

EXPERIMENTING WITH ENGLISH COLLABORATIVE WRITING ON GOOGLE SITES

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Abstract: A considerable amount of research in recent years has shown the advantages of integrating Web 2.0 technologies with language teaching. Specifically, this paper will shed light on the positive effects of web-based collaborative writing on Google Sites based on a project carried out in four primary schools in Hong Kong, as revealed by the qualitative data samples of students' and teachers' comments and revisions, as well as the result of focus group interviews. Both students' and teachers' revisions and feedback not only endorse but also expand on the benefits of using Google Sites in the linguistic, discourse and motivational domains for students as suggested by previous research findings. Key observations based on the present study will also be highlighted to offer insights into ways of merging Web 2.0 technologies and language teaching in a second or foreign language context like that of Hong Kong.

1 INTRODUCTION

Writing has always been a challenge to students learning a second or foreign language, not to mention young learners in a primary school context. While acknowledging the fruitful results of using web-based collaborative tools in promoting writing in group projects across different subjects (Woo *et al.*, 2011), this study aims to examine the extent to which collaborative learning in a Web 2.0 environment can enhance students' writing abilities in English. Web 2.0 technologies have been increasingly perceived by teachers, parents and the general public as an essential tool for equipping students with the necessary skills, such as communication and collaboration skills, required in the 21st century (Zammit, 2010). Google Sites is also believed to provide students with a free online collaborative platform to co-construct their group projects — an avenue that enables teachers to engineer discussions that activate students to see each other as resources and owners of their own learning, to monitor their learning progress and to provide timely feedback that moves them forward (Wiliam, 2005).

This paper will highlight the literature guiding the design of the study, discuss the intervention program prior to and during the project, outline the data collection methods, report on the main findings,

and raise issues for critical reflection.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

New technologies have been found to have a tremendous impact on the teaching and learning of English writing in the last few decades (Goldberg *et al.*, 2003). Many studies have started to bring in the application of Web 2.0 in education involving collaborative tools called wikis (Woo *et al.*, 2011). Hossain and Aydin (2011) have suggested that social networking applications such as blogs, forums, podcasts and wikis are successful in creating a collaborative virtual society for users to share information interactively. Google Sites, a kind of wiki, is a “collaborative web space where anyone can add content and anyone can edit content that has already been published” (Richardson, 2006, p. 8).

A considerable number of studies in the past decade has pointed out specific benefits of Google Sites and other similar wikis. First of all, such form of technology can promote social and achievement motivation. The interactive and read-write nature of Web 2.0 technologies facilitates users' participation in and building of many rich and user-centered virtual communities (Alexander, 2006). What's more, providing a genuine audience to the

participants motivates them become more engaged writers (Lo & Hyland, 2007). With this, they are likely to get more actively involved in the co-writing process (Parker & Chao, 2007) and in their own knowledge construction (Boulos *et al.*, 2006).

Apart from igniting students' motivation to be involved in the writing process, Google Sites also offers a convenient context for them to contribute in various ways. Hossain and Aydin (2011) indicated that wikis allow users to have different levels of access to edit or delete content. Students can play a part according to their availability as well as their ability. This study provides solid evidence of this in Section 4 of the paper.

Most recently, Woo *et al.* (2009) conducted a study to explore the challenges and benefits that a wiki may bring to the students and teachers in a primary five English class in Hong Kong. The results showed that the students held a positive attitude towards both the process and the product of the collaborative writing experience. A follow-up investigation done by Woo *et al.* (2011) on students of the same age group has reconfirmed previous findings that students enjoy using the wiki and that it had a significant impact on their collaboration and writing skills development. Although these two studies and a few others (e.g., Wheeler *et al.*, 2008) have generated encouraging results in the use of wikis to facilitate primary students' writing and revision of their texts, no larger scale projects have been carried out in Hong Kong with students of different ability groups in primary schools across the territory to investigate the value of using Web 2.0 technologies in English language learning. This paper therefore aims to bridge these research gaps by describing the effects of using Google Sites for collaborative English writing online with examples of students' work from four local primary schools. The divergence in the approach adopted by the teachers in the four schools in monitoring their students online is nevertheless beyond the scope of this discussion here.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Participants

Four primary schools located in different parts of Hong Kong, including KF, SH, CP and WS¹, were

