the nonsynchrony of the communication means that a text can be composed and edited prior to transmission at a more leisurely pace, rather than being co-constructed by participants. This tends to mean more reflective and considered responses with greater participation from less proficient students. Topics change less rapidly and contributions do not rush past in an incoherent sequence so that responses are typically more thoughtful, more carefully edited, and more closely reflect conventions of written communication. So, this makes it possible even for the weakest student to participate in.

Perhaps, there are too much research that has been sugarcoating the effect of online learning and has overshadowed its potential disadvantages. It is also worth mentionable for us to look at the potential threat as Kabilan et al. (2010) in their papers highlighted few possible challenges that might hinder the learning of English in the online environment. This includes wasting or overspending of time, promoting negative attitudes among students, and last but not least, affecting students’ development destructively. Faudree (2009) confirmed this through his survey with Manchester students and confirmed that students tend to procrastinate and waste their time on social networks. Yet again, to what extent is damage done by online learning. Will writing Wikis inflict more harm than benefit to students’ writing skills? Yunus and Salehi in their study in 2012 from the perspective of 43 UKM students later contended this claim. Despite distractions in social networks, they both found out that social networks do bring upon noteworthy benefits in aiding in students’ writing. Regardless, a teacher or a facilitator is still required to guide and direct the learning process. They also recommended for an experimental study to be done in the future to further explore this.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

“Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead” (George Fowler in Byrne, 1988, p. 46). Many students share a similar opinion of writing. It is not easy to write and put ideas to paper. In comparison to speaking, you need to put a lot of focus and thoughts before putting pen to papers. Yet, writing can be an invaluable tool for learning.

In ‘real-world’ contexts, writing is not a solitary enterprise; it is a social act. Studies done (e.g. Heath in 1983; Halpern in 1985; Harwood in 1982) have demonstrated how writers in the real world collaborate and it is common sighting in the community or workplace. Parallel to this research on real-world writing is the pedagogical focus on cooperative learning (e.g. Kagan, 1986) or collaborative learning (e.g. Bruffee, 1984). In response to this growing body of research and pedagogical theory, writing theories are calling for collaborative tasks in the teaching of writing driven by a socially-constructed theory of writing. If we want to ensure that our ESL writing classes prepare students for their life outside the classroom, we must give them opportunities to experience collaborative learning (Nunan, 1992). Nunan in his book then continued to categorise collaborative writing into two: 1) those in which the majority of the interaction occurs on paper and 2) those in which the text is constructed through oral discussion. Of which, Wiki-writing can be categorised as both as it requires both types of interaction in order for it to take place.

Collaborative writing was essentially a social process through which writers looked for areas of shared understanding. For a task to be truly communicative, Morrow (1981) claimed that participants must have different knowledge, that there must be a gap in information between the participants. Coincidently, as noted by Nunan (1992), Morrow’s requirement for communicative tasks in the ESL classroom is the information was an important principle in the collaborative writing. Because of this information gap, group members had to negotiate content, style, and even the goals of the writing. Hence, without the gap, collaborative writing will not occur. A teacher therefore, should be wise in setting a collaborative task – to ensure the evidence of information gap.
Despite all that, while peer responses are often evident in collaborative writing, often they take place in limited ways, the single writer will in the end responsible for his or her final text. This will be worse if students do not know each other well, they may feel like they should not edit each other (Barkley et al, 2014). This may make it more difficult to develop an integrated final product, in this sense, Wikis. Thus, Barkley et al suggest employing collaborative writing only when students have worked together on other activities. This is in line with Nunan’s idea for collaborative writing except he added further that the collaborative activities need to be “based on what actually happens as native speakers collaborate in literacy events” (Nunan 1992, p. 115).

In spite all that, we have to admit the potential benefits of using Wikis in writing classes is that they allow students to work together to reach a common goal and giving them a sense of how writing can be performed in collaboration (Hadjerrouit 2011). Yet again, besides the promising collaborative capabilities of Wikis, Wiki alone cannot make collaborative writing happen. Students do not automatically become more active, participate and collaborate with others when they use Wikis as the research literature clearly reveals (Chao and Lo in Hadjerrouit, 2011). In addition, students’ willingness and motivation to use wiki in a collaborative way is important but not sufficient to initiate true collaboration. To foster collaborative writing, participation, and active involvement in wiki development there is a need for a systematic approach to the development of wiki applications.

Students may be familiar with face-to-face collaborative writing tasks; working online together via a Wiki can create uncertainties. These uncertainties can include “uncertainty about the nature of learning activities; difficulties with the structure of learning space; need for more proactive interaction in groups, perceived benefits of learning through the Wiki, and issues about leadership” (Ramanau et al., 2009 in Lund and Williams, 2014). Some of the ways to remedy this could include, instead of making Wiki writing as the only work per se, teachers can be creative to make Wiki-writing integrated to a bigger project. Instead of assessing the product, Wiki, teachers can include the group presentation of their Wikis as one of the criteria used in the assessment. Like it or not, students will have to collaborate on a presentation about their topic in the Wiki.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Learning styles within cultures and disciplines have changed over time. Over the last decades, we have witnessed notable paradigm shift towards constructivist in education (Lund and Williams, 2014). Social cognitive perspective posits that meaningful social interaction is fundamental for language learning since learning a language is considered as the outcome of a process one’s L2 knowledge with friends rather than as a result of an individual’s construction of knowledge (Aydin and Yildiz 2014; Sidek et al, 2016). This idea is grounded in Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theories of learning and specifically his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In other words, ZPD highlights the role of other people – teachers and friends, in enhancing the learning process (Sidek et al., 2016). In recent years, those involved in online learning have had a growing awareness of the benefits of constructivist online learning. Hence, the recent interest in Wikis in education. Wikis allow learners to participate in collaboratively building resources.

