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FIVE FEATURE
ARTICLES

TWO ON ONLINE
TEACHING, THREE ON
FACE-TO-FACE
TEACHING



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Kurume University, in Kurume, Fukuoka

Photo by Alex Cameron

The new “normal”?

At this stage, it's getting hard to remember what “normal” ever was, isn't it? Let's think back... classrooms full of maskless faces, pairwork, students mingling, interacting... Not to mention, of course, heading back to the teachers' room to discuss it all with colleagues over coffee or lunch. I for one would feel pretty lost if I woke up into a world where that was all miraculously back on the cards!

CUE Circular was started with those teachers'-room discussions in mind, as a venue for writing about the day-to-day realities and practicalities of our work. Well, that's something that hasn't changed! The articles in this issue not only continue that tradition but once again draw a nice balance between online class and face-to-face class concerns.

Kristie Collins and Jason Morgan discuss an intervention that got Zoom cameras turned back on and students enjoying learning together over distance. Meredith Stephens shares what the last year and half has been like as a teacher who, prior to the pandemic, used technology in teaching only minimally. Richard Ingham shares what he learned when he had to become familiar with the phonemic alphabet, Glen Hill discusses how students and teachers view English teachers' roles in preparing students for their *zemi* classes and how that informed grammar teaching, and finally Dion Clingwall and Chris Colpitts address the use of smart devices in writing classes.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *CUE Circular*.

Steve Paton, Editor

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Feature articles

The Great Reitaku Switcheroo: Zoom classes as real—not virtual—learning experiences

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In a previous issue of *CUE Circular*, James W. Porcaro (2020) noted that the classroom is not a “stage for a dress rehearsal for a later performance in the ‘real world’.... It is the real world itself” (p. 9). He also reminded us of Betty Azar’s view on grammar-based teaching, where in a classroom, “communicative practice means real people are communicating in real time about real things in a real place for a real purpose” (Azar, 2007, p. 7). The unprecedented shift to online classes during the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the already-present tendency to think of education as divorced from “the real world,” unconnected to life outside of the classroom. While students

and teachers have been spending more time online than ever before (see Andrews, 2020), many students and teachers routinely refer to online classes as “virtual,” indicating that even as many of our commercial and social exchanges move to cyberspace, many of us continue to see Zoom lessons—the ultimate in high-tech connectivity—as ironically unconnected from real life.

Like many of our colleagues, we watched with growing concern as our students, one by one, virtually disappeared from virtual classes. At the beginning of the online experiment in the early spring of 2020, most of our students kept their cameras turned on during Zoom classes. But as time went on, the cameras were turned off. We lost the vital facial connection with our classes, already tenuous due to the electronic medium, and, subconsciously in many ways, we began to revise our lessons to work around this new absence of the face from the educational experience. In other words, we began tacitly to accept the bias that the classroom really is, in the end, superfluous, a kind of backstage to reality, a dressing room for the real world.

It was at this point that one of us, Collins, proposed revisiting an idea which had been in the works before the COVID disruption: a rotation of instructors through the five levels of Discussion on Culture and Society (DCS) classes at our institution. It was suggested on our Google Classroom page—which we five

DCS teachers use to communicate about textbooks, technical challenges, and other class-related matters—that we take advantage of Zoom to facilitate the rotation idea that we had left behind in the planning stages during pre-COVID times. As a trial, the authors agreed to a two-teacher class rotation. The results were heartening, and we believe the experiment could be repeated, *mutatis mutandis*, with similarly positive results for other teachers in a variety of classes. What we are calling the Great Reitaku Switcheroo need not be proprietary to us or to Reitaku—the idea is simple, and the outcome was too good to keep to ourselves.

DCS classes use a common textbook series, with textbook levels chosen to match student TOEIC scores and placement test results. Most DCS class meetings, whether in-person or online, are rooted in the textbook lessons. In our classes there is, as one would expect from a discussion class, a great deal of discourse between teacher and students and, in the breakout rooms, among students themselves. However, while the textbooks are excellent and the students generally participate well using Zoom, the phenomenon of ghosting, or turning off the camera and disappearing from the exchanges, leaving behind only a disembodied voice to take part in communication, is almost universal. Except for two or three brave holdouts, the rest of the class is visually absent.

