

Wikis and the World: Connecting Japanese Non-English Majors

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Abstract

In spite of instant Internet access many young Japanese have limited exposure to the actual outside world. Globalization and Internationalization are especially difficult to explain and convey to Japanese learners of English who are also non-English majors. Through the use of Wikis, students are assigned a country to investigate through class tasks and assignments. These projects can range from simply posting a Google map or YouTube video on their Wiki page; to more detailed information such as available resources or potential environmental problems. Each student's gathered results are then offered to their classmates in the form of a short presentation. At the same time that learners are acquiring English language skills such as English introductions, shopping and travel scenarios they are also exploring the world around them. This technique offers a more modern and open approach to language learning that traditional methods such as texts and listening CDs cannot offer. The ever expanding availability of 24/7 media offers a free open resource to explore the world while learning a language, be it English or another vernacular. Student-Teacher evaluations at the conclusion of the course have shown favourable results. This presentation will briefly explain the free and secure Wiki software that is available and how it is being utilized at a Japanese university. Additionally, the presenter will offer some other suggestions for use in a variety of courses not associated with language learning.

Keywords: culture, education technology, efl, esl, internationalization, Internet, Japan, tbl, wikis

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Introduction

Although most students today enjoy easy access to the World Wide Web, outside of their circle of chat chums or Facebook friends, they may have little understanding of the world as a whole. Many students in industrialized nations have little need to go abroad or interact with peoples of different cultures. This is especially true of Japanese university students. According to a survey by Benesse Corp., a correspondence education and publishing company based in Okayama, the number of Japanese students enrolled in Harvard University in fiscal 2010 stood at 100, down 58, or 37 percent, from fiscal 2000 (Oka, 2012). Similar statistics can be found at other schools in overseas locations. This is occurring while at the same time Japanese companies are attending to stall their skid in business losses in the homeland, Japan, by shifting their businesses overseas.

If it were not only for this lack of overseas travel but also a general disinterest in those things foreign by Japanese students then the outcome would not be so worrisome. Classroom instruction may be only a small part, but what goes on in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom can help expand and change some Japanese student's views on the outside world. The advent of the Internet age has allowed individuals immediate access to a wealth of knowledge. Wikis are one option to get students involved in learning EFL while at the same time exploring their own country's culture along with those of other peoples.

Wikis

Although not an entirely new teaching tool for use in the classroom; wikis have been forever changing and expanding. They are a free, safe and secure way for lecturers and learners to post and edit course work online.

A wiki is a powerful, free Internet tool that allows users to quickly create web pages organized into websites without special training. The web page editing screen has recognizable formatting tools. Although these tools are limited, wikis have a number of exceptional features that enhance web page creation for educational use, both individually and collaboratively (Scholtz, 2009).

The power of Web technologies has opened new potentiality for learning (Anzai, 2011). For Japanese students this tool allows for research and presentation projects to be conducted individually or in small groups. The assignments can be simple such as locating countries through the use of Google Maps or more involved with pertinent information on birth rates, economics, valuable resources, or unemployment rates collected by use of the CIA homepage.

Additionally more detailed cultural aspects can contain the downloading of videos from YouTube or other sources. Subjects more in tuned with learners lives can be explored and commented on. Sports and music are usually two topics that are of

upmost importance in young people's lives and these are readily accessible with nothing more than a few simple computer key strokes. E-learning has truly become fruitful and lively (Anzai, 2008).

Of important note is that Wikis are not only for English language learning. Wikis allow most any language to be used with the proper fonts installed. This freedom allows endless possibilities. Collaboration on projects can be accomplished through numerous connected classrooms regardless of the country of which students reside in. Pen pals and key pals have been driven up a notch with the potential that Wiki has to offer. Additionally, being password protected offers security from outside forces such as spammers.

The World

The world although vast and diverse in its makeup has numerous similarities that can be explored through the use of the Internet and Wikis. Environmental problems, population growth, and global warming are but a few examples. When given as written reports or oral presentations, the world can be explored in an ESL classroom in detail. This can be accomplished over several lessons or briefly on one or two relevant areas that are of consequence to a single lesson.

Foreign language teachers regardless of language of instruction can take advantage of the learning opportunities available to students. Opening opportunities for teaching and learning is the history of education (Anzai, 2011). In addition to English, Spanish lessons for example, can explore the varied countries from which the language is spoken along with any other language under study.