Warschauer and Kern (2000) argued previously that the use of computers in language teaching reflects a move from structural through cognitive to sociocognitive orientations to teaching. The earliest CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) programs were consistent with a structuralist model which emphasised grammar and vocabulary drill and practice activities with the computer acting as a tutor. In line with cognitivist conceptions of learning, the second generation of CALL shifted agency to learners by requiring them to use computers to solve problems and navigate through simulated environments. On the other hand, current uses reflect sociocognitive approaches, shifting “the dynamic from learners’ interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computers” (ibid. p. 11). In fact, one of the most significant features of a Wiki environment is its social function because it allows for “distributed participation and collaboration” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006, p. 80). Social constructivist believe that we learn by social and communal activities - meaningful interaction among learners in the learning processes. As Achterman (2006) noted, the structure of a Wiki provides meaningful interaction among students, content and teacher. The collaborative nature of Wikis means that they enact knowledge building with and for others, with the focus being on community rather than on the individual learner. Thus, Wikis are one of the success stories in the world of constructivism.

TRADITIONAL WRITING VS. ICT WIKIPEDIA

One important point is that writing, in the sense of making language visible, always involves the application of technology, whether a quill, pencil, typewriter, or printing press, and each innovation involves new skills applied in new ways (Lankshear and Snyder in Hyland, 2008). Writing is, therefore, not fixed but constantly evolving and each new mode of communicative practice requires different skills and understandings. Technology as deemed by Warschauer (2002) is not a method but a resource which can support a variety of approaches.
Although L2 teachers may be hesitant to make use computers in their classrooms, in many circumstances, computer-based instruction presents stimulating alternatives to traditional paper materials and tasks. They are easy to learn, straightforward to use, and technically robust. Evidence suggests that the use of computers can improve L2 students’ motivation, attitudes, and confidence about writing (Yunus et al., 2013). However, as warned by Hyland (2008), teachers should consider carefully why they want to use computers, how students might benefit from them and how best to integrate them into a coherent writing course. Like any other learning activity, the use of Wikis in writing class will only be effective when they are integrated into a sustained, coherent program that offers learners some control over their learning and guidance from teachers.

When choosing Wiki’s writing topic, careful consideration should be made based on students’ target needs and current abilities. As noted by Yunus et al. in their research in 2013 too, as much as Wikis and blogging can be motivating, they will be on their demotivating too if students are lack of skills. They added further that there are times when students simply turned reticent and passive. This claim however, is open to dispute as their study done did not in any way specify the number of samples used and it was only aimed to study the perception of English lecturers on blogs. Thus, we will never know the reason why these students were passive since the only way to understand their reasons for being so is to ask for their perception which happens not to be the main focus to the study. We can assume many things as such it could be that these passive students themselves have struggles in L2 writing or that they are not interested in writing the topic suggested by their lecturers. Further research is recommended in order to explore the perception of students on blogging and in this case, in writing Wikis.

However, this is not going to be an easy shift – from traditional writing to Wikipedia writing. Studies related to ICT have identified one of the reasons that slowed the adoption process and as highlighted in Woodrow’s study (1987) any successful transformation in educational practice requires the development of positive user attitude toward the new technology. Similarly, Sewlyn (2003) discovered that some of the factors that affect students’ acceptance in using ICT is due to lack of technology skills on ICT, technophobia, and wrong perception towards ICT. On the same note, Yunus et al. (2009, p. 1465) conducted similar research in Malaysia and found teachers are reluctant to the changes due to “access to computer such as email, internet, affordability of computers and connectivity, telephone and electricity and infrastructure, computer literacy, expertise and others.” They then outlined a few recommendations before integrating Wikipedia writing in students’ language learning. Such recommendations include: 1) Teachers must at first change their students’ perception and their attitudes towards the ICT, 2) Teachers could instil students’ confidence level on ICT through encouragement of using ICT tools and make aware of the resources they can use for learning, 3) The Ministry of Education can also organize a course on the programmes such as CALL or ICT guideline for the students. These recommendations can be beneficial to the Minister of Education, headmaster, and school teachers to make aware of the problems faced by students in using ICT for language learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the mentioned studies, equal weightage has been given to the potential pros and cons as well as few potential shortcomings in employing collaborative writing in class through Wiki-writing. However, all the studies are unanimous that Wiki-writing is potent if employed strategically. As Yunus et al. (2009) have agreed on their studies, many understand the benefit of ICT but its benefit in enhancing language learning is often overlooked. Hence, ICT in language learning falls behind from others in the same area. Teachers should also mastery the technology skills before teaching their students so that the knowledge is transferred effectively (ibid). Hopefully, the Ministry of Education will take note of this and shall organize courses to upgrade teachers with technology skills. Additionally, more experimental studies are recommended to be done in the context of Malaysia especially in terms of scaffolding the Wiki-writing approach in class. This is due to the fact that Malaysia is still slowly moving out from the teacher-centred classes. Hence, a soft-landing approach is more recommendable rather than immediate introduction in class. Regardless, all in all, Wikis and computers can never replace teachers but crucially depend on them both so that technology is used effectively in the time available and so that students receive adequate support.

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