In order to break out of this rut and encourage students to return to the classroom both visually and aurally, we

decided to switch classes for one day. To complete the break with routine, we also decided to give the textbooks a rest for that one session. We wanted the Switcheroo to be a change from routine, a chance to engage anew with colleagues and peers and to overcome the sometimes disorienting faceless hyper-connectivity of Zoom. Collins did a film and discussion lesson on kindness, modified from a lesson plan from film-english.com. Morgan did a lesson, adapted from another class he teaches on Japanese culture, on the hit film *Kimetsu no Yaiba*.

Collins' lesson consisted of viewing a short film, checking comprehension, discussing themes related to the film, and brainstorming ways we can perform random acts of kindness in our everyday lives. Having students watch the short film ahead of time appeared to have been a good way to ease students into an unfamiliar environment, especially given the film's emphasis on positive interactions with others. Morgan's materials comprised a five-page packet prepared beforehand using articles from the English-language website *JAPAN Forward*. The readings were also shared ahead of time, but were native-level and therefore challenging. Morgan highlighted key terms in green and went over the words with the students at the beginning of class to help facilitate learning. Also, most of the students were already familiar with *Kimetsu no Yaiba*, having already seen the movie, read the manga, or heard about the plotline from friends or on the news. This greatly enhanced the lesson and subsequent conversation and is

something to keep in mind when implementing a Switcheroo of one's own.

The lesson started with both classes gathering in Collins' Zoom room via a link shared with both classes in a prior, "regular" session of DCS. Collins and Morgan briefly introduced themselves to the other teacher's class, and then Collins offered a short overview of the Switcheroo. She emphasized, as had been agreed, that, as a gesture of courtesy to the visiting teacher, students were encouraged to turn on their cameras and leave them on for the duration of the special lesson. At the end of the preliminaries, Morgan shared, via the chat function, the link to his own Zoom class and asked students to wait for about thirty seconds before clicking it. Morgan then left Collins' Zoom room, started up his own Zoom session, and then let in the students from the joint session as they each clicked the link.

What happened next was almost magical. In both Collins' and Morgan's Switcheroo Zoom sessions, nearly every single student—all but two with poor wi-fi connections—turned on his or her camera. The Zoom session was suddenly alive with the semiotic richness of the human face. Students were nervous at first. This was apparent by the relative reticence of the group, and was confirmed by the answers to the survey which Collins prepared and which the students in both classes were asked to fill out later. Soon after that the classroom was humming with interaction. Discussions were vibrant, students were laughing and smiling, and student uptake of new material was noticeably improved. After

the classes were finished, Collins and Morgan met in a new Zoom session and were brimming with enthusiasm over the Switcheroo, wondering if the students enjoyed the experience as much as they had. Fortunately, student satisfaction with the experiment spoke for itself in the survey's guest lecture reviews:

"He told a joke to make everyone laugh and said many funny something," wrote one student of Morgan.

"Because she laughed a lot and made the atmosphere of the class brighter," wrote another of Collins.

And most significantly, another student wrote:

"That was fresh and fun to me. Because it was a different teacher and teaching method than usual."

What we realized through this exercise was that the viscosity of the Zoom experience is crucial to the pedagogical value of the medium. The Great Reitaku Switcheroo surprised us, by acting as a departure from the Zoom norm and therefore opening up new ways to think about Zoom as an educational tool. We expected only to be sharing content—new lessons—with one another's classes, but what we found was that the students themselves were also sharing, both by speaking openly and by opening up the semiotic field of the human visage for others to "read" and understand. (Percy, 1981; Bergo, 2011). What is often almost instinctively relegated to the status of second-class educational experience, namely the Zoom lesson, confirmed

instead the primacy of reality in pedagogy, the complete lack of separation between the classroom and “the real world”. Social distancing, in other words, brought our classes together in new and exciting ways and pointed the way toward an even richer in-person experience when, as we expect, Zoom sessions eventually give way again to physical presence in shared classroom spaces.

