

Learning to use technological support for self-organised EFL learning: Web-based tasks and YouTube relayed instructional videos

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This article examines an action research project concerned with the need for Japanese university students to learn how to use technological support for self-organised EFL learning. In particular, the research focused on the potential of the Internet for English self-study. In outlining a solution for teaching awareness of existing Internet-based support for English language learning, the paper explores the novel usage of YouTube relayed instructional videos with English subtitles and the need for simple and clean website design to enhance intuitive task communication. Furthermore, the paper discusses the concept of the teacher operating in three spatial domains, the notion that the course solution provides a bridge between conventional classroom study and self-study, and finally the possibility that the course solution is enabling the students to take on a higher degree of challenge than may have otherwise been expected.

Introduction

The Journal of Educational Technology and Society issued a July 2009 special edition entitled "Technology Support for Self-Organised Learners." In it, the view of Kalz, Koper & Hornung-Prähauser (2009) is that with the advent of social networking technologies we are likely to see, or indeed have seen, a shift in focus away from the structured CALL classroom towards self-organised learning. The research reported here suggests there is potential for this to occur, yet with respect to lower level students, the outcome is far from being likely.

In framing this research within the wider academic context, we need to make a distinction between research and practice

learning languages on-line or by distance and learning to independently use on-line language learning resources. For example, Dudeney (2007) outlines guidelines and ideas for using the Internet as a teaching resource. Warschauer (2000) undertook an ethnographic study of second language on-line learning. Blake (2008) and Bernard et al. (2004) both examined the value of distance learning. These are all broadly related areas, yet outside of the focus of the research outlined in this paper. This research was initiated from the perspective that the student subjects were potentially, rather than actually, autonomous, self-organised, **CALL** learners. Consequently, whilst identifying with Holec's (1987) notion of the student as manager of their own learning, the research was framed under the working assumption that the observed learners required self-study management training. Indeed, Wenden (1987) noted the emergence of the need for learner training with language training. More recently, Murray and McPherson (2006) examined the need for scaffolding whilst reading on the Web. The aim of the research described in this paper was to increase Japanese students' ability to use the Internet for English self-study, through scaffolding with YouTube relayed instructional videos.

The use of Internet video scaffolding resonates with Gruba's (2006) media literacy perspective (i.e. the idea that visual media may aid lower proficiency users to understand and communicate). Royce (2002) suggests that **ESOL** instructors need to help students gain multi-modal communicative competence. Royce defines multi-modal as the mixing of text, audio, video and images. This need for competence may have been true in 2002. However, the working assumption of this research in 2009 was that Japanese university students already had a high degree of multi-modal communicative competence and are to a certain extent media literate. The idea behind the task instruction videos was to take advantage of this multi-modal communicative competence and bring the teacher into the on-line domain, providing instruction, as the students found themselves both physically and mentally distanced from the classroom. It was hoped that this multi-modal approach to instruction would provide a bridge from classroom style learning to independent on-line study.

Finally, the YouTube relayed instructional videos are a relatively novel component of the research. However, YouTube has been used in the classroom for a range of purposes. For example, Kelsen (2009) used it as a supplementary resource at a university in Taiwan and Hazzard (2006) used it as part of a project-based approach at a university in South Korea.

Background

As an English instructor at a university in Japan during 2008, I concluded, through use of a self-created homework resource website, that there was a cross-section of the university's first-year student population that had a genuine problem with making use of technologically-supported self-learning **EFL** activities.

Homework Task

- ✧ Go to my website: http://eca.seigakuin-univ.ac.jp/j_byrne/
- ✧ Visit the links section.
- ✧ Choose 2 links and visit those links.
- ✧ Write 100 words on what you found.

From the problems encountered, I suspected that the Internet needed to be first brought into the classroom before the students would confidently utilise this abundant resource for English study. This became apparent when students were asked to go home, go on-line, and follow simple written instructions (see Figure 1). The students simply could not or would not do it.

