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Applying Technology to an ESP Course: What have the Instructors Learned?

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This paper discusses and explores how technology has been applied to a tertiary ESP (English for Specific Purpose) course at Matsuyama University. Similar to other universities, Matsuyama has a specific number of languages credits that students regardless of major must acquire. For language majors this is not a difficult task; for those in other majors though this can be a formidable chore. The path of least resistance is through a course entitled “Travel English”. Students have frequently been overheard to refer to this course as “Trouble English”. In addition to the reluctance on the part of students; there also been the challenges of class size, appropriate instructional methods, classroom location, text selection and specific university policies. To alleviate some of the discrepancies and vicissitudes while at the same time injecting modern teaching techniques that allow students to take ownership and responsibility of their learning experience; innovation instructional methods have been attempted to be formulated. These techniques which encompass the versatility of the World Wide Web still provoke issues and impediments to a smooth and enriching learning acquisition. The authors share their positive and negative experiences over the previous years in the hopes of enlightening those readers to the benefits and rigors of engaging technology with language acquisition techniques. This paper is especially beneficial to those who might be involved with ESP courses or language teaching in general.

Introduction

It is well known that society is currently experiencing great technological momentum and that technology has found its way into our classrooms. Yet, many teachers have not demonstrated an adoption of such advances and their instructional practices do not reflect the integration of instructional technologies (Wells, 2003). Technology is becoming increasingly important in both our personal and professional lives, and our learners are using technology more and more. The advent of the Internet has dramatically strengthened the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and boosted its role in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Al Shammari, & Albalawi, 2011). Yet teacher training programs often ignore training in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and teachers are often far less skilled and knowledgeable than their own students when it comes to using

current technology (Dudeny & Hockly, 2007).

“Numerous books and research studies on the topic are now available, which may be one indicator that educators in both online and blended learning environments continue to strive to create more effective learning experiences for their students and see interaction as the key to that effectiveness” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012, p ix),

The use of blended learning is becoming main stream in any type of language course today. The use of ICTs and traditional instructional methods are enabling teachers and students to become involved with technology and learning inside as well as outside the classroom. A blended learning course is potentially greater than the sum of its parts, and positive learning outcomes are most apparent when clear roles are assigned to the teacher and to technology. The instructors at Matsuyama University have utilized the application of education technology tools in a variety of modes to encourage interest and motivation for various courses. In many ways, integration strategy is often guided by different factors including equipment accessibility, educational objectives, students’ needs and the teachers’ technical know-how (Halpin, 1998).

Past Imperfect

While not quite involving a cast of thousands, the original Travel English course was taken by classes of over one hundred students (all non-English major, second year or above, as previously described). Large rooms were assigned accordingly, although to accommodate such numbers, these actually had seating catering to even larger groups, meaning that even here, the problem of many, frequently less motivated participants occupying seats in the furthest regions of the wide space available still arose. Perhaps the only concession to the proposed communicative nature of the course was, upon request, the allocation of classrooms in which the chairs with attached desk panels could be moved together to facilitate pair or group work.

Recognizing a considerable proportion of lower ability students from general English courses taken in their first year, it was the responsibility of the single full-time non-Japanese lecturer teaching the class to search for a suitable text, at a level that would be sufficiently accessible. These included some designed specifically for the local market by writers in Japan, featuring basic travel situations in a variety of countries and some documentary material on DVD (with “real” interviews requiring much higher listening comprehension skills than the rather artificial dialogues read by exclusively American actors in the main section of each chapter). A typical example was “Adventures Abroad” (Cleary & Fuller, 2008), well-intentioned enough, with its jaunty title and cover, but ultimately proving distinctly limited in scope and unpopular with other teachers (now expanded to include more of the full-time faculty), if not necessarily the students themselves, who often appear to be less concerned with such matters. While the actual level was probably appropriate for the majority, there was some concern that a number of more able students, including some with experience of travel overseas (one or two had even visited a number of countries independently, quite rare in this peer group), found the content particularly un-engaging.

Changing Course

After a couple of years continuing in this somewhat unsatisfactory manner, an overhaul of the course was undertaken both administratively, with the students now spread between *all* full-time native English speaking staff, resulting in a helpful if not overly significant reduction in numbers (averaging around eighty members), and regarding the syllabus itself, where certain choices resulted in the establishment of some standardization.

The first of these was the adoption, by largely mutual agreement, of a new textbook, previously used by one lecturer in a content based class under a more general course title. While it would be possible to work through “Travel Abroad Project” (McMahon, 2005) with conventional printed resources, it clearly represented an ideal opportunity to make use of online research of the kind that many of us felt could and should, however belatedly, be a part of today’s learning process. As such, all classes were assigned to fully-equipped rooms where every student had individual access to an internet-connected computer for the duration for each of the fifteen sessions.

