Utilizing Technology to Enhance Communication in the Classroom

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英語コミュニケーション能力向上のための授業におけるテクノロジー利用

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Abstract :

The question of how to motivate Japanese university students to study harder is almost certainly a recurring theme among educators across the nation. It would be fanciful to suggest that any single adaptation to teaching practice could produce a revolution in student behavior, but improvement is always possible. Clues as to how to achieve this may be found by identifying the ways in which students spend their time and what interests them. It is worth noting that the younger generation of people today is the first to have grown up in an environment in which access to, and utilization of, Internet tools and social media are taken for granted. Consequently, teachers need to consider the implications of this fact and decide how, and to what extent, to implement such technology in their courses. This article represents a small step in this direction, and includes specific observations about the integration of technology as a learning tool in English courses at the School of International Studies.

概要：日本の大学で教鞭をとる教育者にとって、授業中の学生のモチベーションをいかに高められるかは、永遠の課題である。どのような方法を用いても学習態度に効果が現れるとしたら夢のような話であるが、実際はそうではない。しかし、改善は可能である。改善のためには、学生が時間をどう使っているのか、学生が何に興味を示すのかを理解することに鍵がある。現代社会の若者は、インターネットツールやソーシャルメディアにアクセスし利用することが当たり前の環境に育っている。よって教師には、この現実を受け入れ、これらテクノロジーをどのように、どの程度、授業に取り入れるべきかを見極めることが求められる。当論文では、この課題に対する方向性を探り、国際学部の英語の授業で活用できる、学習ツールとしての様々なテクノロジーについて、見解を論じた。

Key words : Internet, technology, motivation

1 Introduction

The notion that the typical Japanese university student is not necessarily enthusiastic about study is hardly new, but before complaining too bitterly educators would do well to reflect on areas of possible improvement in their own practice. It seems probable that teachers are prone to reaching a

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point in their careers where they feel confident in their abilities and become more or less set in their pedagogical ways. However, as professionals, teachers owe it to themselves and their students to remain alert to ways in which they can improve their teaching. It is not unreasonable to maintain the hope that advances in teaching practice can bring about a degree of corresponding improvement in student motivation. An area that teachers, particularly older ones, might consider exploring more thoroughly is the way in which technology can be utilized in the classroom to promote learning.

2 Understanding our Students

Needless to say, developing an understanding of one's students is a basic fundamental of teaching. In recent years, plentiful space in both scholarly journals and mainstream media has been devoted to the subject of the younger generation, the so-called Millennial Generation (or Generation Y), which is usually defined as including people born between 1980 and 2000. The "Millennials" are said to differ markedly to people of previous generations at the same age in many ways, but perhaps most strikingly, it is the first in which individuals have lived their whole lives surrounded by computers, the Internet, video games, and all the other products of the digital age. This is what famously led Prensky (2001) to coin the phrase *digital natives* to describe the youth of today (as distinct from *digital immigrants,* who were raised in pre-digital times). In recent years, the so-called Web 2.0 revolution has ushered in an era in which a wide range of software allowing cheap, easy to use online voice and video communication is available. Reports indicating that Millennials are more enthusiastic about using digital technology than older people are commonplace these days. For example, figures for the United States in 2011 showed that "eighty-one percent have wireless access to the Internet, compared to 59% overall, and 83% are active users of social networking, compared to 65% overall" (Pacansky-Brock, 2012, p.4). Moreover, they participate more intensively in social networking activities, such as commenting on content, than other generations.

It seems highly likely that the situation in Japan is similar. Research shows that Internet use in Japan almost doubled between 2001 and 2006, and that "Internet users constitute a majority among people in their teens to their forties, most markedly in their twenties" (Nakano and Watanabe, 2009, p.237). Furthermore, data collected in five Asian cities, including Tokyo, revealed that familiarity with digital technology is the norm among 12 to 17 year olds, with "96% of them being internet users, and having 6 years of computer experience on average" (Lin et al., 2010, p.839).

Faced with this demographic landscape, researchers have made concerted efforts in recent years to explore the implications for student learning styles and beliefs about learning. Prensky (2001), for instance, suggested that "as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today's students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors" (p.2). According to (Brown, 2000) Millennials are more adept than earlier generations at absorbing a number of media at once, or "multiprocessing". Others have reported that they can be viewed as experiential learners (those who prefer to learn by doing), and to be "more comfortable in image-rich environments than with text" (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005).

Of particular significance is the finding that Millennials typically expect their teachers not only to be experts in their fields, but to be able to utilize technology creatively to pass on their knowledge (Roberts, 2005). Therefore, regardless of how comfortable teachers feel about using the new technologies as teaching tools, the inescapable fact is that they are here now and are not going to go

away. The students of today expect educators to be aware of this and to respond positively. "They want learning experiences that are social and that connect them with their peers" (West and West, 2009, p.2). The question is not whether technology should be utilized in educational settings or not, but how, and to what extent.

