An Investigation of the Use of Wikis in English Language Learning*

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Abstract

This paper presents a study exploring the efficacy of Wikis in an online language exchange program involving a purposeful sample of university students from China and the UK. The article first provides a brief overview of the use of Web 2.0 applications in language education. It then specifically addresses the potential advantages of using Wikis in second language acquisition, particularly in tasks designed for the purpose of collaborative learning. Research methods employed in the study included questionnaire, interview and analysis of textual input on Wikis. Participants were students from two partner universities in China and the UK, who communicated with each other in English and Chinese to discuss curriculum-based topics posted to the China-UK Wikispaces. The results demonstrate that tasks designed for Wikis offer students constructive opportunities to communicate with each other and develop their language proficiencies. The findings also indicate that the informed involvement of language tutors in selecting topics and designing tasks is instrumental in effectively facilitating and further enhancing students’ experiences of collaborative learning on Wikis.

Key words: Wikis; online collaboration; English; Chinese

* This study is part of a provincial key project of Jiangsu, “The 11th Five-Year Plan” of the Scientific Education Program dating 2009 to 2011 (project number: B-b/2009/01/043).
1. Introduction

Web 2.0 tools including Blogs, Facebook, Wikis, Podcasts, MySpace, YouTube, i-Tube, Second Life and Ning provide users with opportunities to post and edit textual messages as well as audio and video clips for the purpose of sharing these files with others. A large number of people around the world have experience of working, communicating and socializing on these platforms. These new technological environments have transformed the range of opportunities that learners now have access to in pursuit of information, and young learners of this era have been described as the Google Generation or “digital residents” (Elliott, 2009). Web 2.0 tools have expanded second language learners’ interest in their studies, based upon their motivation to work on these platforms (Zou, 2011). The difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 is that, in Web 2.0 environments (for example, Wikis), language learners can post messages and receive prompt feedback from peers and others from anywhere around the world. “They control the tools of production and publication” and “there are no more gatekeepers” (Solomon & Schrum, 2007: 2). In such environments, these platforms also enhance students’ autonomously collaborative learning skills (Boulos, Maramba & Wheeler, 2006; Kessler & Bikowski, 2010). Meanwhile, these new technologies have offered educators new tools to use in their instruction. Teachers find it more convenient to create learning environments for their students than they did in the past (Godwin-Jones, 2009).

Wikispace is a prominent Web 2.0 platform, wildly used for second language learning in recent years. Wiki allows learners to upload language learning materials to a designated web page shared with other learners around the world, and also offers the function of being able to edit others’ input. This study investigates the ways in which Wikis may help Chinese learners improve their English competencies, and explores the ways in which learners can collaborate in this process of second language acquisition on Wikis. It is based on an English-Chinese language exchange program involving participants from partner universities in China and the UK.

2. Literature review

With the development of Web 2.0 technology, interest has recently emerged regarding the ways in which Web 2.0 tools are used to support second language learners in their language acquisition. Researchers have found that Web 2.0 environments provide valuable opportunities for learners to practice their language skills (e.g., Lund, 2008; Sharma & Barrett, 2007; Thomas, 2009). The new technology provides opportunities for students to digitally discuss language learning materials with peers at their own physical and temporal convenience, while also offering opportunities to communicate with people at great distances via the Internet; such features of Web 2.0 tools provide students with additional motivation in their study (Chapelle & Jamieson, 2008). Moreover, ESL learners can use Wikis to develop their communicative skills through collaborative group work, illustrating and negotiating their work with an authentic audience (Butler-Pascoe, 2011).
Wikis and blogs, for example, allow students to publish their ideas and communicate with other learners online; these applications offer collaborative learning environments where language learners are invited to give feedback on each others’ posts or complete tasks together (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Sun, 2009). Additionally, in that Wikis allow learners to modify texts written by previous contributors, learners can help each other in the correction of language errors on Wikis (Kessler, 2009). These corrections can be easily identified, as different colors are automatically applied to corrected or deleted texts on Wikis. Thereby, learners can use Wikis to refine their writing skills through collaborative activities (Arnold, Ducate & Kost, 2009; Mak & Coniam, 2008). With this in mind, Liu and Lee (2011) investigated a Wiki-based collaborative writing process involving 18 university students; data analyzed in this study consisted of students’ writing products on Wikis as well as questionnaires. The results suggested that students benefited a great deal from collaborative work using Wikis in the completion of their writing project. Student participants commented that collaboration is more efficacious than individual work on Wikis.