Secondly, the material was specifically designed with student presentations as the principal goal, with work to be written up in the “journal” attached to the main text, adding visual material gathered online or elsewhere. Many, though not all, teachers made the progression from a “show and tell” approach in small groups, to requiring learners to use PP (PowerPoint) in performance to the whole class. Both in its basis on a long term project and goal orientation towards presentation, this was unfamiliar territory for many students, particularly in an English class, and results were, not unexpectedly, quite varied.

On the one hand, some individuals showed increased motivation in being able to work with others or individually using familiar technology. On the other, some wasted much time failing to apply that same technology in any useful manner, even needing assistance to simply log on to their university accounts, a problem often awaiting discovery well into the ninety-minute class. Such difficulties compounded an already heavy logistical load for the teacher who had to spend much of the lesson checking on progress in a manner less necessary when working with more traditional, less open-ended activities.

There was also the predictable frustration, in spite of numerous warnings and explanations, of work being either copied directly from general knowledge sites such as Wikipedia, or translated poorly by the available software from Japanese-language versions of the same. Here is an example, quoted as written, from a typical project on Italy:

(THREE TOPICS) Most famous Arts is painting. Italian painting *enjoyed pre-eminence* in Europe for hundreds of years... Italy *is located in* Southern Europe and *comprises* the long boot shaped, Italian Peninsula... The Italian population *surpassed* 60 million...
(CONCLUSION) Italy is beautiful country.

This excerpt shows the mix of foreseeable errors in the simple but original phrases that they had been encouraged

to use, and in the copied sentences, unfamiliar vocabulary and constructions (italics added) that were unlikely to be internalized for future use.

Moving on – in one direction

With class size now down to a considerably more manageable size of less than twenty members, usually settling to an average of about fifteen regular attendees, a survey was undertaken (see Appendix 1) to assess student attitudes toward both the course and its context.

While only administered to two groups, one consisting entirely of male students, the other rather more evenly balanced; the answers provided some interesting insights into views of the style and content of learning. Questions regarding general internet use and the possibility of actual travel abroad also hinted at discrepancies between teacher expectation and the reality of student lives.

It was found that surprisingly as many as 40% of students described their own use of the internet as limited, while only 5% made use of non-Japanese sites, for a variety of reasons, with perhaps some misunderstanding arising from the apparent inclusion of Japanese versions of originally English-language search engines (Google and Yahoo, for example). The internet may be a global phenomenon, still dominated by English, but the growing availability of country- or language-specific sites may represent some inward consolidation within the generally perceived expansion overall.

The above can undoubtedly be seen as contributing to the low priority given by about half those surveyed to learning skills to improve their use of the internet *in English*, which the teachers themselves would mostly have felt as one of the prime goals of the course. However, in terms of the specific use of computers in class (in this case, moreover, the use of a computer room for the entire course), all responded positively, in what may be appreciation for the autonomy and freedom granted by the arrangement.

Finally, it was surprising to find that as many as 40% of those asked stated fairly clearly that they believed they would probably not travel abroad within the next five years, at a stage in their lives when it might be expected as most likely, and considering their interest in situational conversation practice expressed in the next question. It would not be unexpected for the male majority and non-language major nature of the groups to have been a factor in these results.

Wikis Applied

In addition to the difficulties encountered with students directly copying and pasting or utilizing translation software to ease their burden; there was an issue with employing PP as the main software component for presentations. PP as numerous Travel English instructors found out could be very bland and monotonous when 20

or more students gave their presentations. Even with varying templates the presentations came across with an unpleasant ‘sameness’ that when encountered over and over again tended to put the other students as well as the instructors in a sleepy daze.

A primary reason for this effect of all the presentations looking similar was due to the technological limitations of PP. Embedding videos or audio was confusing and laborious for the instructors as well as the learners. Students pasted pictures on to their PP with the results being nothing more than comparable slideshows one after another. An alternative presentation device was required that would allow for entrenchment into the presentations of such recent Web tools such as Google Maps, YouTube videos and others.

Wikispaces.com was selected due to the fact it met all the required criteria in addition to its secure internet features against spam and hacking. Additionally the ability to use wikis at no cost to the university was an added benefit. Logging in was secured with a course password that could be easily changed if any issues did arise.

Having been in existence for over 10 years, the use of wikis has been documented and researched by numerous scholars (Grant, 2006, Windham, 2007, Su & Beaumont, 2010). The simplicity, flexibility and openness of this technology provide higher education with new opportunities for developing online interaction in a way that was not possible before. Moreover wikis can help provide an efficient, flexible, user-friendly and cost effective interface for collaboration, knowledge creation and student interaction (Schwartz, Clark, Cossarin & Rudolph, 2004). Thus learners are actively, involved in their own co-construction of knowledge (Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006). This active involvement is essential in a course such as Travel English from many angles. Students through the use of wikis can fulfill the aims of the course while at the same time expanding their knowledge of the world around them.

