

In the Classroom

Improving Proficiency, Building Community: A Wiki Case Study

KASUMI KATO, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-WHITWATER
LAUREN ROSEN, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN



Technology is becoming more and more accessible, resulting in an increase in the number of courses taught using distance technologies. Many institutions are jumping on the bandwagon and expecting language courses to follow, along with other disciplines.

As described in D'Antoni's *The Virtual University*, distance learning is no longer just for outreach and continuing education. Instead, it is becoming mainstream, with students expecting anytime-anywhere opportunities to learn everything.

The difficulty with language courses in a distance learning setting is developing a communicative language learning environment where students have ample opportunities to use language to talk about themselves with their peers. This personalization process not only teaches students to use language but also helps build a strong community among learners not always found in traditional lecture courses. While lectures are easily adapted to distance learning, communicative language courses are not. Given the challenges of developing language proficiency and creating community between learners in distance learning environments, both the instructor and the student need ways to communicate more regularly, personalizing the language learned in order to become more familiar with each other. In our experience, both with distance learning and traditionally taught students in Japanese classes, wiki use can help accomplish these tasks.

What Is a Wiki?

Wiki is a collaborative website on which one can post texts and digitized media and edit their own work and that of others. One of the best known wikis is Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org). These sites can be open to the public or set up with login access privileges only. Requiring login access protects students from outsiders altering their content yet allows for students in a given class to work collaboratively. This online communication tool, wiki, provides opportunities for self and peer correction and students can spend time reflecting on their writing and that of their classmates. The login access also makes available the history of a document, identifying/tracking which students contribute to the writing process, and indicating exactly what contributions are made.

The University of Wisconsin Collaborative Language Program (CLP) is a hybrid distance learning program for languages that

includes interactive two-way videoconferencing (ITV) with a variety of desktop technologies, one of these being a wiki. Students given wiki assignments have more opportunities to interact in the target language with one another than is typical of students who are restricted to communication during class meetings and working independently outside of class. In addition, the use of wikis is an excellent way for students to build a stronger sense of community and to become more deeply acquainted with their classmates and overseas partners. That said, wikis need not be restricted only to distance learners and in fact, our second year traditionally taught students at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UWW) are also engaged in wiki activities.

Our Students and Their Capabilities

CLP students in first year Japanese meet four times per week in an ITV classroom. UWW students in second year Japanese also meet four times a week, but they learn in a traditional setting. Each semester, students complete 60 hours of instruction. Choosing to use wikis as a way of communicating outside of class extends interaction in Japanese beyond the classroom. Students are able to easily—without knowledge of HTML or other coding—read and contribute to their group wiki pages, including adding photos and media. They are now writing for a larger audience than just the teacher. CLP wiki assignments encourage process writing as students may return to what they have written and add more or change content at anytime. Peer correction is also a built-in part of the process. The initial objectives for the Japanese course wiki include: using the target language to share ideas/opinions and to ask questions; creating a sense of community among classmates; and becoming familiar with aspects of Japanese culture. Yet we have found that while these objectives have indeed been met, students have done a great deal more than anticipated with this tool.

The Process

At the beginning of the semester the instructor introduces the first wiki assignment and explains what a wiki is, its implementation, the collaborative goal, and grading criteria for the assignment. For assessing the quality of student written communication and col-

laborative efforts, a rubric is used and provided to students when the activity is assigned. [You can find the rubric online at www.actfl.org. Click on "See It In *The Language Educator*?"] Before the first wiki "Self-Introduction" assignment, the instructor provides examples of posting texts into the class wiki by introducing herself. Students' and instructor's digital pictures are uploaded into the wiki files area. The use of pictures personalizes the information and also helps distance students recognize and connect with their classmates during class sessions. Students are given step-by-step instructions for the process of typing in Japanese and an editing guide specific to typing in a wiki.

Students are then divided into small groups of four to five and wiki postings are assigned. Grouping students for each assignment helps to focus their interaction and reading within a smaller context. Students respond to the wiki assignments which are made up of three postings: (1) students post personal information in response to a set of questions related to the theme being studied; (2) students read their own group's first postings and ask three to five questions related to their classmates' information. [In addition, students read postings from another group and highlight three errors.]; and (3) students respond to the questions their classmates asked in the second posting and correct the errors that are highlighted. Since students are reading postings both from their own group and another group, they get to know more students in class than if they are only focused on their own group.

