

TEACHING MULTI-LEVEL UPPER-DIVISION JAPANESE LANGUAGE COURSES –
IS TECHNOLOGY A SOLUTION?

複式授業（中級・上級レベル）-果たしてテクノロジーは助けになるか？

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Abstract: Many language instructors teach courses that are comprised of students at different levels of language proficiency. This study describes how technology was used as a means to solve the challenges encountered, and the resulting observations. This study asked if technology (online schedule, online exercises, discussion, e-portfolio) helped or hindered the learning of students in multi-level upper-division Japanese language courses. Due to the complex nature of multi-level classes and student learning styles, this study illuminates mixed results in effectiveness of the use of technology and suggests needs for better communication with students and search for more carefully crafted instructional approaches.

Keyword: multi-level, upper-division, online schedule, discussion, e-portfolio

1: INTRODUCTION

This study explores the role of technology in multi-level upper-division Japanese language courses at California State University, Sacramento. Due to funding constraints and enrollment, the third-year and fourth-year students with different proficiency levels (from novice high to advanced level) are placed in the same classes all year around. These classes had an average of 22 enrollees in each semester. In these classes, the instructor is challenged to use a variety of materials, activities, and techniques to engage the interest of the learners and assist each learner in his or her educational goals. The effective use of technology is also suggested. This present study asked the following questions: (1) Did technology help or hinder the learning of students in the upper-division Japanese language courses? In what way did technology benefit or hinder their learning? (2) Did technology help learning especially in multi-level courses?

Multi-level classes can provide opportunities for learners. English as Second Language (ESL) researchers (Corley, 2005; Wright, 1999) stated that those with limited proficiency have an opportunity to interact with more proficient English speakers, and advanced learners benefit by using their language skills to help lower level students using the target language.¹ Students in multilevel classes can successfully learn to work together across differences and develop learning communities in which members learn from one another's strengths. Past literature also points out that planning for multi-level classes requires the ability to juggle many different elements, as teachers must provide activities that address the learning styles, skill levels, and specific learning objectives of each individual (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).²

To understand students' perspective on multi-level upper-division classes, comments were collected from Spring 2005 through semi-structured interviews by teaching assistants, anonymous surveys, and face-to-face informal interviews. The survey results

¹ Corley, M. A. (2005). Differentiated instruction: Adjusting to the needs of all learners. *Focus on Basics*, 7(C). Retrieved November 2, 2006, from www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=736. Wright, S. (1999). Learners first. *Focus on Basics*, 3(B). Retrieved November 2, 2006, from www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=363.

² Wrigley, H.S. & Guth, G. (1992). *Bringing literacy to life: Issues and options in adult ESL literacy*. San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International. (EDRS No. ED 348 896)

revealed both positive and negative views toward multi-level courses. Students with more advanced proficiency (AP) said that they could review the material by helping students with less proficiency (LP), and students with LP indicated that they were compelled to study hard to get to the same level as students with AP, and students with LP could learn by working with students with AP. On the other hand, students with AP pointed out that the slower class pace made class boring, while students with LP felt frustrated and overwhelmed with the pace of instruction.

To meet this challenge, a team has developed web-enhanced upper division courses which incorporate self-access materials (online scheduling and class handouts) and self-paced online exercises and quizzes. The team created and offered approximately fifty kanji, vocabulary, verb conjugation, and grammar exercises, supplied by questions from a database (300 kanji, 1000 vocabulary, 3600 verb, and 300 grammar). Technologies used include PHP server-side scripting and a MySQL database. Students were allowed to take the quizzes until they mastered the material. To promote proficiency and critical thinking, all upper-division courses were transformed into project-based curricula using thematic units. While online exercises were designed for students to acquire basic skills, students were required to engage in various projects using technology: online discussion on selected topics, e-Portfolios, video letters, bilingual webpages, podcasting, etc. To find out how the use of these technologies impacted their Japanese language learning, a survey was conducted in 2006-2007 via email and informal face-to-face interviews. The survey was sent to 20 students who completed more than two upper-division courses, and the return rate of the survey was 60%.

II. DISCUSSION

Q1: Did technology help or hinder the learning of students with upper-division Japanese language courses? In what way, did technology benefit and hinder their learning?

A. Access to online schedule and course materials. A majority of the students viewed the online syllabus and access to course materials as useful and convenient. A student wrote, "The online schedule was helpful because, unlike a static schedule issued at the beginning of the semester, an online schedule that is posted unit-by-unit allows the instructor to make any adjustments in response to class progress." She continues "...since I was not looking at the whole schedule all at once, I was less overwhelmed by the volume of work that was required in class. The visual representation of a whole semester's work all at once can be discouraging for the student with low self-confidence in the subject." Another student said, "I thought that WebCT did help out the learning process. It brought a convenient (and paperless) way of posting assignments and schedules. This is a good thing because sometimes students can lose the papers their instructor hands out, but if it is on a computer, they can access it at any time, given the means to access them." It seems that the availability of course materials offered a better and more structured learning environment, which resulted in better learning.

B. Self-paced online exercises and quizzes Again, a majority of students stated the usefulness of self-paced online exercises and quizzes. A student said, "I found the exercises helpful because they allowed me to challenge myself at the time of my choosing and, usually, as frequently as I liked. As I improved in my results, my confidence rose, and this allowed me to validate my own success." The online exercises and quizzes were perceived effective when the students had easy access (unlimited access

at anytime from anywhere) and felt it “easy” to take these quizzes because of its less demanding content and its short quiz duration. It appears that the students perceived online exercises and quizzes to be effective when they established a learning habit to take them regularly. That is, the more they used them, the more they felt that these online exercises were useful to their learning.

