Incorporating wikis into the teaching of English writing

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Abstract
Many teachers of English as a second language (ESL) have begun to perceive the place of collaborative writing in the teaching of writing. With the development of Internet-based resources such as blogs and forums, learners have begun to adapt to online writing and to use tools that supports such activity. Teachers are beginning to perceive the value of this and consequently such resources have begun to be incorporated into the teaching of ESL writing by getting students - as yet, mainly on an individual basis - to write e-mails, express their ideas on forums, and create web pages. An extension to these individual writing activities involves the incorporation of Internet resources into cooperative writing, where more than one learner produces a text jointly. The current study explores these issues in the use of wikis, and how wikis may be utilised in a group writing task. The paper describes a case study in a Hong Kong post-secondary institute where over the course of a month, groups of learners produced a report based on survey data they had collected. The outcome of the project was generally successful - in that groups produced more cogent documents than had previous groups who had worked in a pen-and-paper format. Nonetheless, a number of issues concerning the running of the project arose that need to be addressed for collaborative writing with wikis to be successfully implemented. While the study took place in a post-secondary institute, the use of wikis holds good across secondary level forms, with implications for their use at different levels discussed and elaborated.

Keywords
English as a second language, writing skills in English, wikis, collaborative learning
Introduction

Collaborative writing has recently been receiving considerable attention in terms of its applicability in developing students’ writing skills (Loudermilk & Hern, 2006). One benefit of collaborative writing is that it motivates students to write because of the cooperation and brainstorming that is involved. Various educators argue (see, for example, Mak et al., 2007) that through interacting, students can learn from each other; this encourages them to contribute more detailed ideas than does individual work (Mak et al, 2004; Goodwin-Jones, 2003).

A recent computer-based resource to facilitate collaborative work is the wiki. According to Leuf & Cunningham (2001), the word “wiki” is derived from a Hawaiian word “wiki wiki” which means “fast, quick; to hurry, to hasten”. It is used to describe something which can be both formal and informal, with a sense of being speedy. Cunningham (2001) defines the concept of the wiki as a “freely expandable collection of interlinked Web pages”. A wiki is therefore a hypertext system for storing and modifying information - a database with each page being easily editable by any user through a standard Web browser.

The features of a wiki offer the potential to incorporate it into educational contexts. These key features include a user-friendly interface for editing the content, history tracking, defining the size of authoring groups, and a non-linear structure for editing.

In order to investigate the issue of incorporating wiki into the teaching of writing - in particular the teaching of survey report writing - a project was carried out in April 2007 with a group of students (aged 18) studying for the Foundation Diploma of Hospitality Studies at a post-secondary institute in Hong Kong. As will be detailed later, however, the use of wikis is by no means restricted to the age group in the current study, with their use extending to lower secondary school as well as upper primary levels.
Background

Constructivists such as Piaget have long argued that individuals are, from birth on, actively involved in constructing personal meaning, with their personal understanding arising from their experiences. Von Glasersfeld (1992) suggests that constructivism involves putting learning into practice by presenting issues, concepts and tasks in the form of problems to be explored in dialogue. He claims that teachers should not simply tell students what concepts to construct or how to construct them but that, ideally, students should discover concepts for themselves and develop their own understanding. The concept of the wiki is therefore in line with constructivist perspectives; through interacting with each other, students can construct their own knowledge bases (see Achterman, 2006a).

Wikis have great potential as educational tools as they provide a format for the collaborative construction of knowledge (Achterman, ibid). Students can add or delete content on the wiki; some of these changes reflect newly-added ideas or feedback to others’ ideas or reflections on others’ work. In addition to the collaborative side of students editing their own wiki content, teachers can also participate by posting comments or evaluations of students’ work. Both teachers and students can therefore collaborate to create content throughout the learning process, as all parties are effectively contributors.

One significant feature which enables students to enrich the content is that of a non-linear structure, which allow for the insertion of multimedia content, e.g. photos, sounds and hyperlinks. The possibility of being able to add in more than simply linear matters means that the content can be enriched and expanded through linking up peripherals such as visuals to the central idea.

Wikis can also provide a platform for group projects or problem-solving scenarios in that they can be used to model and facilitate the exchange of ideas - something which is much harder to accomplish individually. In Achterman's (ibid) words, the explicit structure of a wiki in the inquiry process can provide meaningful interaction both with each other and with the data students are uncovering. In other words, there will be interaction between students, content and also teachers, with the collaborative environment providing an opportunity for students to learn how to work with others and how to create a community.

