Social Software in the EFL Writing Classroom:
A Literature Review

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Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the study of English by nonnative speakers living in a non-English speaking environment (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2008). One area of interest is how incorporating computers and Web 2.0 social software into classes may improve EFL students’ language learning and change the face of EFL instruction. For the purposes of this literature review, social software is defined as an online discussion space, specifically a blog or a wiki environment. A blog is a frequently updated online journal that records entries in reverse chronological order (Wu, 2005). A wiki is a collaborative web site where content can be edited collaboratively by users (Parker & Chao, 2007). This literature review includes two strands related to EFL to argue that social software can benefit EFL writers: from computers towards social software in writing classes; and peer collaboration via social software.

Social Software and Writing

Research by Santiago, Nakata, Einwaechter, Marschmeier and Shimada (1996) supports the integration of computers into the writing curriculum of Japanese EFL learners. The authors identified factors that affected integrating technology in to an EFL English writing class and hypothesized these factors may improve student attitudes toward the writing process. A descriptive research survey was administered pre and post semester to 74 high-school EFL students. A semester totaled 15 weeks. The authors found 91% of students enjoyed writing in English and 79% claimed to welcome computer technology in the writing process. However, 91% of students were concerned about their ability to use a keyboard. The percentages were equivalent pre and post semester. The authors conclude that technology can be motivating for
Japanese EFL writers and the challenge of integrating technology into the EFL classroom is students’ perceived ability to use an English keyboard. However, the method of data analysis and comparison of the two surveys are not explained well. Although the conclusion supports integrating technology into the EFL classroom, the validity of the study is weak. Internal validity is weakened because it is not clear how the authors calculated the compared percentages, the survey questions are not included in the report, and details on statistical analysis are not included to support bar-graph figures. Despite shortcomings, the authors’ suggest computers in the writing classes motivate and are welcomed by EFL writers. However, as it is dated, this research does not examine social software. Beyond motivating EFL writers and improving the writing process with word processing, computers now bring social software into the writing class.

Cummings (2004) action research study identifies changes in attitudes and motivation of 50 Japanese university EFL students in an online EFL sophomore level writing class which incorporated a blog. Students were 19-20 years old, 5 females and 45 males. Pretests showed students’ equivalency in writing ability. Students were given a class blog space to post discussions and review each others’ written work. Students read and respond to eight readings over 14 weeks and submit weekly assignments. Students answered two questionnaires about their experiences with and attitudes toward English and writing, and compared their past experience with face-to-face learning to their present online environment through open-ended questions. Questionnaires were given at the beginning of the course and at the end using a confidential online format. Analysis of the initial questionnaire suggests students were not highly motivated to write in English, distrusted the computer mediated class, and preferred face-to-face classes (Cummings, 2004). The second questionnaire showed an improvement in students’ attitudes toward writing, learning English and communicating with each other in an online
environment. However, most students preferred face-to-face interaction with the teacher for feedback purposes (Cummings, 2004). Results suggest online EFL writing classes lead to positive results: students are more motivated and enjoy the writing process more than in a face-to-face setting (Cummings, 2004). This is one isolated case of action research, and the results should not be over generalized as students were not randomly selected, the sample was small and data was subjectively assessed by the actual classroom teacher. However, the results strengthen the argument that social software is a positive addition to the EFL classroom.

In a preliminary investigation, Wu (2005) hypothesized that EFL students in Taiwan would be receptive to the use of blogs in an EFL writing class. Wu (2005) introduced two English classes designated as Class A and Class B, of university students in an engineering program to the use of blogs, taught all students how to set up a blog, and instructed them to use their blog throughout one semester. Class A, of 35 students, was instructed to post homework assignments and Class B, of 16 students, was asked to write seven online journal entries. A descriptive survey was given to all students at the end of the semester to assess the number of postings and reasons for posting. Wu (2005) concluded 76% of students, from both classes, posted fewer than five articles. Interestingly, 85% of students believed posting on the blog was a “good idea” and more than half wanted to continue using a blog in English writing courses (Wu, 2005). Wu’s (2005) preliminary investigation led to further research on peer review discussed in the following section. Wu (2005) does not include the method of data analysis and fails to include an example of survey questions. The samples are not equivalent, which weakens validity. Despite drawbacks, the results are encouraging and support the integration of social software into the EFL classroom.
Wikis, another form of social software, are most commonly used to support writing instruction (Parker & Chao, 2007). Research comparing traditionally written collaborative documents to wiki methodology has been published by De Pedro, Rieradevall, Lopez, Sant, Pino Nunez and Llobera (2006). De Pedro et al., (2006) conducted a mixed methods study to examine the effects of using a wiki, compared to traditional word processing, on communication and cooperative learning between 230 students from two universities in Spain. Quantitative analysis was based on three data collection techniques: individual surveys; time invested per week and type of task; and academic mark achieved. Qualitative data was collected through opinion surveys and interviews. The authors collected data at the end of each term for two years. Students had several group assignments and instruction on using wiki or traditional methods. Traditional methods are defined as creating individual documents on computer, exchanging documents, and meeting face-to-face throughout the editing process. Group size is defined throughout the study as small (2-4 students) or big (15 students). It is not clear how many assignments students completed throughout the study. Quantitative data suggests students devoted less time to writing and editing using wiki methodology, were more satisfied with their collaborative writing experience, preferred to collaborate on a wiki when in a large group, and obtained higher grades than when traditional methods were used (De Pedro et al., 2006). Qualitative data suggests students responded positively to letting others modify their work on a wiki and preferred wikis over traditional methodology for collaborative projects (De Pedro et al., 2006). De Pedro et al., (2006) published their findings in two separately. Part one refers to the qualitative study and part two to the quantitative study. The authors conclude the use of wikis to collaborate on written assignments is superior to traditional methods (De Pedro et al., 2006).
Social software is welcomed by students in EFL writing classrooms and in general writing classrooms social software has improved collaboration between students (De Pedro et al., 2006; Wu, 2005).

