The implementation of collaborative learning in teaching writing to Indonesian university students: A blended language learning context

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Abstract

Upon the policy of the integration of technology into language learning by the Indonesian government (macro level) and the university where the authors are currently teaching (meso level) (Arifin, 2017), we will use Wiki, a feature of SharePoint within Office 365, as the tool to promote collaborative learning in teaching writing to university students. To

demonstrate the robustness of theoretical and pedagogical foundation of the designs, the design philosophy and principles of collaborative learning as an approach to teaching writing are first explored. The paper then continues to the discussion on how these principles are put into the context and can be facilitated with the use of Wiki. It concludes with a brief discussion of some potential limitations in the implementation of these design patterns.

Keywords: collaborative learning, teaching writing, blended environment

Design philosophy

Rooted within Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (Levy & Stockwell, 2006), collaborative learning could broadly be defined as a situation in which students learn through participation, production, and negotiation (or interaction) with peers to achieve shared objectives (Laurillard, 2012). Interaction, production of an output, and negotiation for meaning have all been considered facilitative to language learning (Ortega, 2009). As a result of interaction, students will also learn through acquisition (input) and practice. All these factors become the main rationale for the use of a collaborative learning approach to teaching writing within the current teaching context.

Design principles

Although research (Zeng & Takatsuka, 2009; Hsieh, 2017; Yang, 2018) has suggested the effectiveness of collaborative learning to teaching writing in a blended language learning environment, Laurillard (2012) warns that empirical studies also show that students do not necessarily have the willingness to collaborate albeit put in a group. This becomes the main reason why the teaching design needs to have theoretically and pedagogically sound foundation.

Based on the Conversational Framework for collaborative learning proposed by Laurillard, the following pedagogical pattern is a guideline that we have modified to suit into my teaching context, based on my understanding of the collaborative learning theories.
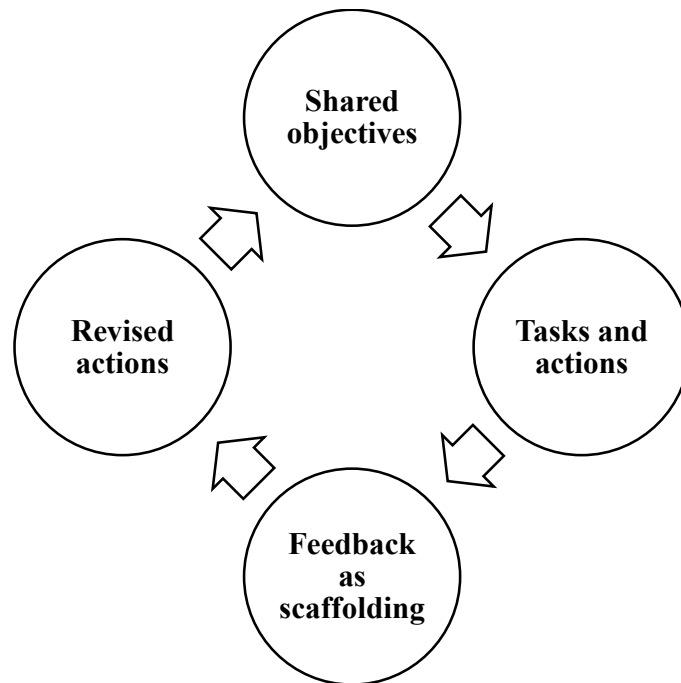
Figure   1   Pedagogical   Pattern   to   promote   collaborative   learning (adapted from Laurillard, 2012)

First, teachers based on the syllabus inform students regarding the outputs that they are required to produce collaboratively; the syllabus is designed based on students' needs analysis. Next, teachers determine and explain communicative tasks that students must perform to achieve the shared objectives. The tasks need to be clearly understood by the students to avoid disorientation; thus, this instruction needs to be done within the face-to-face classroom. Teachers may also need to generate the modelling environment to help student become clear with the tasks. The tasks should be just beyond the students` capabilities, or zone of proximal development, to ensure that students benefit most from the tasks. Actions in this case refer to all activities that students do to complete the tasks. These actions may then, as generally, need revision by the use of intrinsic and extrinsic feedback as scaffolding. Eventually, the final revision is submitted to the teacher.