McPherson (2006) discusses the relationship between wikis and developments in students’ writing. He suggests that wikis provide flexibility and authenticity in that they allow a range of users to log in at the same time, all of whom are able to view or edit the work, contribute or upload new material.

Authenticity comes in part from a wiki’s audiences. If the wiki is open to the public, anyone anywhere in the world can access it. Because of this potential audience, students may consequently be more enthusiastic in writing their work since they know that their work may well be viewed by a larger audience, not only by their teachers and their peers (see Achterman, 2006b; Richardson, 2006, on the value of blogs).

While wikis may be able to enhance students’ writing experience and further develop their writing skills, adequate preparation needs to be in place before applying wikis to the teaching of writing. McPherson (2006) suggests that teachers need to equip students...
with the skills of negotiation, cooperation, collaboration, and respect for others' work and thoughts. As students will be involved in a considerable amount of interaction with group mates, they need to learn how to get along with others in the writing process. Once students are equipped with these essential skills, they will then hopefully develop a deeper understanding and there will be strong bonds among and between their group mates. Teachers need to carefully consider therefore the size of any authoring group. Another issue is that while bringing in audiences from all over the world can raise the authenticity of a writing project, this may cause disturbance as such 'outsiders' will not have received any prior training or briefing and may therefore edit content in undesirable off-task ways. To this end many wikis need to be 'closed' - that is, in the first instance, only accessible to the larger community (the class, for example) that is actually developing the project together. This is the case with the wiki in the current study.

In discussing how to incorporate wikis into education, Leuf & Cunningham (2001) state that a wiki can be the outcome of collaboration between a group of different parties. These may variously be the authors, purpose agents, central users, peripheral users, site designers, developers, administrators and support staff. Each role will have their parts to play in the construction and operations of the wikis. Authors will tend to be mainly students who add material, find new material, and connect related material; they will be the main contributors to the wikis. At the same time, it may nonetheless be an idea to assign some students as group leaders, or 'central users' so that these students can better define the wiki space structurally. Some students may not be actively involved in adding content to the wiki and may just view material but not contribute anything; i.e., these will be 'peripheral users'.

'Purpose agents' will tend to be teachers or instructors who give a purpose to the learning, so that students have goals or targets to work towards. Teachers' duties as such will be to encourage proper usage and specify usage context. They need initially to create a set of pages in the wiki to support certain activities - e.g. group pages and discussion pages for students to post content and comments. Some teachers may also serve as site designers in that they will tweak the look and feel of the wiki site, perhaps editing the template, to better suit the needs of the users.

On other issues, but related to the concept of open access referred to above, Borja (2006) discusses the importance of security and privacy of wikis. He suggests that while there is no perfect method for monitoring all posts on a wiki, one thing that teachers can do is to cultivate a sense of ownership of the wiki among students. He gives the analogy of posting inappropriate content in a wiki as being similar to writing on the school wall. As a member of the group, everyone has the responsibility for monitoring and protecting the school's reputation.

As the potential of wikis have become apparent, their use in L1 and L2 learning have increased substantially (see, http://www.teachersfirst.com/content/wiki/wikiideas2.cfm). At the adult level, Kittle and Hicks (2006), describe their experiences at an American university, using wikis to improve peer collaboration as teachers and as collaborative writers themselves. Hodgson (2006) discusses the use of a wiki for teachers in the American National Writing Project [Note 1] as a way to share and collaborate on the Six Word Stories venture (http://mistereye.podbean.com/
In the field of L2 language learning, a number of innovative projects using wikis have been initiated. Godwin-Jones (2003) discusses the uses of wikis for writing group ESL projects. In Hong Kong, Mak & Coniam (in press), discuss the innovative use of wikis by Year 7 ESL learners in a secondary school in Hong Kong. In this project, students used wikis as a collaborative writing platform to produce - over a period of a month and with minimal input and support from their teachers - an authentic description of different facilities and features of their school, with the final draft being a printed brochure of their school to be actually distributed to parents.

**Background to the current project**

The current study extends the concept of using wikis in the ESL context in Hong Kong. Building on Mak & Coniam's (in press) notion of authentic purpose, the current study describes post-secondary students using wikis to write a survey report. Students were enrolled on a Foundation Diploma of Hospitality Studies, studying Vocational English and Communication Skills. One of the key skills in this course was formal business communication where students were required to learn to write in various business English genres - reports, letters of enquiry, application letters and resumes. The aim of the current project was to familiarize students with one Business English writing genre - the survey report. The report was based around simulated data, requiring students to evaluate the English programme in the institution at which they were studying, and to make recommendations based on data provided.