Language teachers and researchers alike have implemented language exchange projects using Web 2.0 tools to facilitate students’ learning of a partner’s first language. Cloke and Absalom (2007) conducted a language exchange using Wikis to help students in Italy improve their English skills and students in Australia to learn Italian. Similarly, Webb (2009) reported that an online language exchange program conducted through blogging between students in the UK and Spain helped those students develop Spanish and English skills, respectively. Both studies found that Web 2.0 technologies foster second language development for students who communicate internationally in this way and, importantly, that students are motivated to work on these platforms using the target languages in question. Students in these projects provided positive feedback on the use of Web 2.0 tools in education.

Despite the fact that Web 2.0 tools provide students with opportunities to work by themselves as well as collaboratively with peers, researchers still argue that teachers also need to guide and direct students in their use of the new technology throughout the learning process. Teachers should provide support and pedagogical designs in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) environments, to reinforce students’ computer-based learning (Bax, 2003; Chambers & Bax, 2006; Chen & Cheng, 2008). When language teachers design guided activities or designate specific topics for students to discuss, students use Web 2.0 tools more effectively. As Egbert, Akasha, Huff and Lee (2011: 12) have recently asserted:

Computers, mobile devices and all forms of new technology can be used for language learning, but the essential component to make them effective is a creative, innovative, and forward-looking teacher who can match the needs of students with the capabilities of evolving technology to result in learning.

However, few studies have explored the ways in which Wikis can be used by such forward-looking teachers in the facilitation of specifically English and Chinese language exchange...
programs. We are highly interested in investigating the use of Wikis in an English-Chinese exchange; to this end, a Wiki page entitled China-UK Wikispaces has been set up between the Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in China and the University of Bristol in the UK. The project aims to enrich the educational experiences of students who are learning English in China and students who are learning Chinese in the UK. Students can enter various forums and discuss topics covering a wide variety of interests, including British and Chinese culture, food, pop music, travel and the like. Participants are encouraged to communicate with each other in their target languages, and to assist each other in the correction of language errors in either English or Chinese on this Wiki space. Students, in this way, become aware of areas in which their English or Chinese writing can improve, and both groups thus benefit from the exchange. Based on this project, a research study was implemented to examine the effect of using Wikis in developing students’ English writing skills through communication between students in China and the UK.

3. Methodology

The current study was conducted with the participation of 14 second-year students enrolled in the Business Stream of the English and Study Skills Program at the English Language Centre of Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. All participants from this university were Chinese students aged 20 or 21, of whom four were male and ten were female. These participants collaborated with approximately ten students aged 20 to 23 from a variety of departments at the University of Bristol, all of whom were learning Chinese as a foreign language at the university’s Language Centre. Students from both universities were asked to participate in discussing two topics specifically designed by teachers; the topics were duly integrated into the intermediate and post-intermediate level Chinese courses at the University of Bristol. As Sun (2009) has supported, specific topics assigned by teachers in Web 2.0 environments are a matter of interest in CALL contexts. Students are more likely to be engaged by CALL tasks if they feel that these activities will help them improve their language skills and if the tasks are integrated into their language curriculum. The two topics presented to students in this study were: “Compare different uses of leisure time for university students in China and the UK” and “Discuss the effect of the one-child policy on your life.” Students in the UK posted questions on the two topics using Wikispaces in Chinese; students in China responded to their questions in English. Finally, as part of the assessment of their Chinese course, students at the University of Bristol had to use information and examples from their Wiki discussions with students in China for a presentation delivered in Chinese.

This research was guided by the following research questions:

- Did the students spend more time using English on Wikispaces?
- In which ways did the students use Wikis to collaborate with UK students to develop their English skills?
- Did the students like to work on the designed topics with UK students on Wikispaces?
• Did the students actually make progress in their written English?

Data collection consisted of a questionnaire survey and interviews with the 14 students in China, as well as the print documentation of texts which students had entered and amended on Wikispaces.