During the phase of actions, teachers need to ensure active engagement of all students because this is where students will have to interact or negotiate for meaning one another, and the negotiation for meaning is the learning itself. To achieve this, teachers need to provide individual tasks that students have to complete, that is, each student within a group is required to produce an output or idea. Other group members then provide comments, which can be in

the form of a debate, dialogue, challenge, or support (scaffolding). The comments have to be based on clear argumentation that could be supported by an example, reason, or reference. This negotiation process is the extrinsic feedback itself to the extent that students may need to revise their actions or ideas based on other students` feedback. Another type of extrinsic feedback is from the teacher`s guidance. This guidance is crucial to ensure that students feel supported and confident that their actions are correctly performed; otherwise, they may feel disoriented and unsure over what they are doing. It is important to note that teachers` feedback needs to be provided as necessary, and it needs to be reduced over time to lead students to independent learning. The intrinsic feedback comes from the students themselves by comparing their actions or ideas to their peers or to the modelling environment provided by the teacher.

Putting the principles into the context

Following the pedagogical pattern (Figure 1), within face-to-face classroom we will first explain the students regarding the objective that they have to achieve collaboratively within a group in a blended environment. This explanation has to be done within the classroom to avoid confusion among students. The objective is to produce an essay on the topic of `culture shock`; the potential sub-topics covers the definition of culture shock, the reasons why it could occur, and the solutions on how to deal with this issue. (Please refer to Appendix 1 on how these sub-topics are arranged within a Wiki page as part of Office 365.) The reason for using this topic is that most students, if not all, are highly motivated to pursue their master`s degree abroad; the topics as part of the syllabus are decided based on needs analysis. The students that we refer to in the current teaching context is university students in their fourth or last year.

To ensure active engagement of all students, we will ask each of them to post one idea for each of the three sub-topics within their group; the group consists of four to five students. Laurillard (2012) recommends a maximum of five students within a group to ensure active participation of all students; if more than five, some may not actively engage. After articulating their own ideas, they then give comments or challenge other students` ideas within their own group. They will have to keep debating one another until they all have agreed over the ideas that will be put in the essay for the final submission; this is an iterative process. In challenging others` ideas and maintaining ideas, the students are required to provide a rationale, example, or reference to support their ideas. During all these processes, we will give some comments as necessary showing whether they are doing the tasks appropriately. We will avoid giving too much contribution to lead the students to achieve independent learning.

For the assessment, it is important that all students are clear about the criteria of the assessment so that they can carry out self-assessment and become more aware of their own performance (self-reflection). For this reason, we will then inform students regarding the criteria for the assessment prior to the tasks. For the criteria, we adopt and adapt the rubric designed by Gruba and Hinkelman (2012). The authors propose three assessment criteria to assess students` participation in a blended language learning environment including quality of response, interaction, and frequency. However, we will add a feature of `accuracy` in that some of my students may still have grammatical issues that could impede the communication; in my teaching we apply form-focus instruction (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). (Please refer to Appendix II for the rubric.)

To conduct the assessment, all students` dialogues have to be recorded from the beginning to the end when the essay is ready for submission. This becomes the main rationale for using Wiki as the tool to promote collaborative writing within the current context; Wiki, a feature of SharePoint within Office 365, has the feature to record all the dialogues. Another reason is that because empirical studies have reported the effectiveness of Wiki for collaborative writing (Su & Beaumont, 2010; Kessler & Bikowski, 2010; Zou, Wang, & Xing, 2016) and positive perceptions among students (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Wang, 2014; Vorobel & Kim, 2017), although not all research (e.g., Thomas, David, & Minocha, 2009) has reported positive evidence. Laurillard (2012) argues that the teacher plays the key role to successful utilisation of any technology tools including Wiki. The rationale for using Office 365 is because of security, confidentiality, university ethics, and practicality; it is practical because it is free for university staffs and students.