An informal class survey of 76 students from three classes in three different departments revealed that the task was extremely difficult. Of the five students who had actually completed the task, none of them were comfortable with the task as they had not had any experience using English areas of the Internet. However, the same homework assignment, when demonstrated in class, proved a great success. The students' eyes lit up with enthusiasm and interest. Whilst demonstrating the task to small groups, it was evident that I had the students' full attention (which is unusual). The students jostled for position and wanted to try the tasks. Only six students displayed body language and distance from the computer that suggested they were less than totally involved.

Certain conclusions were drawn from this. Firstly, my original homework self-study instructions were not adequate, and secondly, the students were not yet sufficiently capable of undertaking on-line self-study.

Action research

The following research took place as a consequence of my being a practitioner researcher. I conducted participant observations, in the role of teacher, in my classroom. This uncovered a need within my classroom involving a significant sample of the first year students. It may prove that this need exists more broadly outside of my classroom, the university and indeed outside of Japan, but the experiential nature of the research makes me hesitant to suggest any wider implications. What follows is a record of my observations and an account of the action undertaken based upon analysis of those observations.

The need

Firstly, the homework experience of 2008 suggested that the students could benefit from a course designed to make them aware of technologically-supported study activities. Secondly, it suggested that the students would require activity instructions in a format that would be easily understandable and that they would be able to use independently in order to develop towards a self-study mode.

Method

Pilot course

Influenced by the homework experience of 2008, a course targeting technologically-supported self-organised **EFL** learning was developed for spring semester 2009 and observed during the same semester.

Participants. The course was piloted with eight university students in Japan. Seven of the students were Japanese citizens and one was an international student. There were five males and three females all below 25 years of age. The learners were of a mixed ability range,

from elementary to mid-intermediate. The course was an elective and primarily targeted at second- to fourth-year students studying Euro-American Studies. All of the students had taken and passed a high beginner/elementary communicative English course during their freshman year, which included 80 hours of class time plus extensive vocabulary homework. The Euro-American Studies students had also taken 80 hours of reading-based English classes. In comparison to other English classes that I have taught within the university, the motivation and ability levels of the students were relatively high.

Course aims and style. The course entitled “Internet English (Basic),” incorporates all four skills plus structure and vocabulary. The lesson themes generally reflect language points and key skills. Thus, while the course is specifically focused on learning to use the Internet for semi-formal study, in some senses it is only a marginal shift from textbook-style course delivery. The lessons are themed around grammar games, speaking robots, reading, listening, idioms and useful phrases. The writing component is provided through written assignments which students are able to prepare partially during allocated class time under teacher supervision. The examined aspect of the course includes oral communication. Hence, the course is a fairly well-rounded task-based communicative experience. In addition, it should not be a large leap from the students’ previous experiences of English study, although the style and format probably appear innovative and unique.

The lessons in focus. The course is divided into 26 lessons of 90 minutes. The uniqueness of the course largely stands on the manner in which instructions are provided and the resources that it utilises.

In essence, teaching students of elementary to intermediate level to use a range of English Internet resources is a genuine challenge. It would seem the real-world nature of the Internet context lends itself to task-based learning. However, the sub-tasks need to be framed in such a way that they do not appear impossible. In fact, the tasks and objectives must appear do-able. Indeed, Prabhu (1990) states that the best methods tend to be context-specific. In this case, the context is a university in the greater Tokyo area and the students are young gadget-wearing Tokyoites being instructed to use the Internet as an English study resource. Consequently, I am optimistic that web-based video instructions can provide the vehicle for communicating the tasks effectively to the students.

The Web-based tasks. Each lesson is compartmentalised into a series of tasks with one task per web page. Each task is sub-divided into intuitive packets of information displayed in a variety of visual formats.

