

**[Forum Article]****Wikipedia Projects for Language Learning**

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**Abstract**

Wikipedia has quickly become a well-known source for information about a wide range of topics of interest and importance to people around the world. While Wikipedia is now familiar to many language learners as a potential source for information in the target language, it also offers a range of opportunities for such learners to engage in actual production of the target language for an authentic audience by creating original entries or by adding to existing articles. This paper seeks to provide a rationale for the use of Wikipedia projects in language classes, an overview of the basic steps involved in such a project, a link to an actual sample of student work produced, and a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses qualitatively observed. Although several challenges were presented throughout the Wikipedia project detailed in this paper, it is believed that such projects can serve to reinforce academic research and writing skills, increase motivation, make language learning more meaningful, foster technological skills and contribute to a publicly-available information source with an authentic global audience. Ideas for future directions of Wikipedia projects are offered and a call for further research to more precisely determine the effectiveness of such projects is made.

**Introduction**

Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>), an online, collaboratively-authored encyclopedia, is now well known and widely accessed around the world as a potential source of information about a wide range of topics available in a host of languages. According to the site's statistics as of June 1, 2007, there were more than 5,300,000 total entries available in over 100 different languages with 1,827,183 articles in English ("Wikipedia:About," 2007), and these figures continue to increase on a daily basis. As the name implies, Wikipedia exists as a wiki, a website that allows for instant online editing, and it relies on volunteers to contribute to and edit its growing number of encyclopedic entries. Indeed, one of the most famous aspects about Wikipedia is that it promotes itself as "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit" (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2007, main page heading) because nearly all of the entries can be edited by anyone with an Internet connection and web browser. While the relative open and fluid nature of the information available on Wikipedia has led some members of the academic community to be reluctant to accept it due to a perceived lack of reliability (Shareski & Winkler, 2005), its current role as a popular initial entry point for less scholarly research

cannot be denied and its potential implications for teaching and learning should not be overlooked.

One such implication relates directly to the teaching and learning of second or foreign languages. As Wikipedia is now familiar to many second and foreign language learners, it can quite easily be used to access authentic reading content of interest or importance in the target language online. In fact, learners will most likely find that Internet search engine results on a wide variety of topics will list Wikipedia entries prominently. While Wikipedia may be well known to language learners as an authentic source of information through receptive reading, the fact that it exists online as collaboratively-authored wiki offers the possibility for language learners to utilize this popular Web site to actively produce written English as well.

This paper provides an overview of the author's integration of a Wikipedia project in a foreign language class at a Japanese university. The Wikipedia project described is a multi-step course project in which the Japanese EFL students utilized their skills as researchers and writers of academic English while working to create an original Wikipedia entry. Although the particular Wikipedia project discussed was incorporated into a short-term, intensive-English program for EFL learners at an intermediate level of proficiency in a Japanese university, it is believed to be highly adaptable to a variety of teaching and learning contexts. This paper seeks to describe how Wikipedia projects may be used to assist in language learning, discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses qualitatively observed from actual use, and explore the potential future directions of such projects.

## **Rationale**

Second and foreign language teachers have included project-based instruction in their repertoire of approaches as a way to smoothly integrate content into language lessons since the rise of content-based instruction in the field (Stoller, 1997). Put succinctly, project-based instruction is an approach which allows for the development of integrated skills in a meaningful way as learners work through multiple steps toward an achievable goal or final product (Moss, 1997; Moss & Van Duzer, 1998). Moss and Van Duzer (1998) outline various benefits of project-based language instruction: it supports authentic use of language for communication, it reinforces organizational skills, and it can draw on individual strengths and learning styles while encouraging teamwork and cooperation. In addition, Stoller (1997) notes that project-based instruction is advantageous because it is student-centered and may increase student motivation.