**The Hong Kong school system**

In Hong Kong, students currently follow a seven-year secondary pattern of schooling, with secondary schools graded according to the ability of a school's intake - generally at the beginning of Secondary 1 (S1, Year 7) - when students are placed in a school that best fits their ability on the basis of their primary school results. There are currently three bands of ability with each band covering approximately one-third of the student ability range: Band 1 schools take the most able and Band 3 the least able [Note 2].

Hong Kong's major public examination is the Hong Kong Certificate of Education (HKCE) examination, administered by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) at the end of Secondary 5 (Grade 11). In 2006, the candidature for English language was in the region of 80,000 (HKEAA, 2006). [Note 3]

After the Year 11 HKCE examination, about 38% of the Year 11 cohort continue on to study in Years 12 and 13, with approximately 25% going to vocational education institutions (http://www.edb.gov.hk/) [Note 4].

**The project**

The project described in this paper was carried out in April 2007 during the Easter holiday with a group of 29 students studying for their Foundation Diploma (Hospitality) at the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (IVE). There were 13 males and 16 females in the class; the average age was 18. The Hong Kong IVEs are vocational institutions that mainly admit students after their Year 11 public examinations. The English language ability of IVE entrants therefore varies according to subject. Students
studying Hospitality Studies, relative to certain other disciplines, have a comparatively higher command of English. The general ability of students in the current class was impressionistically rated by the instructor at around IELTS level 4 [Note 5].

The English language programme - Vocational English and Communication Skills - on which students were enrolled was a 180-hour course, divided into eight modules. In the programme, one module was devoted to listening, two modules to reading and writing respectively and three modules to speaking. The current project was designed to provide online practice and exercises for the second writing module (referred to below as Writing 2), the focus of which was, as mentioned, formal business communication. The objective of the module involved providing students practice in writing and putting together survey reports (as a prelude to a real survey students would conduct the following academic year). To familiarize students with the format of a survey report as well as the language involved in putting together a report, all necessary information and details were provided. The wiki was therefore intended to be a supplement to the writing module to give students additional practice with the structure and language involved - before the assessment in June.

In order to illustrate how wikis operated and how students might use them in writing their survey reports, in late March, before commencing the project, students were first given an overview of wikis, their benefits and instructions as to how to use them. Most students were quite computer literate in that they all had a computer at home (with the exception of one whose case is discussed below). They were therefore familiar with standard computer applications such as the word processor, browser, and chat programs such as MSN, and consequently grasped the concept of wikis without difficulty.

There were two main stages to the project. In Stage One (31 March - 8 April) - the setting-up phase - students were divided into six different groups. In each group, there were four to five members with a range of ability in English - the intention being that more able students would help the less able. The idea of collaborative work was also targeted in this first stage, with each group member made responsible for a part of the report. In Stage Two (9 - 13 April) - the actual writing phase - group members were encouraged to read and consider others' work within the group, proofreading and editing the group's work with additions, deletions or modifications as they felt appropriate. Names that appear though the course of this article should be taken as pseudonyms, with students having been anonymised.

**Design of the Wiki (http://www.markleesir.pbwiki.com)**

The wiki website was constructed by using the free online authorware PBwiki (http://www.pbwiki.com), which allows users to create their own wiki site through simple, ready-made tools. With the templates provided, users can easily create different pages such as syllabuses, group projects and classrooms. Once a template has been selected, a screen with composing tools appears. This is quite user-friendly in that the environment is similar in nature to that of a word processor such as Microsoft Word. Users can type in their content along with features such as tables; they can adjust font sizes, insert pictures and even attach files to the page. Figure 1 below provides an example.
The idea of the above structure was that each group would have a space to compose their own survey report. While each group had a page for their own work, they could, at the same time, view the work of other groups.

Students entered the wiki at the Front Page (see the top of Figure 2). This page contained a welcoming message from the instructor, intended to encourage them to log on and move on to their own wiki group page. Apart from the message, the Front Page also contained notices reminding students of their tasks and providing links to the instructions on how to complete the tasks. From the Front Page, students moved to the Writing 2 wiki forum - a page listing the groups and the name of group members (Figure 3).
In the Writing 2 forum, students had to click on the group they belonged to (Figure 4). As mentioned, groups had been set up by the teacher based on students’ varying levels of English competence and their participation in lessons generally. Each group had been assigned an able and a less able student with the intention that more capable students would aid the less capable, and that with active and passive learners grouped together, students would encourage each other.

