

Web 2.0 and mixed ability EFL classes in Japan: challenges and possibilities

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Abstract

This paper reports on the integration of internet-based software applications and the use of blended learning in three second year elective classes at Toyo Gakuen University. It also discusses the challenges presented by this approach and suggests possibilities for improvement.

1. Introduction

Once upon a time, learning English was an end in itself. People learned English in order to do business, to travel, and to survive as immigrants in English speaking countries. Much of the communication was interpersonal and face-to-face. This is changing. Warschauer (2001) relates an illuminating story. He says, “earlier this year, an English teacher in Egypt told me... ‘English is not an end in itself; it’s just a tool for being able to use computers and get information on the Internet.’” In other words, for this teacher the primary purpose of English language learning was not interacting with English speakers. Thus, the central place of computers in our lives has added a new dimension to English language learning. Computers are not only a means of learning English; they are also a reason for learning English (Chappelle 2001). Consequently, computers, and the internet have made their way into English language teaching and learning. This has resulted in a *blended learning* approach, which has been described as, “an integration of face-to-face teaching and learning methods with online approaches” (Frydrychová Klímová, 2008, p. 58). In addition, emerging technologies known as Web 2.0 applications are beginning to have an important impact.

Web 2.0 is the second stage in the evolution of the World Wide Web. In the beginning, most internet users were passive participants. Content was created by professionals and it required a high-level of specialised knowledge. In short, most people just read, few wrote. Web 2.0 is the “read/write” web. This read/write web is created by providing applications resembling software familiar to a large number of people and therefore relatively easy to use. The content on these

websites is user-generated. They rely on an architecture of participation, which is a “structure that encourages users to contribute, interact and remix user-owned data” (Talandis 2008, p. 797), and the more that users participate, the better these websites become. The interactive nature of Web 2.0 technologies and their close resemblance to a social-constructivist model of learning make them attractive to English Language Teachers. Web 2.0 technologies have made instantaneous inter-class, intra-class, and international student interaction in English easily accessible (Rice and Rooks, in press). This potential for a world-wide audience, says Hockly (2009, p. 64), makes students “...keener to produce good quality work.”

Three years ago I started a blog called *Mr. Stout's Blog for Students and Teachers* (<http://mrstoutsblog.blogspot.com/>) while teaching at a high school in Tokyo, as a means of participating in a blogging project that my students were engaged in. Initially the purpose of the blog was to model blogging for the students and to interact with them outside of school. Over time it evolved. I began using it as a means to assist students with projects by providing them with links. When the students completed their projects I displayed them on my blog. The projects displayed on the blog were then used as models for the students who were assigned these projects the following year. Through blogging I discovered an online social network called EFL Classroom 2.0 (<http://eflclassroom.ning.com/>). Through this community I learned of more Web 2.0 applications and I made connections with teachers from all over the world. My own experience with web 2.0 applications and online social networks encouraged me to start integrating these tools into my classes. I was also encouraged by research that suggested that doing this can be effective. Fellner and Apple's (2006) study was especially encouraging because it found that blogging could increase the writing accuracy and fluency of low-level learners.

In this paper, I will describe how I have used a blended learning approach and integrated Web 2.0 applications into three 2nd year interest-based elective courses at Toyo Gakuen University. Then I will discuss the challenges presented by the use of this approach. Finally I will suggest possible ways that my approach can be improved.

2. An Overview of the Classes

I began teaching three second year elective courses in April of 2008. Two of the classes, Interest-based English — Travel and Interest-based English — Homestay, are designed as preparatory courses for students planning to travel overseas or do a homestay. The third course, Interest-based English — Music, is topic based, and it lacks the specific purpose present in the other two courses.

All of the classes are ninety minutes in length and they are held once a week for a period of thirteen or fourteen weeks. Since these classes are elective, the first class is divided into three 30-minute sessions. Students are given a brief introduction to the course and then they move on to another class. After sampling up to three classes the students make their choices. By the fourth week teachers are given a final class roster. This means that effectively the courses are nine or ten weeks in duration for a total of approximately 15 contact hours. The classes are limited to thirty students. Ten 1st year students may take these classes. These classes are entirely optional for 1st year students and 1st year students tend to be more proficient and more motivated than the 2nd year students. In fact, many 1st year students are turned away, whereas the quota for second year students often remains unfilled.

