

Fostering Independent Language Learning with Wikipedia

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Abstract

Wikipedia, an online, collaboratively-authored encyclopedia, has quickly become one of the most popular destinations on the World Wide Web. While Wikipedia is now well known as an easily-accessible resource for basic information on any number of topics in any number of languages, it can also serve as the conduit for a number of language learning opportunities. Most readily, Wikipedia can serve as an ever-growing source of linguistic input, both at a level intended for native speakers and, in the case of English, at a modified level for English language learners. Beyond its usefulness as a receptive source of information in the target language, Wikipedia also offers a range of opportunities for learners to engage in the self-directed production of language for an authentic audience. This paper seeks to provide both a rationale for, and an overview of, several ways that Wikipedia can be utilised to foster independent language learning.

Introduction

Wikipedia, 'the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit', is a collaboratively-authored online encyclopedia available at <http://www.wikipedia.org> that exists as a wiki, a type of website that allows for instant online editing ('Wikipedia:About,' 2008). While there are a great number of wiki websites available on the World Wide Web, Wikipedia is arguably the most well known wiki around the world. Since its inception in 2001, Wikipedia has grown exponentially in terms of the languages in which it is accessible, number of entries created and maintained, and in its popularity on the World Wide Web. Indeed, as of April 30, 2008, Wikipedia hosted a total of more than 10,000,000 articles in over 250 different languages ('Wikipedia:About,' 2008), and ranked among the top ten most visited websites in the world ('Alexa Top 500 Sites,' n.d.). Though Wikipedia is an extremely popular online encyclopedic source, it has yet to be fully embraced by many members of the academic community because of a perceived lack of reliability (Shareski & Winkler, 2005). Interestingly though, a 2005 study for the journal *Nature* found that the number of errors in a typical Wikipedia entry was not significantly more than those found in an online version of *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Giles, 2005). Regardless of the continuing debate over its reliability, the fact remains that Wikipedia's widespread popularity and expansive collection of entries in many languages creates a range of opportunities for learners to engage in self-guided language learning.

This paper seeks to provide an overview of several ways that Wikipedia can be utilised to promote self-directed language learning both as a receptive reading source and as an outlet for written production. In both cases, a rationale will be outlined and several possible ideas for largely self-guided activities will be offered. It is hoped that such an overview may better inform language instructors of the great potential offered when using sites like Wikipedia while, at the same time, increasing awareness to new issues raised when doing so.

Wikipedia for Receptive Reading

Undoubtedly the most immediate way that language learners can take advantage of the surge in popularity of Wikipedia is by utilising this free online encyclopedia as a source of reading material in the target language. As Wikipedia's

popularity has grown in recent years, so has its massive number of entries on a wide breadth of topics. The English site alone boasted 2,353,058 articles as of April 30, 2008, with more and more entries being added every day ('Wikipedia:About,' 2008). This massive collection of information creates a rich repository of authentic written output which language learners can take advantage of as a source of reading input.

Use of the World Wide Web as a resource for exposure to target language reading material is not new and, in fact, has been an emerging trend in language teaching for several years (Aebbersold, McDonald, & Morgan, 2006; Anderson, 2003; Konishi, 2003; Leu, 2002). The growing incorporation of Web-based reading materials in language instruction has been brought about by several factors: increased access, ever-increasing content, and the belief that such use increases learner motivation and the overall effectiveness of reading instruction (Konishi, 2003). As Anderson (2003) importantly points out though, with the increase in web-based reading comes the need to sufficiently train learners in how to effectively read online as not all of the traditional reading strategies may be appropriate or sufficient in online environments. In fact, in a study that examined the online reading strategy use of second language readers, Anderson found an increase in the reported use of problem solving strategies, such as adjusting reading rate and rereading difficult text, while support strategies, such as taking notes and using reference materials, were used less frequently. These findings seem to confirm Coiro's (2003) view that 'electronic texts introduce new supports as well as new challenges that can have a great impact on an individual's ability to comprehend what he or she reads' (para. 1).