- ✧ The task parameters are on the right side. For example, time and group size.
- ✧ The task is always provided in the form of a video.
- ✧ The video task has subtitled captions.
- ✧ The resource link is always below the video.
- ✧ The *Next* link leads to the next task until replaced with the words *Finished*.
- ✧ Classroom-based post-tasks then follow as required.

It was expected that the resource content would prove challenging. However, since the information flow is highly intuitive and formulaic, the students should have been able to follow the lesson instructions. This would likely be a consequence of the minimal usage of sentences and paragraphs making the information appear far more accessible and usable.



Figure 2. The website layout.
This figure illustrates the clean, compact design of the task layout.

The YouTube Task Videos. Task videos with subtitles, relayed from YouTube, are the primary feature of the course. Prior to starting the project, it was felt that the students would probably enjoy the challenge of watching the video tasks whilst reading the subtitle captions. This was in contrast to students attempting to read a paragraph of written English. In general, it is usually the case that large chunks of written English are both daunting and unappealing to the average student. Therefore, it would seem likely that large chunks of written English would be a barrier to effective communication. Thus the mixed-modal video approach should prove a useful alternative. Yet arguably, the videos could be spoken by the teacher in the classroom with the aid of a white board. However, there are compelling arguments outlining a number of potential benefits of utilising the video resource. For example, class size, age, maturity, dynamic, level and average attention span were such that auto-repeatable instructions should have been very useful. I usually find myself repeating instructions multiple times to multiple sub-groupings for multiple reasons. The constant instructional repetition takes time and in such a non-conventional course could lead to a course meltdown. For example, in the computer lab, students might be listening through headphones or focusing intently on monitors leading to misunderstandings or missed instructions. Nunan (1995) notes that there is often a gap between what the teacher is trying to teach and what the students are actually learning. Hopefully streamlined focused instructions will help bridge this gap. Using video instructions will mean the teacher's spoken class instructions will be greatly simplified. For example, "Go to task one." This means the teacher can focus on monitoring the delivery of the video instructions, allowing the teacher to tackle disciplinary issues and help the weaker students, whilst the stronger students can push on.

In a variety of ways, the video instructions provide scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) allowing students to work with greater independence.

- ✧ The students can listen to the instructions multiple times.
- ✧ The students can read the subtitle captions whilst listening.
- ✧ The students will be working at home and in the classroom. The instructions are available 24 hours a day.

- ✧ If a student misses a class they can very easily catch up. This is vital for this type of course, where one lesson is often linked to the last or next lesson.



Figure 3. The YouTube videos. This figure illustrates the subtitled teacher instructions.

Results

I have been able to pilot and observe the course with a group of eight students. The key aspects of the course were the video instructions and simple formulaic website design. These definitely work. They have required little clarification and I suspect the personal one-to-one viewing of the videos leads to greater focus and consequently greater understanding. The students can and do decide when the video plays, is paused or reviewed. The students are capable of reading the subtitles and appear to have found them beneficial. Therefore, my working assumption that the students had already developed Royce's (2002) mixed-modal competence would appear to be supported by field observation. Furthermore, Gruba's (2006) concept of media literacy, visual imagery aiding lower proficiency students, would also appear to be supported by this research.

In addition, as I stated in the background section, the students at the university are not used to the concept of self-study. Unfortunately, many of the students required a watchful eye to keep them on track, especially during the latter half of the semester. This tended to happen as the tasks became freer and the students were required to provide detailed information to other students. At this time, what tended to happen was that the stronger students would spend 20 minutes researching a quality answer, whilst the weaker and/or less motivated students would spend five minutes on the same task. This tended to lead to 15 minutes of free time for certain students. However, the time freed up by using video instructions meant that I was more aware of slack behaviour and able to deal with it where appropriate. Nevertheless, in fairness to the students, they almost certainly required more guidance than I had given to alleviate the problems they were facing. On the plus side, I would suggest, based upon observation, that at least three of the more mature students most likely benefited and will graduate with a range of self-study skills and knowledge of English study websites.