Peer correction is an important part of the writing process incorporated in all wiki assignments. Students highlight errors and type their initials next to the highlighted text. The original author needs to correct the errors their classmates find and is able to edit and refine his or her work throughout the semester. The history feature in the wiki can also be used to monitor what changes are made when and by whom.

The Elements of a "Good" Wiki Assignment

Thematic wiki activities are created to promote student written communication that integrates with the units studied and develops interpersonal communication skills. These assignments replace compositions so students are still writing as much as they would in a traditional setting. The added benefits of wiki assignments

over a composition are that students are interacting with one another (as their audience is the entire class—not just the teacher) and students are writing more often on a more regular basis than a typical composition assignment would require. Using a wiki, which is accessible at any time by both instructors and students, allows for and encourages continued refinement of one's writing and discussion of content. Just as students learn more if they study daily than if they cram right before a test, the process of writing gets easier the more they actually write.

Aspects of sound pedagogy in group work and process writing are the same as those that apply to developing good wiki assignments:

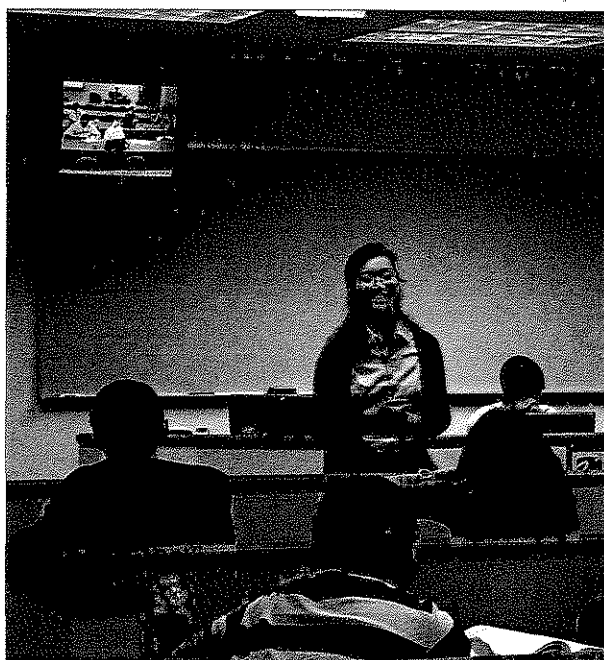
- (1) Make sure to provide a context that engages a reason for content to be written, not spoken. Adjust the context of the assignment accordingly (i.e., there is no reason to write a phone conversation).
- (2) Engage students in topics with which they can make a personal connection.
- (3) Provide students with a rubric clearly describing the expectations of the assignment.
- (4) Assign students to groups of four to five participants. Each group should have its own wiki page.
- (5) Provide clear instructions and due dates for each stage of the process.

Furthermore, it is important that students know that wiki assignments replace other composi-

tion assignments and are therefore not adding work for them (or for the instructor). Wiki assignments provide opportunities for students to be writing and reading throughout the semester rather than focusing on those skills during designated periods of time.

What We Learned

Students' perception of language development and attitude towards the use of wikis are measured with both formal assessments and through student surveys. An analysis of the content students wrote in the wiki and the final exam proved to have some interesting results. Additionally, students completed a survey inquiring about (1) their understanding of the concepts covered and how effective wiki assignments are for learning Japanese; (2) how well they know their classmates as a result of the class wiki; and (3) how easy it is to edit and post content. The survey results also



Kasumi Kato teaching her second year Japanese students at UW-Whitewater in the distance learning lab. The students on the TV are from UW-Platteville.

More Information on Wikis

Looking for wikis free to download and host on your own server?

MediaWiki: www.mediawiki.org

Xwiki: www.xwiki.org

Wikis where content is hosted on someone else's server:

WikiSpaces: www.wikispaces.com

Wetpaint: www.wetpaint.com

Stikipad: www.stikipad.com

Comparison of wiki software:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_wiki_software

included student feedback on their likes and dislikes with respect to wiki activities.

Perhaps most intriguing with respect to language development is the correlation between what students write and read in the class wiki and the content they use in their final exams. Some students' final exam essays appear to be an expansion of content written in the class wiki. That is to say, in the final exam composition, students cover additional topics and write more in depth about the topics that are addressed more briefly in their wiki assignments. Other students also demonstrate a refinement of the content written in the wiki. Their final exams cover some of the same topics but students use more complex language and structures than used in the wiki. From these results, we believe that the wiki assignments are preparing students well for final writing assessments and also play a key role in demonstrating student development as they move through the language learning levels. Observations from other Japanese instructors not using wikis indicate that there is an increase in writing proficiency demonstrated by the students in courses using wikis.