3 The Need to Keep a Pedagogical Purpose in Mind

Some researchers have claimed that technology has a limited role to play in English language teaching. For instance, Graddol (2006) argued that rather than offering anything new, computers have simply changed the venue of learning, in that the kind of tasks language learners use them for can be conducted just as well in an ordinary classroom. According to Bax (2006), technology can only really serve a useful purpose when it becomes "normalized", or not viewed as somehow special or distinct from other tools around it that are being used toward the same purpose. In other words, he contends that there is a danger of teachers simply using technology for the sake of using it, and not giving enough thought to how the technology-based tasks contribute towards achieving curriculum goals. This is clearly a valid point. Hurst (2007) also notes that bits (binary digits) have the potential to be used either productively or unproductively for language learning purposes, which places the onus on teachers to achieve "bit literacy", or an understanding of how technology can be used to help their students. Technology in itself will never replace language instruction based on a sound knowledge of second language acquisition research, pedagogical methodology, and a thoughtfully prepared curriculum.

By and large though, consensus among researchers in support of a blended approach to language teaching appears to have solidifed significantly over recent years (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008 ; Stacey & Gerbic, 2008). Although it has been defined and implemented in various ways, blended learning basically entails "the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.5). Different teachers and institutions are bound to arrive at their own interpretation of blended learning, depending on their own familiarity with the technology, the needs and abilities of their students, budgetary considerations, and so on. There is no single template for carrying out a blended approach, and doing so requires an acknowledgement by all involved of the element of trial and error inherent in the process. Stacey and Gerbic (2008) identified numerous factors that are likely to affect the success of blended programs, including the level of readiness of students, teachers, and institutions to carry them out, the degree of ongoing communication between participants, and the strength of integration between the two environments. Implementing a blended approach is likely to involve taking some missteps along the way, but educators should not allow that to discourage them.

4 Student Attitudes toward Technology Use in the SIS English Program

Bearing in mind the factors that affect the success of a blended approach, it is perhaps timely to review how students of the School of International Studies (SIS) at Kwansei Gakuin University are responding to the fledgling experiment with integrating technology into their English course. In the first year of the program, blogging was introduced into writing classes for fluency-based tasks, and proved to be very popular with students (Ballou, Holthouse, & Marlowe, 2011). In the following year, students started using English Central in conjunction with their Oral Communication classes in

order to promote vocabulary acquisition, plus further develop the students' listening and pronunciation skills. After the first year, research found that only 50% of those surveyed rated English Central as useful for improving their English (Holthouse, 2012). In response to this disappointing statistic, an attempt has been made in the current year to more closely integrate the classroom and online environments by introducing in-class activities related to the content of the videos that students have watched. Students have been free to select the videos that they want to watch, but now have to use some of them as sources of group work with their peers. They have to explain some vocabulary that they learned, describe what the video was about, their reaction to it, create conversation questions and lead a group discussion on a theme related to the content of the video.

A follow-up survey was conducted this year to determine whether the new approach to English Central had affected the students' perception of its value as a learning tool. A total of 159 students were surveyed, including 68 freshmen and 91 sophomores. The sophomore group was presented with the four statements below (Figure 1), to which they indicated the extent of their agreement or otherwise (SD = strongly disagree, MD = moderately disagree, MA = moderately agree, SA = strongly agree). The results are displayed in Table 1, below. Ideally, one would have hoped to include all of last year's freshmen respondents in this year's sophomore sample. Although it proved impossible to contact all of those students, the vast majority were included in this year's group. In any case, the total sample size is almost double last year's, which should remove doubt about the veracity of the data's implications.

As demonstrated by comparing the results of item 1 with the feedback from last year, there has been a notable improvement in the proportion of students (73%) who believe English Central to be useful for them. This is confirmed by the response to item 4, with 68% claiming to be more positive about it this year. Items 2 and 3 indicate that although students didn't necessarily consider the newly added, in-class discussion component to be enjoyable, a significant proportion (63%) rated it as useful. This might explain the overall upswing in approval for English Central.

Finally, as a means of supporting the implications of the sophomore group's response, 68 freshmen were presented with a similar survey. Item 4 was changed to "I would prefer to just do English

| 1. I think English Central is useful for improving my English. |
| 2. Speaking with classmates about videos I've watched on English Central is enjoyable. |
| 3. Speaking with classmates about videos I've watched on English Central is useful for improving my English. |
| 4. I feel more positive about English Central now than I did last year. |

Figure 1   Survey questions

Table 1   *Sophomore Attitudes*

	Boys (40)					Girls (51)					Total (91)			
	SD	MD	MA	SA		SD	MD	MA	SA		SD	MD	MA	SA
1	2	9	16	13		1	13	35	2		3	22	51	15
2	9	15	14	2		3	23	20	5		12	38	34	7
3	9	10	13	8		3	17	26	5		12	22	44	13
4	6	6	17	11		3	14	26	8		9	20	43	19

Table 2 *Freshman Attitudes*

	Boys (24)					Girls (44)					Total (68)			
	SD	MD	MA	SA		SD	MD	MA	SA		SD	MD	MA	SA
1	1	2	17	4		1	5	23	15		2	7	40	19
2	3	8	12	1		3	9	22	10		6	17	34	11
3	3	3	12	6		1	6	28	9		4	9	40	15
4	3	14	7	0		16	22	6	0		19	36	13	0

Central by myself and not talk in class about the videos with classmates". As seen below, the overall response towards English Central, supplemented by related in-class discussion, was overwhelmingly positive.