Questionnaires can be used to discover people’s attitudes, perceptions and opinions, and offer valid results with statistically substantial outcomes (Black, 1999; Denscombe, 1998). Furthermore, and especially pertinent to the current study, Chapelle (2001) has asserted that evidence about learners’ perceptions regarding the significance of a CALL task can be collected using questionnaire data. The questionnaire designed for this study explored students’ opinions about using Wikis to develop their writing skills with students from Britain, and included items concerning their motivation, experience, perceptions and improvement they made from this Wikis project. It is worth noting that the questionnaire as a measure of experience is in some ways more reliable than interviews due to its anonymous character, and that it “encourages greater honesty” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000: 129). For this reason, the use of the questionnaire in this study was an important part of the methodologies employed.

In the questionnaire, a coding system was used to categorize responses according to question type: “Strongly agree” was coded “1”; “Agree” was coded “2”; “Neutral” was “3”; “Disagree” was “4” and “Strongly disagree” was coded “5”. The questionnaire used in this study was written for students of the target university in China, and it was designed to explore their experiences, perceptions and opinions of how they worked on Wikis. Whether they liked using Wikis, and in which ways they preferred to use the new technology in their language learning, were the major topics of inquiry. Examples of questions have been given below in Table 1 to demonstrate the format of the questionnaire.

Table 1. An example of the questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of questions</th>
<th>Strongly agree (1)</th>
<th>Agree (2)</th>
<th>Neutral (3)</th>
<th>Disagree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly disagree (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The topics on China-UK Wikispaces are interesting.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I have enjoyed discussions with UK students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. China-UK Wikispaces is useful for my English learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, questionnaires were of precursory importance in the current study; despite their significance as anonymous measures of experience, researchers were unable to pursue further explanations for the responses which students offered. In order to compensate for the limitations of the questionnaire method of inquiry, the collection of qualitative, interview-based data was warranted and essential in revealing further insights into what students thought about using Wikis. As Denscombe (1998) has noted, interviews are particularly suitable when researchers wish to gain information about participants’ motivations, experiences and opinions, because interviews allow researchers to call forth valuable information and ideas from respondents in a reflexive manner, producing detailed data and hence providing in-depth insights into the focus of inquiry. Interviews
are flexible, and researchers can explain their questions and ask for clarification about responses which are initially unclear (Wellington, 2000). Interview data is highly valid for this reason, because “direct contact at the point of the interview means that data can be checked for accuracy and relevance as it is collected” (Denscombe, 1998: 136). During the interviews conducted for the current study, when responses were unclear the researchers asked participants to further explain and develop their assertions in order to elicit further evidence or examples. The researchers also clarified questions for the respondents when the inquiries were unclear. In these ways, the interview data was ensured of validity.

The interview schedule included a number of items addressing the first research question in this study, exploring students’ actual use of the Wikis. The following is a sample of questions with this focus, from the schedule: How often have you accessed this website? What type of topics would you like to discuss? How do you work on Wikispaces to communicate with students from the UK? Have you looked at any modification of your writing on this platform? Is the modification function helpful? The schedule then turned to the second focus of inquiry, exploring the students’ perceptions of working in this Wiki project. Questions such as the following were asked: What’s your motivation to access and participate in this China-UK Language Exchange Program? Do you think this Wiki program can provide you with real-world interactions with an authentic audience? How do you think participating in the project on Wikispaces can improve your language learning? Can it develop your communicative skills?

Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour; all were recorded by a digital recorder, then transcribed into written form by the computer. The student interviewees were coded as S1, S2, S3 and so forth. Meanwhile, the researchers also looked at students’ textual input on the Wiki itself, analyzing the frequency and content of their posts. It was expected that the combination of the three research techniques would create a system of internal checks resulting in a multifarious log of valid and reliable data.