Web-based projects, in particular, have been shown to demonstrate a multitude of positive language learning attributes: they foster communication with an authentic audience, they are flexible in subject matter, and they foster collaborative learning (Davey, 2001; Kitao, 2002; Kitao & Kitao, 2001; Warshauer & Whittaker, 1997). Of these, the potential global reach offered web-based projects may be of one of the biggest draws, especially in EFL contexts where learners may not have many opportunities to interact with native speakers. This authentic outlet also serves to make working with web-based projects intrinsically meaningful to the students who realize that the project has a final product with real world exposure that can extend beyond the traditional audience of

classmates and teacher. The relationship to the real world that is somewhat uniquely provided through the use of web-based projects also serves to increase student motivation (Davey, 2001; Warshauer & Whittaker, 1997). Web-based projects are also motivating to many younger learners today because the technology involved is seen as familiar and interesting. The use of this technology, too, promotes the development of essential computer skills (Kitao, 2001; Warshauer & Whittaker, 1997) and the accessible nature of the Internet may serve to encourage increased learner independence (Hoshi, 2002; Pinkman, 2005).

Given the general benefits provided by project-based instruction and the more specific attributes of web-based projects, the author concluded that a project in which students would create an original entry for Wikipedia might serve to maximize these benefits for the particular learners involved, a group of 8 third-year, intermediate-level students attending an intensive English course offered by Kwansai Gakuin University's School of Science and Technology in Japan. The course is offered yearly in summer and attracts approximately 60 students from all scientific fields who stay at a university-owned and operated Sengari Camp and study in groups of 8-10 with a native-speaking instructor for a total of 5 days after an initial 2 days of class on campus. As the students in each group are drawn different academic majors, a main goal of this course is for the students to utilize their specific scientific skills and interests while improving their English skills. The author decided that a Wikipedia project in which the students would create a Wikipedia entry for the site of the course itself, Sengari Camp, would serve as an innovative way to capitalize on students' existing knowledge, skill sets, and interests while fostering basic research skills, as well as those of academic reading and writing in English. A final group presentation of the project was added to meet other course objectives such as the promotion of spoken communication and presentation skills.

## **Project Procedure**

As mentioned previously, this Wikipedia project was implemented over the course of the seven days of the intensive English course in a multi-step process established and guided by the instructor but fundamentally left in student control. The initial steps were performed during the first two days of the course, the search for resources and formulation of hypotheses were conducted during a one month break between meetings, and the final steps were completed during the five days of the course on location at Sengari Camp. Overall, approximately 18 hours of class time was dedicated to the project, with an additional 5 hours of work done outside of class.

The initial steps were largely aimed at familiarizing the students with Wikipedia and determining the specific interests that the students wished to pursue while working on the project. At first the students were asked about their previous experiences with Wikipedia and all 8 students responded that they had accessed Wikipedia both in their native language, Japanese, and in English for a variety of purposes. Next, the students were directed to browse several Wikipedia entries and to note the kinds of information included about the topics, the manner in which the information is conveyed, and the rhetorical pattern and tone used. The students were then directed to the Wikipedia entry about the students' university and the information presented was discussed. The teacher

then pointed out that the hypertext link for Sengari Camp included in the entry was red, a color code which signifies that the linked entry does not yet exist. The goal of the Wikipedia project, to create the Wikipedia entry for Sengari Camp, was then presented to the students and the steps involved in the project were briefly outlined.

After the necessary background information and overall objectives were established, the students began brainstorming ideas for areas of information they felt should be included in the entry about Sengari Camp. After an exhaustive list of possibilities was collected from the group, the students then narrowed the ideas to those that were most interesting yet practical to complete. The students were then told to search for resources related to their particular areas of interest at the school library and online for homework. Each student was instructed to locate at least two resources in either English or Japanese; if it was determined that substantial resources could not be found for that area of interest, the student was asked to choose a different aspect to investigate. During the subsequent step, each student was paired with another who had expressed a similar area of interest. For the final step of the first part of the project, which was to be completed during the one month break in the course, the students were instructed to read through the resources that they had found on their areas of interest and compile a list of what they expected to actually find on site at Sengari Camp.