While the past year of online teaching and learning has presented us all with a multitude of challenges—from internet connectivity, to new technology, to noisy pets and family members unwittingly joining our Zoom classes—we cannot deny how remote emergency teaching has also enabled some truly innovative teaching and learning experiences to take place. Whether our DCS classes will be conducted face-to-face or online this coming year, there is no doubt that we will institute guest lectures as part of our regular teaching plan, and we hope that the other instructors will join us to make four of the thirty DCS class meetings Switcheroos. We hope that students and teachers alike can look forward to as fresh, revitalizing opportunities to interact with students in a “real” way.

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Learning the International Phonemic Alphabet

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I was vaguely aware of the International Phonetic Alphabet's (IPA) existence prior to becoming a teacher, having occasionally noted some strange-looking letters in dictionaries. During my CELTA training more than ten years ago, I learned of Adrian Underhill's Sound Foundations chart ([here](#)), which elegantly lays out the sounds of English in diagrammatic form. Unfortunately, for a long time I remained oblivious to the IPA's usefulness, until two events caused me to learn it and then to subsequently begin actively applying it in my teaching context. Firstly, I watched [a YouTube video from Adrian Underhill](#). In just over an hour, he clearly illustrates the organisation of the chart, where and how specific sounds are made, and how those sounds relate to each other. My second reason for learning the IPA was due to the Cambridge DELTA qualification that I undertook last year. In order to pass the written exam, it was necessary to transcribe some parts of connected speech, and this proved to be a good

reason to finally learn it. Although on a personal level it was useful for passing my DELTA test, I hope to relate through this article how learning to read and write the IPA may also provide a multitude of benefits for English learners within Japan.

Word Level Pronunciation Benefits

Firstly, knowledge of the IPA has helped my learners with pronunciation at the word level. For example, the word "close" as a verb (/ˈkloʊz/), and as an adjective (/ˈkloʊs/) are spelt in the same way yet pronounced differently. I feel that the IPA provides an excellent medium to visually demonstrate these kinds of differences to learners. I have also used it to highlight the pronunciation differences between different "Englishes". For instance, the pronunciation of the country "Iraq" differs between British English (/ɪˈrɑːk/) and American English (/ɑːˈræk/). Additionally, I have been able to draw attention to problematic sounds in my classes. By way of illustration, the difference between work (/wɜːk/) and walk (/wɔːk/) can be particularly taxing for Japanese learners. A key difference here is in lip rounding: they are wider in the /ɜː/ sound of work and more rounded in the /ɔː/ sound of walk. As I learnt more about pronunciation, I was able to help learners improve their speaking accuracy by showing more precisely how specific sounds are physically generated, e.g., from the shape of the mouth, position of teeth and tongue, etc. A further benefit in this area is that my active use of the IPA in class has helped to promote autonomous learning. As learners' knowledge of the symbols has increased,

they have been able to sound out the pronunciation of words in their dictionaries by themselves. Thus, since learning to read and write IPA, I have been able to provide several tangible benefits for learners with their pronunciation at the word level.

Connected Speech Benefits

Whilst the IPA has clear use at the word level, I feel that this knowledge really comes into its own in helping learners with connected speech. This is something that Japanese EFL learners often struggle with, as they are often unaware of the ways in which the individual sounds of English are changed in fluent speech. Increased knowledge of pronunciation has helped my learners through many areas of connected speech, for example, assimilation. Assimilation occurs when a sound in one word causes the sound in a neighbouring word to change. Thus, in the request “Could you give me that magazine?”, the /d/ sound in “could” and the /y/ sound in “you” are combined to make the sound /dʒ/ (“Couldja”). Assimilation occurs with other sounds and sound combinations, too. For example, when words that end in a /d/, /z/, or /dz/ sound are followed by a word that begins with a /y/ sound, those two sounds will combine. I have found that highlighting sound changes such as assimilation in connected speech helps learners to be better able to pronounce sound combinations, thereby building their fluency and making their English sound more natural. Knowledge of the IPA has been vital in this regard.