On the whole, it seemed the six students with pre-intermediate or higher English ability found this course beneficial. However, two of the students had an elementary ability combined with lower motivational levels. The course and assessment appeared too difficult for them. They were able and willing to follow the instructions as required in the videos. For example, they were able to find their way to the various websites and retrieve the required

information. However, fluency tasks were generally a step too far. For example, show-and-tell tasks offered a high degree of challenge with minimal teacher support, as the students interacted in groups and explained the pros and cons of the various websites. That said, even the weakest students still appeared to benefit from the challenge and I would suggest that they may have taken some positives away with them.

Discussion

Interactive confirmation

The videos allowed for an interactive confirmation of the instructions that would be unlikely in a normal classroom environment. In essence, the video instructions allowed the students to clarify without actually putting their hand up and asking the teacher. This enhanced access to instructional understanding appeared to breed confidence in what they were tasked with doing and led to an enhanced ability to tackle the tasks set.

The teacher in three spatial domains

If I, as teacher, told the students to visit a website, they might feel the class is too free. However, watching a video of the teacher telling them to visit a website, will, in my opinion, create a better impression. The teacher becomes an avatar and enters the on-line domain. There are three spatial domains, the classroom, the homework location (library or home) and the abstract domain of the Internet. The videos and website appear to bring the teacher into all three spatial environments. Psychologically this may have an important effect.

Bridging the gap

Furthermore, as Nunan (1995) states, students have to learn to know what they need to learn, to allow student-centered approaches to work. The videos may act as a link between the classroom styles that the students are accustomed to and individualized learner autonomous self-study. I would suggest that the video tasks are a halfway house, helping the students to take study out of the classroom. The tasks demonstrate fairly vividly that there are other ways to study and that the learners can, if they so wish, take more responsibility for those studies. This is consistent with Holec's (1987) concept of learner as manager which highlighted the choice of learner autonomy and the positive effects of active participation. Furthermore, this approach resonates with Kumaravadivelu's (2001) postulating of a post-method pedagogy in which there is a methodological power shift from theorists towards the teachers and students.

Raising the level

Furthermore, I suspect that the video tasks provide more than a window to greater student independence. I would suggest that the video instructions and website challenge the students to reach new levels beyond which they may not have truly dared. The video instructions are supported by Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD could be defined as the zone beyond the student's ability that they can operate within with the help of a more capable peer or teacher. The videos are also supported

by Vygotsky's notion of language as a mediation tool (Lantolf, 2000). The rationale for the video element is to improve the mediation of the task between student and teacher, and this on-line scaffolding may be similar to students interacting with a more competent peer within their ZPD. Supported by the teacher as virtual assister, learners use English as a means of mediation to overcome the Internet challenges. Indeed, this course seems to broaden the student experience of English, as the Internet allows students in EFL environments, such as Japan, to widen their contact zone (Singh and Doherty, 2004).

Conclusion

Overall, the student responses to both the video instructions and the course goals were positive. Naturally, there is always room for improvement; for instance, the course goal of teaching self-study English requires a lot from the students. Those who were ready found the course both useful and enjoyable. However, as a teacher, there was at times the feeling I had given certain students a little too much freedom and possibly not enough guidance. Therefore, I will have to reflect further on how to improve this for future years. That said, the central idea of using subtitled video instructions was, in my opinion, a good one. The students seemed to find the videos quite natural and I suspect easier to understand than they would have in live real time. In a media-literate age where young people are almost always connected to digital resources, video task instructions can find a place. In my opinion, the video tasks are a means to interface the teacher and the students spatially within both the classroom domain and the abstract domain of the computer. In addition, the auto-repeatable, independent, scaffolded and multi-modal nature of the videos strengthens the process of communication and actual understanding of the tasks. Consequently, this may have allowed for more challenging tasks to be undertaken than may have otherwise been anticipated or possible. The end result is, I hope, that eight more students have become technologically supported self-organised learners, or at the very least, have started to explore this possibility.

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