

ONE WAY OF USING NEWS CLIPS FOR STUDENTS IN LEARNING PLATEAU

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Abstract: Computer technology has made it very easy to access great resources for language education, but students still need guidance from instructors. Most often at the intermediate level, students experience learning plateaus where they cannot see clear progress despite continued effort, and the internet, as a vast resource of authentic material, often daunts them. How can we, as language instructors, help them? In this paper, I experiment with one approach employing dictation, or aural input with visual reinforcement for learning retention

Keywords: learning plateau, dictation, visual input, aural input, news clips

1. BACKGROUND

I presented a paper on my news video project at CASTEL-J 2002 in San Diego, and this is a follow-up report on it. My focus in the 2002 presentation was two-fold: (1) listening, rather than reading, to build vocabulary and (2) the preparation of digitized news video and audio clips for upper-intermediate class use. In 2002, I focused on students both with and without a Chinese character background in the same class. Since then, my target has shifted to learners in the learning plateau, a phase of language acquisition common to students in the intermediate level, whether they have a Chinese character background or not. Here, I still use digitized news clips, but in a slightly different way. Also, this time my emphasis is on pedagogy rather than on technology.

2. PROBLEMS WE FACE

One thing which almost all students in the intermediate level experience is the sense of being in a learning plateau. They no longer have the sense of achievement which they used to feel when they were in the beginning level or when they participated in study abroad programs. They also face a vast amount of authentic foreign language material on the internet, a mass of information that often daunts them. What can we, as language instructors, do to allow them to overcome the learning plateau? There is no easy way out of this predicament. A common suggestion from the pedagogy specialists is to set *individual* targets to help each student measure what he or she has achieved. Although this type of suggestion is certainly reasonable, in reality it is rather difficult to implement successfully without using a considerable amount of extra time outside of class. Are

there any other ways to give students a sense of achievement and of growth, so crucial to overcoming the learning plateau, without making our class overly individualized?

3. APPROACH

One common area that every intermediate level Japanese student has to build is vocabulary, especially Kango or Chinese character compounds. These words are essential for learners in order to leave the survival-skill-level, and to understand and express more abstract ideas. I believe this acquisition is one of the key components necessary for students to strengthen in order to overcome the learning plateau. And yet these are difficult words for students to firmly implant in their memory due to lack of needs and opportunities to use them in casual communication. My question: how can we implement the retention of Kango or Chinese character compounds, and so help students overcome the learning plateau at the intermediate level?

There has been both research and discussion on the co-relationship between reading and listening, or the visual and the audial, in the language learning experience. For example, Suzuki, Quackenbush, and Shimizu (2002) report their experiments on the reading comprehension and reading speed of advanced learners when they are given audio representation of the reading material as they read. Although the results are not conclusive, the research reveals an interesting path for language instructors to explore: the phenomenon of simultaneous input through visual and audial channels. In related research, Suzuki, Kijima, and Shimizu (2002) report that listening to audio representation while reading improves the learner's listening comprehension, where sentence length dictation is used to test the learner's listening comprehension.

For my research purposes, I argue that dictation, when used as a special learning utensil at the intermediate level, applies and extends the research on the co-relationship between reading and listening as given by Suzuki et al. In my opinion, dictation should be more fully implemented in the process of language acquisition because learners are able to reinforce their memory of Kango or Chinese character compounds through the processing of audial input into visual output. More specifically, I argue that a crucial reinforcing process occurs when students practice transcription through dictation, an instance of audial to visual processing and reinforcement that primarily nuances cognition and secondarily broadens the applications of muscle memory in the retention of Kango or Chinese character compounds.

4. DICTATION

As teaching material, I use short (2-3 minute) video news clips in Japanese from my previous project. (Each is a complete news unit.) The topics of these news clips are general and familiar for American students: Global Warming; Obesity; Guns and Crime;

or Cell-Phones and Traffic Accidents, for example. I focus on American or international topics because students are familiar with them, and it is therefore easier to motivate them to form and express opinions. The following is a typical session, which takes 4-5 days to complete.

1. Pre-activity: before students see the video clip, the main topic is introduced, and they discuss it in pairs.
2. Students watch the video clip without any vocabulary introduction. Their comprehension degree may vary.
3. Students are asked to pick out words that they don't understand. Help is given by the instructor or sometimes by other students.
4. The video clip is switched to an audio clip (in slow version), and 3 is repeated. Usually, students can pick out more new words because they can concentrate on sound without complication from the visual component of the video clip.
5. A vocabulary list is given. Kanji and phonetic representation (yomigana) are given, but students have to provide definitions using dictionaries.
6. Dictation in Kana using the audio clip begins. Explanation of sentence structures is given, if needed. Any part that cannot be covered in class due to time constraints becomes a homework assignment. Students access digitized audio clips via the courseware to complete their dictations. (The course site provides access to both video and audio clips.)
7. Two reporters are selected: one reports the news itself and the other reports additional information on the topic found through internet research.
8. Discussion follows the reports.
9. Students submit dictations, summaries, and essays of their opinions on the topic. The minimum requirement for the dictation is Kana, and it is graded by the number of mistakes in phonetic representation.
10. A vocabulary and Kanji recognition quiz is given.
11. The authentic transcription of the news clip is given, and students are asked to read it aloud in class.

I have been using this type of dictation method for about five years, and the above is the most satisfactory sequence for students as well as for me as an instructor. My course meets fifty minutes a day, four days a week. Steps 1-4 are done in one session. Step 5 is given as homework. Step 6 takes 2-3 sessions. Steps 7, 8, and 9 occur in one session,

and Steps 10 and 11 occur in the last session. As students become used to dictation, I leave more for homework, and increase other in-class activities such as presentation/discussion based on new information found on the topic through internet research. I should mention that Step 11 is also essential to conclude this practice sequence because the audial to visual processing of dictation is reversed here, and students have to process visual input into audial output. Such practice reinforces students' memory by reversing the typical processing sequence of dictation.

5. CONCLUSION

It was my concern that dictation might bore students, but to my surprise, that was not the case at all. Students concentrated well on the work at hand, and they requested replay of the audio without hesitation until they were satisfied with their transcriptions. Encouragingly, students paid close attention to details, and often their questions developed into a discussion of grammar, vocabulary selection, and even style. Scanning and skimming are important reading practices for students at the intermediate level, but it seems that they are also seeking a more substantive and measurable sense of accomplishment, such as an appreciably heightened rate of transcription of dictation material, which was often the case following these exercises.

My conclusion is that dictation practice improves students' retention of Kango or Chinese character compounds through practice in reinforcing audial to visual processing, and that this process in which all four skills can be utilized ultimately prevents class sessions from becoming overly individualized, which is often the case at the intermediate level. Moreover, I am appreciative of the technological component that facilitates this type of practice, at once connecting students to the world and making the learning process more enjoyable for both students and instructors.

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