There are no prerequisites for these classes and any second year student regardless of ability may take the class. Second year elective courses are taught by both Japanese and Native English speaking instructors. Classes taught by Japanese instructors are conducted mainly in Japanese, and classes taught by Native English speaking instructors are conducted mainly in English. Therefore, students with lower proficiency, motivation, and/or confidence can choose to take classes taught through the medium of Japanese. However, students frequently base their choices on other factors including the time the class is scheduled and whether or not their friends are taking the class. Furthermore, many students put off registering for these classes until the last minute, which means that their choices are based on availability rather than interest. Consequently, the classes are mixed and include students ranging from those with very little communicative competence in English to those with intermediate communicative competence.

No standardised test scores are available to teachers, and some students have never taken a standardised test. However, some idea of the students' communicative competence was gained by asking the students which 1st year English classes they were placed in. First year English classes use the books in the *American Headway Series* published by Oxford University Press, and they are split into four levels corresponding to the levels in the series. According to *New Headway and the Common European Frame of Reference*, a downloadable document available on the Oxford University Press website, the students' books in the series can be mapped onto the Common European Framework (CEF) as follows: Beginner — A1, Elementary — A1/A2, Pre-intermediate — B1, and Intermediate — B1/B2. Most students in these classes were placed in 1st year English classes using the elementary level textbook, placing them within the A1 to A2 range. Level A1 is considered the lowest level of generative language use (Council of Europe, 2001, p.33). Some

students had almost no communicative competence in English and could be considered below Level A1. On the other hand, one student was in the B2 range.

Faced with students with mixed needs, motivations and proficiencies I decided that a blended learning approach would be most appropriate for these classes. I reasoned that this approach would allow students to work independently and at their own pace, and this would allow me to give more attention to weaker students, and it would prevent the stronger students from being held back. Furthermore, I hoped using the internet would provide the students with an authentic audience and a sense of agency, increasing their motivation to use English. According to Warschauer (2001, p.7), it is agency that really “makes students so excited about using computers in the classroom” because “the computer provides them with a powerful means to make their stamp on the world.”

With this in mind, I conducted all the classes in a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) room and organised the classes using my blog as the anchor. During the first full class I introduced the students to my blog and showed them how to subscribe to the blog. Once the students subscribed to the blog they received an e-mail informing them of new blog posts. This allowed them to preview the lesson materials before each class. Then I showed them how to bookmark a webpage. Once they bookmarked my blog the students were able to find it easily. This was important because they would be using it for every class. From the second class on, the students immediately went to my blog at the start of each class. Along with an outline of the lesson plan, the blog post included links to websites the students would interact with that day. Every post had a link to an online vocabulary flashcard site.

Ten to fifteen minutes of every lesson were devoted to vocabulary study using online flashcards. I decided to do this for a number of reasons. First, the students required a lot of vocabulary learning in order to cope with the content of the classes. An action research project conducted by Taylor and Birchley (2008) found that Toyo Gakuen students enjoyed vocabulary learning through online flashcard applications during class time. Furthermore, the students considered this method of learning vocabulary to be effective. Second, I thought that doing vocabulary flashcard drills near the beginning of the class would settle the students down and help them to concentrate on the lesson.

The site I used most often was *Wordchamp* because it allows users to create their own vocabulary lists and flashcards. Since these classes were heterogeneous and there was a diversity

of vocabulary learning needs, it was important for students to be able to create their own lists and flashcards. *Wordchamp* also allows teachers to create “classes”, homework assignments, send students messages, and track students’ progress. In addition to *Wordchamp*, I used *Quizlet* and *Study Stack* because these two sites offered games as well as drills.

The teacher blog and online vocabulary flashcards were common to all three courses. I used additional applications to suit the needs of the individual courses. In the sections that follow, I will describe each of the courses in more detail and discuss how I used these applications.

3. The Travel English Class

Travel is a common reason people have for learning English, so there are many textbooks on the market to serve this need. I chose *Passport* by Angela Buckingham and Norman Whitney (2000) because it is specifically designed for Japanese learners, it includes a bilingual glossary, and it has a complimentary website. *Passport Online* has activities corresponding to each unit of the textbook and tests as well. These activities include not only the standard multiple choice questions, scrambled sentences and fill-in type exercises, but also activities that appeal to spatial learners. For example, there are activities that require the learner to use the computer mouse to drag and drop words on to a matching picture. *Passport Online* became an important part of this course for consolidation, revision and testing the material studied.