Guth’s (2007) two-year action research on wikis in EFL classes at the University of Padua (Italy) qualitatively examined using a private versus a semi-private wiki in two upper level EFL courses. A public wiki is read and edited by anyone but a semi-private wiki requires the course password (Guth, 2007). Initially, Guth (2007) incorporated a wiki and blog in English courses for students to collaborate on writing assignments. Questionnaires and informal interviews showed a hesitancy to write on a semi-public wiki, but enjoyment using a public blog. Initial results led to a more detailed investigation involving 28 EFL graduate students for two semesters. Two groups were formed and assigned to an intercultural course to collaborate with American university students on a telecommunications project using a semi-public wiki or a Web 2.0 course using a public wiki, with blog space. In the second semester, the groups switched classes and wiki formats.

Qualitative data was collected through informal interviews, wiki participation logs, wiki entries, end-of-course questionnaires and academic assessment of written work. Guth (2007) found collaboration was more effective on a public wiki due to decreased hesitancy to edit or create pages and increased writing accuracy. However, students were frustrated by the edits made by course outsiders. A semi-private wiki decreased student’s feelings of pressure to publish and students felt most comfortable with this format. Guth (2007) suggests EFL students would benefit from a wiki format that blends private and semi-private functions.
Peer Review via Social Software

Collaboration between EFL writers can be explored through peer review using social software. Peer review and editing in traditional face-to-face settings has been found to significantly improve writing fluency in EFL writers (Prater & Bermudez, 1993). Social software may have an important role in the future of peer review in the EFL classroom.

Wu (2006) investigated the effects of online blog peer review on the revisions of seven low-intermediate university EFL students in the final year of a Bachelor of English program. The exploratory study involved qualitative analysis and comparison of students’ writing processes over an 18-week (one semester) writing course. Wu (2006) did not state a hypothesis. Students were taught how to set up and use a blog in a separate course at the beginning of the semester. Students produced two pieces of writing on their blog and were instructed to peer edit the first writing assignment and self-edit the second writing assignment. A peer editing session and guide had been given to all students. After the assignments were peer and self-edited on the blog, students were instructed to complete final drafts. An author-designed rubric and rating scale guided analysis of peer editing and revisions. On-line peer feedback did not result in significantly improved written work, but 14% of students substantively revised their work based on peer comments. Self-editing was not found to be effective. Peer-editing resulted in significantly more final revisions, although the revisions did not improve the quality of the work (Wu, 2006). The author concluded EFL learners may benefit from peer review if instructions for peer review are clear and editing guidelines are followed. Due to the limited sample in-depth statistical analysis was not conducted. In addition, the sample size does not provide for external reliability as results can not be generalized. Triangulation in assessment is needed in this research design, as the rubric used is weakened by potential subjective analysis. Further research
is needed to determine how peer review using a blog can improve the quality of written work in the EFL writing classroom.

**Conclusion**

Computers have been used in writing classes successfully in the past and have improved the writing experiences of EFL learners (De Pedro et al., 2006; Goldberg et al., 2003; Santiago et al., 1996). The use of social software in the EFL classroom is a relatively new area of research and it is difficult to find convincing studies on effectiveness. However, studies incorporating social software in EFL writing classes have found blogs and wikis facilitate collaboration, are motivating and can be used in the peer editing process (De Pedro et al., 2006, Wu, 2005; Cummings, 2004). Limited preliminary studies show EFL writers can potentially benefit from social software. Future research is needed to investigate beyond writing; to examine the effect of social software on EFL learners’ gains in vocabulary acquisition, grammar acquisition and fluency.
References


