

## Peer-correction through wikis: a case study with Brazilian learners of English.

Claudio de Paiva Franco

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society is viewed as 'liquid modernity' (cf. Bauman, 2001), which underlines the instability of relationships and moral values in our times. The metaphor of 'liquidity' can be applied to our educational field as well, more specifically in writing. Students should understand writing as a process of constant fluidity. In this sense, how is it possible to awaken learners to this feeling of increasing change? The answer to this intriguing question lies in a useful tool employed by Information and Communication Technology (ICT) experts call a wiki.

It goes without saying that students profit a great deal from peer-correction and wikis enable them to do so in an exciting and stimulating environment. At first, a wiki seems similar to a blog, but it actually allows users to edit the organisation of contributions in addition to the content itself. Having students freely edit any page in a website promotes cooperative learning, which allows a community of learners to be able to teach each other something in a learner-centred fashion.

### WHY IS COOPERATIVE LEARNING IMPORTANT?

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000:164), cooperative or collaborative learning essentially involves students learning from each other in groups. But it is not the group configuration that makes cooperative learning distinctive; it is the way

that students and teachers work together that is important.

Students benefit from the givens of the sociocultural approach as it is through the promotion of interaction with peers and teachers that new meaning is conveyed. To Vygotsky (1978: 57), the aforementioned interaction allowed students to progress.

As Johnson (1994: 4) suggests:

Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes beneficial to themselves and all other group members. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups through which students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. It may be contrasted with competitive learning in which students work against each other to achieve an academic goal such as a grade of "A".

### PRODUCT WRITING AND PROCESS WRITING

Since the idea of collaborative learning empowers our teaching context, we are interested in the creative process of the writing, which is achieved in groups. With a view to understanding the purpose of using wikis to foster cooperation in writing, a distinction should be made between product writing and process writing. Thornbury (2006: 249) describes both means of writing:

....This approach is called a *product approach* to the teaching of writing, since the focus is exclusively on producing a text (the product) that reproduces the model. By contrast, a *process approach* argues that

writers do not in fact start with a clear idea of the finished product. Rather, the text emerges out of a creative process. This process includes: *planning* (*generating ideas, goal setting and organising*), *drafting* and *re-drafting*; *reviewing*, including *editing* and *proofreading*, and, finally, “*publishing*”.

Advocates of a process approach argue for a more organic sequence of classroom activities, beginning with the brainstorming of ideas, writing preliminary drafts, comparing drafts, re-drafting, and *conferencing*, that is, talking through their draft with the teacher, in order to fine-tune their ideas.

### GOING BEYOND CORRECTION

In this section I will use a text written by a Brazilian student, whose classmates cooperatively contributed to its adjustments. The text will serve as a springboard for the crux of the discussion.

The first text was written by a young teenager (student A) at low-intermediate level. The task was: *Write about the advantages and disadvantages of being famous*. Students were told they had to write about 120 words.

#### Original text written by student A

There are more advantages and some disadvantages of being famous. In my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: have a lot of money, travelling a lot, spend time with others famous people,

sometime they can go to events that others people can't go because they don't have money to pay tickets.

A good exemple of rich person is Prince William.

This is some advantages, but there are disadvantages too.

For exemple: The famous people don't have freedom, they have many problems and a formol life as weel as Madonna, her life is incontrolled.

I don't like to be a famous people and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as weel.

In a traditional approach to writing, the teacher would “hunt” for mistakes and use a red pen to mark them. Instead, students are invited to read each other’s text, make comments and corrections. At this stage, the teacher is just a mediator and does not interfere in the correction. The teacher also encourages learners to take part by indicating where they can find certain mistakes or pinpoints the nature of the error, such as spelling, punctuation or word order. In this way, students not only develop their reading skills but also improve their writing skills by adopting important correction strategies.

The following is an “improved” version of the learner’s text, in which most spelling mistakes have been corrected by the learner’s peer (student B). The changes are presented in bold.

#### “Improved” version - corrected by student B

There are more advantages and some disadvantages of being famous. In my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: have a lot of money, travelling a

lot, spend time with others famous people, sometimes they can go to events that others people can't go because they don't have money to pay tickets.

A good example of rich person is Prince William.

This is some advantages, but there are disadvantages too.

For example: The famous people don't have freedom, they have many problems and a formal life as well as Madonna, her life is incontrolled.

I don't like to be a famous **person** and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as well.