At this point, where they were in their own individual wiki, students were now ready to begin working at their own task. They were reminded to include their name and time of editing the page as a clear reference for their group mates. This would then enable other students to see who had done the last piece of editing and when. To help guide students throughout the writing process, questions and headings were built in by the teacher (Figure 5 below). Where appropriate,
the teacher also commented on some of the groups' pages and their contributions. Figure 5 below presents a sample from Group 3. This group was selected as it was generally representative of the student mix in that it comprised students of various degrees of competence in English, as well as levels of enthusiasm for the course and participation in the course.

**Figure 5: Early contributions from Group 3**

As can be seen from Figure 5, all components in the report were clearly defined with headings and subheadings so that students had a clear picture of where they were to write their own parts.

**Observations**

The first (setting-up) stage was carried out from 31 March - 8 April. At this point, each group member was responsible for a part of the project. Some group members turned up immediately after the announcement of the online project whereas some left it to the last moment of Stage 1. In total, there were 31 entries at Stage 1, which were made by 13 students. Most students logged on to the wiki a few times to edit and check the progress of their work, although not all contributed edits or additions. Nonetheless, many group members logged in and contributed on more than just a single occasion.

From the screen capture above of the history of Group 3's work, it can be seen that four (out of the six) group members, Eva Chan, Ho Chi Ho, Snake Lok and Bo, logged in and contributed to the writing of the report. Bo, Eva and Snake logged in twice to add their part to the report. Most groups successfully completed the Stage 1 work on or before 9 April, as requested.

At this first stage, so as not to discourage students from including ideas or commenting on each other's work - either their own or other groups' pages - the instructor limited his 'interference' to encouraging comments such as "Good job!", "Keep it up!".

Wikis produce a number of use statistics, with those provided by pbwiki.com including general logon, pages viewed, pages edited, settings/views changed etc. From this log, one interesting observation
concerned students' log-in times. It was apparent that quite a number of the students involved in the project logged in after midnight. While such study habits are not necessarily to be recommended, it does illustrate that students can pursue their own learning at any time they like - utilising this additional learning resource when they are outside the classroom at their convenience rather than the teacher's.

Stage 2 was the modification and extension stage, and was carried out over four days of the Easter holiday from 9 - 13 April. In this stage, students were expected to review and edit their group's work - by adding, deleting or modifying information in the wiki. As different activities were carried out at this stage, students involved were essentially divided into two main groups - 'observers' and 'editors'.

Observers just logged in frequently and viewed changes made by others. Through the use statistics provided by pbwiki.com, it was apparent that many pages had been viewed from 9 - 10 April, with all these views made by different students (pbwiki.com records users' IP addresses).

Students also made a number of observations across groups. While these observations may not necessarily be deemed active participation, they can still be considered to form part of the learning process in that while such observers may not make any direct contribution in the form of an edit, they still learn by reading other people's work.

The other group of students, who were actively involved in this project, were the editors, and these were the group members who played a key role in this project. By tracking the changes in Group 3, for example, it could be seen that Eva, a more capable student in Group 3 and a positive and active contributor (echoed in the number of her editing contributions), was a key player here in that she edited a number of the entries made by her group mates. Figure 6 below presents a sample.

Different colours and layout are used in wikis to indicate the type of composing that has taken place. Initial text contributed appears in grey. Strike-through text (which appears in red in the wiki page) indicates text which has been deleted. Underlined text (which appears in green) represents new text which has been added. The use of this colour-coding mechanism (although it may not be too easy to see on a black-and-white page) allows for easy tracking and monitoring of the different content composed (i.e., created) by a student, and contributed to (i.e., created and/or deleted) by other students.
Eva's edits were not concerned with correcting so much as replacing words with other words of similar meaning - trying to improve the meaning quality of what her peers had been writing. For instance, some changes involved the correction of the errors. Consider for example the contribution towards the end of Figure 6, the third line from the bottom (pointed up by the arrow). Before Eva's intervention, this read:

Besides, less of people to consider the toilets and changing rooms in the swimming pool...'

Here Eva corrected grammatical errors made by her group mates. She replaced the incorrect quantifier 'less of' with a more correct one 'minority'. In the wiki, it therefore read as:

Besides, minority of people consider that the toilets and changing rooms in the swimming pool ...

or with wiki edits removed:

Besides, minority of people consider that the toilets and changing rooms in the swimming pool ...

