

## **Topic: Using Wiki to Improve Students' Academic Writing in English Collaboratively: A Case Study on Undergraduate Students in Bangladesh**

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the possibilities of improving Academic English writing by dint of collaboration and peer support carried out online. Writing activities were carried out on a Wiki for ten weeks and after that a questionnaire survey and an FGD were conducted with twenty five selected students. Findings showed that students thought it was effective though they always wanted direct supervision of a teacher. These findings revealed the importance of extended help needed for the weak students to bridge the existing learning gap in a language class with students from diverse background.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Most of the undergraduate students of BRAC University, unlike many other private and public universities in Bangladesh, are very familiar with to internet technology with all the updated online tools. As a result, teaching of English language through the support of online tools has become the pressing need of time to make the learning more effective and interesting. Talking about the background of the undergraduate students of BRAC University, most of them are from financially well off sections of society except a few rural students who are very brilliant but poor. Regarding student mix, it is generally found that about forty percent students of BRAC University are from English medium institutions who has passed their GCE A Levels under British Curriculum and the rest sixty percent or so students come from Bangali and other media of instructions.

Since, the average class time each student gets is inadequate and the weaker students find it very difficult to cope up with the other students in terms of English language proficiency, I planned to find the potentiality of using PB Works Wiki as a platform to extend help when students are not in the class. In this connection, as mentioned earlier, the heavy exposure of BRACU students towards ICT is the biggest strength that persuaded me to explore this study.

Looking at the diversity of students, here are students from both English and Bangla medium institutions; as a result there are students with varying degree of English proficiencies. Apart from that, students from different academic disciplines are put in the same English Course based on their performance in the admission test. When they are in the class, along with many other problems regarding speaking, there are some common problems students facing while writing their ideas in English. Irrespective of backgrounds, students are found facing problems while writing a Topic Sentence (TS) with a controlling idea, writing a thesis statement in the introduction of an essay, maintaining coherence and unity and so on. On the other hand, the total time students get in an entire semester, if compared with the number of the language items in the syllabus, really seems to be very short. So, students who are really serious from the beginning about their study can cope up with the time and finish it successfully. For others it becomes very difficult to understand many of the important aspects of Academic Writing (A.Wr.) which will be required by them to write their thesis in their final stage of graduation. Therefore, the use of online tools becomes very important for these students by which they get extended help from the teacher and their friends while working on all the assignments at their own pace outside the class. So, the use of Wiki comes in here and students not only use it to overcome their difficulties but also reinforce their learning by giving and receiving feedback to other people on the group.

In this research, PB Works Wiki has been used as the main tool primarily to help the group of students who really struggle expressing their ideas while writing. Often it is difficult to allocate time for each and every student because of tight class schedule and so is the situation with the teacher. Therefore, this attempt has been taken to see how much the help can be extended through online collaboration in the process of learning via PB Works platform. Through the activities done during this study, the participating students have been encouraged to reflect together on their peers' and own learning. This process helped them build a learning community outside the classroom which was very important since they could carry out the same practice when the classroom learning was over. Participants have worked there on the group on asynchronous environment and

that gave them the opportunity to improve their writing fluency by dint of mutual help and collaboration using the said platform. This opportunity of working in group has inculcated in them the sense of self responsibility and interdependency while doing their tasks.

Through this practice of collaboration, the students not only get over their own drawbacks in terms of dealing their academic writing but also become better users of English language which helps BRAC University meet its goal to be an English medium University someday in the coming years.

The reason I have decided to use 'Wiki' as a tool to extend support towards my students is because of some unique features of this Web 2.0 tool. It is very much controlled and the record of progress can be measured very easily because of its history aspect. Some of its remarkable aspects are like its unique, collaborative approach, having open editing system, simple coding system and finally its revoltingness. In this study, I have used the free version of PB Works Wiki which has allowed me up to 2 gigabyte of space, more than enough to carry out any study in my context.

To explore the potentials of collaborative writing using online tool (Wiki) the following questions were asked:

1. In what ways will the students be benefitted working in collaboration while carrying out writing activities online?
2. How peer feedback can contribute to develop students' academic writing?

