

## How do learners collaborate on wiki writing tasks?

### What this research was about and why it is important

Wikis are websites that combine a discussion forum with a text editor to allow any user to discuss, write and edit content. Theoretically they have a great potential for the language classroom because they allow learners to collaborate on writing tasks and discuss their language use. Through these discussions learners can learn from each other and co-create knowledge about the target language. Findings from studies looking at collaborative writing tasks are mixed. Some studies have found that learners indeed engage in discussions about language use and are happy to collaborate on their texts. Other studies have found that learners are rather reluctant to engage in dialogue with each other. These studies looked at discussion forums independently of the writing tasks. They might have missed when learners made changes to the text based on discussions in the forum or informed their colleagues about changes they just made to a text. This study linked discussion forums and writing behaviour to see how they influenced each other.

### What the researchers did

- Participants were female learners of English as a foreign language in Kuwait. They were 17-18 years old and their first language was Arabic. They had an intermediate level of English.
- The researchers divided the learners into groups of 4 based on their self-reported orientation to group work. More and less collaborative learners were mixed together in each group.
- The learners used the PBwiki (<https://my.pbworks.com>) platform for their collaborative writing task. They designed a poster about Kuwait.
- The project lasted for 13 weeks. In the first two weeks teachers and learners completed technical training of the platform. During the next 8 weeks learners completed the collaborative writing task. Learners completed this activity out-of-class.
- The researchers used the time stamps of discussion entries and edits to texts to link them together.

### What the researchers found

- Had the researchers only looked at text edits, they would have missed some conflicts that occurred in the discussion forum around these edits. For example, one learner (Salma) had corrected the text another learner (Aseel) had written. Just looking at the edit would have suggested that they were collaborating. But in the discussion forum, Aseel rejected the changes Salma had made to her text. This rejection would not have been visible from the text edits alone.
- Looking just at the discussion forum, researchers would have missed crucial information as some learners responded to comments in the discussion forum by making edits directly in the text instead engaging in discussion. These in-text comments would be missing from the discussion forum and researchers might get the impression that learners are not collaborating even though they are.
- In other examples, learners discussed changes to the text in the forum but did not actually follow them up with edits in the text. When looking at the discussion forum alone, researchers might have gotten the impression that learners are collaborating but actually their discussions were not followed up by actions.
- Some learners also used the text edit function and the discussion forum in a complementary way. They edited the text and then let their colleagues know about the changes via the forum. There they engaged in more extended discussions. Or learners discussed, for example, the meaning of the word in the forum and then one of them made the necessary change to the document.
- The most collaborative learners switched back and forth between the discussion forum and the text a lot. They made changes to the text, notified their colleagues, discussed any further edits that needed to be carried out and then returned to the text to make those changes.

### Things to consider

- This study shows that it was important to look at text edits and comments in the discussion forum together. By looking at them in isolation, researchers would have missed that learners sometimes did not take on suggestions made by others, implemented suggestions made in the discussion forum in the text, or switched between the forum and text to discuss changes. It is important to bear this in mind when studying and evaluating the collaborative efforts of learners during wiki-based writing tasks.