Listening Comprehension Benefits

An additional use of the IPA is through helping learners with their listening skills. A major problem affecting students in Japanese EFL environments is that they are provided with few opportunities to converse with native speakers. Learners are often unfamiliar with how native speakers really talk, and this can clearly interfere with their understanding of spoken English. This problem is compounded by the listening materials frequently used in classrooms in Japan that are characterised by slow and inauthentic dialogues (Yanagawa, 2016). As a result, whilst my learners perform adequately well in standardised listening tests, they often admit to finding the comprehension of fluent, rapid speech problematic. I found that through use of activities that involved using the IPA, I could highlight ways that fluent speakers really talk, thereby improving my learners’ listening skills.

Learning the IPA

Despite initial reservations, learning the IPA was simple. I made practice flashcards on Quizlet, used an app designed by Macmillan, and within a week I had learnt the additional 25 symbols that I needed for transcriptions. As for my learners, most already had at least a basic awareness of the IPA, because they had studied it in junior and senior high schools. The textbook we used in class had regular pronunciation sections, so I made sure to use these as and when they came up. The students gradually built on their prior knowledge of IPA as we proceeded through the year.

Use in the Classroom

The key benefits for learners were the ways in which this readily available yet underutilized resource was actively applied in the classroom. I ensured that we had posters of the Sound Foundations chart around the classroom, and I also had a live sound chart on my tablet. With these two resources, I provided ways to visually and audibly demonstrate the sounds when needed. With regards to pronunciation practice, whilst I adopted the maxim of “little and often”, I used the symbols from the IPA in many situations. For example, use of the IPA was useful for focused pronunciation on isolated sounds that the students found difficult. I also found it particularly useful to support choral drilling by highlighting elements of connected speech. In such cases, I would write the symbols underneath the English to highlight areas of focus, for example, the assimilation mentioned above. Additionally, I found IPA useful in an ad hoc fashion for emergent language, or when I noted pronunciation problems during speaking classes, thus providing a useful means to give valuable feedback to students on their speaking skills. Finally, my knowledge was also useful to help listening through highlighting of connected speech in listening dialogs. As an example, I recently demonstrated how the simple phrase “I don’t know” was actually spoken as /aɪ dənəʊ/. Overall, I found many uses for the IPA in my classes, and the feedback from my students relating to its use was and remains very positive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I feel that learning the IPA and applying it in my classes has been highly beneficial to my learners. Firstly, it has helped students with pronunciation at the level of individual sounds and also at the word level. Secondly, by focusing on connected speech, it has enabled learners to speak English more fluently. Finally, as an added benefit of increased knowledge of connected speech, it has also helped learners to improve their listening skills. For the relatively short time required to learn it, I feel that becoming familiar with the IPA is a very worthwhile investment.

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Grammar tidbits offline

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By the time students begin their studies at university in Japan, they have had at least six years of English coursework in junior and senior high school. Much of it is grammar-based, and toward the end of their secondary education, it becomes more a matter of preparing for college entrance exams than practicing communicative English. Regardless, the grammatical foundations are there, whether the students are aware of them or not.

At my national university, whose student body consists solely of science majors, the

curriculum requires only three courses of English for graduation. These are distributed as one course per semester for the first year and a half of a student's university life. A 2015 survey that I conducted among third- and fourth-year students showed that about 80% stated they do nothing to improve or build upon their English fluency after the mandatory courses end. This was a disturbing but not entirely surprising result.

The science teachers were also surveyed, and it was interesting to see overlap between them and the students when asked what both groups felt the English teachers should do to help prepare students for their third- and fourth-year *zemi* studies in which they were often required to read scientific journals (Table 1). Teaching scientific terms is unfeasible because of the variety of non-overlapping majors. Using scientific texts in class is difficult at best for students with such low levels of English (based on TOEIC scores). What remains is an ill-defined “basic English”, something they should have already received sufficiently prior to entering the university.

Table 1.