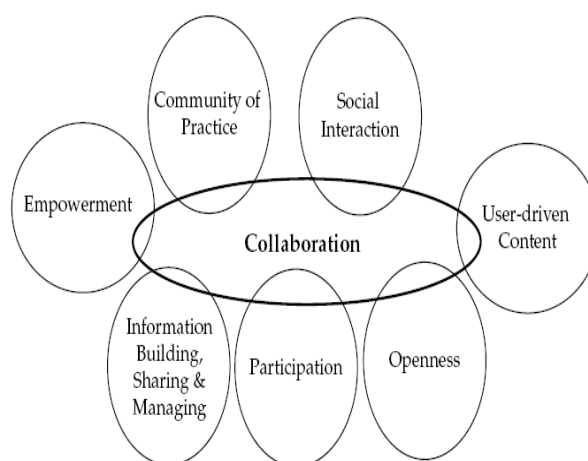
## **II. Literature Review**

Web 2.0 tools like Wiki is used as platforms for collaborative writing. Wiki is a tool through which anyone can edit or comment on uploaded text: so it is useful for interactive editing and discussion of student-generated texts. It is increasingly used as a basis for class website which often develops into full discussions, with 'comments' going back and forth (Ur, 2012).

Now, moving to collaborative wiring, it is such a process where all the learners get involved in the process writing which includes group planning, co-creating written work, peer reviewing, and co-edition etc which can be done in a synchronous or asynchronous time (Chuan, Chao and Lo, 2011). According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (1978), it can be either among students or between students and teacher. It can be used for assisting each student in advancing through his or her own Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). During this study, I have tried to help students help themselves with very careful and prudent intervention. I studied the students' personal profile earlier to have enough idea about their preferences. This has helped me to select types of activities which would draw their attention and interest more. According to Oxford, R. L. (1997), making a collaborative task especially on group is challenging and if the teachers can make it more involving only "by knowing students' attitudes then they start to inspire them" to be more involved, thus making student learning more effective.

Collaborative writing has been a widespread idea in many countries of the world and most importantly this idea started getting momentum for last one decade. But countries like Bangladesh has not yet progressed much onto that path since infrastructural facilities are very rare here. But taking both the rural and urban scenario combined, it has been noticed that the country has been experiencing a digital divide since the rural areas have been completely out of internet facilities.

This study has been done through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Making a collaborative task especially on group is challenging and it the teacher can make it more involving only "by knowing students' attitudes can teachers start to inspire them" Oxford, R. L. (1997) to be more involved, thus making student learning more effective. So, there must be openness and user-driven contents so that students can carry out communication and social interaction very easily and comfortably. If this can be ensured, the platform becomes very vibrant and remains with lot of information for other users of the group who can use them for expressing their own thoughts and ideas.



**Figure 1:** [Figure adopted from Research on E-Learning and ICT in Education P. 236] Jimoyiannis, A.(2012).Research on e-Learning and ICT in Education. New York: Springer

To make the learning happen, it is very important that the Instruction is very clearly given so that all the participants get them without any difficulties. Reigeluth (as cited in Jimoyiannis,2012. P. 141) has mentioned that instruction is “anything that is done to help someone learn” and it targets the improvement of the quality of the help the teacher extends towards the learners. Therefore Instructional Design (ID) is one aspect to ponder and since it really, according to the recent trends, is helpful to influence learners positively. In recent years the instruction has started changing from ‘system controlled’ to the ‘learner controlled’ one so that there is a role of ‘self-determination’ and ‘self selected goal’ by the learners (Ryan and Deci as cited in Jimoyiannis, 2012. P. 141).

Hadjerrouit (2012) has given eight types of activities in his project where he found a number of problems which were mentionable. Through the activities he applied were helpful for the students as they take part in the collaborative process of writing. The activities used were: Add content to existing pages, modify and rephrase content, delete existing content, add link to existing content, delete existing link, fix and correct existing link, format pages or section of pages, and finally grammar, style, and spelling. He found that only one group did very good performance in terms of equal participation of all the members. Another mentionable problem from his study was that most of the students preferred to add information rather than editing their peers write ups. Keeping this lesson in mind, I devised some strategies so that each and every student took part in the process of editing peers' writing. To make the job easier, I attached rubrics for all the activities which encouraged students to take part in the editing process and giving feedback.

A study by Oxford, R. L. (1997) showed that there are several ways of providing input for students. He also added “Just as students can learn from their teachers, so they can from and with their peers in carefully designed activities”. Students can learn from the input given by their teachers, but they may also learn by “co-constructing knowledge with their friends” Oxford, R. L. (1997). Such a learning mode is a good example of collaborative learning in that two or more people gather to study something together. The author further explained that as part of 21st century skills, access to knowledge through discovery and co-construction rather than receiving it directly from a teacher is an essential skill in language classrooms since a student should not rely only on the teacher as a source of information to develop language skills.

