

The Twenty-First Century Classroom

A case for developing multimedia literacy in Japan

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This article will discuss how children in their teenage years and early twenties have utilized new technology to communicate with each other in different ways and how these new forms of communication could be an area that the English language teacher can build lessons around. Regardless of what students are communicating, the use of technology to communicate will have an effect on their communicative skills and how and where they would like to express themselves. This article will not discuss in detail what effect new technology has had on the content of communication rather that teachers should be aware of how language lessons could reflect these changes and use some of these technologies to create interesting ideas for classes.

It is true to say that mediated communication on a scale previously unseen is now part of all modern life in Japan, the UK, in the US and across Europe. This article aims to discuss and promote the use of multimedia and various media formats in the classroom, both for Junior and High School level and at undergraduate level at universities and technical schools. Empirical examples from University teaching experiences in the UK and High School teaching experiences in Japan will be discussed. In the case of Japanese High Schools, there will be a detailed example of multimedia use and film making. The English level of the high school students and undergraduate students is taken to be roughly beginner to pre-intermediate in both cases.

A Quick Definition of Multimedia

In this article the use of websites, digital cameras, video camera, smart boards, PCs and digital projectors will be referred to as multimedia items. This will be different from referring to media as video footage, TV footage, DVDs, website content and newspapers.

Dilemmas for both Native and Japanese English Teachers

There has been a recurring theme among teachers, educationalist, and academics that particularly

Japanese students are the hardest to motivate, engage with, and get to discuss and communicate in an EFL classroom. Certainly the text book based classes so popular in the past are fast becoming a dull and repetitive way to instruct students, even though repetition and practice are what students need to remember and build on. The choice by students whether to go along and participate with this old method of instruction seems to be waning, replaced instead by a need for excitement, life-relevance, and a certain 'wow-factor'.

For many teachers, introducing new technology into the classroom has not been welcomed. As a teacher trainer in the UK, I was in charge of training long servicing EFL teachers in the use of 'Smart Boards' and mobile video projector units; neither of which were eagerly adopted by teachers who spent twice as long in preparation time, learning and remembering technical operation skills, and re-making materials for PowerPoint slides.

However, as J. D Fletcher points out in his article, 'Evidence for learning from technology-assisted instruction' (2003), retention rates of students exposed to class material during a lesson using multimedia were higher than those classes using 'traditional' lecture methods. In Japanese High Schools, empirical evidence of success using multimedia has produced some speaking results from often quieter, less linguistically able students (see section 'A case for video production in high school language lessons').

Multimedia should be considered as an additional tool to engage students in the classroom above and beyond the individual teachers who happens to be good 'techno geeks' and want to try a new gadget out. Indeed, it is the students' life experience of using technology on their own time that should produce data on what learning environment would benefit them the most and the context that much language appreciation and communication is done.

A change in the law in Japan

The Japanese Government has issued a plan to raise the famously low English level of its students by making English only classes compulsory for 16 to 18 yrs by 2013. Kwan Weng Kin writes in his article 'Japan to raise English fluency' (2009), that educationalist and academics welcome this but want an extension into Junior and Elementary school also. Therefore, the need for Japanese teachers to engage more with their students in real-life English communication will be a challenge for them as the new laws come into effect. The common lecture style and book work in Japanese teacher English classes would not pass any inspection of good practice based on these new rules. Foreign teachers in Japan with a background in teaching with new technology could be the key to further training sessions for Japanese teachers.

In Britain, the adoption of computing in schools was introduced in 1982 and has been a key feature of lessons, both in Computer Science classes and in others. The effect of this, on the students, has produced a competence level of basic PC skills, such as file accessing and word document production, as well as simple presentation slide preparations; perhaps the most commonly used skills outside of Information Technology lessons. On the teaching side, the development and exchange of materials in electronic format has meant that the sharing of ideas audibly, visually and graphically has grown to an unprecedented level. The mandatory use of 'Smart Boards' and mobile digital projectors has hastened the pace of developing materials and websites such as 'teachit.co.uk' to download and use. Therefore, there is a strong case for Japanese high schools and undergraduate English courses to follow suit.

Beyond PCs in the Language Classroom

In their study of multimedia use in the classroom amongst 700 university students, Shuell and Farber (2001) found a significant increasing in attention and understanding from classes using multimedia than from those which didn't use any form of new technology. However, it was found that male students were more responsive than female students when asked about their degree of satisfaction using PCs. Does this suggest that certain multimedia formats are in some sense gender weighted? If so, are there types of other multimedia that are profoundly female centred? Certainly, for multimedia to be used effectively in a classroom the issue of gender preferences should be considered along with the level of technological skill students have in each class.

A Mediated Way

The case for using multimedia in the English language teaching classroom has been strengthened by advancements in technology over the past twenty years. Recorded speech on CDs or cassettes and videos on televisions have been utilized by even the most 'techno-phobic' teachers for years. Therefore, as the establishment of new media technologies has shaped daily social and working lives, so these technologies should be reflected in language teaching. According to Internet World Stats, published 30th August 2010, Japan has just under 1.4million Facebook users; this is not the most popular social networking site in Japan. However, it does demonstrate a willingness of young Japanese people to use English language based Internet sites regularly; coupled with Japan having the third largest Internet consumer base in the World at 90.1 million users (CIA Factbook 2010).