¹ KF = CCC Kei Faat Primary School; SH = Cheung Chau Sacred Heart School; CP = Canossa Primary School; WS = STFA Wu Siu Kui Memorial Primary School (a.m.). The population in these four schools should reflect the language performance of upper primary students in the higher, average and lower range across the territory.

invited to participate in this project so as to ensure that a sufficient quantity of student writings representative of those of the average local primary student population could be gathered to examine the effects of online collaborative writing in English. The 401 Primary five students who took part in the study were first required to do at least one collaborative piece of writing on paper in the first term (Phase One) to experience writing as a team and to be acquainted with peer evaluation, a part of the intervention program to be discussed in 3.2. In the second term (Phase Two of the study), students completed their writing on Google Sites. The four schools differed in terms of the number of classes involved, the composition topic as well as the duration and details of their implementation plan. At KF, for example, two classes took part in the study and their writing topic was *Our Weekend Activities*. Similarly, two classes from SH joined the study with *Cheung Chau Bun Festival* as their theme. CP had *Lost* as their topic while WS chose *Good Person, Good Deeds*; both CP and WS had a larger number of students taking part in the study. It is worth noting that all the topics were closely relevant to the students' daily life, school activities and lesson focus.

3.2 Intervention Program

Teachers facilitated students' writing in a pen-and-paper format in the first phase and then via Google Sites in Phase Two. Pre- and while-intervention professional development workshops were held and teachers from the four participating schools took part. Two pre-intervention workshops were organized prior to the commencement of the study and designed to deepen the teachers' understanding of the potential benefits of process and collaborative writing using White and Arndt's (1991) model that illustrates the cyclical and developmental nature of the writing process as shown below. (See Figure 1)

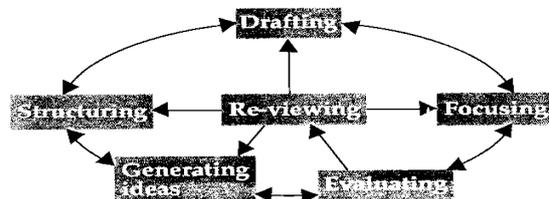


Figure 1: (White & Arndt, 1991, p. 4).

At the workshops, the teachers' knowledge of the writing process, approaches to the teaching of writing, their role in facilitating learning and the

giving of quality feedback was strengthened. In particular, the teachers were reminded of the importance of having a clear set of assessment criteria and ways of guiding their students in interpreting the criteria and evaluating one another's written work with the help of different evaluation templates. The workshop organized during the intervention provided the opportunity for the teachers from the four schools to come together again to share and reflect on their experience of their try-outs in Phase One, to compare the evaluation templates they used and the impact on the quality of students' written work, to voice their concerns and to collectively plan ahead for Phase Two. What was notable about this while-intervention workshop was that teachers received feedback on the comments they made on their students' work, discussed the impact of their use of prompts, questions, suggestions and revisions in different forms, and explored how they could maximize the benefits of their strategy use.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Focus Group Interviews with Teachers and Students

Focus group interviews were conducted on 42 students and 19 teachers from the four participating schools to gather their opinions on the use of Google Sites. In general, the majority held a positive attitude towards Google Sites as a collaborative writing platform. Some interesting qualitative findings are captured in Section 4 of the paper.

3.3.2 Documentary Analysis of the Students' Progress

Google Sites has the function of 'page history' that generates information on the person making the revisions and identifies the types of revisions done, thereby enabling one to trace how different kinds of peer and teacher feedback lead to the latest version of students' work. Qualitative data was thus gathered and analyzed through multiple sources of evidence, including students' first drafts, peer evaluation of their writing from their group mates and classmates depending on the accessibility of their writing to everyone in class as determined by the teachers, information edited as recorded in the wiki history page and a comparison of this with the revised texts posted on Google Sites. The analysis revealed benefits for students of different ability groups and this is documented below.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Positive Pressure to Write

Throughout Phase Two of the study, when writing was all done on Google Sites, it was observed that there were fewer instances of non-starters, compared to writing in the pen-and-paper format. As exemplified in the online exchanges below from a class of students in CP, the candid and innocent responses from students such as "was your writing eaten by yourself?" served as a powerful socially motivating factor in encouraging their friends to at least begin to write:

writing5 p5process - 2011/6/26 上午 5:43
was your writing eaten by yourself???

Figure 2: Sample one.

Another comment "You are very lazy" by a classmate was also proven to be more persuasive than a similar remark made by the teacher as it came in a more timely fashion on Google Sites than it would on paper and was made public to everyone in the class.