4. Findings

4.1 Students contributions to China-UK Wikispaces with the two topics

In analysis of texts posted on Wikispaces by students from the two universities, findings illustrate that the students were interested in discussing the two topics which their teachers had designed. The statistical data on the Wiki shows (see Figure 1) that during the period in which the discussions were being conducted (March to April 2010), the number of students’ hits or views were 1769 in total. The number of edits in April constituted 60 of these views. However, these figures declined substantially throughout the remainder of term time of the year, when there were no specific topics for students to work on. Despite some other factors that could contribute to this difference, the result indicates that the topics were likely to inspire students to communicate with each other frequently during the two months. The UK students were motivated to ask questions regarding the two topics because they needed to incorporate answers from students in China in the production of an assessed presentation. The Chinese students were willing to answer the
questions in accordance with their perceived relevance to personal experience.

Figure 1. Statistical view data on China-UK Wikispaces in 2010

One question from the UK could receive several responses from China. Further questions and discussions often emerged from these initial exchanges. For example, in the comparison of leisure time for university students in China and the UK, the participants were keen to learn about the different ways their counterparts spent their free time. They discussed at length about travel, films and TV programs, sports, going to bars, and even casinos in the UK. Figure 2 illustrates the manner in which two students discussed this topic by posting texts consistently on the Wiki. This indicates that they were interested in exploring the diversity of students’ lives in the two countries and exchanging their insights; this theme motivated their communication.

Figure 2. A comparison of leisure time between students in Chinese and British universities on China-UK Wikispaces

On the topic of the one-child policy in China, students from the UK showed particular interest in discovering individual people’s opinions on this issue and how this policy affects people’s lives in China. Actually, apart from the questions they asked, they also expressed their own understandings of this policy in their discussions with the Chinese students. This topic revealed two types of understandings regarding this policy; namely, UK students are influenced by Western media, whereas Chinese students describe their
own lives in support of their government. The Chinese students not only used their own experience but also provided web links for the UK students to learn about some of the positive effects they felt the one-child policy had on their own lives.

Figure 3. Discussion about the one-child policy in China between participant universities on China-UK Wikispaces

Data in Figure 3 is representative of the discussion between student correspondents regarding this topic. The UK students expressed their concerns about this policy and intended to question this policy. Meanwhile, the Chinese students endeavored to convince them that China is compelled to maintain this policy due to its large population. Thus, for a topic which is more frequently discussed as an abstract and foreign governmental control, the UK students were able to hear how it was perceived by ordinary students living under the policy.

The excerpts above illustrate the manner in which students working on Wikis engaged in discussion of designated topics, and answer the first research question. Data collected from the Wiki page confirmed that the students communicated with each other in their target foreign languages. The students from both sides seemed to express interest and ownership in their discussions, evidenced by the enthusiasm of their contributions to the Wiki page. This suggests the vital importance of designing attractive topics which will encourage students to contribute to discussions on Wikis.

4.2 The ways of students used Wikis for collaboration

4.2.1 Experience of using Web 2.0 tools

In the interviews, 86% of the students said they had previously used Web 2.0 tools in their daily lives. As S8 said: “I usually use Weibo (MicroBlog); very good experience. I just write, and upload some photographs. It’s very convenient to share with your friend.” All the 14 interviewees stated that they felt it convenient to input and edit on Wikispaces. One student (S1) commented: “I do have the experience of using the Wiki. It’s open to anyone online. It’s very convenient for us to…um…to read, to edit and to add our own
opinions on it.” It was not a problem for any of these students to work and edit on Wikis, as they already had rich experiences of posting and editing on similar Web 2.0 tools in the past. This finding echoes Elliott’s (2009) remark, cited earlier, that young learners are now “digital residents”.

4.2.2 English-Chinese communication

In the communication on Wikis, the Chinese students used English while the UK students used Chinese. Regarding this English-Chinese communication as one of the driving purposes of the discussions, as shown in Figures 2 and 3, the students commented that this inverse use of languages was of great use, and moreover, quite interesting. They also considered this communication as a “real” one because they felt this gave them—the opportunity to have a real-world interaction with an authentic audience—and they felt this kind of exchange was useful in the development of their communicative skills. On this point, S1 confirmed: “Yeah, yeah, yes. Because we are communicating with real British people.” Not only did the participants develop communicative proficiencies through their discussions on Wikispaces, they felt they had also developed their English writing skills—by typing their responses in English. Despite the fact that only the UK students were required to complete the task as part of their course, students from both countries were motivated to participate in the collaborative discussion and found the exchange educationally constructive.