Collaborative writing is such a process where all the learners get involved in the process writing which includes group planning, co-creating written work, peer reviewing, and co-edition etc which can be done in a synchronous or asynchronous time (Chuan, Chao and Lo (2011). According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (1978), it can be either among students or between students and teacher. It can be used for assisting each student in advancing through his or her own Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).In this study, this is going to be done through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).While using CMC, it is very important to maintain a balanced and very effective group formation. Thornbury and Watkins (2007) in their research has clearly mentioned that organization of class into groups is very important since students are in need of working outside the classroom on different collaborative projects, assignments and so on. In this study, I have used wiki where students have worked in groups and tried to help each others with ideas and writing those ideas.

Though a good number of research have already been carried out with different level of students, it is not found that any research is done especially on improving the academic writing of some weak and selected students. Furthermore, no research of this kind (especially on Wiki) was ever done in Bangladesh. That is why, I think this research is going to be important not for Bangladesh but for any country in the world.

### **III. Methodology**

To administer the research, I used questionnaire and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to get the data. As for the questionnaire, there were questions both for qualitative and quantitative data so that I get information that satisfies my research questions. During the research, the participating students got ten weeks time to work on PBWorks Wiki on given tasks and the survey was done after that. All the students were added on the Wiki by me and given the Sing-In IDs and Pass Words by me to make sure they do not find any difficulties to get into the group to carry out the given tasks. After that I decided to carry out ten types of activities over the period of ten weeks so that students did not find difficulties to complete them. In the beginning of the ninth week the survey with questionnaire was administered where as the FGD was done by the end of tenth week. The purpose of the FGD was to find clear views on some answers participants had given in the questionnaire. It was administered in the form of informal discussion where all the participants felt free and could speak without any hesitation. To get the most of the ideas on each question, I allowed enough time so that everyone intending to speak could express their opinions. I recorded the FGD from the beginning to the end with participants' prior permission..

So, starting from week two, my plan was to run the activities on the group for ten weeks so that I could finish my project in twelve week. That means, first and last -these two weeks of the semester were left out of calculation to make sure the group activities went smooth and uninterrupted. To allow the students ample time to work on the group, I was prepared with all the exercises on selected contents and posted them weekly basis. To cover all the ten contents, ten weeks were taken and after every two weeks, I sat with all the participating students to have a general discussion where my focus was to see if things were running well and if not, then what are the problems evolved. To maintain such a fortnightly sitting, I fixed my consultation time so that all the students know where I sat during the consultation time. To be able to reach each and every student, I had collected the email ids and mobile numbers of all the participants so that they are accessible by me at any time. Oppositely, they all also had my email id and phone number to consult any difficulties they encounter.

One of the most important points of keeping the peer leaders on the group was to let them scaffold other members of the group with occasional support from me preferably in the first few weeks and then give them the total control in the last part of the project. For that reason, I remained present in the discussion frequently in the first three weeks and then from week four onward up to week seven I lessened my visit to the group. It was done purposefully to see if it went on well without my support and let them help themselves. Initially it was going on smoothly and no big problems occurred up to eight week but after eight week, it was found the the number of visit by the participants started decreasing on the group. Finally, from the very beginning of the tenth week, I again returned on the group (Wiki) and was able to increase the frequency of participants' visit on it. Regarding my concern about visit of the online groups, it was found that if the participants visited them, they had done some tasks which was really important. So, paying visit was very important as that turned out to be helpful for collaborative learning.

Moving to the final part of the study, it was by the end of ninth week when I surveyed the students with the questionnaire in an informal session conducted outside the classroom. All the students were given instructions especially regarding the name. So, it was found that students did not write the names as per instruction.

#### **Participants**

A total of twenty five participants took part in the experiments that were from six different departments ranging from Business, to LLB to CSE to Architecture. They all were from same semester though their linguistic capacity was different. They were selected based on a diagnostic test taken in the first week of the semester and most of them needed help in terms of writing a Topic Sentence, Controlling Idea, and as a result a Paragraph, the smallest unit of Academic Writing. Five of twenty five participants were better users of English who were very enthusiastic and serious about their improvement. All these twenty five students were divided into five groups so that they can focus on only the members of their own group. So they were there on the groups to work for themselves and to see if they could help other members of the group with necessary feedback. As an administrator of the groups, I discussed the purpose of putting these five students in five different groups earlier so that they remain punctual and careful in doing their tasks properly. They all were also suggested to get back to me to report any problems they would encounter. Regarding their status on the Wiki, I gave all of them the status of 'Editor' which allowed them to read and edit other's write ups on the group. This opportunity of editing other's write ups helped them to be more careful in giving feedback to others because they would not give any feedback until they are sure about any particular rule or forms of sentences, etc. Also, while forming the groups, I made sure there was diversity in the student mix in terms of academic disciplines, and media of education.