Given the relatively consistent encyclopedic format followed by Wikipedia, it seems that it can serve a unique role as a bridge between traditional, print-based reading and online reading because its format is more directly based on that of a printed text than most other websites, yet it retains many of the newly established conventions of online texts. Furthermore, as Wikipedia entries typically contain a system of keyword hyperlinks, it allows users to easily access more information about unknown words or more deeply explore interconnected topics. Such features may be extremely beneficial to language learners who, once introduced to the nature of the encyclopedic rhetorical style and hyperlinked structure, may be better suited to manage their own self-directed reading of Wikipedia articles of interest.

While the English Wikipedia site is intended for native speakers, advanced level learners are not the only ones who can benefit from reading on Wikipedia. Though not as well known as the native English site, Wikipedia has also maintained a 'Simple English Wikipedia' for several years with approximately 28,000 articles available as of April 30, 2008 ('Main Page - Simple English Wikipedia', 2008). The articles on the Simple English Wikipedia are largely written using only the 1000 most common English words and a simple grammar ('Wikipedia:Simple English Wikipedia', 2008). Another useful feature of Wikipedia is that language learners can most likely access a great deal of related background information on any article they are reading in the target language on their own native language's version. This easily-accessed supplemental material in one's native language may be of great value in fostering learner autonomy as self-directed learners can readily monitor their comprehension of the material and related vocabulary on their own.

There are undoubtedly countless ways that Wikipedia can be used by language learners to encourage independent reading. One of the most obvious is using Wikipedia as a source for basic research in the target language. Learners could simply choose a topic of interest, research it on Wikipedia, and report on it through a writing assignment, blog entry, or presentation. This research could range from a simple overview of any topic to a critical review of a Wikipedia entry itself, to a comparison between one's own native language version of an entry to one in the target language, depending on the context and learners' background. By being able to search for and select a topic of individual interest, learners are made responsible for determining their own target language reading material and may be better able to choose authentic

material that is personally relevant and meaningful. Another way to utilise Wikipedia's target language content is to make use of any of the information displayed on the frequently updated main page. The main page typically contains a featured article of the day, a list of articles connected to topics recently in the news, a number of interesting 'did you know...' informational tidbits, a listing of famous events for that date, and a featured picture. Language learners could follow these daily items and report them to the class or use them as a springboard for deeper investigations or discussions on current events. Similarly, language learners could follow the displayed link to a random article on Wikipedia which, again, might serve well as a new topic of research or discussion, or the start of a new line of investigation. Clearly, Wikipedia presents many opportunities for language learners to capitalise on the growing body of content for target language reading input in ways that may serve to increase learner motivation and contemplative interaction with the material as they are more directly involved in deciding which authentic materials they wish to access and read.

Wikipedia for Written Production

Although many language learners and instructors are likely to be familiar with accessing information on Wikipedia, probably very few have considered contributing to the site themselves. Yet this avenue for written production in the target language provides not only an excellent opportunity to hone one's skills as a writer, it also coincides with one of the stated aims of Wikipedia as a collaboratively-written encyclopedia that is constantly evolving thanks to contributions from volunteers. Indeed, the site's own introduction provides an open invitation to all who wish to help Wikipedia continue to grow:

Don't be afraid to edit - anyone can edit almost any page, and we encourage you to be bold! Find something that can be improved, whether content, grammar or formatting, and make it better.

You can't break Wikipedia. Anything can be fixed or improved later. So go ahead, edit an article and help make Wikipedia the best information source on the Internet! ('Wikipedia:Introduction,' 2008)

While the possibility of contributing written material in the target language on Wikipedia may be daunting for many language learners, there are a range of ways that learners can contribute and many reasons why the prospect should be considered.

Producing written work on the Internet has been shown to exhibit several qualities beneficial to independent language learning: it allows for communication with an authentic audience, it allows for variation in content, and it is conducive to collaboration (Davey, 2001; Kitao, 2002, Kitao & Kitao, 2001; Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997). Of these, the authenticity of the written communication is one of the key attributes of production on the Web. Knowing that their writing has the potential to be seen by many people beyond just their instructor works to heighten the meaningfulness of the process for language learners and has been shown to increase motivation (Davey, 2001; McDonald, 2007; Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997). Interaction via the Internet may also have a positive effect on promoting learner independence (Hoshi, 2002; Pinkman, 2005) and collaboration is central to contributing to Wikipedia. Once learners are introduced to ways that they can easily and effectively communicate with others via the Internet, the potential for them to continue doing so on their own is greatly increased. It is important to note though that the computer skills being used when producing written work for the Internet should be sufficiently explained at the outset. The development of computer skills is yet another attribute of utilising the World Wide Web for learner production (Kitao, 2001; McDonald, 2007; Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997), and its growing importance should not be overlooked in relation to studying English.

