Using Wikis in the ESL Classroom

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**Abstract**
Although teachers may groan when they hear students use the word “Wikipedia”, wikis can actually be an effective tool in the ESL classroom. Wikis can be used for group collaboration, improving writing and editing skills, and providing ownership for a student over a product that can be used in future classes. This article discusses the pedagogical benefits of using wikis in the ESL classroom, provides brief instructions for creating a class wiki, and gives suggestions for how a wiki can be used in the classroom.

**Introduction**
As the global community becomes ever more technologically savvy, ESL students at the university level arrive with increasing technological knowledge. To stay ahead of the game, ESL instructors must be aware of emerging technology and how to use it to an effective purpose in the classroom. Students in the modern age expect instructors to use technology in the classroom. In the digital age, to avoid using technology in the classroom is to, at best, be considered a dinosaur, and at worst, to be ineffective at communicating with “digital native” (Prensky, 2011) students. This paper seeks to clear away the mystique surrounding the classroom Wiki: to provide both a rationale for using Wikis in the ESL classroom and to give instructions, tips, and practical suggestions for ways to use Wikis in the ESL classroom.

**Definition**
A “wiki” is Web 2.0 software that allows collaboration among those chosen by the creator of the wiki. In layman’s terms, it is a website that anyone can contribute to, depending on the access granted by the site administrator. This means that a wiki can be edited by multiple people, sometimes at the same time, depending on the host site. In the case of Wikipedia, access is granted to all internet users, making it at once an excellent and an unreliable resource. This paper will provide examples based on two of the most common free wiki hosting sites available at the time of this writing: Google Sites (google.com/sites) and Wikispaces (wikispaces.com). Because they do not require knowledge of HTML or other programming codes, Wikis are useful resources for teachers and students.

**Rationale**
The main rationale for using Wikis in the classroom stems from the TESOL Technology Standards themselves (Healey, Hanson-Smith, Hubbard, Ioannou-Georgiou, Kessler, & Ware, 2011).

“Goal 1: Language learners demonstrate foundational knowledge and skills in technology for a multilingual world.” (Healey et al., 2011, p. 19)
The first goal suggests that students must have a basic knowledge and ability to work with technology. Wikis are a great way to teach this because they incorporate typing skills with the creation of hypermedia. Students must learn how to use technology in order to participate in the classroom Wiki.

“Goal 2: Language learners use technology in socially and culturally appropriate, legal, and ethical ways.”[MITESOL C4] (Healey et al., 2011, p. 36)

Goal 2 requires that students must learn to use technology in ways that are appropriate and morally sound. These issues often come up when using Wikis, due to students being able to copy and paste from the Internet. This also allows for conversations and lessons about plagiarism.

“Goal 3: Language learners effectively use and critically evaluate technology based tools as aids in the development of their language learning competence as part of formal instruction and for further learning.”[MITESOL C5] (Healey et al., 2011, p. 46)

“Standard 3: Language learners appropriately use and evaluate available technology-based tools for communication and collaboration.” (Healey et al., 2011, p. 55)

This last goal and standard lay out the critical thinking requirements for students when it comes to technology. Wikis provide a hands-on, real-life way for teachers to address and for students to learn about the necessity of evaluating online resources. In addition, Wikis are, by their very nature, collaborative, and can help increase collaboration in and outside of the classroom.

These selected TESOL technology standards clearly lay out that ESL students should first have a foundational knowledge of technology, know how to use that technology appropriately, ethically, and morally, and use that technology to enhance their language learning through “communication and collaboration.” Wikis are an excellent way to incorporate these three Technology goals for students into an ESL curriculum.

In addition to the TESOL Technology Standards, other researchers have indicated that wikis can be used for a variety of other instructional uses as well, including:

- Scaffolding (Nakamaru 2011)
- Collaboration (Nakamaru 2011)
- Documentation (Herrell and Jordan 2011)
- Writing for an audience (Herrell & Jordan 2011, Barley & Coniam 2008)
- Hypermedia documents (Herrell & Jordan 2011)
- [MITESOL C6] Immediate, specific feedback
- Can be used with all ages

**How to Create a Wiki**

Technology changes rapidly. Detailed directions on how to set up a wiki on our recommended sites may be outdated by the time of this publication. In addition, the wiki sites we recommend provide excellent tutorials on setting up wikis. Rather than providing detailed step-
by-step instructions on setting up a wiki, we are providing Herrell and Jordan’s (2011) recommended basic steps used to create a wiki:

1. Set up your wiki. We recommend using WikiSpaces (http://www.wikispaces.com) or GoogleSites (https://sites.google.com). Follow the tutorials to set up your wiki.

2. Decide how you want to use wikis in your classroom. You could decide to have students use the wiki as individuals, pairs, or groups. Decide who will be able to access which pages and what power they will have to make changes.

3. Demonstrate how the wiki works. Model the project, and demonstrate to students how to edit and interact.

4. **Encourage students to get started and provide support.** Provide lots of time for guided practice and support for students. Look at this as an opportunity to learn together!

**Ideas for Wikis**

1. Have students write stories using picture stories or story starters.
2. Have students use a wiki page as a common space to collect information for group work.
3. Use a wiki for peer editing! Have students type their rough drafts on the wiki, then assign a peer editor to make suggestions.
4. Have students keep a wiki page as a writing portfolio.
5. Have students collect songs that illustrate relevant grammar points and post the titles (maybe even YouTube videos) on the wiki.
6. Create a wiki to be a “living document” from class to class, semester to semester. Students can add to the work of students in previous semesters.
7. Have students journal using a wiki, and then provide feedback to students on the wiki.
8. Use a wiki as a class calendar and have students track progress on assigned tasks.

Be Creative!

**Recommendations**

When using wikis in the ESL classroom, several cautions are advised. First, instructors should guide students through at least the first session with hands-on experience in a computer lab. This allows students to ask questions if necessary, but also ensures that the students have received all instruction necessary with initial hands-on experience so that if they do have problems later on, hopefully they know what to ask. Second, instructors should limit editing privileges, depending on the project. There are benefits, in some cases, to students knowing that their work is going to be on the Internet for anyone to see, not just classmates (Barley & Coniam, 2008). However, students can also be intimidated by this fact if the project involves, for instance, their own writing. Instructors should use their own discretion, and perhaps the input of their students, in determining how “live” to make their students’ work. Finally, teachers should intervene and give clear goals to prevent “social loafing” and “free-riding” (Arnold, Ducate, & Kost, 2012). When technology is used in the classroom, it provides a potential for abuse due to the fact that students can be easily distracted by the Internet. Teachers should remain engaged in
any project taking place during class time, but also ensure that students are participating fully by requiring an account with log-in credentials from each student.

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