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Online collaborative writing through Wikis and Google Docs

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Introduction

Many studies on language learning have highlighted the advantages of collaborative writing (CW) in promoting learners' writing skills (Strobl, 2014). To achieve the end product of collaborative writing tasks, learners are required to work collaboratively in various stages of planning and editing the writing as well as finalizing the shared texts (Woodrich & Fan, 2017). According to Storch (2011), although CW has been widely used and found to be very effective in promoting writing skills, it has been practiced mostly outside the context of second language (L2) learning. However, Kessler et al. (2012) suggested that with the assistance of technologies, we can integrate Web 2.0[1] applications and pedagogical practices in teaching and learning writing to enhance students' writing via online CW.

Storch (2011) defined collaborative writing as text production jointly produced by more than one writer. Arnold et al. (2012) distinguished writing as collaboration and writing as cooperation by highlighting key differences between the two activities. While cooperation in writing is known as responsibility division for individuals in pairs or groups, writing as collaboration centers on all learners' involvement, either in pairs or groups, in the production of texts and provision of feedback to their peers.

Digital technologies for collaborative writing

[1] Web 2.0 is a second generation of web development and design that facilitates communication, secure information sharing, interoperability, and collaboration (Arnold et al., 2012, p. 431).

According to Li et al. (2017), information technologies have significantly changed writing practices and ways of learning languages. There are some available digital technologies which enable learners to maximize their writing skills through online collaboration. Li et al. (2017) added that Web 2.0 applications (1) allow multiple authors to contribute to writing the content of the text, (2) enable target audiences and general viewers to give feedback to writers, and (3) enable writers to use corpus-based tools as references for their writing. Wikis and Google Docs are two among other sophisticated technological applications which enable learners to collaborate to improve their writing abilities using the three features mentioned above.

Wikis' impacts on students' learning

According to a study by Lee and Lee (2010), writing practices using Wikispaces has a positive influence on learners' writing development, since from the beginning to the end of the writing process, learners can continuously contribute to group writing and receive feedback and scaffolding, which enriches the quality of their final writing drafts. Storch's (2011) study on CW showed that Wikispaces encouraged learners to write since they could engage in both synchronous and asynchronous writing and editing. Learners had fun in writing as they could see improvement in their writing and ideas. Strobl's (2014) study also showed that CW through wikis promoted group collaboration and enhanced learners' writing accuracy.

Wiki-based writing tasks also allow students to improve their writing since they can learn through collaboration, feedback, scaffolding and ample learning opportunities provided by wikis (Rott et al., 2013). Aydin and Yildiz (2014) found that wiki-based writing promoted peer-correction, self-correction, grammatical accuracy, and students' attention to the meaning of the writing. Furthermore, participants in Aydin and Yildiz's (2014) study believed that their performance on writing had improved after using wiki-based writing tasks.

Google Docs' impacts on students' learning

A study by Kessler et al. (2012) examined project-based collaborative writing mediated by Google Docs, a web-based writing tool. The findings showed that learners were happy with the use of Google Docs since it made them feel that their collaboration was successful and that every member played an important role in the learning process. They believed Google Docs promoted their autonomous writing and collaborative writing.

Another study by Alharbi (2019) about the potentials of Google Docs for enhancing EFL learners' writing showed that L2 learners had positive views about Google Docs for their CW practice and learning. Specifically, Google Docs facilitated the teaching and learning of writing through teacher and peer feedback on local and global errors in writing. It also provided opportunities for drafting, peer editing, and learners' responses to feedback (Alharbi, 2019). Woodrich and Fan's (2017) study found that learners with different language backgrounds enjoyed using Google Docs as it helped them become more successful writers. However, it is important to note that Google Docs was more helpful to learners with higher language proficiency than those with lower language proficiency as it affected their collaborative patterns and writing qualities (Abrams, 2019).

Wikis, Google Docs, and the four strands of the curriculum

According to Nation (2007), language teaching and learning activities can be categorized into four main strands such as "meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development" (p.2). Although CW is related to all the four strands, it is most relevant to the strand of meaning-focused output because this strand is closely linked to language production through speaking and writing (Nation, 2007).

The conditions applicable in the meaning-focused output strand include (a) learners write about things that are familiar to them; (b) the main goal of learners' writing is conveying messages to others; (c) unfamiliar language to the learners is minimal; (d) learners use their prior knowledge, dictionaries, online corpora and communication skills to fill their knowledge gaps to produce intended good quality writing, and (e) there are a lot of opportunities

for learners to write (Nation, 2007). Considering the nature of Wikis and Google Docs and how they can expose L2 learners to all the conditions of the meaning-focused output strand, CW via these web-based applications is effective in promoting learners' meaning-focused output.

Conclusion

Writing is a key component in language education. Learning to write solely through in-class activities may not help learners to improve their writing skills much due to time constraints associated with physical classes. With the assistance of technologies, language teachers can integrate Web 2.0 applications into their teaching to improve the teaching and learning process and enhance students' writing (Kessler et al., 2012). Teachers can also utilize Web 2.0 applications to enable the learners to complete the assigned tasks with their peers anywhere and anytime. In doing so, learners can have plenty of opportunities to practice writing, which is a key factor contributing to their writing improvement.

In short, Wikis and Google Docs are among the many pedagogical approaches which can be used to promote students' writing. Thus, language teachers should consider using them to support students in developing their writing skills.

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