For many Japanese students, the use of social networking sites is as prevalent as in any developed nation as well as mobile Internet use on cell phones. The increase in Internet bandwidth and widespread fiber-optical cabling throughout parts of Asia has vastly increased the potential for

videophony and telephony, in addition to multiple chatting sessions by many users at the same time. The frame rates of the video streams that are now available over broadband Internet connections has made recognition of facial and vocal inflection more realistic than ten years ago. A study by Simon Mason in his thesis 'Video Conferencing as a tool for language learning (2002)' shows that video technology was not able to cope with detailed facial signals on video streamed on a lower bandwidth Internet connection in 2001.

The popularity of new forms of communication media such as 'Facebook', 'Skype', 'Yahoo messenger', 'MSN messenger' and 'Mixi' in Japan have meant that students come to classes with a set of operating skills and knowledge that can be utilized to engage the student in language learning. In Japanese high schools with international exchange programmes, the use of English language based social media has increased as students wish to stay in contact with their new family and friends abroad. In a study on social networking, cited by the BBC in the UK, it was found that girls are more familiar and use more of the features of these sites than boys. Girls are said to use social networking sites up to 40% more than boys and use more of the technical features like photo uploading and chat functions.

Video Production

As well as the improvements in Internet quality, cheaper prices and the availability of good quality audio and video hardware has meant these technologies are affordable for a wider population than ever before. This has created new possibilities in easy-to-use high quality video productions. Even in the case of digital video cameras, the quality for the video recording has vastly improved even in budget level digital cameras. This is combined with the recording of footage to a flash memory card rather than film or tape, making downloading and editing relatively small computer files possible on standard PCs that may be available in school and university computer rooms. Students, therefore, have a variety of places where technology could be used, both in the family home, at school or university, and on the street with the development of handheld technologies, such as the Apple iPhone.

Therefore, we can draw some conclusions from these studies and the state of students' life experience of using new media in communication.

- Students are familiar with types of media and multimedia technology in their daily lives.
- Certain multimedia formats could favour genders.
- General interaction with multimedia does promote understanding and interest in the

classroom

- Multimedia formats now include high quality visual and audio production locally and over distances.

A case for video production in High School language classes

As students go through High School and develop socially in co-ed or single sex schools, their levels of motivation and involvement in classes depends on many factors; numbers of friends they have, their home life, their natural ability in each subject, their feelings towards the teacher and other students. For the English language teacher these feelings may not be expressed directly, yet the resulting behaviour of these influences and attitudes would be presented to the teacher in the student's level of attention to tasks. Therefore, most language classes have multiple levels of ability and motivation.

Usually the teacher pitches the class material at a median level after assessed of all students. Consequently, the teacher is often faced with a dilemma of who to disappoint; either the high level students think it too easy or the lower level students think it too hard. The answer would be to find a task or tasks that appeal to all but also on an individual level.

In one particular Junior High School class in Japan, this was the situation and the teacher's response was to use video and film making to engage students in English and promote their confidence at different levels. It required a certain amount of planning to get the students into groups that each reflected the highest and lowest levels of ability in the class. Then the teacher encouraged the higher level students of each group to start script discussions based on a single word chosen from a list. This word would have to be reflected in the story in some way. Students would be shown how to write a story arch of an introduction, then a changing event, and finally the result of that change. This would give each group a chance to write or draw their own stories before shooting them.

Once the scripts or storyboards were finished the teacher assessed the content and helped the students to write simple dialogues and actions. Lower level students were encouraged to take the lead roles, while the higher level students were encouraged to take the production roles of directing and shooting the film.

In this particular example, it was found that in small groups with mixed levels, some previously shy and uncommunicative students responded well to their new status as lead actors and actresses. Given actions with related dialogue, lower level students were able to contextualize the words and apply them to a situation. The higher level students were instructed to direct these actions using English

with gestures and commands, also prompting the students with the English language dialogue from the script.

The resulting work was then edited by the teacher and DVDs and Internet broadcast were made. Students saw how even with a limited ability and grasp of English their actions and dialogue could move a story along and entertain an audience. This was a hugely motivating factor and helped the lower level students to participate more in subsequent classes.

Although this task was done in a Junior High School Class it could easily be transplanted into a high School or undergraduate class level with more technical skills instruction by the teacher with lessons in editing techniques in PC classrooms.

Conclusion

There is a case to be answered that Japanese English acquisition has fallen behind other Asian countries and as not been given the support and attention that sciences and the Japanese language have over the last fifty years. As the Japanese government seeks to improve the standard of English in Japan there should be a consideration of how new multimedia technology could play in the development of more communicative lessons for both native speaking teachers and Japanese English teachers. As stated by the Japan Association for Promotion of Internet Application in School Education, the need for High schools to develop multimedia technologies would help in:

'...promoting education for living in an advanced information society and leading that society. (JAPIAS 2002)'

However, facilitating such changes on a national scale requires a consideration of the following points:

- A commitment to training staff in the use of new technologies.
- A budgetary commitment by the Boards of Education and Private school managers.
- Further academic study into the effects of multimedia in the classroom.
- Presenting examples of best practice and developing websites for the sharing of information.

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