Wikipedia seems particularly well-suited as a potential outlet for language learner writing on the Internet because, unlike many kinds of web-based writing, it aims at following a consistent rhetorical style across its varied collection of topics and languages and allows for nearly any topic of interest to be included. Once learners are familiar with the encyclopedic style of writing, perhaps first in their native languages, and the guidelines that Wikipedia provides for those who wish to contribute written work, they can work to adhere to the style and guidelines aided by the vast collection of models that already exist. The system of continual review, in which volunteer editors constantly patrol Wikipedia's entries, also ensures that language learners' written work will be checked, refined, and verified by others and may be of assurance to those language learners leery of posting information to Wikipedia in the target language on their own. Here, too, it is important to keep in mind the nature of Wikipedia as an encyclopedia which encourages contributors 'to be bold' ('Wikipedia:Introduction,' 2008) in adding information currently lacking; Wikipedia entries can always be changed and improved.

There are a whole host of ways in which language learners can independently produce written work in the target language on Wikipedia once familiar with the encyclopedic rhetorical style and the site's policies and guidelines. These ways range from minor edits of existing entries to the full-scale creation of entirely new entries. Importantly, the subject matter which the learners choose to pursue is entirely open, creating a unique opportunity for self-directed learners to tailor the focus of their own learning to their own interests, background, and areas of expertise. On the smaller side of the production spectrum, learners can simply note mistakes, errors, or information missing on the discussion page of any article or take on correcting these minor problems themselves. If the learner is ready to become more involved, there are always articles that can be further expanded or updated to reflect recent events. Another possibility would be to translate an article existing only in either the target language or one's native language to the other language version of Wikipedia. Finally, setting out to create a new article represents the most ambitious written production possible on Wikipedia. The great range of possibilities in which one can contribute to Wikipedia ensures that learners of all backgrounds and levels can find some way in which to produce written work in the target language on Wikipedia. A summary of these ways, in addition to the receptive ways discussed earlier, is included in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the Various Ways of Using Wikipedia with Language Learners

Receptive	Productive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a topic of interest and read about it. • Compare one’s native language version of an article with the one in the target language. • Conduct a critical review of an entry within one’s field of expertise. • Read the featured article of the day. • Read the ‘In the news’ selections. • Read the ‘Did you know...’ titbits. • Follow the historical items included in the ‘On this day...’ section. • Examine the featured picture of the day and its related entry. • Follow the ‘Random article’ link to a mysterious entry. • Check out the Simple English Wikipedia. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alert others to problems with current articles. • Help verify articles as written correctly according to Wikipedia’s guidelines. • Clean up articles with noted issues. • Perform a minor edit of an article. • Update an article to reflect recent changes. • Expand an article. • Combine related articles or cross link them when appropriate. • Translate an article from one’s native language to the target language or vice versa if it does not yet exist in either language version. • Start a new article on a topic in which the learner has unique insight, knowledge, or expertise. • Answer a request for a new article on a specified topic. <p style="font-size: small; margin-top: 10px;">See ‘Wikipedia: Contributing to Wikipedia’ at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Contributing_to_Wikipedia for more ways to contribute to Wikipedia.</p>

Conclusion

The growing worldwide popularity and sheer quantity of information written in numerous languages available for free on the World Wide Web has helped make Wikipedia a potentially intriguing medium for language learners to both read and write in the target language. This paper has sought to provide a reasoned rationale for the potential value of both receptive and productive uses of Wikipedia and an outline of various ways that self-directed language learners may go about doing so. Ultimately it is hoped that more instructors and learners will consider the great potential for independent language learning offered by Wikipedia and begin to establish a more thorough research base of the most effective ways to utilise this innovative resource.

The Author

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