4.2.3 Discussion on designed activities

The topics discussed between participants were designated by their teachers. In a pilot preceding this current study, the students did not actively engage in communication, as there were no organized activities to guide their exchanges. Therefore, the teachers at the University of Bristol were asked to select two topics which the British students had covered in their Chinese courses. These curriculum-based topics concerned the different uses of leisure time between students within the two countries, and the effect of the one-child policy in China. The UK students were to ask questions about the two topics in Chinese, and gave assessed presentations using responses from the Chinese students at the end of this project. The Chinese students were compelled to use English to reply to the initial questions, addressing also any further inquiries raised by students from the UK.

In the interviews, the students were asked to comment on the activities designed by the tutors. They said that they liked to work on organized activities in which they had motivation to participate. They enjoyed discussion on topics related to their academic study and life. S2 said: “Um…yes, because many…many answers are based on my experience of life.” They commented that this activity effectively encouraged them to make contributions. S11 said: “It’s effective. As long as I find it interesting, as long as there is someone replying to my contribution, I’d like to participate and contribute.” They also said that they would be less willing to involve themselves in discussion in the absence of organized topics. For instance, S9 noted: “I prefer the topics or discussions organized by somebody so that we can go further in these topics. Because if we only put information in one topic, but other do not reply. They may not feel interest. I cannot post myself.” S14
provided positive views of these topics:

These topics are so close…to our life, to the Chinese situation; we can give our real ideas. This is the first time I think western students ask Chinese students about our China. I feel very happy about this. Because I can share my experience, give my ideas, not always we ask them what about their life.

S9 stated that the topic of the one-child policy had influenced her decision to join the discussion:

I’m interested in these topics, [for instance,] one-child policy. I read the discussion; I found it interesting; they have quite different opinions. I want to join this discussion and I have given my opinion, and I got reply.

S10 preferred the other topic:

I’m interested in leisure time. It’s a big different topic. In one child policy, most students in the UK don’t understand this policy. We try to explain to them. In this topic, we can share different opinion and ideas.

The students provided positive comments on the organization of the exchanges as well as the designated topics, because the tasks were related to their lives; they were interested in sharing their personal experiences with students in Bristol, while exploring their counterparts’ use of leisure time in the UK. These interview findings are instructive; language teachers will meet with more positive results if they provide pedagogical designs when using Wikis to conduct a language exchange program. This study supports Sun’s (2009) claim that designed tasks improve students’ concentration on CALL activities in Web 2.0 environments.

4.2.4 Modification function
The students appreciated corrections of grammar and vocabulary amended to their Wiki posts, acknowledging the value of such modifications in refining their writing skills. S1 stated: “Yeah, because they are English speaker; they have very good English. If they help me modify my language errors then it will really help me.” Questionnaire data revealed this to be a common perception held by a majority of participants; interview data corroborated the finding. However, modification of other users’ contributions did not occur often, even though the students recognized the modification function as useful. It seems the use of this function was passed over because students focused on topics, ideas and clear communication, rather than any mistakes in language. Several students were suspicious about this function and its value. S8 raised this point: “Correction is necessary, but the motivation for us to use and engagement is far more important.” Moreover, as students were trying to forge new online partnerships, they may have sensed that correcting another person’s writing might be perceived as impolite and thus potentially
shut down free communication.

Personally, I’d like to have somebody modify my writing, but I’m not sure if everybody’s OK to have their writing modified by other people. It sounds impolite to change other’s writing. I think as long as I can understand the meaning, I don’t want to modify the language. (S11)

This respondent articulated a concern that although some students made positive comments regarding the correction of mistakes on Wikis, other students might not like to correct others’ written work. The modification function was, overall, underemployed in this exchange, as a result of students’ due emphasis on meaningful communication and interpersonal propriety.