The basic structure of each lesson was as follows:

1. Introduction to the lesson goals and content via the teacher blog
2. Vocabulary learning using online flashcards
3. Listening and speaking activities using the textbook
4. Passport Online activities and practice tests corresponding to the unit studied.

In addition to this I gave the students authentic tasks such as visiting a website called *HotelTravel.com*, researching hotels in a city of their choice and then choosing one based on its price, location and facilities.

The last thing I introduced to this class was a collaborative multimedia web-based application called *Voicethread* that can be used for narrated slideshows. *Voicethread* is currently ranked 23rd in the Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies top 100 tools for learning (Brewster, von Dietze and Hunter, 2009), and it is becoming very popular with teachers all over the world. In addition to allowing users to make narrated slide shows, users can leave comments on them in a variety of ways including: video, audio and text. Another appealing feature of

Voicethread is that it allows users to create an unlimited number of “multiple identities”. This greatly simplifies its use in the classroom because the teacher only needs to open one account. Once this is done all the students in the class can log in using the same username and password. Then they can create their own identities that they can use to create pages for a class project and comment on the pages made by their classmates and peers around the world.

I discovered *Voicethread* through Ronaldo Lima Jr., a teacher in Brazil. Ronaldo’s students created a *Voicethread* presentation called *This is Brazil* in which they presented the five cities that they considered to be the most important in Brazil. I created a series of tasks that required my students to watch the presentation, listen to the narration by Ronaldo’s students and finally leave a voice comment on the presentation. Through the course of completing these tasks, the students had an opportunity to hear the English spoken by Brazilian students their age. They were also exposed to the English spoken by people who left comments before and after them. Furthermore, their comments became a part of the presentation. This provided them with the important authentic audience and the sense of agency mentioned above.

4. The Homestay English Class

The Homestay English class resembled the Travel English class in some ways. It also included a textbook. The first textbook I chose was *American Homestay Dos and Don’ts* (Ferrasci and Murray, 2001), which was the textbook used the previous year by a Japanese teacher. A video accompanied the textbook. Based on student feedback in two classes I taught in 2008, I changed the textbook. Students complained that the reading sections were too difficult. However, they said that they enjoyed the video, so I kept the video as part of the course. This year, I chose *Homestay Adventures* (Fuller and Cleary, 2008). *Homestay Adventures* includes a DVD, which can be used in the classroom and by the students at home. The DVD features interviews with actual homestay families and students. The basic structure of each lesson for this class was as follows:

1. Introduction to the lesson goals and content via the teacher blog
2. Vocabulary learning using online flashcards
3. Activities using the video and/or the DVD
4. Listening and speaking activities using the textbook

As with the Travel English class I added authentic tasks to the lessons. The students in this class also interacted with the Brazilian *Voicethread* presentation. In addition to this, students in the second semester of 2008 participated in an international sister classes project.

The EFL/ESL Sister Classes project includes classes from North and South America,

Europe, and Asia. The project is organised around two blogs on the Edublogs platform, one for the teachers and another for the students. The teachers' blog is called *ESL/EFL Sister Classes*. It is used for exchanging ideas and organising collaborative projects between classes. The students' blog is called *Student Showcase*. It is used as a place for students to post their projects and comment back and forth on them. *Student Showcase* also includes a "chatboard" called *Sister Classes Forum*. Student can start discussion threads using this forum.

Students in the Homestay English class took part in this project in two ways. First, they wrote about their hometown and used this to start a discussion thread on the *Student Classes Forum*. Then students from the United States, Mexico and Spain joined the discussion. Below is an example of one of the discussions that resulted.

Hirona, a Toyo Gakuen University student:

Hello

I'm Hirona. My hometown is Edogawa in Tokyo. Edogawa has two River, The Edogawa river and the Arakawa River

Famous vegetable is Komatuna..It's very famous vegetable.

Famous places is Kasairinnkai Park. There is small aquarium and Ferris wheel

I hope you will visit Edogawa

Please ask me a question about Edogawa. Please tell me about your hometown

Daniel, a ESL student in California:

dear Hirona

my hometown is Mexico. Mexico has four rivers, the name of one river is Nilo in a form Mexico. It is very famous vegetable apples. but in my city is too bad. sincerely

daniel

Hirona:

Hi! Dear daniel

How are you? I'm fine. Thank you comment.

Nilo is famous river.

How old are you?

The second way these students took part in this project was by watching and commenting on a presentation about Christmas in Tarragona, Spain. The following comment by Ryo is a good example of the comments that were made:

Hello! My name is Ryo.K

Thank you.