A very positive attribute of working with digital text is that you can make use of various features (colours, highlights, bold, italics, etc.) to facilitate the perception of what has changed. Besides, this clear evidence of correction makes students aware that they have a lot to profit from each other, not merely from the teacher. In other words, it is the interaction among peers through cooperation that enhances learning. This belief breaks completely with the traditional pattern of learning, which regarded the teacher as the solely responsible for transmitting knowledge and conveying meaning. Alternatively, students are no longer seen as passive recipients, but are active participants in the co-construction of knowledge.

In the second improved version that follows, major shifts concerning cohesion and lexical problems can be noticed. This time, a third student (student C) was engaged in the writing process.

### ***“Improved” version - corrected by student C***

There are more advantages **than** some disadvantages of being famous. **In** my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: **they** have a lot of money, travelling a lot, spend time with others famous people, **and** sometimes they can go to events that others people can't go because they don't have money to **buy** tickets.

A good example of **a** rich person is Prince William.

This **are** some advantages, but there are disadvantages too.

For example: The famous people don't have freedom, they have many problems and a formal life as well, like Madonna, Her life is **uncontrollable**.

**I wouldn't** like to be a famous person and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as well.

The text is liquid, i.e. alive, thus allowing improvements. This fluidity is only made possible given the active participation of students. In opposition to product writing, everyone is involved in this process writing even if they simply read the pieces of writing and their changes over time. Each group member is encouraged to participate and leadership is “distributed”.

Reading will help them avoid certain mistakes, become more aware of their weaknesses, value proofreading and, eventually, expand their lexis. As a consequence, when there is an incentive for peer-correction through *wikis*, a responsibility and accountability for one another's learning is shared.

The following “improved” text is the last one and presents minor changes made by a fourth student (student D).

### “Improved” version - corrected by student D

There are more advantages than some disadvantages of being famous. In my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: they have a lot of money, travelling a lot, spend time with others famous people, and sometimes they can go to events that others people can't go because they don't have money to buy **the** tickets.

A good example of a rich person is Prince William.

**These** are some advantages, but there are disadvantages too.

For example: ~~The~~ famous people don't have freedom, they have many problems and a formal life as well, like Madonna. Her life is uncontrollable.

I wouldn't like to be a famous person and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as well.

At last, student A is invited to rewrite her text with a critical eye for paragraphing. The teacher also allows her to customise the text.

### Final text rewritten and customised by student A

There are more advantages than disadvantages of being famous. In my opinion, the advantages of being famous are: they have a lot of money, travel a lot, spend time with other famous people and sometimes they can go to events that other people can't because they don't have money to buy the

tickets. A good example of a rich person is Prince William.

These are some advantages, but there are disadvantages too. For example: famous people don't have freedom, they have many problems and a formal life as well, like Madonna. Her life is uncontrollable.

I wouldn't like to be a famous person and I don't like this kind of life because they have a lot of problems and don't have freedom as well.

In this qualitative and quantitative analysis, learners become less dependent on the teacher and share responsibility with their peers. Consequently, they gain higher degrees of autonomy in the sense that they have to make choices and try out new hypothesis.

### IMPLICATIONS IN USING WIKIS

At the end of the semester, students were well acquainted with employing useful writing techniques on wikis. Therefore, it was high time to reflect upon its use. Each student (out of eighteen) received a questionnaire which helped me draw some fundamental conclusions from the application of peer-correction through wikis. The questionnaire was composed of eight multiple-choice questions.

The first issue raised is related to students' views on writing. Overall, their attitude towards writing is positive (87,5% - taking into account the first two statements).

**Table 1. Students' views on writing**

| Statements                       | Frequencies | Percentages |
|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| I find writing exciting          | 8           | 43.75       |
| I am quite interested in writing | 8           | 43.75       |
| I find writing boring            | 2           | 12.5        |

The following question concerns their preference for the writing mode. Their responses show that most students (61,11%) would rather write using a wiki than paper.

**Table 2. Students' preference regarding the writing mode**

| Statements                | Frequencies | Percentages |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| I prefer writing on paper | 7           | 38.89       |
| I prefer using a wiki     | 11          | 61.11       |

After such a short period of time, students had already favoured the use of wikis. However, it is necessary know the reason of their choice. There are a great many possibilities for working with wikis, but most learners believe peer-correction is a distinguishing aspect of wikis.