Results of an on-campus survey of students and science faculty

What should English teachers do to prepare students for <i>zemi</i> ?	Teachers ^a (<i>n</i> = 32)	Students ^b (<i>n</i> = 152)
Teach scientific terms in English	5	18
Teach basic English and sentence structure	3	21
Use scientific texts in class	2	36
Miscellaneous	1	32
No response	12	45

^aVarious course majors, representing ~33% response rate

^b137 agriculture majors (3rd/4th year), 15 veterinary medicine majors (4th/5th year); overall a 32% response rate

English courses at the university constitute separate cohorts (reading, composition, and oral communication) in the first two semesters, each taught by a different teacher. That dynamic makes it difficult to provide the basic English training. Each of the three courses has its own full syllabus of materials, and not all teachers are willing to add to their already full workload for students. In fall of 2020, I thought I would experiment with some supplementary grammar to my second-semester reading course for freshmen by offering Japanese-language materials outside of class.

Based on grammatical mistakes I saw over the years in homework from the freshman reading courses and a second-year writing course, I chose six “grammar points” (Table 2) that I thought they needed and that could be explained easily with some available Japanese-language reference books. The explanatory sections for the grammar points were offered as online study files a week before a quiz was given. I did not cover anything in those Japanese explanations myself but merely assigned them with the instruction that

students would have a quiz. It was up to them to review and prepare. Students were aware that these tidbits of grammar points would count for part of their final grade in the course and were not merely a self-study tool.

Quizzes were made using the drills in *Grammar In Use Intermediate* (Murphy, 2016) as models. They were given online, during class, on Moodle in the form of multiple-choice questions usually with a computer-controlled timer set for 5-12 minutes (Table 2). The first two quizzes had no timer, but Moodle logs provided data on how long students took to complete them, so subsequent quizzes were made with timing constraints that approached what most students were capable of completing.

The grades for the quizzes showed that students did fairly well but had not perfected their knowledge of these grammar points (Table 3), as evidenced by the range of students with correct answers (59.2% to 84.7%). An informal poll during class asked students whether these grammar points were deemed

Table 2.
Grammar points and quiz settings

Grammar point content	Week	No. of quiz questions	Timer (min)*
-ed vs. -ing adjectives	2	10	none
so, such	5	15	none
for, since, while	7	15	5
much, many, few, a lot, a little	11	21	10
still, yet, already, anymore, no longer	12	16	10
too, enough	13	18	12

*Schedule when grammar items were assigned, quiz 1-week later; 15-week course schedule

Table 3.
Scores for each grammar point quiz

Quiz number	Average score/total	Average % correct	No. of Students*
1	6.97/10	69.7	99
2	8.88/15	59.2	101
3	11.40/15	76.0	96
4	13.10/21	62.3	95
5	13.56/16	84.7	97
6	14.17/18	78.7	88

*Varied with attendance

useful as review from their high school days, and the majority (unrecorded) said yes.

The average scores were neither extremely high nor low, suggesting that the intermediate level of grammar that was provided was a suitable one. It is not known whether students actually studied the files or merely relied on memory to attempt the quizzes. Moodle contains logs of whether students visited the link where the grammar point material was provided, but it would be a challenging task to determine a differentiation of scores between which students did or did not open the link, and how much time they spent studying the grammar point.

No follow up was made to ask students whether they felt this means of independent study of the materials was acceptable for reviewing the grammar, but a similar set of presentations of grammar points is underway for freshmen in 2021, with feedback planned on that issue and others. Had such a survey been conducted last year, it is hard to say what

students' reactions would be. The year 2020 was a new experience for students during the coronavirus pandemic. They were forced to learn technology in all-online English courses as well as most of their science courses. Furthermore, science teachers generally gave more homework than usual in order to satisfy university demands for confirming attendance. The volume of other online course work, coupled with the difficulties associated with learning to use new platforms, might have affected student views on being given these grammar points as self-directed review.

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Maintaining the student-teacher relationship, and adapting resources to online teaching

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Prior to the pandemic, I used minimal technology in my classroom, and I confess to having had an aversion to technology in language teaching. This was because students complained about online learning programs featuring traditional methodologies such as comprehension exercises, multiple choice exercises, and fill in the blanks. I eschewed such exercises because I was inspired by Bruner's (1996) notion that learning "is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" (p. 84). No wonder many of my students tended to dislike online learning programs; they tended not to conform to any of the conditions specified above by Bruner.