Tarragona very good place. I like sea. Tarragona is beautiful beach. I want also to go once!!

Tarragona is Christmas and New years day (Eve) different from Japan.

Very cool.

Here again, through their participation in this project, the students were given an authentic audience.

5. The Music Class

The Music Class utilised the most Web 2.0 applications of all the classes. In fact this was a paperless class. I had originally intended to teach this class using lyrics, an approach used by many teachers including some at Toyo Gakuen University. However, I discovered on the first day of class that this was not going to work. Only one student in the class liked music sung in English. Some students stated openly that they did not want to listen to English music. Therefore, I decided to make this a project-based course. I designed two projects for this class. The first project was a collaborative group *Voicethread* project about music genres. The second was an individual powerpoint project about a musical artist.

The *Voicethread* project required the students to complete the following tasks:

- * upload a picture, give the picture a title and create a link to the source of the picture
- * record a talk and ask three questions about the talk
- * navigate through the pages of the presentation and answer the questions asked by their classmates
- * participate in a conversation of at least 6 turns with two people

This project was posted on The *Student Showcase* blog, so some of the interaction included students from other countries. A total of 378 comments were made on the presentation and as of 24 October 2009, it has been viewed 1589 times.

The powerpoint project required the students to create a powerpoint consisting of 5 or more slides, and record a narration of at least two minutes in length. They were also required to include a slide listing their sources. The completed projects were converted to video MP4 files and uploaded to YouTube.

Unfortunately by the time the students completed these projects the semester was over, and there was not time for the students to interact with their projects on YouTube. However, I did give them a link to their projects in the hope that they would view them and view any comments that were made on them.

6. Challenges and Possibilities

As you can see from the examples shown above some very satisfying outcomes were produced by integrating Web 2.0 applications into these courses. However, we were faced with a few challenges along the way. Many students had few computer skills, and for some this was the first time they had used computers in any class. This is not surprising. According to a UNESCO study published in 2007 the uptake of technology in education in Japan remains comparatively low and ICT does not appear to be a priority in national educational policy. Furthermore, a study conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Science, Education and Technology (MEXT) found that more than a third of teachers were unable to use computers, much less provide computer instruction. By 2003, less than thirty percent of classrooms were connected to the Internet. Even where investment in technology has occurred, there is little evidence that any new or better learning is happening due to the persistence of an authoritative, paternalistic education system that prevents students from developing autonomous learning skills. (Vallance et al, 2009, pp. 2, 4).

Another serious problem was attendance. Some students did not join the class until weeks after it began. Consequently, I was forced to spend time getting these students up to speed. For this reason, I didn't continue with the international sister classes project. Students had to register with *Edublogs* in order to participate. Teaching them how to do this took time. Students who missed this lesson created an unacceptable disruption to the class.

The biggest disappointment was that students were not as motivated by their interaction with the various Web 2.0 applications as I had anticipated. Few students took advantage of the opportunity to use Web 2.0 applications outside of class time. Some students failed to complete their courses. Kikuki, K. and Otsuka, T. (2008, p.50) found that the use of computers in some English classes might actually make some students demotivated. Anderson (2007, p.33) asserts:

While some experts focus on the idea of 'self production' to argue that learners find the process of learning more compelling when they are producers as much as consumers, others argue that the majority of learners are not interested in accessing, manipulating and broadcasting material. Indeed, there is serious concern that 'techno-centric' assumptions will obscure the fact that many young people are so lacking in motivation to engage with education that once these new technologies are integrated into the education environment, they will lose their initial attraction.

Perhaps this was the case for some students in my classes.

Poor computer literacy, a lack of autonomous learning skills, and a lack of motivation to engage with education are the challenges. What then are the possibilities? How can these challenges be overcome? One possible solution would be to make blogging easier for the students by allowing them to post to the teacher blog via e-mail, which all of them are familiar with and use regularly. Another solution would be to make better use of the social networking features of many web-based applications. This might help build a stronger sense of community within the class, which would foster motivation.

7. Conclusion

My experience over the past eighteen months has made me believe that blended learning and the use of Web 2.0 technologies can help alleviate some of the problems posed by mixed ability classes. However, this experience has also shown me that along with the benefits come new challenges. Some of these challenges can be met through interventions but some challenges will remain. Still, the central place of computers in our lives and the changing nature of global business and communication make it imperative for English language teachers to make them a part of their instruction.

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