**Procedures and Timeline**

The process of working on the activities started from the second week of Spring 14, 2014 and students were selected from BRAC University Residential Semester (RS). All the participating students were selected from four of my ENG 101 sections (1, 5, 6 and 8) and they started working as soon as they were included into the groups. As I mentioned earlier, all the twenty five students who really needed help in overcoming their existing problems regarding writing in English were selected based on one writing strand taken in the first class of first week of the semester.

**Ethics and Limitations**

Referring to the possible limitation, with all precautionary attempts taken beforehand, some students might give some information to please the teacher (me) though it was not whole the situation. Most important limitation of the study was the difficulty faced by the students while accessing to the Internet. Sometimes, because of poor speed, many of the participants could not get access to the group which really made them delay to post their ideas on the groups. Being a collaborative platform, it affected other members pace of work which was a mentionable limitation to mention.

**IV. Results**

In this chapter, I interpreted the results found from the survey and integrated the findings from FGD so that I could compare and contrast wherever it was required. To better interpret the results, I divided the items on the questionnaire into five categories so that it becomes easy for the readers.

**Teacher Role on the group**

Now, one of the important concerns of this study was to see if the activities on the group could go smoothly without the intervention of a teacher where the findings gave a rather opposite view. The study said that teacher's role as an administrator and overseer was very important. It was found that teacher intervention is a must to run activities on the group since hundred percent of the respondents thought that the teacher must be there. While evaluating teacher's role on the group, more than fifty percent respondents mentioned that the role of the teacher was very caring, fair, friendly, and necessary. However five percent of them mentioned that teacher's role was not so fair, friendly and consistent.

Looking at the findings from the FGD, they also revealed that participants preferred the involvement of the teacher in a more active form. It was found that some of the participants were not that reliable on the feedback gotten only from their peers. They found it difficult to integrate in their own writing until it was ratified by the teacher.

Variables	5	4	3	2	1
Caring	55%	30%	15%	-	-
Fair	55%	20%	20%	5%	-
Friendly	65%	15%	15%	5%	-
Consistent	35%	30%	30%	5%	-
Necessary	55%	35%	10%	-	-

**Table 4: Evaluation of teacher's role ( 5 indicates Very Caring and 1 Careless)**

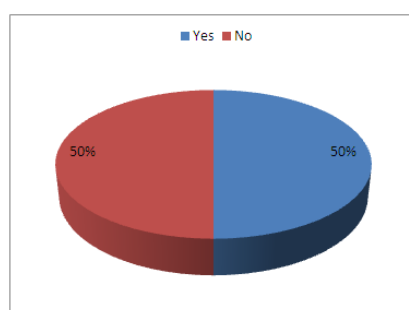
**Role of Peers on the groups**

As for peer role and feedback on the group, the survey revealed that it was important and useful to get ideas from peers and friends. Fifty five percent of the respondents mentioned that the role of the peers was very useful and though ten percent of them mentioned that it was not necessary. As for feedback given towards peers, the study revealed that fifty percent of the respondents only visited the groups but did not give any feedback whereas the rest fifty percent gave feedback for their peers. Asked how many times they gave feedback towards their peers' write ups, it was found that only fifteen percent of them gave feedback more than five times. According to the comments made by the respondents it was found that most of the feedback was given only on four areas namely "Grammar and Structure, Ideas and Organizations, Spelling and Punctuation and Vocabulary"

Variables	5	4	3	2	1
Effective	40%	35%	10%	5%	10%
Useful	55%	20%	20%	-	5%
Necessary	45%	30%	15%	-	10%
Frequent	45%	35%	10%	10%	-

**Table 5: Role of peers ( 5 indicates Very effective and 1 Ineffective)**

While delving into the reasons of not giving feedback towards the peers, the responses by the participants revealed that there were a number of reasons behind the inactivity of many of the participants. One of the questions on the survey questionnaire was if they faced any problems with other members in the group. It was found that twenty percent had problems with other members while carrying out the activities and giving feedback. Some participants mentioned that people did not really take the feedback they gave seriously and they would only sit and gossip while working on the group online which not only disturbed other people but also discouraged them. Moving to the findings from the FGD, same type of comments was found from the participants. It seemed that some of the participating members of the group were not serious enough and they did not play an effective role. That, according to the findings, resulted in the less productivity on the group.