I was also influenced by Van Manen (2015), who highlighted the importance of the physical presence of the teacher through eye contact, voice, gestures, and

presence. He explained that eye contact on a screen was qualitatively different from eye contact in person. He compared the toxic nature of plastic in baby bottles to that of technology in teaching: "the chemistry in the technology of media and teaching has become toxic for our students" (p. 110).

I was able to witness the benefits of in-person teaching in my classroom, and my observations seemed to confirm what Van Manen was arguing. I had my students regularly change partners as they engaged in pair work. The students would be paired into Partners A and B, and every time the conversational topic was changed, Partners B would move clockwise around the classroom to the next Partners A. I would observe the expressions on the students' faces as they engaged in conversation, and many of them were animated, engaged, and smiling. I considered that this was because their communication was "participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" as Bruner (1996, p. 84) specified.

My views changed during the pandemic when I was forced to abandon in-person teaching in favour of the Zoom online platform. Unaccustomed to using online resources, I had to quickly master this new medium. A JALT colleague in Kansai, Curtis Kelly, kindly sent me some videos on how to use Zoom, and my daughter sat at my side during the beginning of each lesson to help me as I started to use this new technology from home.

My desktop computer, books, and other resources were in my university office, but I could no longer gain entry to the campus from my distant locale. My only guide was the university's online syllabi which I accessed from my laptop at home. I had to find online teaching resources to match the syllabi. Thankfully, I managed to find free online resources that were even better than those in my office. The British Council provides a range of resources covering the four skills, grammar, vocabulary, business English, and IELTS. The video zone on their website *Learn English* (<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/general-english/video-zone>) was particularly useful.

These videos are a few minutes in duration and are designed to cover upper intermediate (CEFR level B2) and advanced (CEFR level C1) levels. They begin with a warm-up exercise, and feature a video with a transcript. I send the students the video link a few days before the Zoom class. During the class, I play the video first without the transcript and then with it. Next, we complete the featured comprehension exercises. Of course, I am not a fan of comprehension exercises, but I concede that spending five minutes doing them probably helps students consolidate new vocabulary.

My other preferred online resource is *Learning English* (see previous link). This resource covers grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, news, and business, and has sections for teachers as well as children's stories with audio. I use the pronunciation section with a second-year

required class, for 15 minutes in every lesson: (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/pronunciation>).

The presenter provides important tips on pronunciation that learners in Japan are generally unaware of. The video clips feature the pronunciation of ordinary people in city parks and other public places, and some of them are slowed down so that learners can easily observe lip movement. The presenter is animated, and there is quirky humour at the end of every video clip. Each lesson concludes with a simple written explanation to summarize the featured pronunciation point.

For my trainee teachers' class, I use "Classroom teaching tips with The Teachers' Room" (https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/classroom_teaching). These videos cover topics such as word stress, error correction, vocabulary, how to give instructions, intonation, reading, dictation, collocations, grammar, songs, using realia, speaking, listening, writing and using social media. The presenters are lively, humorous, and engaging. I follow up each video with written assignments asking students to write 100 words summarizing the video and 100 words explaining how they would use these in their classrooms. In the latter, they have to integrate this with a lesson from one of the prescribed English language middle or high school textbooks from our university teaching library, so that they can adapt these videos to Japanese pedagogical requirements.

Finally, I will explain how I overcame my aversion to technology in language teaching. My concerns were whether I could establish and maintain rapport online. I was less concerned about teaching students on Zoom who I had previously taught in the traditional classroom. I *was* concerned about students whom I had never met in person. It has been over a year since I started teaching this latter group, and I can report that it is possible to establish rapport with them. I can see all of the students' faces at an equal distance. I can engage with them in paired discussions at regular intervals in breakout rooms. I hope I can meet these students one day in person, but teaching online has not prevented me from establishing rapport. Also, I concede that technology has given me speedy and convenient access to quality online resources.

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Encouraging students to write using mobile devices

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This short article offers insights into a first-year Japanese university writing class where students were not only allowed to utilize their smartphones (or tablets) but actively encouraged to do so. This particular lesson approach has been used regularly by both the authors.