Enablement of Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning can be encouraged through cultural activities and tasks within a Wiki based learning environment. One obvious benefit of technology for language learning is the creation of opportunities for students to use language in authentic contexts. Such activities encourage students to strive for autonomy in the target language (Kessler, 2009). Benson (1997, 2001) recognizes the enormous potential for the development of autonomy through the use of technology, as well as the reliance upon autonomy in order to effectively utilize the potential of technology-based learning environments. Learner autonomy is obviously important in SLA. Successful autonomous use of the target language should be the ultimate goal of language instruction (Kessler, 2009). The researcher Kessler (2009) additionally goes on to state that:

Students may benefit from a carefully created and controlled environment that encourages autonomous collaboration without the teacher playing a strong presence or any presence at all once the collaboration is underway. It may be fruitful to provide a variety of collaborative tasks in order to find optimal conditions for particular

groups of language learners and their unique needs. With a limited body of research on the use of wikis in the language classroom, language teachers should embrace the opportunity to experiment and observe students' use in varied collaborative tasks with varied teacher content and form-focused intervention.

Thusly, the ease and freedom that Wikis allow for lecturer and learner alike can induce opportunities for cultural exploration that have not even been conceived as of yet.

Task Based Learning

It seems that if there was one tool that was specifically designed for TBL (Task Based Learning) it would be that of a Wiki. Tasks from the simple to the complex can be accomplished with little to no previous computer knowledge. After demonstrations by the instructor on how to use the various facets that make up a Wiki students can begin their own work and exploration. With each student assigned a separate country to gather details on, the aspects of autonomous learning begin to blend in congenial ways with the TBL aspects of Wikis.

The examples listed below and posted on the instructors own Wiki page can help guide students in their completion of assigned tasks. Each lesson can have as many tasks as time in the lesson allows. The language required can be taught before hand or as students need it.



This is a Japanese monkey.



This is a Japanese bird.



This is a Tanuki.
It is like a wild

raccoon dog.

The longest river is the Shinano River. The Shinano river, approx 230 miles, is Japan's longest river and flows from Nagano to Nigata.



The tallest mountain. The highest mountain in Japan is Mount Fuji, it is 3776 meters or 12385 feet.



Task assigned and completed by students may include gathering information on that specific countries currency or brief facts about the type of government or world leader as shown below.



Euro is the currency (money) of the countries in the euro zone. Austria is one country in EU (Student A, 2013).



Heinz Fischer (born 9 October 1938) is the current president of Austria. His wife is Margit Fischer. (Student A, 2013).

The limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge of students does not mean that they are unable to accomplish tasks. Students can be reminded that communication can take place even with the simplest of words. From an Instructors perspective learners should actually be encouraged to keep their explanations short and modest. Dissuading students from copying or pasting information from Internet sites will hopefully eliminate plagiarism and unnatural relies. For some non-English majors the temptation to quickly conclude the assignment in the quickest fashion possible can lead to piece meal or entire passages being reproduced.

Conclusion

An e-learning environment is almost the norm for any subject matter in classrooms of today. English language education has always advanced along with the advancement of technology: cassette tapes, video tapes, CDs, DVDs, radio, television, and computers and the Internet. In the past few years, English education has entered new era (Anzai, 2008). Wikis allow access to online content and information that would take hours to gather through a traditional library book retrieval system. Students are actively involved in their language learning through the use of task based assignments. The downloading of videos and images enhance their learning environment as they construct the necessary language needed to describe their findings.

Individually or in groups the assigned work can be accomplished inside or outside of the classroom where ever an Internet connection is possible. This learner independence encourages autonomous learning and directs self discovery through teaching tools that allow 24/7 access. Recently, education has been heading to more flexible, participatory, interactive and collaborative learning. By using the mobile tools effectively, English learning will expand its proximity. Furthermore, by utilizing Web2.0 technologies, getting over physical distance and time is not an impossible dream anymore. Students can interact on the Web (Anzai, 2008). The ability to be able to revisit and revise the content of their post at any time, is an important feature of wiki due to its asynchronous nature, it is also supportive of the learning style of the Asian culture (Lanham, Augar, & Zhou, 2005).

While the world is becoming more open and accessible the attitudes of Japanese young people are tending to become more and more withdrawn and out of touch with the overall global environment. Some of these feelings can be tied to Japanese culture and the perception of a safe Japan in a sometimes hostile and volatile world. To bridge this gap in information and ideas the use of a wiki can be a way to introduce cultures to Japanese students that they would not normally come into contact with. Some students may feel that learning another language and interacting with other cultures may be useless while they are concentrating on their core major. Once they graduate from university and enter the working world though their opportunities for employment can only expand with any additional language skills or international awareness that they may have acquired.

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