

ESP WRITING: WEBLOGS OR WIKIS?

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Abstract:

This paper aims at analyzing learners' attitudes to weblogs and wikis which are common for communication in the networked world. The present investigation into application of wikis in English classes is compared with our previous research into weblogging.

Current findings show that the experience of online writing for the audience provides an important opportunity for improving writing skills. Learners' attitudes to weblogs and wikis are examined and a possible practical implication is indicated.

Key Words: English for Specific Purposes, writing, weblogs, wikis

1 Introduction

The most common applications of e-learning include weblogs and wikis which serve as valuable tools for improving writing skills in a foreign language. Their advantages in language classes comprise instant publishing online, having a readership, and creating an online portfolio of student written work. In this article we discuss learners' attitudes to weblogs and wikis. The obtained data document learners' self-assessment of experience in online writing and provide some insights into their attitudes.

The object of our research has been the analysis of learners' attitudes to weblogs and wikis. **The aims of research** have been to examine the challenges that students face in application of wikis in English classes and to analyze learners' self-assessment of experience in online writing. **The methods of the research** include administering an appropriate survey to project participants, and learners' reflections on their experience of online writing. **The participants** in this study are the first year students who study English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania. **The intended outcome** of research has been to formulate the recommendations for good practice in helping respondents to perfect skills of writing.

2 Weblogs in Teaching English

The detailed review of literature on application of blogging was presented in our previous article which described our research into using weblogs for improving writing skills (Kavaliauskienė et.al., 2006).

It is worth mentioning that attitudes to weblogs differ (Eastment, 2005): some students loathe blogs for either their poor or non-standard English, others love their authenticity and liveliness.

According to Walker (2005), who applied weblogging in his classes, by the end of the semester the majority of students said they had enjoyed weblogging and found it beneficial to improving skills of writing. Some students wrote with great enthusiasm and adapted their templates daily to reflect on the newly acquired skills and new aspirations. Some students absolutely hated being forced to blog. Most of the students stopped blogging when the semester was over, but about 20% continued.

A. Campbell (2006, 2003) researched learner attitudes to weblogs by administering an anonymous survey to 57 learners in four classes. His results are: 86% feel that the blog is 'OK' or 'good', most students only rarely or occasionally read the entries. Learners seem to prefer to do only what is required of them. This assumption is reinforced by decreasing numbers of learners following links in the entries and making comments. Although most learners recognized the value of a blog, the majority (95%) rarely or never utilize the English learning resources available for self-study via permanent links in the margins of a weblog.

3 Wikis in Teaching English

A word „wiki“ is of a Hawaiian origin and means „quick“. The name has become common in the internet lexicon along with other Web-based terms such as weblogs, or blogs, for short.

A wiki is a web page that can be viewed and modified by anybody online. In other words, any person can change its content. Wikis permit group collaboration across the Internet and provide users with both author and editor functions.

One of the most commonly used wikis is Wikipedia, i.e. an editable encyclopedia online. Obviously, as the content may be modified or changed completely, the information might be unreliable. Its another shortcoming is the collective attitude of the group that uses a wiki for collaboration.

However, a wiki is thought to be a great tool for online collaborative writing activities (Sze, 2008), providing a new medium for students to express and share their ideas in writing.

G. Kessler (2009) used a wiki technique to investigate learners' behavior within a long-term autonomous interactive task and to focus their attention to grammatical accuracy throughout the task, addressing in particular the level of accuracy that participants achieved. Participants were willing to contribute to the collaborative task in the form of peer- and self-editing. The pedagogical aims of this research is the necessity for language teachers to experiment with the use of wikis and observe students' performance in varied collaborative tasks.

The comparative role of wikis and blogs in rational-critical debate is examined elsewhere (Barton, 2005). Blogging helps students develop subjectivity and explore their ideas in a writing space, i.e. a

sense of ownership is prevalent, while wikis provide the space where students seek consensus and learn to share a community attitude.

4. Respondents and Research Methods

4.1 Previous research data

The participants in our previous research project were the first year students of the Faculty of Social Policy at Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania. They studied English for Specific Purposes. The design of ESP course reflected the learners' needs in professional language and adjusted to requirements of students seeking a Bachelor of Social Science degree. Total number of respondents is 33, and the majority of them (30) are females aged 19 and 20. The average level of L2 proficiency, which is usually assessed by administering Oxford Placement Test at the outset of ESP course, is pre-intermediate, although there are a few students of intermediate proficiency. The period of research project on application of weblogging in the ESP classes lasted three terms.

