THE APPLICATION OF WIKIPEDIA FOR ENHANCING IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS’ READING PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

The use of technology and related tools has long been of interest in language pedagogy. Among these tools, wikis have gained increasing notice in the cyberspace community mainly because of their ease of use. Among wikis on the web, Wikipedia is one of the most visited wikis. Though, much has been written on the benefits of the application of the wikis in language pedagogy in general and Wikipedia in particular, we are still far from having a vivid picture of how Wikipedia can be put in the syllabi of EFL and ESL learners. Accordingly, the present study attempts to 1. Justify the position of Wikipedia as a potential language teaching and learning tool and 2. Show the feasible ways in which this tool can improve the learners’ reading skill in Iranian context. In so doing, first, the theoretical underpinning of the tool is presented followed by the discussion of the application of the tool in an EFL context in which a total of 36 intermediate EFL students participated. The results of the study demonstrated that Wikipedia can be a promising authentic resource to help EFL/ESL learners to improve their reading skill.

Field of Research: Language pedagogy, cyberspace, Wikipedia, EFL/ESL learners, reading skill.

1. Introduction

Language teaching has traversed a long way in search of a treatment for language teaching and learning. Many methods, approaches, and theories have been suggested various insights to language teaching and learning. There is a consensus today that successful language pedagogy depends much upon sound teaching and learning principles (Brown, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Bachman (1991) stated that the given principles should be taken into consideration for the development of any teaching or learning task. Accordingly language practitioners are recommended to look for texts and tasks that meet such requirements. One of the essential requirements for a task to be taken into account is authenticity (Widdowson, 1979, 1990; Bachman, 1990; 1991; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Lewkowicz, 1997; Morrow, 1991; Wood, 1993; Douglas, 1997; Cumming & Maxewell, 1999). A number of language specialists (e.g. Canale, 1984) have discussed the features that characterize an authentic test task.
It seems that language practitioners should look for materials, tasks, and texts that fully are in line with the given practices and principles. Much has been proposed in this regard, for example, materials that may be linguistic, visual, auditory, or kinesthetic, and may be presented in print, audio, or video form, on CD-ROMs, through live performance or display or on the Internet (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). The emergence of new technologies has brought hope to the field for the potentials that such tools offer to language pedagogy much in line with teaching and learning principles.

Podcasts, vodcasts, video clips, emails, chat rooms, task-based textbooks, power points, WizIQ, quia, Moodle, mail, wikis, blogs, etc. all offer good opportunities for language learners and teachers. One of the promising tools to use in language classrooms is the use of wikis. Wikis are flexible, highly collaborative, focused on content, frequently administered by a group, edited by anyone (open editing), and organized in various ways. One such available wikis is Wikipedia which is a free, web-based, collaborative, multilingual encyclopedia project supported by the non-profit Wikipedia Foundation. The multilingual, web-based encyclopedia Wikipedia represents the prime example of the collaborative potential in the wiki. The quality is remarkably high even though anyone can contribute and change articles (Giles, 2005). Research on educational use of Wikipedia has increased in recent years. The theoretical perspectives vary, but overall, Wikipedia is considered to be especially good in facilitating social constructivist learning processes (Bruns & Humphreys, 2005; Ruth & Houghton, 2009). It is also claimed that they challenge traditional pedagogical assumptions about the teaching of reading and writing (Lundin, 2008) by facilitating both revision writing (Ma & Yuen, 2008) and authentic reading (Forte & Bruckman, 2006; Mak & Coniam, 2008).

There is still a lack of research that investigates the pedagogical potentials of Wikipedia for collaborative learning (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008). Some research also indicates that collaborative reading and writing is more the exception than the norm (Lin & Kelsey, 2009). This is thus a challenging idealistic hypothesis that Wikipedia is natural beneficial. Empirical studies usually focus on how Wikiedians work (Bryant, Forte & Bruckman, 2005; Hoisl, Aigner & Miksch, 2007). The limited research that has been done is also mainly prescriptive (Staley, 2009). With all these studies done, the literature on Wikipedia and language pedagogy seems to be in its infancy. On one hand, the application of Wikis in general and Wikipedia in particular needs to be justified at the theoretical level and on the other hand, there is no inclusive report of how such a tool can be used in EFL contexts with complex net of learning and teaching variables. Accordingly, the present study attempted to show the feasible ways in which this tool can improve the learners’ reading skill in Iranian context.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The English language learners who participated in the project were, at the moment of the collection of the data, studying English at an English language institute in Ilam, Iran. They consisted of 36 students who had already been selected out of 56 based on their
results on a placement test; The Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1999). They were all at the intermediate level and attended two classes who were randomly assigned to, namely an experimental group (18 students), and a control group (18 students). The participants were all female with the age range of 15 to 20.