Eva also identified the wrong use of the main verb in the above statement - replacing the infinitive 'to consider' with the main verb 'consider'.

Eva also worked on the word choice and expressions in the report, rewriting, for example:

There are 75% indicated that there is one badminton court only....

as:

Most of students indicated that there is one badminton court only....

In this edit, she replaced the percentage with a phrase "Most of students" to make it more analytical and conclusive.

While some students contributed a lot at Stage 2 (Eva, for example), this was not true of all students. One possible reason for this is that - given the long tradition of students seeing it as the teacher's duty and position to correct and mark students' work - students were not completely confident in their own language ability that they felt they could change, or improve,
others' work. Most of the changes to Group 3's work, as mentioned, were conducted by Eva. As she was one of the most able students in her group, this presumably accounted for her greater confidence in editing her group mates' work. Correcting and editing others' work is, for many students, a novel approach to what they perceive constitutes learning English, and possibly requires time for them to take on board what is involved in such an approach.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

After the project, informal discussions were held with the students concerning their reactions to the wiki project. In general, students were positive. They mentioned that while this was the first time they had engaged in such a collaborative writing project, they had enjoyed completing their project on computer rather than via pen and paper. Many of them kept their own blog and hence were used to writing on the web as blog and wiki interfaces are quite similar. Some of them consequently stated that they would consider how they might use wikis as a platform for composing group projects on other courses that they were taking in the institute. As many of the students were holding down part-time jobs, they felt that wikis enabled them to work during their free time - such as on public holidays or later at night as it suited them.

Not everything was all smooth sailing, however. Some students complained about cooperation, or rather the lack of it, with group mates. As mentioned above, some students did not complete the task they had been assigned; as a result, some groups were not able to start working on Stage Two (the writing and editing stage) as scheduled. Further, some students did not keep to the schedule laid out for what was to be done at each stage. During Stage One, each group member had to write a specific part; in Stage Two it was intended that students could edit and improve their own and others' work. It transpired, however, that certain students contributed very little until Stage Two - at which point they attempted to make up for lost time by writing what they should have contributed earlier. This interfered substantially with certain groups' progress in writing and editing, with the result that some groups were delayed and were not able to start working on Stage Two from 9 April as planned. Two groups faced this problem, and consequently, little editing was done in Stage Two, with these two groups' work emerging as incomplete.

Further, since this was a trial project framed as extension work, and for which there was no penalty for not completing, some students did not take it as seriously as they might have. If the wiki concept is instituted as a core part of the course, this issue of non-completion will have to be considered. In part this also relates to the way students are grouped. In future projects, student groupings need to be carefully arranged by the instructor with the consequence of lack of completion needing to be taken into account before the project starts - possibly by allocating a small percentage of marks (10%, say) to participation.

Another major issue involved the project's nature in terms of the genre. Since this was a survey report, students were asked to draft a survey report based on findings that they had previously been provided with. In other words, the exercise was essentially a piece of 'closed' writing which only involved a description of findings, conclusions and recommendations, with not a great deal of variety in the way these might be expressed. Recommendations in the different reports
were inevitably broadly similar, with minimally different expressions and some variation in vocabulary. The nature of the project tended to have limited the input students might make as there was not a great deal of leeway to contribute one's own ideas. This needs to be given attention in future so that the wikis have more open-ended potential.

Since this was the first time students had attempted to work together collaboratively online, and working at producing a joint report, some problems naturally arose. Although students were familiar with the wiki interface in that it is generally similar to that of Microsoft Word, there were differences. One of these involved the Save function in Microsoft Word and the wiki site. Whereas in Microsoft Word users can save their work at anytime, in pbwiki.com, users need to click the Save button only when they have finished all the editing to hand. Some students clicked the Save button a number of times, with the history consequently recording (erroneously) that they had made several entries over a short period of time. In contrast, some of them only clicked the Home button and neglected to click the Save button. Their entries were consequently not recorded in the wiki.

Another problem that arose concerned the availability of computers. All students but one had a computer at home. While Hong Kong is a very connected society (see Coniam, 2003), consideration still needs to be given to the fact that not everyone is connected. To this end, once the teacher realised the problem, she allowed the student concerned to start working earlier and to use a computer on campus.