Students point out that wiki assignments allow them to apply what they are learning in creative and personal ways. With students not all being at the same location, one student states that the wiki assignments "promoted communication between the two sites" while another states that they "provided a good opportunity to learn from other students' progress." These comments illustrate that student interaction includes both sharing with and learning from each other. Students also use the wiki to initiate their own discussions of topics that are of interest to them. Topics include suggestions for how best to learn and study Japanese and cultural aspects such as music, food, and animé. This area, while primarily written in English, is completely student directed and includes research they choose to do independently on aspects of culture.

In a more directed model, students may be given topical headings and can choose to do research on the topics of interest to them. The amount of information and media students find to share with their classmates is extraordinary. These discussions, which occur only because of the class wiki, also provide a window for the instructor into the world of her students, including their concerns about and motivation for learning Japanese. The ease of editing allows students to link to web pages and add media to their pages making for rich cultural discussions.

The complaints focus mostly on students who do not complete their assignments in a timely manner thus preventing other students from commenting as required. Some students without the ability to type in Japanese on their personal machines or in all campus labs, also reported that accessibility is a problem.

Recommendations and Remaining Questions

While the distance learning classroom may pose some difficulties in developing a collaborative learning environment across sites, our experience shows that it is possible to bridge the sites and that outside of class sessions, students can collaborate through a personalized writing process, interacting with one another by using the language learned in class.

Overall, using wikis in language learning can be extremely beneficial. Students are given authentic and personalized writing tasks for real audiences. Students are learning from each other through all parts of the collaborative writing process and student-initiated discussions. Our goal of building a stronger community of learners is largely being met with the use of this tool.

While our case study clearly indicates the advantages of wikis in language learning with particular focus on the benefits of written proficiency and community building, it is unclear the extent to which the wiki assignments have an impact on student oral proficiency assessments. Since the wiki assignments are not given in isolation but rather in the context of the themes students are studying, it is not possible to isolate the content and determine the direct impact on speaking. That said, students are addressing topics they have written about in the wiki during their oral proficiency exams. Student oral interviews are given in pairs and many of the questions that are in the wiki writings are the same as those used by students during oral interviews. Some students during oral assessments speak more accurately and with appropriate register—a level of communication not seen in the wiki assignment earlier in the semester. This suggests that future research as to the effects of wiki use on spoken language proficiency would be advantageous.

Kasumi Kato is a Japanese lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Lauren Rosen is the director of the Collaborative Language Program for the University of Wisconsin System.

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Perspective <i>ACTFL President Rita Oleksak</i>	7
Breaking News	8
WHEN LANGUAGE LEARNING IS A TRUE ADVENTURE <i>Sandy Cutshall</i>	14
Tech Talk	22
Inside ACTFL	26
Milestones	29
So You Say	30
USING YOUR . . . CEREBRO, GEHIRN, 두뇌, CERVEAU, MOZG, 頭腦, CERVELLO, 腦子: A Look at Research on Foreign Language Learning and the Brain <i>Teresa Kennedy and Susan Reese</i>	32
INTERVIEW WITH CHICAGO MAYOR RICHARD M. DALEY	36
TEST SCORES, EXTRACURRICULARS. . . AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES: Colleges Value Students Who Make the Investment in Foreign Language Study <i>Maura Hallam Sweley</i>	38
Legislative Look	42
NOT JUST "SEAT TIME" ANYMORE—EARNING CREDIT THROUGH PROFICIENCY <i>Ellen Murray</i>	44
GOETHE-INSTITUT IS A PARTNER AND RESOURCE FOR GERMAN TEACHERS <i>Patricia Koning</i>	48
In the Classroom: IMPROVING PROFICIENCY, BUILDING COMMUNITY: A WIKI CASE STUDY <i>Kasumi Kato and Lauren Rosen</i>	52
Regional Updates: CSCTFL, NECTFL, PNCFL, SCOLT, SWCOLT	56
Web Watch	60
Upcoming Events Calendar	62
Advertiser Index	63
ACTFL 2008 Call for Proposals	64

ON THE COVER:

Audrey Singer, a student from North Carolina, participated in an Academic Treks Immersion China program in summer 2007. (Photo courtesy of Academic Treks/Broadreach)