Possible paths / continuing questions

Given the preferences expressed by students and the desire to provide a better balanced course on the part of the teaching staff, it would appear that a blended approach might be the most suitable, allowing, as it does, for flexibility in the proportion of technology-assisted and more traditional methods and materials. Utilizing authentic sources such as tourist, hotel, airline and other transport websites can give greater relevance to practical research online while also allowing for the development of goal-orientated internet skills (going through booking procedures step-by-step, though ensuring progress is halted before the last, and that no actual reservations are made!) without prior labeling as such.

These can then be directly supplemented by related conversational activities, expanding student knowledge of the language needed and strategies for its use via practice in a variety of situations in a travel-based context. Many of the goals can be seen to correspond directly to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Language (2001) and Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) “Social and Tourist ‘Can Do’” lists, and

further to the Cambridge exams which use them as a guide.

Having four full-time lecturers administering largely the same syllabus also represents a rare opportunity to work in tandem on action research of the most direct kind, comparing results and filtering these back into the system through adjustments to the course *as it continues*.

Questions that might be closer to being answered as a consequence include those of the extent to which the technology is visibly and measurably adding to the progression of the class, and whether the material concerned truly matches the machinery being utilized. How different is the work produced from what might be expected from a Wikipedia-based junior high school project? Is course content taking precedence over the computer facilities available or is it chosen for the ease with which it can be used within them? With the greater student autonomy implicit in the nature of research-based learning, what are the implications for the teacher's role? Is it as instructor, guide, technical assistant, or a combination of all three?! And finally, just what is meant by "Travel English", and does the concept bear any relation to student expectations of the same?

Conclusion

The freedom that the Internet gives learners over what, when, where and how they study, makes it at the top of any other CALL applications leading to more autonomous, self-centred and proactive learners (Al Shammari & Albalawi, 2011). The Travel English course at Matsuyama University allows for such freedom and ease to enable learners to take charge of their own learning. Unfortunately, in the past, other factors such as class size, lack of motivation and purpose, and improper course material have impeded the major objective of providing a basis for basic EFL skills and cultural awareness.

Administrative changes have also affected the general framework for the Travel English course. These changes have been beyond the control of instructors and in some ways have added frustration to an already difficult and at times unclear teaching objective. Better communication and swifter implementation of modifications in course curriculums are essential. Additionally, student input has been obtained on a small scale but a more in-depth inquiry as to what students are looking for in a Travel English type course needs to be addressed. Lack of motivation has been a continuing factor even as class size has decreased and more suitable texts and material via the internet have been obtained.

The structure of this course has been continuously adjusted for the betterment of the learners. In this process, the Travel English course has become a learning experience for not only the students but the instructors as well. The instructors have ascertained over time the importance of class size and structure, text selection, and the significance of implementing proper ICT and CALL tools for EFL attainment in today's classrooms. This knowledge gained has been of immense value to the instructors. The interaction between instructors has enabled a synergy effect that has benefited learners and lecturers alike, empowering new paths to learning through the ever-expanding tools of the

Web as well as traditional methods of learning. All of this can of course be transferable to future classes to expand the learning and teaching potential. It must never be forgotten that teaching is actually a continuous learning process for the instructors as they advance through their careers. All this of course can only benefit the learners in their process of EFL.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

A) *Why did you choose to take this Travel English class?*

Any of 4 reasons circled (more than 1 ok)

(Because it looked...)	interesting	useful	easy	different
	13	13	2	0

From question B) to E) only 1 answer circled

B) *How do you feel about using computers in this class?*

Good	OK	Not so good	Bad
7	17	0	0

C) *How much do you use the internet outside class?*

A lot	Sometimes	Not often	Very little
6	8	4	4

What for? **(re)search/shopping/music/YouTube/anime/sport**

D) *How many non-Japanese websites do you usually use?*

Many	Some	Few	None
1	1	10	11

For example? **search engines/news/shopping/Asian language**

E) *Do you think you will travel abroad in the next 5 years?*

Definitely Maybe Probably not No
 2 12 5 4

Where? **Various answers including Korea/France/USA (3),
 UK/‘Europe’ (2), Australia/China/‘Asia’ (1)**

F) Please rank these activities 1-4 in order of importance to you

Ranking	1	2	3	4
<i>Online research about countries</i>	6	5	7	2
<i>Using travel related websites</i>	7	3	4	5
<i>Travel situation conversation practice</i>	6	8	6	0
<i>Learning English net skills</i>	3	5	3	9

Note: questionnaire given to 24 students in 2 classes in the 5th week of a 15-week course, with explanations in English and Japanese

(No response to certain questions resulted in some totals below 24)

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