4.2 Writing for a Real Audience

Students generally valued Google Sites as an avenue for mutual exchange, peer learning and publication of their work. Comparing this to the pen-and-paper mode they experienced in an earlier phase of the study, two students had the following views: "When we use Google Sites, we have the chance to read the compositions from other classes, comment on our classmates' work and exchange ideas. When we did our work on paper, we could only read a few pieces of writing." "Google Sites allows other people to comment on our work and we can learn more from that." Interestingly, a third student shared the pride he took in having the opportunity to publish his work: "... we can save our work easily on Google Sites and show it to others."

4.3 Better Writing and Peer Learning

It is precisely because of the communicative nature of this collaborative writing platform that students have demonstrated their interest in commenting on not only the orthographic, grammatical and syntactic aspects of their peers' writing but also, much more importantly, its content.

While some linguistically more advanced students were seen making detailed suggestions for

their peers on spelling, tenses and the use of conjunctions as indicated below,

1. be careful the spelling: terry>ferry.
2. some verb in past tense should add 'ed'/'d' at the end, some verb shouldn't add at the end: losted>lost.
3. use the conjunction carefully

Figure 3: Sample two.

their not-so-strong counterparts² left comments such as

the line five ,the word amn ,what mean?
 don't forget "although" and "but" can't use in the same sentence!

Figure 4: Sample three.

which had an equally positive influence on their peers' revisions as shown in their edited work. The communicativeness of such exchanges is further evidenced through responses to the comments above and actions taken by students:

Thank you for your comment! I will pay attention next time!
 I have corrected the wrong spelling already.

Figure 5: Sample four.

Even more impressive were nevertheless the questions that students raised which led their classmates to reflect on and revise their writing on the content level. For example, one student noticed a classmate writing a story about The Big Buddha in Tai Mo Shan and posed the following two questions for him³:

go to Tai Mo Shan visit the Big Buddha?
 Tai Mo Shan have the Big Buddha?
 ?????????????????????????????????????

Figure 6: Sample five.

Other examples of comments of this nature include:

They felt unforgettable because their food were stolen?A little bit unreasonable
 Mrs Chan and Mr Chan went to Lantau Island. Suddenly they got lost ???

Figure 7: Sample six.

These friendly but stimulating and provoking questions, plus helpful prompts such as

They missthe bus, so the result is...

Figure 8: Sample seven.

² The students were classified as high, average and low performers in the English language by their teachers according to their official results in school.

³ Geographically, The Big Buddha is situated on Lantau Island in Hong Kong and not Tai Mo Shan.

in response to a writer who brought his composition to a close with the following sentence

When they came in the bus stop, the bus went away and they missed the bus.

Figure 9: Sample eight.

gave their fellow students useful pointers to revise their work by further developing their ideas, enriching the content of their writing and fixing problems with relevance for overall greater logical and textual coherence⁴. This not only supports the argument put forward by Woo *et al.* (2009) that primary students have the ability to comment on their peers' work but even takes it further to prove that they are capable of reviewing one another's writing in different dimensions, given appropriate guidance from the teacher.

There were also concrete examples of peer learning and peer tutoring at work from the average to lower performers as identified by their teachers. In the following instance, a student was noted reading another group's piece of writing and, in his eagerness to understand its content, tried to find out what "truthful" means and got this reply:

- 2011/5/24 下午6:26
 Your writing is good but I do not know "truthful" this word??
 - 2011/5/24 下午6:32
 Truthful means honest.

Figure 10: Sample nine.

Overall, both teachers and students were found giving encouraging feedback on ideas as well as language use as shown in some of the examples cited above and in this interaction between four students and the target writer:

writing1 p5process - 2011/6/19 下午8:43
 your ideas are very interesting
 writing5 p5process - 2011/6/19 下午8:54
 is good
 writing4 p5process - 2011/6/19 下午8:54
 very relevant to the topic
 writing2 p5process - 2011/6/20 上午7:21
 Example of good word:despairing, afield, village, beggar, ahead, hoplessly, rocksack, mosquito, adventure.
 耶!

Figure 11: Sample ten.