**Table 3. Students' thoughts on what is the**

| Statements  | Frequencies | Percentages |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| My classmates can read my compositions, not only the teacher                            | 2           | 11.11       |
| My classmates can spot and correct my errors  | 8           | 44.44       |
| I can comment on my classmates compositions   | 3           | 16.67       |
| I can personalise my composition by choosing the font, colours and even insert pictures | 2           | 11.11       |
| When I don't have any ideas, my classmates writing can inspire me                       | 3           | 16.67       |

At first, people may assume it is time-consuming working with wikis, whereas a significant number of students don't agree with that.

**Table 4. Students' response to working with wikis being time-consuming**

| Statements                                 | Frequencies | Percentages |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| It does take a long time                   | 1           | 5.55        |
| It does not take much time                 | 12          | 66.67       |
| It takes the same time as writing on paper | 5           | 27.78       |

The following table shows how attached some students (38,89%) still are to traditional writing.

**Table 5. Students' preferred mode of posting on a wiki**

| Statements  | Frequencies | Percentages |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| I would rather write straight on the wiki           | 6           | 33.33       |
| I use a word processor and paste text onto the wiki | 5           | 27.78       |
| I write on paper and then type my text on the wiki  | 7           | 38.89       |

The majority of learners (88,89%) reacted optimistically to peer-correction, mainly due to recognising the fact that wikis enable them to raise their awareness of the writing process.

**Table 6. Students' reaction to peer-correction on a wiki**

| Statements  | Frequencies | Percentages |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| I like it because my classmates can spot my mistakes and this helps me understand why I made them | 11          | 61.11       |
| I like it because I can compare the difference between before and after the corrections           | 5           | 27.78       |
| I don't like it. I prefer the teacher to correct everything using a red pen                       | 2           | 11.11       |

An enquiry was also made as to why some students still rely on paper to produce pieces of text. Due to the fact that some students first write on paper and then transfer their text to the wiki, they find traditional writing faster (57,14%).

**Table 7. Students' who prefer traditional writing give the reason for their choice.**

**Statement: I am more comfortable with traditional writing because:**

| Statements                               | Frequencies | Percentages |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| it is faster                             | 4           | 57.14       |
| it is more organised                     | 2           | 28.57       |
| I do not have a good Internet connection | 1           | 14.29       |

Interestingly, most students are not influenced to use the Internet just because they are working with digital text. Conversely, only 22,22% of learners do so when they work with wikis.

**Table 8. How much use of Internet students make in the writing process**

| Statements   | Frequencies | Percentages |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| They always use the Internet when writing on paper or using a wiki | 7           | 38.89       |
| They only use the Internet when they work with wikis               | 4           | 22.22       |
| They never use the Internet  | 7           | 38.89       |

**CONCLUSION**

Wikis represent a new generation of web-based tools for collaborative learning which should be considered if one intends to focus on process writing. Learners benefit, as argued, from the interaction among peers. What is more, wikis offer a meaningful context for students to move towards autonomous learning.

We have come to notice a rapid increase in web-based tools used with an educational purpose, mainly *blogs*, *wikis* and *podcasts*. However, it is part of our role as teachers to make the right use of these potential applications and consider what benefits they will bring to our students.

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**Claudio de Paiva Franco** currently teaches English at an English Language School called *Cultura Inglesa in Duque de Caxias, Brazil*. He is doing an MA in Applied Linguistics at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He is interested in Educational Technology and the Multiple Intelligences theory. He can be contacted at: [cpaivafranco@yahoo.com.br](mailto:cpaivafranco@yahoo.com.br)

### A Report on the IATEFL Learning Technologies' SIG event in Japan

Wireless Ready: Interactivity, Collaboration and Feedback in Language Learning Technologies, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2008, Nagoya University of Commerce & Business

Michael Thomas

*The second one-day international symposium on wireless learning environments sponsored by the IATEFL Learning Technologies' SIG took place in Nagoya on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2008. The venue was once again the excellent facilities of Nagoya University of Commerce & Business in its downtown business school campus near to the hotel district and city's central transport connections. The facilities provided a large 120-seater hall for the three international keynote speakers and two further modern lecture rooms, complete with two display screens and state-of-the-art AV equipment. Also in attendance were Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Pearson Longman and the Japanese vendor for Camtasia screen recording software.*

Due to a university MBA orientation the event began later than on the first occasion, starting in the afternoon and finishing in the early evening. In addition to three keynote speakers from outside Japan (Michael Coghlan, Russell Stannard and John Collick), five panels offering a further 12 presentations were provided. The event once again attracted a sizeable audience, drawn from all over Japan, as well as international participants from China, Australia, the UK, Europe and Korea.

Building on last year's event which offered one of