Without question, there exists a range of opinions on whether students should be allowed to access the internet during class time. However, regardless of how individual instructors feel, there is no debate about the usefulness of language learning tools currently available online. An important aspect of these language learning tools is whether students should be allowed to use mobile devices during class time to access online resources and complete specific tasks. This article

argues that one effective approach to classroom writing tasks is employing a combination of traditional writing instruction and web-based technology.

Student expectations and motivation

Most Japanese university students, regardless of faculty or department, are required to take an English course during their first (or second) year of study. Thus, students arrive in writing classes from a wide variety of academic backgrounds, with differing levels of motivation and a broad range of expectations. For example, some students have no interest in English but expect and are prepared to complete homework and write weekly essays, while others are excited about English but assume there will not be much more than a final exam. It is up to the instructor to pull together whatever disparate group of students might arrive in class and motivate them to write in English and hopefully learn something while doing so. To that end, we feel that mobile devices such as smartphones or tablets can play a valuable role in achieving this goal.

Initial class goals

Two of the critical goals of this first-year Japanese university writing class were to increase both student motivation and productive output (as mentioned in the introduction, both of the authors have taught this course). Motivation is vital for the success of a lesson, especially when hoping to see overall progress and specific writing skill development. With this in mind, we attempted to increase motivation using the following approaches:

i) *short, focused, productive writing tasks*: Bursts of an intensive writing activity is one such effective method we have found that keeps students energized, attentive, and productive.

ii) *individualization*: Having a personal stake in the content creates genuine and sustained interest and leads to more personalized writing.

iii) *student-generated topics*: Based on student journals (in-class or online submissions) and classroom discussion, we suggest topics or themes that the students themselves have suggested.

iv) *interactive and student-driven/learner-driven class*: The instructor interacts continuously with students while they write about an individualized theme. We have found that this combination of teacher-student interaction and student-generated topics seems to increase motivation and commitment, as the student becomes vested in the task in a personal, direct manner.

We have found that this combination of individualization and learner-focused/learner-generated topics is an effective way to generate writing exercise content, based on subject matter drawn directly from the students (in-class discussions, student journals, and free-writing content). We also suggest that using student-generated topics also leads to an increase in overall production (based on word-level analysis with the word count feature of Microsoft Word) and an increase in the range of low-frequency vocabulary found in the written text (based on word-level analysis using the freely available, online lexical analysis site “Lextutor vocabprofiler”):

<https://www.lex tutor.ca/>). Furthermore, in this class students complete writing tasks every week. In so doing, there is a focus on production, repetition, and a wide variety of exercises.

Three-components principle

We now build on the above approaches by applying what we call the “three-components principle”. These components are intended to create a writing class that fosters progress, flows more efficiently, and allows students to track their own skill development.

To begin, the instructor makes clear to the students that all tasks consist of three different components. During the first two components, students are rewarded for taking risks (e.g., using unconventional phrases or structures), being creative, and using low-frequency vocabulary. Students’ efforts to express their ideas and opinions are highly valued in these tasks.

Although mobile devices are not used during the first two stages, they are encouraged for the third component. We have found that this approach to writing tasks leads to consistent production of a wider range of expressions, an increase in low-frequency vocabulary, and more complex grammar usage (e.g., conditional constructions, relative pronouns, etc.). The manner in which the devices are used and which applications the students choose are up to the students. As instructors we do however, beginning with the first class and continuing throughout the semester, introduce various applications and websites (e.g.,

online translators (translate.com, yandex, etc.), grammar practice (Quizlet, Memrise, etc), and vocabulary acquisition (Praxis, British Council, etc.) among others.

Now to consider the three writing task components specifically, here is their breakdown:

Freewriting – task component 1

Students choose a topic from among a range that, beginning in the first class, are taken from student-generated content such as journals, classroom discussion, etc. Students write freely about this topic for a given time period.

Students carry out short, focused, productive writing tasks. They are provided with specific time limits, 5 to 10 minutes, and are encouraged to write as much and as fast as possible (using either paper and pen if in a regular classroom, or using the computer if in a computer/CALL lab). It is important that students are not penalized for errors, and they are not allowed to use a mobile device during this first component. While the students are writing (in their notebooks), the instructor walks around the classroom encouraging the students, answering questions when asked, and reminding them that mistakes are acceptable and will not be graded. Given this short time frame and no access to a mobile device, students rely on their productive lexical resource to write about the topic.

