

Wikipedia for Language Learning

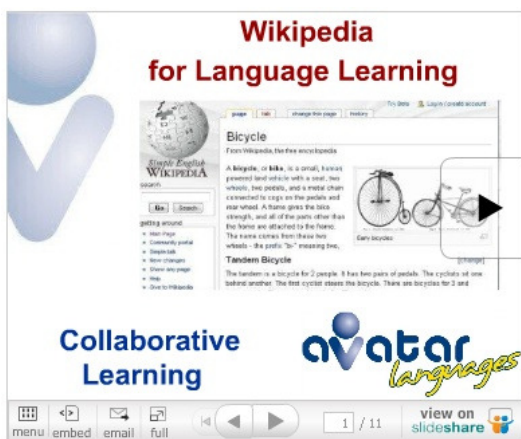
a guide for teachers



How to use Wikipedia and Wikitravel in Language Lessons

Wikipedia is well-known and has become a main source for initial research. Yet its interactive nature allows language learners to play a more active role, to gain an online voice and focus on accuracy and quality in their written work.

What is it? And how is it normally used?



[Wikipedia](#) and [Wikitravel](#) are both examples of wiki-based websites that are the online equivalent of a collaboratively written book. They allow any user to read, write and edit the content of the website according to guidelines and subject to a form of 'peer review'. Wikipedia is an encyclopedia and Wikitravel is an online guide book to the world. These wiki sites make use of 'crowdsourcing', whereby many people can add their own expertise in order to create a more complete product; quality is managed through everyone's ability to edit the work of the others. The vast majority of users simply read the content. However, some will make small changes to the content when they see that there is an inaccuracy or insufficient detail. A few

users will contribute much more – perhaps even writing entire articles.

Why would we be interested?

Wikis open students up to some important [21st Century skills](#) and raise issues of how knowledge can be collectively managed.

- **Familiarity:** Wikipedia has become a household name and many students will recognize the concept of a resource that can be edited and updated by everyone.
- **Relevance and niches:** Wikipedia is especially relevant because of the enormous range of subjects covered. Wikitravel is relevant because it covers the whole globe and therefore covers somewhere that every student knows well. Both are infinitely expandable, so there is always room for more content.
- **Empowering:** contributors have a strong sense that their knowledge matters and that they are a part of a wider community. Language students in particular see that their language skills are in fact sufficient to contribute to the world.
- **Knowledge management:** editing Wikipedia allows students to gain a sense of how information is jointly crafted, why knowledge management is a continual process (unlike the product focused nature of paper-based publishing) and why the content's bias is complex and fluid.
- **Simplicity:** Wikis are easy to learn how to use. It is easy to register as a user, click edit and add/change text and images.

How can we use it for language learning?

Wikipedia and similar wiki-based projects offer students a voice for their specific expertise. The quality of any edits must be high in order to be both beneficial for and accepted by the wiki's community; editing a public wiki helps students focus on accuracy and quality.

1. **Reading Wikipedia:** Wikipedia is a great source of information. Controversial subjects have a discussion layer behind the page that shows the underlying debate and disagreements among the contributors. The discussion is visible in a way that the meeting notes of Britannica's editorial board are not; this allows students to consider how editorial decisions



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are reached and perhaps how they are different in a wiki-based project from conventional publishing.

- II. **Editing while reading Wikipedia:** students can correct or add to wikis when reading their content. As such students are reminded that the information flow need not be entirely in one direction. Advanced level students may notice grammatical or spelling errors that need correcting. Discussion activities can follow on by considering the reliability and bias of wiki-based information sources.
- III. **Writing Articles for Wikipedia:** students or teachers can find gaps in Wikipedia that they wish to fill. This can be a very general topic or alternatively something specific and highly technical. Students can research the subject using other resources or even using Wikipedia itself (perhaps content in another language) and then add paragraphs or entire articles. Although many topics are well documented in Wikipedia, there are many others that still lack substantial content and therefore offer opportunities to add content. The '[Simple English](#)' version of Wikipedia has many more opportunities and the language is more accessible for English learners. Wikitravel offers similar opportunities and students may well be able to easily add content of their local surroundings. Such a project requires the students to consider what the needs of a tourist would be and how these may be different from their perspective of their home town.

Pedagogies for Wikipedia

- **Dogme:** group work necessarily involves conversation, which in turn offers Dogme teaching opportunities. There are also tangential questions about bias, perspective, meaning and relevance that have the potential to generate 'Dogme' conversations, from which language will emerge.
- **Task-based Learning:** reading and editing Wikipedia is clearly task focused in itself. Further tasks can be created around the research, whether through online fact finding or interviewing local experts.

Practicalities

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that is editable by anyone. Volunteer administrators have the ability to delete and restore inappropriate content, although usually only after a public discussion of the content's merit. Some pages are more tightly controlled if they are more controversial or sensitive. The scope of permissible content is limited by the project's intention to be an encyclopedia; inappropriate content may well be submitted to similar projects such as Wikibooks, Wikinews and Wiktionary. All these projects have editing guidelines to explain the preferred format and any restrictions on content.

Wikitravel is an online travel guide that is similar in nature to Wikipedia. Anyone can edit, whereas volunteer administrators perform certain functions. The project has editing guidelines to explain the preferred format and any restrictions on content. [World 66](#) is a similar project to Wikitravel. Student work will be shared with the world, but it may also be edited, even deleted by anyone. Students can retain a permanent public record through publishing it separately online (perhaps using [Scribd](#)).

Further Information

- Avatar Languages blog post about [Wikipedia in language learning](#).
- Avatar Languages blog post about [Wikitravel in language learning](#).
- Article by Kurtis McDonald on [Wikipedia Projects for Language Learning](#).

Visit <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/teaching/wikipedia.php> for multimedia and links.