The findings in this section suggest that the students had had experience of working on Web 2.0 tools in the past, and that this ensured that they were able to efficiently post and edit texts on Wikis. The participants from both universities were able to spontaneously express their views in their target languages; the inverse application of English and Chinese was readily adopted in discussions on Wiki and was positively evaluated by the interviewees as an effective practice of their foreign languages. This indicates that using target languages in a language exchange program is an efficient way of encouraging communication between the two groups of students. The participants also made positive comments on the organized activities and designated topics on this Wiki page. With respect to the modification function Wikis provide, although the participants acknowledged its significance, not all expressed enthusiasm to make use of it; some students expressed concerns that the use of this function might interrupt their free communication and that it could be perceived as impolite. The finding implies that the modification function of Wikis might not be appropriate for all learners. These results have primarily answered the second research question of this study, regarding the ways in which students use Wikis to develop their English skills.

4.3 Students’ motivation in the collaboration on Wikis

4.3.1 Findings from the questionnaire

Table 2 presents responses to selected items from the questionnaire. First, the response from students in China showed that 71% of them agreed or strongly agreed that the topics on the Wikispaces were interesting, and that they enjoyed discussions with students from the partner university. The majority of the students were intrinsically motivated to discuss the designated topics with their British counterparts; as Dörnyei (2001a) has noted, when learners enjoy a task they are motivated and generally willing to spend a great deal of time engaged in that task.

Second, 64% of the participants reported that this Wikispace language program was useful for their English learning. Notably, 78% of them valued this type of interactive online communication with international students, and 86% agreed that the English-Chinese Language Exchange Program offered a platform to apply their language skills. These findings suggest that a significant proportion of these students valued the China-UK
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Wikispaces. One potential explanation for this may be that they have few opportunities to talk to international students and develop their communicative skills in China (Wen, 2008); online communication offers an alternative environment in which to meet this need in their English language learning.

Table 2. Questionnaire data from students of the Chinese university on China-UK Wikispaces (n=14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of questions</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The topics on China-UK Wikispaces are interesting.</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have enjoyed discussions with UK students.</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China-UK Wikispaces is useful for my English learning.</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China-UK Wikispaces provide a platform to apply my language skills.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive online communication with foreign students is a positive way to learn language.</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The modification function is useful and people can see errors modified by others on Wikis.</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s convenient to contribute to China-UK Wikispaces.</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that 79% of the students thought that the modification function (editing other users’ posts) was useful. Students found it convenient to post and to edit messages on Wikis, and no student disagreed or strongly disagreed with the benefit of using this Web 2.0 tool in furthering their language learning (see Table 2). The current generation of youth, being already familiar with the use of Web 2.0 tools, easily identifies the positive role of new technology in their second language acquisition.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) have suggested that the value of a task is an important aspect of motivation. Questionnaire data in this study indicate that the participants identified collaborative tasks on Wikis as having practical value for their language learning. They also enjoyed Wikispaces communication with students in the UK, thus bolstering their intrinsic motivation to participate in those collaborative tasks. Their motivations for participating in the China-UK Wiki project may, in return, enhance intercultural communication and connection (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

4.3.2 Findings from interviews

Interview data from the 14 student-participants corresponds with findings from the questionnaire survey and posts on the Wikis. During the interviews, the participants expressed their willingness to discuss given topics with students from Britain on the China-UK Wiki pages. S1 noted: “The topics are interesting for me. I’d like to give my opinions or to discuss something with somebody else…yeah…it’s my motivation.” They also said that online communication provided them a good environment in which to develop their written and communicative skills with others. While it is rare to use English
with peers in China, the China-UK Wikispaces created opportunities to communicate with native English speakers. S12 said: “On Wikis, we can communicate with international students. They can know our mistakes in writing, so that I can improve my English.” S2 commented that he liked online communication with international students for its efficacy in building an English environment; he said: “You know, in China I don’t have any chance to speak English with our peers. So I think the Internet is a good choice.” Other respondents also made mention of this benefit of the program:

You know in daily life, we cannot communicate with international students and teachers. But it’s very convenient. We search on the Internet, and we use the computer to communicate with them. (S14)

I think in the university, it’s difficult to communicate in English. We feel strange if we talk about something in English after class. Communication online in English is helpful for us. (S6)

Interview findings indicate that the Chinese participants were motivated to work with students from the UK on Wikispaces because it provided them with a good environment to communicate with foreigners and develop their English skills, corroborating the results of the questionnaire. One reason for this enthusiasm might be that Chinese students often do not have many chances to use their English after class, whereas the Wiki platform provided them with opportunities to discuss interesting topics in English with native English speakers. Answering authentic questions from their British peers created an alternative English environment in which the Chinese participants were able to apply and further develop their written and communicative skills. This finding can be linked to Wen’s (2008) concern regarding the lack of an English environment in China.