Writing to communicate – task component 2

Students revisit their freewriting and attempt to rewrite it with a specific target audience in mind, intending to adjust the content accordingly, and with as much detail as possible, specifically verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

In this second component, again for 5 to 10 minutes, students are asked to read through and then re-write their component one draft. This time, however, they are asked to write for the purpose of communication. This means they need to choose a target audience and include as much specific detail as possible. Students are asked to focus on more precise verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, as well as to make notes in their notebook (in English or Japanese) about terms, phrases, or grammatical points that they would like to look up during component three. The instructor highlights the difference between general and precise terminology at this point of the lesson. During this second component as well, the instructor continues to give feedback to the students.

Consolidation and expansion – task component 3

Students then revisit their writing for a second time and use their smartphones or tablets to update, correct, and edit their work.

For this final component, students have 10 to 15 minutes to freely use their mobile devices. They are encouraged to further research the topic they have written about in the first two components and add content if they would like. Students also use this time to find words or phrases that

more accurately describe the point they are attempting to convey. By waiting until the third component to use mobile devices for correcting and editing their work, students develop a clear picture of what they would like to say and a better sense of where their productive English knowledge is lacking. Throughout this final component, the instructor offers the students more specific and detailed feedback than in the previous two components.

Ongoing feedback

Suggestions, although always brief, begin with general commentary during the first component and gradually become more detailed as the students work through the three iterations of their papers. Continuous, corrective feedback helps to build a relationship between the instructor and students while encouraging them to seek more specific vocabulary and detailed phrasing. When the allotted time for part three concludes, students hand in all versions of their essays (either handwritten or printed out) for a closer examination by the instructor, who marks and edits them accordingly and returns them in the next class.

Final feedback and supplemental tasks

At the outset of the next class, the essays are returned to the students followed by a short discussion about common errors and general problems. The students are then given a chance to read through the instructor feedback and ask questions.

An optional task that has been very successful in raising awareness of

problems within student writing is to split the class into groups of four or five and have students give a short summary presentation of their essay. This summary reinforces the new expressions, grammar, and vocabulary within a student's accessible L2 knowledge. At this time, the instructor makes notes, offers suggestions, and provides further encouraging feedback.

Justification for this approach

We feel that monitoring in-class writing provides both instructors and students ongoing and specific insight into students' writing skills. Furthermore, by having students write during class time, we were able to gain a clearer sense of our student's ability, level of proficiency, and the challenge it may be to carry out writing tasks. Finally, by completing this task in class we were able to control the degree to which students utilize their mobile devices when completing assignments (unlike with homework assignments).

Expanded writing tasks

We have also used this same approach with larger writing projects. For example, the blocks of time can be varied for as long as a particular instructor deems necessary, or as the task requires. Another option is to carry out a writing task over multiple classes whereby the instructor collects the writing at the end of task 1, and then returns the essay with specific written feedback in the subsequent class. Task 2 is then carried out, followed by task 3 in the next class. For all of these tasks, clear goals, time limits, and ongoing feedback provide the student

with both support and a framework within which to work.

Conclusion

These conclusions are drawn from both our own judgments as well as student feedback via mid and end of term surveys. Our experience suggests that writing to communicate quickly and efficiently, both with and without mobile-assisted language learning tools creates a greater connection between the student and their writing. Our students are invested in the topic they are writing about and thus appear to feel less constrained by lack of knowledge and less concerned about making errors. The ongoing and consistent feedback helps to encourage and guide our students as they navigate their topic. Employing a mixed approach regarding the use of mobile devices appears to enhance both student writing and their overall understanding of when it is most appropriate to use a mobile device. The errors they produce across the three iterations of the task function as useful measuring sticks for the teacher as well as the students. We as teachers are able to track student progress, while survey feedback from the students indicates that they feel better able to identify their own specific areas of weakness. In this era of mobile devices, instructors need to recognize the benefits and allow students the opportunity to employ these devices when most beneficial.

References

(Although this reference isn't specifically cited in the article, it is a paper that both of us have read and referred to when

developing the online components of this writing class.)

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