Upon arrival at the site of the camp, the students continued their work on the project by gathering the information necessary to adequately write the entry. While a few pairs of students conducted interviews with members of the camp staff and teaching faculty, other pairs inspected the facilities and surrounding environment, taking notes and pictures of distinguishing features to include in the Wikipedia entry. After the students had gathered all of the information necessary for each section of the entry, they then began logically organizing the information to form the written entry. As the first drafts of each section were completed, they were peer reviewed by other members of the group who made comments on the drafts and offered suggestions about aspects that warranted improvement. After revising their work, the students then began posting their information on the blank entry for Sengari Camp on Wikipedia by logging in, one pair at a time, under a single, shared group account created previously by the instructor, clicking the 'edit this page' tab at the top of the entry, and copying in their revised written work. Aspects related to achieving the desired standardized layout and style for the entry were achieved through trial and error while limited instruction and assistance concerning basic wiki functions was offered by the teacher. Finally, after the pairs had posted the information related to each section, final style and layout issues were resolved and the entry was deemed by the group as complete. Though not directly related to the process of producing the Wikipedia entry itself, the students also had to prepare a professional, 15-minute group presentation on the project to present to the other groups and instructors who had participated in the same intensive English course.

## **Project Results**

The results of the students' work on the Wikipedia project detailed above are viewable on the Wikipedia entry they created at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sengari\\_Camp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sengari_Camp). The sections that the students chose to include in the entry were the basic details about the

camp, the history of the camp and plans for future development, more specific details about the location, facilities, and visitors, and information about the plant life to be found on site. Only two print sources were actually used to support the students' writing for the entry and these sources are included in the references. An external link to the official homepage for Sengari Camp was also added by the students following standard Wikipedia formatting. Additionally, the students' final presentation about the project was successfully completed on the final day of the course.

## **Discussion**

Overall, a number of strengths and weaknesses of the Wikipedia project were qualitatively observed by the author. In terms of positive attributes observed, it is important with an experimental project of this nature to underscore the fact that the students were able to successfully meet the rather challenging goals of creating the Wikipedia entry and presenting their work within the relatively small amount of class time allotted. However, perhaps the biggest strength of the project was that a majority of the students involved demonstrated excitement toward the opportunity to publish an actual entry on Wikipedia. More objective support for this claim can be found in the written responses on course evaluations completed by the students on the final day of class. When asked, "Did you like your group project? Why or why not?" on the written course evaluation, all 8 students involved expressed a favorable view toward the project. Reasons offered for these positive responses were that students found the project to be "interesting", "exciting", and "a good experience" while others noted that they "like research" and were motivated by "serious" nature of the project. Many students also responded that they were proud to see the substantive result of their work and felt a sense of accomplishment. One student further noted, "We could encounter students who is [sic] not the same major to [sic] me and work together." Indeed, the students were observed to work together very well, both in pairs and as a group, while collaborating throughout the project, often with little or no direct guidance or supervision needed from the instructor.

The project was also seen to enhance the students' language and computer skills. In terms of language learning objectives, there were several benefits observed. First, the students were able to utilize and refine the critical skills of process writing: gathering sources and conducting research, organizing information logically in English, peer revision, and editing. Also, the final steps of the project also served to hone the students' presentation skills for discussing scientific topics. In terms of computer skills enhanced by the project, the students learned directly how to post information and pictures on a collaboratively-authored website, how to adjust for formatting and style concerns on such a site, and how to track changes made on wikis.

While the Wikipedia project demonstrated numerous benefits, it was not without its problems. First, as mentioned previously, the students, working in pairs, were able to choose the different aspects that they would research before camp, investigate on site, and then write about in English for the Wikipedia entry. Although the instructor had anticipated that the students would naturally select scientific aspects about camp to research in line with their academic majors, this was not the case. Of the four pairs of students, only one pair chose to research the plant life at Sengari camp; the other three

pairs chose to research basic details about the camp, its history, and the location and facilities. While these areas are all legitimate aspects to include in the entry, they somewhat negated efforts to activate the students' scientific interests and skills and to take advantage of the unique natural location of the camp. Furthermore, due to the specific aspects that the students selected to research and the limited English resources available, the students were unable to find adequate resources in English. As a result, all pairs spent a great deal of time translating information from the few relevant Japanese resources into English. Although the students never complained about this aspect, and translation of source information may indeed be a worthwhile skill for such students, it was a painstaking process that detracted from the overall enjoyment of the project.