A number of insights were gained from this wiki project. One of the initial advantages of wikis appeared to be their potential for involving a lot of students in the writing and drafting process. In theory, every student could be a contributor to the wiki, with students hopefully being responsible for their own learning. As has been outlined, however, the situation did not transpire as perfectly as envisaged. While a number of students were very engaged in the project, a few students contributed only minimally. These students were perhaps of the mindset that learning essentially involves the transmission of knowledge from teacher to students, and did not see it as their responsibility for their own learning.

There were, nonetheless, a number of definite pluses to the project. One of these related to the fact that a number of weak, and shy, students had actually contributed to the wiki, more so than they usually tended to do on class projects. For these students who tended not to be active participators in class, the wiki provided a platform to facilitate their English learning after class. Consider the log of one (weaker) student from Group 1, Chi Man. While this student only wrote a rather short piece as her contribution to the wiki, she nonetheless viewed her group mates’ work frequently.

The instructor leading the programme did feel positive about the students' commitment to task (as was evidenced, for example, in the late night log-ons) and in general about the quality of the final products. The instructor also noted ways in which he himself had gained from the project - as a 'purpose agent' in particular. He had to step back and think of how his students would work on the project when he was considering the layout and the different wiki sections. This required providing a clear layout for students to write their parts, dividing students appropriately into different groups, and giving comments to students at
appropriate points. It is not clear how these skills may be developed in a standard classroom setting.

Wikis further provided the instructor with a way of keeping track of students' learning processes outside class time - even during holidays! Wikis can produce a range of statistics on students' activities and on the type of editing they have been doing in the wiki. In this way, it is possible for teachers to trace the kind of changes they make and to appreciate how, for example, they are able to form sentences and paragraphs in the context of meaningful content. Setting up a wiki with a purposeful objective requires a certain amount of time and careful planning. It is not, however, that arduous a task, and, as the case study in the current paper has attempted to portray, can be very rewarding for both students and teachers.

Finally, the issue of implications for broader-based use need to be examined. While the study in this paper took place at a post-secondary institution, this does not mean wikis are inappropriate as a basic education tool. Two issues need to be considered here: computer expertise and ability in English. As has been outlined, wikis are a user-friendly tool that require little more computer expertise than how to use a word processor and an Internet browser. The English language level of the students in the current study was only around IELTS level 4. This is quite a limited level of proficiency and indicates that level of language is not a bar to the use of wikis. What is necessary is that the task required of students be tailored to their ability level. To this end, implications for their use extends very easily to lower secondary form levels as well as to upper primary, as the work of the WriTE (Writing for Integrated Teacher Education) project described in Mak & Coniam (ibid) illustrates. At upper primary level, for example, students could be given a task whereby two or three students who live in the same estate produce a description of the features in their estate, with each taking responsibility for writing about certain features. Alternatively, a small group might collaboratively put together a description of a school event such as the school picnic or Sports Day. The essence of the appropriate use of wikis is that a task needs to fit students' interests and language level, with authenticity incorporated as a matter of course. Finally, it must be pointed out that while the use of wikis here has been in the context of English as a second language, their potential is in no way restricted to English. Wiki software is available in Chinese (http://evchk.wikia.com/), and hence wikis can also be created in Chinese, with the broad concept of relevance and authenticity being easily adapted to a Chinese language situation.
Notes

Note 1. The National Writing Project (NWP) is a network of 195 university-affiliated sites across the United States with selected international partnerships. Administered out of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, the mission of the project is to improve the teaching and learning of writing in English in schools by recognizing the primary importance of teacher knowledge, expertise and leadership.

Note 2. Secondary school in Hong Kong starts at age 12 (Year 7), with schools banded ('streamed') according to the general academic ability level of their students determined by achievement tests at the end of primary school. There are three broad bands of ability, with each band covering approximately 33% of the student ability range.

Note 3. Overall grades awarded on the HKCE English language paper (prior to 2007 when the examination underwent major reform) were A to C (credit), D and E (pass), F and U (Fail). Grade C and above were the crucial grades since these were accepted as a GCSE level pass by the University of Cambridge.

Note 4. The figures for students going to Year 12 or to vocational studies are for the 2005/06 school year; they are drawn from the Education Bureau's website (http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?langno=1&nodeid=1029).

Note 5. IELTS (the International English language Testing System; http://www.ielts.org/) measures the ability to communicate in English of people who intend to study or work where English is the language of communication. Originally the UK and Australia's tertiary-level English language test, it is now taken by over half a million test takers yearly. It rates test takers on a nine-point scale, with a score of 6.0 generally being the standard required by UK universities for entrance purposes.

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