2.2 Instrumentation

The instruments of the study comprise a pre-test and a post-test. The Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1999) functioned as the pre-test and the post-test developed by the researcher-teacher. The post-test consisted of a reading comprehension test with seven texts taken from Wikipedia. Each text was followed by at least five comprehension questions, all of which were in multiple-choice format. An attempt was made to select those texts with almost the same level of difficulty of the taught texts. The selected texts required general background knowledge. The experimental interventions consisted of twelve treatment sessions generally provided on an average of two sessions weekly by researcher-teacher. The sessions were 60 minutes in duration for participants assigned to the tasks.

2.3 Procedure, data collection and analysis

To achieve the goals of the study, a pre-test and a post-test were conducted for both experimental and control groups (classes). The pre or placement test required the subjects to read a text about a specified topic and answer the questions followed by. During the next twelve sessions, the students in experimental group were exposed to the treatment that was Wikipedia online texts in this study. After the treatment was given, a post-test was administered for both groups requiring students to read a similar text and answer its following questions. In order to make a fair comparison between two groups of the study, the printed Wikipedia texts were employed for the control group. For instance, the selected topic for one of the sessions based on the learners’ interest was food and its related topics; the teacher-researcher had printed the text from Wikipedia (illustrated in the following) and made some duplication for the learners in the control group. Concerning the experimental group, it was tried to select those texts from Wikipedia that contained most of the features of Wikipedia such as hyperlinks, hypertexts, podcasts, video casts, etc. all of which were based on learners’ interest. The data was analyzed using some inferential statistics to find out whether the groups have made any progress in their reading skill.
3. Finding & Discussion

The research question was put forward regarding the efficiency of applying Wikipedia as an aid in improving reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students. In what follows, first the results of the two main groups i.e. the Wikipedia and the traditional classes are represented and then the comparison of both groups participating in the study would be demonstrated followed by the results obtained from statistical analysis.

The present study was based on a hypothesis which claimed that the application of the main software tool offered by ICT, namely Wikipedia in EFL reading comprehension classes leads to better acquisition and performance of students in comparison with the traditional methods of reading textbooks. In order to confirm this claim, the final grades of the participants in both traditional and experimental classes were compared. Table 1 illustrates the results descriptively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11.9444</td>
<td>2.34451</td>
<td>.55261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikipedia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16.1111</td>
<td>2.19997</td>
<td>.51854</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the results in table 1 show, there seems to be a difference in the final performance of the two traditional and experimental classes. In order to check the significance of the observed differences between the final grades of the two classes, the obtained data were subjected to a paired t-test using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 18. Table 2 represents the t-test results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
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</table>

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The statistically significant difference between the final grades of the participants in two experimental and traditional classes suggests that students in Class B (Wikipedia Class) have performed much better on their final exam in comparison with Class A (Traditional Class). Hence, the superiority of the application of ICT tool, Wikipedia, in Iranian EFL classes is confirmed. The results of the post-test are also illustrated in figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>tailed)</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades (Equal variances not assumed)</td>
<td>2.001</td>
<td>21.272</td>
<td>.050*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*= statistically significant (p<.05)

The existing literature shows that the application of ICT tools such as Wikipedia offers numerous potentials for both teachers and learners. The present quasi-experimental study sought to present a comparative overview of one of the most practical tools offered by ICT, namely Wikipedia. As the research findings depict the participants who took part in Wikipedia classrooms collaboratively surpassed those who had participated in traditional classrooms. In addition to a higher level of participation, they exceeded them in final performance. The affective data gathered in this study portrayed the impression of students participating in the study. The participants in Class B (Wikipedia Class) reported their higher motivation, sense of community, collaboration, and pleasure and less confusion than the participants in Class A (Traditional Class).

4. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

The obtained results can be attributed to the flexibility, ease of use and collaborative features of Wikipedia which promotes higher motivation and participation which itself leads to better learning and performance. As far as the ultimate goal of instruction is enhancing learning, it is highly recommended to apply these user-friendly and efficient social 16 software tools generally in EFL classes and specifically in EFL reading courses to facilitate and improve teaching and learning. There are a number of pedagogical implications for the application of Wikipedia in EFL reading classes described in this study. First, using Wikipedia texts in the EFL reading classes can expand students’ interest and allow EFL readers to feel more independent. The tools and applications
offered by ICT can help teachers motivate learners, facilitate material development and promote class resources. ICT tools and software help students to get more autonomous in the process of learning a foreign or second language.

Regarding the ever-growing need for innovative and modernized teaching and learning techniques, the significance of ICT tools and the benefits they offer is widely perceived. In the Iranian context also there is an increasing tendency toward applying such modern and effective tools. The methodology of this study might be used as a basis for further research on the use of such social software in different academic disciplines, with varying age groups and of different learning goals to see if the same results would be reached.

References