Several students noted that they accessed the Wikispaces every day to check responses from their partners in the UK, indicating high levels of motivation to communicate with their counterparts. S11 said, “I used to access it daily. I like it very much.” Their interest in peer response motivated them to spend a significant amount of time working hard on language learning activities on Wikis—leading, ostensibly, to efficient learning. Such tasks may help them achieve their principal objectives of communicating with others in a target language, and may also serve the function of helping them cope with challenges in the academic environment as well as day to day real life situations. As Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Chapelle (2003) hold, such motivation is an essential precursor for students to make an effort at communication; motivation directly affects learners’ levels of achievement in the target language.

The participants in this study were motivated to communicate with students in the UK based on personal enjoyment and practical need, encompassing both integrative and instrumental motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). When learners believe a task is crucial for them, or when the task meets their values and needs in learning, their motivation is intensified. This can ultimately affect their progress, as their efforts are intensified proportionally (Dörnyei, 2001a; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Vallerland, 1997).

Moreover, student curiosity was aroused, on the China-UK Wikipages, by the cross-
cultural differences on the teacher-designated topics. The Chinese participants stated that they enjoyed learning about British students’ lives and studies. One student said: “I…want to learn more about…British students, what they do during their daily life, how they think of China, that kind of thing.” S6 responded similarly: “I think it’s interesting and is related our daily life and academic study. If you go to English or another country, you can begin now to communicate with them, and know what their daily life and study is like.” Another student mentioned a particular motivation to learn more about British culture: “I think it’s a good way to contact British undergraduates because in…about two months I’ll go to UK. I think it’s a good chance for me.” Not only interest but also practical need further motivated him to communicate with students in the UK.

The Chinese students also appreciated that online communication with UK students was reciprocally beneficial; they were able to provide their British peers with similar opportunities to improve their Chinese and enhance their cultural awareness of China. S3 stated: “I think the first motivation is I can use my English and improve it. Also (it) can help the British to improve their Chinese, and help them to know what they want to know about China.”

These results reveal that discussions on the teacher-selected topics helped the students learn more about cultural differences between the two countries, and therefore increased cultural awareness for both groups of students. Such communication with students from the UK enhanced the Chinese participants’ comprehension of cultural differences between China and the UK, which is not only conducive but in some ways essential to English language learning. The participants learned what students in the UK thought about China and also learned about their use of leisure time, directly from British students themselves. Such personal reflections of English culture may not be obtained in or even after class in China.

In addition, students perceived that they had improved their English during the communication with UK students on Wikispaces. 86% of the students said that they had improved their communication and writing skills. They reported that they practiced English in the language exchange program which contributed to their thinking and communication skills. When they were asked whether they improved their communication skills, S4 said: “Yeah, there’s no doubt about that.” S11 supported his colleague:

First of all, it (Wiki) makes me feel more confident to communicate with foreign students because I really communicated with real foreign students. It provided me with an opportunity to communicate with native speakers. It all went well. It’s not difficult.

Their assertions indicate that they were confident to have improved their communication skills in the program. In terms of progress in writing skills, students said that when they replied to the questions from UK students, they had to prepare logical answers with good English. During this practice, they improved their written English. For example, S12 said:

I think practice makes it perfect. This platform offers us chance to practice English, so we can improve our writing. If we want to give our opinion, we will think lots of words, e.g., search form the Internet to find useful words.
These results suggest that the Wiki provided the students with good opportunities to improve their communication and writing skills because the students perceived that they are more confident in communicating with native speakers through the communication and they learned how to organize their writing and learned more new vocabulary which helped to develop writing skills. The findings indicate that making improvements is another factor in motivating students to work on Wikis because they felt satisfaction and achievement in developing their in communication and writing skills, they thus liked working on the Wiki program. As Pintrich and Schunk (1996) and Vallerland (1997) support, satisfaction and achievement can affect learner motivation.