**Figure 3:** Participants' feedback.

### **Suggestions to make the group more effective and learning friendly:**

The respondents came up with a good number of suggestions which could be effective in promoting the usage of the groups and thus helping more people improve their academic writing. Some of the important findings are given below:

Groups should be section wise: This time, we took the students from two different sections from BRACU Residential Semester in Savar and all of them worked on the same group since I added them directly as members. Survey findings indicated that some of the participants did not take it easily and which is why they did not perform well as they thought that their writing tasks should not be read by other people outside of their sections. So, they preferred their own group where no students from other sections would be allowed.

Next finding was the speed of network which, according to the survey, has been very slow. The respondents mentioned that the speed of network in RS (Residential Semester) was so slow that they really got frustrated because of the poor speed which hampered their attempt to work on the group and finish their tasks.

Last but not the least suggestion by some of the respondents was updating of the groups at a regular interval and a strict supervision of the group by the administrator. As for updates, the participants mentioned that the administrator teacher should have updated the group with more visits and through this process he could have maintained a strict policy so that all the students of the class took part in the group activity regularly. They thought that this type of monitoring would have increased the overall performance on the group.

## **V. Analysis**

### **Role of teacher**

Now moving to the role of teacher, it has been found very favoured by the respondents. On an average more than fifty five percent of them mentioned it as very caring, fair and sixty five percent mentioned that it was friendly. But consistency wise, it was not very good and the respondents mentioned that it should have been more consistent. As for consistency, it is found that thirty percent of the respondents remained in neutral position which means they have not said either good or bad. I think, I should take it a matter of concern and consistency must be maintained if more projects of this kind are carried out in the coming days.

Again, looking at teacher intervention it has been suggested by the respondents that there must be a teacher in the monitoring process of the group and that teacher should play an active role if everybody works properly or not. If I look at figure 1, I find that hundred percent of the respondents wanted teacher's intervention and none of the attendants has mentioned that the activities on the group should go without the overseeing of a teacher. Some even has opined that the teacher should make everybody work by properly monitoring on the group.

Regarding strict monitoring of the group, it was really difficult to monitor each and every student and make him or her take part in the discussion took place on regular basis. Part of the study was to see how much peer support is possible here at BRAC University since most of the students were from a good English Proficiency. I hoped that we could use more able students' ideas and knowledge to promote a wide learning environment while students were writing in English. So, it was important for me not to interfere as long as

possible and interference was the last resort to the solution. That is why, I did not very much interfere and gave frequent feedback to the participating students since I silently used to wait for their peers to come up and take a lead and give feedback.

### **Role of Peers**

Drawing peer feedback and support was one of the most important goals of this study since it aimed at collaborative learning. Looking at Table 5, I have found positive note of the participants though it could have been more in percentage. Findings show that fifty five percent of the respondents mentions peer feedback as useful and five percent useless. Looking at the “neutral” point, I have found that twenty percent of them remain neutral. So, taking “neutral” and “useless” combined it becomes one fourths of the respondents who are not very satisfied with the support and feedback given by their peers. May be because of this reason fifty percent of the respondents has not given any feedback. If I notice figure 2, it indicates that fifty percent of the visitors of the groups have given feedback while the rest fifty percent remain away from giving any feedback.

Then comes the next recommendation which is about the training and familiarization of the teachers with new technologies and their usages. It is the responsibility of the institutions to make sure the teachers especially English language teachers are updated with proper training. So, they should be sent to training at a regular interval so that they keep learning and updating themselves and help build the nation through effective teaching. To do that, teachers involved in the process should be financially benefitted after completing up to a certain level of skills and expertise.

Thirdly, all the students taking part in the process of the study must be familiarized not only with the technology but also the rationale for doing that accompanied by all the advantages they are going to reap by the end of the semester. This will really motivate them intrinsically and help them keep working for their own development.

### **Conclusion**

In this small scale study, students took the additional activities carried out outside the classroom positively and they tried their best to learn and helped others learn collaboratively. Through this study, it is expected that it can be replicated in hundreds of other institutions by which thousands of students can be reached and given feedback to improve their academic writing in English. To make it happen, all we need in Bangladesh is more affordable internet connectivity with unfaltering electricity supply. Also, more training for the English teachers are needed which will not only familiarize them with all the updated online tools but also extend their support towards their students when they are not in the class. Therefore, it is hoped that more study on Web 2.0 tools will be carried out and more and more number of students will be within the supporting ceiling, in terms of academic writing in Bangladesh.

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