Another unanticipated area of weakness with this project was the instructor's less than thorough understanding of the official guidelines for contributing to Wikipedia at the outset and, therefore, the inability on the part of the students to adhere to these guidelines throughout. Although it is quite simple for anyone to create or edit entries on Wikipedia, the guidelines for doing so in accordance with the site's policies are complicated and volunteer editors are constantly patrolling the site to enforce the guidelines by adding warnings to disputed entries, particularly new ones. The sudden appearance of such warnings created confusion for the students who were in control of posting their own information on the site but occasionally came across inserted messages without completely understanding their significance or how to correct the disputed issues. Four specific areas of the guidelines proved especially problematic during the execution of this project and, as a result of lack of preparation and time constraints, were never correctly addressed:

1. Wikipedia discourages the posting of original research ("Wikipedia:Five pillars," 2007) so third-party references in English were needed but not attainable. The relevant resources that the students did manage to find were in Japanese and, therefore, should have been quoted in Japanese, translated into English, and cited properly as such. The correct citation format for foreign language sources should have been taught to the students.
2. Wikipedia also discourages articles of local interest ("Wikipedia:Places of local interest," 2007). It can be argued that the topic of this project, Sengari Camp, is only of local interest although it has since been categorized as a visitor attraction in Japan ("Sengari Camp," 2007).
3. Wikipedia, as an encyclopedia, encourages a neutral point of view in its entries ("Wikipedia:Five pillars," 2007). The students' descriptions were not neutral at times, often employing colorful adjectives, and the neutrality of the entry was quickly labeled as disputed by a volunteer editor. Unfortunately, the limited class time dedicated to revising the entry meant that an adequate primer about writing from a neutral point of view was not feasible.
4. All but one of the pictures taken by the group and uploaded to Wikipedia were soon deleted although the copyright permission tags were believed to be completed correctly. The pictures had to be uploaded a second time by the instructor.

While these areas presented unforeseen obstacles to the successful completion of the project, most, if not all of these problems could have been better handled and largely corrected if more time was available. All in all, it was observed that due to the given time constraints of the course, the students did not have enough time to adequately work on carefully crafting their parts of the entries, and as a result, they did not make it through enough of the revision process. The lack of sufficient time for revision led to a final product that was in some ways incomplete.

## **Future Directions**

Although the Wikipedia project discussed in this paper may not be immediately applicable to all teaching and learning contexts, it is meant to serve as an illustrative example of the potential benefits offered by such a project and as a warning about some of the pitfalls that may be encountered. While many of the problems such as those discussed previously may be unavoidable when working on a project of this nature, one of the key aspects that makes working with Wikipedia an appealing idea for language teachers to consider is stated on the site's introduction to newcomers:

"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," 2007)

As Wikipedia continues to expand, there too seems to be a limitless potential for future Wikipedia projects to capitalize on a wide range of students' interests and unique knowledge while fostering numerous pedagogical benefits. Indeed, there seems to be any number of ways that learners may contribute to Wikipedia outlined at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Contributing\\_to\\_Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Contributing_to_Wikipedia). These possibilities range from simple edits of existing information or formatting, to creating new entries as presented in the Wikipedia project described in this paper. When considering a Wikipedia project that may be better suited to another particular teaching and learning context, it is important to think about topics for entries that will be interesting and academically relevant to the learners involved, and to which they can contribute information currently lacking on Wikipedia. Possible topics may include information about their school or university, hometowns or geographic regions, aspects of their native country's society and culture, or even student-generated ideas. There are undoubtedly many topics about which any learner or group of learners will be able to share their unique knowledge and insight with the world.

## **Conclusion**

Wikipedia projects may provide a range of opportunities for language learners to engage in actual production of the target language for an authentic audience through the creation of their own original entries or by adding to entries currently lacking sufficient detail. It is believed that the project-oriented process of contributing to Wikipedia can serve to

increase motivation and make language learning meaningful while, at the same time, achieving countless language learning objectives, developing important technological skills and adding to the public knowledge base. Although Wikipedia projects, like many multi-step web-based projects aimed at fostering authentic communication, may present challenges in planning and execution, it is believed such projects should be considered by language educators as a novel approach to accomplishing course objectives when appropriate. Clearly, more in-depth research is needed before any substantial claims about the effectiveness of this approach to web-based project language learning can be made.

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