In summary, the results indicate that these collaborative tasks on Wikis were perceived as effective and students valued discussions on Wikis. They were willing to make contributions to organized collaborative activities. Thus the designated topics, integrated as assessment into Chinese courses in the British university and closely tied to the daily lives and experiences of Chinese counterparts, were motivational. Further, according to participants' perceptions, students made progress in their written English and communication skills. Therefore, there is strong evidence to suggest a crucial need for teachers to formulate appropriate designs which integrate topics and discussions into their English or Chinese language courses in the use of Web 2.0 environments. The findings responded to the third research question, exploring students perspectives within the context of the program as well as the fourth research question regarding making progress. However, it should be noted that the improvement in written English is only based on students' insights, rather than from a test result to prove that the students made any progress in their English.

5. Conclusions

The preceding discussion indicates that Wikis can promote collaborative learning between students in the two countries involved in this study, and that such exchanges are helpful in the development of English writing proficiency and communication skills for Chinese students. The findings also suggest that China-UK Wikispaces serve as a cultural bridge between students in the two countries, expanding and reinforcing learners’ cultural awareness. By focusing on topics which capitalize on the opportunity to share cultural information and explore cultural differences, students were particularly motivated to contribute to collaborative discussions. Moreover, they found the topics to be interesting and related to their lives. Therefore, students perceived value in working on collaborative tasks with students in the UK. As Dörnyei (2001b) supported, when students think a task is enjoyable and useful, they will have motivation to work on the task. Accordingly, in order to make the collaborative learning and communications between two groups of second language learners more efficient on Wikis, teachers should creatively and proactively organize students’ discussions. Tasks should be designed with a specific purpose, must be related to learners’ real lives and their academic study, and may be integrated into their language courses as a type of assessment.
While these findings are of significant worth, several limitations to this study must be acknowledged. This was a small scale study which may not reflect the complete range of possibilities or challenges which an English-Chinese language exchange program on Wikispaces could offer or pose. Second, although findings suggest a great deal of interest from Chinese learners, the students from China who took part in the study were all from a university which emphasizes the importance of English and cultivates international perspectives as part of its Educational Model. The university’s ambition to integrate the strengths of both Chinese and Western educational systems may have provided a sample of students more willing to share ideas and freely engage in the discussion of sensitive topics. Additionally, this study focused intentionally on the experiences and perspectives of Chinese participants in the program; further research should be conducted regarding the selection of topics and the design of activities in developing Chinese language skills for students in the UK. Pre- and post-tests may be carried out in the next stage of this project in order to assess the efficacy of using Wikis in the context of this language exchange program.

References


September 2007, University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, UK.
FLTRP Launches the First Synchronized Multilingual Cloud Translation Platform of China’s Publishing Industry

On September 1, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) held press conference to launch Transtor—the first synchronized multilingual cloud translation platform of China’s publishing industry at the 18th Beijing International Book Fair (BIBF).

The conference is attended by Guo Xiaoyong, deputy executive director of China International Publishing Group and the first executive vice president of the Translators Association of China, Cui Qiliang, secretary general of the Localization Service Committee of the Translators Association of China, Zhang Zheng, professor and Ph. D. supervisor of School of Foreign Languages and Literatures of Beijing Normal University, and Cai Jianfeng, president of FLTRP.

Transtor is built over two years by experts from fields of translation, IT and NLP (Natural Language Processing). On this online platform, university teachers can mark their students’ translated texts, and translators can communicate with each other via the instant communication tool, and administrators can evaluate the translated texts through the sampling inspection tool and generate translation quality reports. “Transtor is beneficial to formalize the translation publishing process, increase the ability of synchronized translation by teams in different places, and make full use of translation resources in the country and around the world. FLTRP’s exploration in the field of translation technology is of great significance”, said Guo Xiaoyong.

“In 2009, FLTRP initiated ‘Bilingual Project’, a massive translation publishing project, to generate more bilingual resources of good quality. To achieve a win-win situation in the publishing industry and in the field of translation teaching and research is a key point of the Bilingual Strategy of FLTRP. Its more profound meaning lies in improving the speed and quality of cross-cultural communication by enhancing the efficiency of translation”, said Cai Jianfeng.