Given that both blogging and English Central are now recognized by students as enhancing the quality of learning opportunities available to them, perhaps the time is right to consider the options for further integration of digital tools into the SIS English program.

5 Future Directions for Integrating Technology into the SIS English Program

Perusal of the literature strongly suggests that the next step should involve injecting a more "human" element into the online experience of our students (Pacansky-Brock, 2012). Bergman and Sams (2012) developed one model of how this might be achieved, with what is now widely known as the "flipped classroom". The flipped classroom involves shifting the focus away from the teacher by moving lecture or instruction time out of the classroom and bringing what has traditionally been seen as homework into the classroom. Lectures or key concepts that were previously presented in class can now be recorded on video and made available online using screen capture software. Students study the content at home, and then come to class ready to work on tasks that would previously have been considered "homework".

There are a number of advantages associated with having class content constantly accessible online. Students who are busy with other aspects of their lives such as job hunting can catch up on material that they missed due to absence. Furthermore, students are free to view video lectures *at their own pace.* That is, they can pause or rewind as many times as they feel necessary to allow the content to sink in. In this way, slower learners are not left behind. They can take notes about what they have watched and come to class with questions prepared for the teacher, if necessary. Once any areas of uncertainty are cleared up, and all students have begun performing in-class tasks, the teacher is free to take on the role of advisor because the flipped model allows more time for interaction. Students that need help the most are able to ask for it. Another result of increased interaction can be that the teacher is more likely to observe and note common errors for future class discussion.

From an EFL teaching perspective, the drawback with the flipped model as implemented by Bergman and Sams is that the online component is comprised mostly of lectures. While this is well suited to teaching science and mathematics, its applicability to English classes is more limited (to, for example, instruction on particular essay writing skills or points of grammar). Voice tools that retain the previously mentioned advantages of the flipped model but also promote student-student interaction in various ways almost certainly represent the best option for language programs. Pop (2010), for instance, found that Romanian university EFL students who incorporated voice tools

(Voice Thread and Voxopop) into their learning reported greater motivation to speak English and elevated levels of confidence in their ability. Similarly, Elam & Nesbit (2012) claim that Korean college EFL students "make improvements in motivation" (p.125) when asked to use Voice Thread and Ning as part of their courses.

If the SIS continues along the path of integrating technology into its English courses, decisions about which tool to utilize next will not be made by one person alone. Nevertheless, it appears that a strong case can be made for Voice Thread. For those unfamiliar with Voice Thread, the best way to gain a better understanding of it is to visit the site (www.voicethread.com), but in essence it is a tool that allows secure, online group conversations stimulated by photos, videos, documents or presentations on any number of slides. After participants have made a comment (which they may do by cell phone, webcam, microphone, text, or file upload) on a particular slide, their profile picture appears around the edges of it. Comments can be deleted and re-recorded by participants any number of times until they feel satisfied with their production. The benefits of this are obvious. "Students from certain cultures that discourage public disagreement discover a freedom to disagree provided by the impersonal nature of technology. Threaded discussions free them from embarrassment" (Morgan, 2008). Furthermore, knowing that they will have an audience encourages students to be particularly thoughtful about both the content and the delivery of their contributions to a discussion. Pop (2010) noted that his students tended to feel a sense of pride in hearing themselves speak online. They were also able to gain insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their oral production, and to develop confidence over time. Moreover, given the luxury of repeated listening, teachers tend to find the tasks of assessing and advising their students much easier.

As mentioned previously, technology should be selected on the basis of its compatibility with curriculum goals and current theories of language acquisition. In the words of Klopfer et al (2010),

> "Throughout the past few decades, the emergence of new technologies has been paralleled by the evolution of theories on cognition and learning. Where learning and the mind were once viewed as "filling of the bucket," the "social mind" is now a much more prevalent model. Of course, educators have long been aware that learning is a social activity, where learners construct their understanding not just through interaction with the material, but also through collaboratively constructing new knowledge with their peers" (p.13).

When using Voice Thread in their courses, teachers would expect to create some of the media, particularly in the early stages (for example, to create models). However students (at times individually, but also in collaboration with classmates) should gradually become the primary creators of content. Voice Thread is an ideal platform for collaborative student projects such as digital storytelling, which is regularly promoted these days as an effective means of enhancing language learning (Robin, 2008 ; Sadik, 2008).

6 Conclusion

Motivating Japanese university EFL students to devote maximum effort to their studies is probably an ongoing struggle for the majority of teachers. However, we live in an era of rapid technological innovation. Keeping an open mind to the opportunities this presents for language programs is

both a responsibility and a possible source of optimism for teachers. Our students are part of the first generation to have grown up surrounded by digital tools. Consequently, they tend to be adept at using them, and inclined to expect teachers to explore ways of utilizing them in the classroom. This article has indicated the progress toward the integration of such technology into the SIS English program, and potential avenues for further development.

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