Conclusion and potential limitations

To meet the policy of the macro and meso levels, the current paper shows how technology can be integrated into teaching collaborative writing. For the tool, Wiki as part of SharePoint within Office 365 becomes the choice because it helps facilitate collaborative writing principles, and it also ensures security, ethics, and data privacy. Practicality is also the main reason to this; Office 365 is free for university students and staffs. The limitation would be that the university where we are currently teaching has not subscribed to the platform Office 365, yet we have asked the university staff to propose an application to Microsoft company, and the application is now under review. The assessment rubric may also be problematic in that it has not provided specific criteria on how to assess students` achievement as an individual

and their achievement within groups. Further research may be needed to provide validity argument for a rubric to specifically assess collaborative writing.

Acknowledgement

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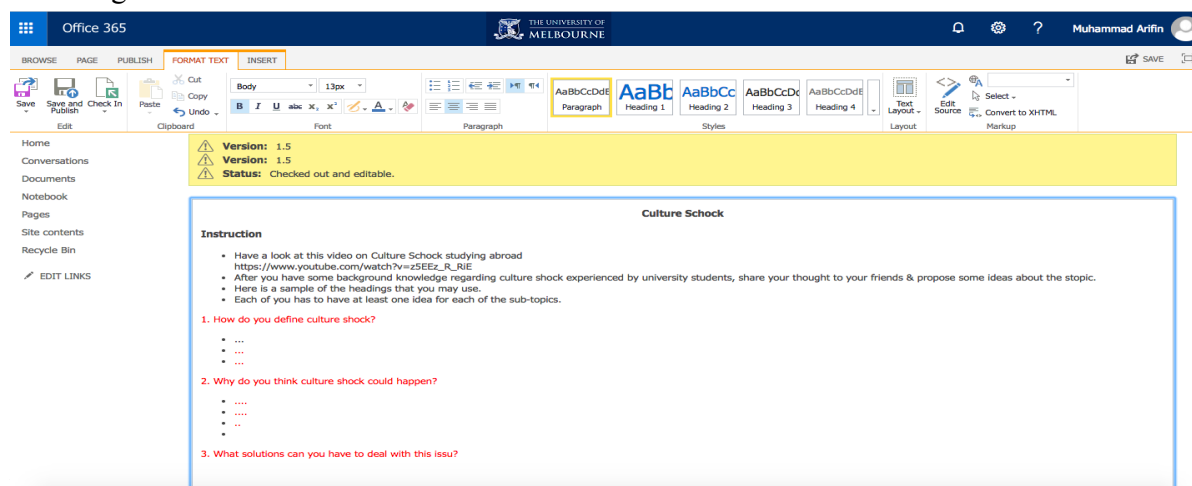
Appendix I

Wiki Page View

Table 1 Rubric for Assessing Participation in a blended approach by Gruba and Hinkelman (2012). The feature that I add is in red.

Criteria	Excellent	Competent	Developing	Unsatisfactory
Quality of Response	Critical and aware: insightful opinions	Understands the issues at hand; informed contribution	Aware of issues; basic understanding	Little demonstration of understanding
Interaction	Leads the discussion	Respectful and appropriate	Uneven style of communication	Sporadic, and tangential, contributions
Frequency	Has attended all sessions	Has attended most sessions	Has attended some sessions	Has sporadically, if ever, attended sessions
Accuracy	No or few grammatical mistakes	Grammatical mistakes rarely impede the communication	Grammatical errors may impede the communication at times	Grammatical mistakes predominate and distort the communication