All this is reinforced by the students' perceptions as expressed in focus group interviews that "Google Sites allows other people to comment on (their) work and (so they) can learn more from that" and teachers' beliefs that this collaborative environment offers the advantage of "promot(ing) the writing skills of a group of students – not just one". What is

⁴ There were ample examples of this from the 'page history' and improved versions of students' work based on their classmates' feedback which unfortunately the limited space in this paper does not allow us to show.

worth highlighting too is that the students were in general writing more than they would otherwise have produced in a pen-and-paper format, and were communicating most of the time in the target language – English – in natural, spontaneous and anxiety-free ways.

4.4 Teachers' Role in the Collaborative Writing Process

Teachers' roles can be conceptualized as being three-fold in the process of guiding their students in completing the collaborative writing task: (i) as "a genuine and interested reader" (White & Arndt, 1991, p. 125) who responded naturally to the content of students' writing as Ms Cheng from KF below attempts to achieve.

Figure 12: Sample eleven.

(ii) as facilitator in helping students strengthen the quality of their ideas as Ms Cheng does above with her suggestion "You can describe the appearance of (your) mum, how hard-working she is, how good she is" or as another teacher Ms Kwok from KF does through the use of questions:

Figure 13: Sample twelve.

and (iii) as language assistant (Tribble, 1996, p. 119) as a teacher from WS Ms Lam illustrates via her prompts and guidance given to a student on his grammatical mistakes:

Figure 14: Sample thirteen.

4.5 Benefits of Google Sites in Itself

Overall students found the experience of writing on Google Sites rewarding. Endorsing a teacher's view that "(a)ll students have the right to evaluate other groups' work and later the groups share their work with the other class and comment on it" and that students "learn to appreciate others' work and ideas", here are some student voices: "If there are some words we don't know how to spell, we can look them up in the dictionary immediately by using the computer." "Using the computer greatly arouses my

interest in writing in English."

The word-search, spell-check and translation options made available to students via Google Sites have made them find "working online more convenient" and the editing process less cumbersome, giving them "the motivation to accomplish tasks" not in their mother tongue.

5 TEACHING IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Indeed, "(o)ne can get close to perfection through producing, reflecting on, discussing, and reworking successive drafts or a text" (Nunan, 1991). There is no doubt that self-reflection and peer evaluation have the potential of giving students extensive practice in developing the skills necessary for editing and revising their work before it reaches 'perfection' (Witbeck, 1976). We have seen from the online exchanges cited in this paper how students of varying abilities took part in and benefitted from the use of Web 2.0 technologies. Yet there is still room to learn from the more successful implementations at different schools based on the observations of the researchers. It is in this light that some recommendations for the use of such technologies are to be made.

Throughout the study, it was observed that schools and teachers that opened up the online platform for students to post their work as early in the writing process as possible created greater opportunities for students to receive feedback from their teachers and peers. These students were also found making more thorough and advanced revisions on the content, organization and language of their writing. This suggests the need for teachers to help students view Google Sites or similar online writing environments as a risk-taking and supportive avenue for them to experiment with language use while not being afraid of showing their mistakes to and learning from as well as with one another.

Teachers who were identified to have succeeded in stretching their students' potential more fully were ones who grasped the chance to make use of student comments such as "Too short!" or "Very long!" to guide them in discovering how they could better develop their ideas or learn from other students to make their writing richer in content and more coherent. The quality of these teachers' feedback was also notable.

The environments found to be more conducive to constructive and specific feedback from students were also ones where the teachers were more

tolerant of students' use of their first language (L1). What one may wish to question is whether or not there should be an insistence on an all-English interaction at the expense of non-communication or whether teachers should acknowledge students' relevant contributions in L1 and then guide them in gradually using more of the target language. After all, aren't words of praise like “勁!” (meaning “Brilliant!”) as quoted in Figure 11 more reinforcing in the students' L1? Shouldn't concepts which may be difficult to express, such as the idea of indenting the paragraph from the first suggestion below, be encouraged?



Figure 15: Sample fourteen.

All in all, the primary students who took part in the study generally enjoyed using Google Sites, experienced the linguistic, discourse-related and motivational benefits of using the online platform to practise their writing, evaluate their peers' work and learn from one another. What merits further and more in-depth investigation is nonetheless individual teachers' management of the web-based collaborative platform, their strategy use in facilitating peer interaction, their approach to feedback and their tolerance of the use of L1.

As Engstrom and Jewett (2005) assert, the effectiveness of wiki application in learning and teaching depends on “careful planning and training of both students and instructors to familiarize them with the technology”. A systematic approach coupled with a pedagogically informed plan is of vital importance to the successful integration of this technology into the curriculum of any second or foreign language.

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