The employed methods of gathering data consisted of administering specially designed questionnaires, analyzing students' responses, carrying out weblogging activities, providing feedback to learners and evaluating learners' performance in various online activities, and analyzing the utility of weblogging. The questionnaires were designed in accordance with the scientific standards (Z. Dornyei, 2003:16).

Students' blogs have been downloaded to the teacher's weblogs <http://gkavaliauskiene.blogspot.com> and <http://kavaliauskieneg.blogspot.com>. Any learner's blog can be entered by clicking on his or her surname, and all entries can be viewed or commented on. The majority of participants declined to personalize their weblogs, i.e. provide their personal information, although some students did: they contributed nice pictures of themselves, their pets or flowers.

4.2 Current Research Data

The participants in our current research project were the same students of the Faculty of Social Policy at Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania (described in the Section 4.1), with the only difference that there were fewer (only 8) respondents. The reason of failing to participate was learners' dislike of wikis.

Teacher's wiki and students' wikis were placed at the website <http://mrunipsychology2009.wikia.com/wiki/Writing-Activity/> and can be viewed online. Learners were asked to enter contributions on two themes: "Study for the Bachelor's Degree at Mykolas Romeris University" and "Research of the British Psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman". The idea of collaboration in writing activities was prevalent, i.e. learners were expected to edit each others' contributions either improving the content or accuracy in writing.

Unfortunately, we failed to carry out the collaboration project in spite of our efforts to seek help from “Wikia Community Support” at community@wikia.com in April 2009. We administered the specially designed questionnaire on students’ online writing likes and dislikes. The major responses to wikis use were negative. Students kept complaining about the contributions or their parts to wikis disappearing. Students have failed at editing peers’ entries, which was frustrating. Moreover, the failure was a negative factor that caused their unwillingness to renew the activities. Majority of students expressed the opinions that writing entries to wikis was a waste of time.

4.3 Excerpts from students’ weblogs

Some excerpts from students’ weblogs that provide information on self-assessment of writing skills and learner likes / dislikes, are quoted below. The names of the students are withdrawn for the sake of anonymity.

Student 1. I like weblogging. To tell the truth, generally I dislike writing because sometimes I make some grammatical mistakes. I tend to prepare to all lessons and I am always keen on improving my skills.

Student 2. Generally speaking, I know a lot of words in English and I can say that my vocabulary is quite rich. However I forget vocabulary when I need it in writing.

Student 3. I think writing is my weak point, and the biggest problem is unknown words. I like using my blog, it’s my own.

Student 4. My English writing skills are good enough. Of course, I make mistakes, but who doesn't make them? I am happy nobody writes negative comments in my weblog.

Student 5. I dislike writing summaries on paper or in my blog because you don’t have many arguments and get low mark.

4.4 Students’ attitudes: weblogs vs. wikis

Student 6. A weblog is my personal site, easy to use and edit. I do not understand the principle of contributing to my wiki – a previous information disappeared and it’s impossible to retrieve it.

Student 7. It is much easier to use weblogs. Wikis are full of chaos. I dislike their arrangement and would rather not use my wiki in the future.

Student 8. A weblog contains a straightforward structure that is easy to use while it is impossible to find my previous entry in my wiki. Trying to edit my peers’ entries was unsuccessful because their wikis failed to respond.

Student 9. I am used to weblogging and I enjoy it. I hate using wiki because of its unpredictable nature.

Student 10. In my opinion, wiki technology is much to be desired – contributions get mixed, hard to find and edit.

5 Conclusion

In this study, the data of our previous research into learners' attitudes to weblogging and our current findings on using wikis for collaboration in editing peers' written work have been compared.

Learners' attitudes to weblogging have been positive even when they found it difficult to accomplish their written assignments to their satisfaction.

To our great disappointment, the application of wikis in English classes proved to be unproductive and unpopular. In spite of the assistance offered by the Wikia Community Support team, our learners failed to use this technology for collaboration in improving their writing skills and expressed unanimous dislike to applying wikis in the future.

Some possible implication to other teachers who would like to experiment with application of wikis in their language classes is to set a wiki for a pair of students. In such an arrangement, learners might be able to seek a consensus in their descriptions of the contents, its structure and improve writing accuracy.

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