C. Discussion Board activities The Discussion Board was used in various ways: doing cultural research, describing events, exchanging comments on works, and stating and exchanging opinions on readings. Most activities were done only in Japanese. Students often viewed them positively when the instructor asked questions for clarification and offered feedback. A student said, “I like the discussion because we were able to say what we wanted to say and you (the instructor) could read it and make corrections. I think the discussion is the most important for improving Japanese.” A student with AP stated, “I believe the exercise we did in Japanese literature helped me learn more about the topic we were doing and posting my ideas on discussion board is useful because I can get ideas from other people and compare my ideas to others.”

The discussions would have been viewed more useful “if there was some sort of dialogue. Perhaps by asking students to choose sides and argue their positions (in Japanese only, of course). Reading other student posts was useful, but I often couldn't think of any reason to reply to a post, and I noticed that many other people had the same problems.” A student with LP shared her frustration, saying “The online discussion was somewhat of a hindrance for me because it contributed to the undermining of my self-confidence. Because of the deadlines and the public nature of the postings, I was frustrated. I want the work I post for others to read (aside from the instructor) to be as close to perfect as can be, and I want to be able to participate on a level with my peers. Because of the variety of skill levels in the class, when we had to interact with each other in online discussions, I often found myself not understanding what others had posted--I assumed because of my own lack of proficiency. When trying to figure out what I was missing, I became frustrated because there was not enough time for me to do that and then compose and post my own replies.”

D. e-Portfolio Since WebCT (Campus Edition 6) does not offer a user-friendly way for students to create homepages, the instructor participated in a masters project which was designed to evaluate how the use of a customized Web application compares to the process of creating electronic portfolios with traditional Web development tools.³ Margolis and Range (2005) stated that the e-Portfolio project was successful since it was a more user-friendly Web publishing tool and resulted in a less frustrating experience for creating a basic online portfolio. Students' comments include: “The e-portfolio is a good place to make a reference such as on a resume,” “The e-portfolio was helpful because it allowed me to package the products of my learning experience in a way that encourages thinking beyond the classroom--here is something I can show to others to demonstrate my (relative) facility with Japanese language.”

E. Other projects: Video letters and Podcasting The video letter project allowed students to post a self-introduction video to their Japanese friends. This project was well received by many students partly because the instructor and online specialist uploaded all

³ Margolis, D., and Range, M. 2005. *Portfolios and Web Publishing at Sacramento State*. An iMet Action Research project. Retrieved November 2, 2006, from <http://imet.csus.edu/imet7/range/portfolio/Dave-Monica-AR.pdf>

video files to their e-Portfolios and students did not experience any frustration caused by the use of technology. Another experimental project, Podcasting, was carried out as a part of another masters project in 2006.⁴ Although podcasting has become a popular way to deliver lectures, this project did not go well. Unlike e-Portfolio, this project was introduced as an optional activity during Winter break and only three students actually listened to the podcasting on daily Japanese news spoken in Japanese. Another factor that hindered this project was that most participants did not own an iPod nor had the technical knowledge to set up their computer to listen to the podcasts.

Q2. Did technology help your learning especially in multi-level courses, which were composed of students with different levels?

The convenience created by WebCT was perceived as effective learning: “I absolutely enjoyed WebCT, and feel that it was very useful in the passing of information, and testing (quizzing). The postings were also a great way to practice writing short summaries in Japanese,” and “...I would prefer to use WebCT because of its great convenience. I can check what is due and what is expected of me in class and it helps me learn better.” On the other hand, the availability of online materials and exercises can be seen only as additional mean of learning, but some viewed the importance of “real” interaction in classroom, saying “While WebCT did provide another means of learning for students, I don't think it really enhanced the learning skills of students, mainly because when it comes to learning a foreign language, I feel there is no better method of learning than an actual classroom setting, which means direct interaction between students and their instructors, where they can easily receive immediate feedback.”

III. CONCLUSION

The design and delivery of web-enhanced upper-division courses is still considered to be in the trial stages. Although the current study is of limited scope, this study revealed that students had formed favorable views toward these implemented technologies when they were not overburdened by technical and content difficulties. When students experienced difficulties in completing online tasks due to various reasons (e.g. technical difficulty, learning style, content difficulty), students were discouraged. When we integrated technology into the first-year Japanese program, a majority of students viewed web-enhanced classes effective. On the other hand, in multi-level upper-division classes, the same task was often perceived as something challenging and frustrating by some while others enjoyed doing the task. Thus, the instructor constantly faced challenges to mediate students learning in order to meet diversified individual needs.

Could technology serve as a tool to ease the level differences among the learners? It is the fact that no matter where students are at their learning stage, they need systematic guidance to engage themselves in self-directed learning. Technology is a tool to assist students learning. Only technologically and pedagogically competent professionals will implement a range of instructional strategies to reach out to learners with diversified backgrounds and learning styles. To improve these courses, it is important to inform students on the nature of the class, analyze problems that they will likely encounter compile strategies to cope with those difficulties, and mostly importantly search out for more carefully and effectively crafted instructional approaches.

⁴ Hattingh, E. (2006). *What Happens When Podcasting is integrated into Language Instruction?* Retrieved November 2, 2006, from <http://imet.csus.edu/imet8/hattingh/eportfolio/showcase/action.pdf>