

THE ONLINE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENTS BOARD IN JAPANESE LANGUAGE CLASSES

KIYOMI FUJII

University of Arizona, USA

<kfujii@email.arizona.edu>

ABSTRACT

Online instructional tools are widely used in language classes. This paper reports on the use of technology in university Japanese language classes. Based on case studies conducted in beginning Japanese courses, this paper discusses an approach utilizing the Online Language Environments (OLE) Board to develop students' oral proficiency. The OLE Board is a web-based instructional tool developed at the University of Arizona. In a beginning Japanese course, students were assigned specific web-based tasks to practice self-introductions and pronunciation. The self-introduction task was designed to be a part of an oral assessment on the midterm exam. The results demonstrate that the online tasks allowed students to have their pronunciation and fluency checked while creating their self-introduction sentences. The students who experienced these tasks and the curriculum that incorporated the OLE Board generally gave positive responses to these new learning methods. This paper reports the positive effects of utilizing the OLE Board from case studies while suggesting the advantages for current language instructors to adopt online instructional tools in their classrooms.

Introduction

To facilitate students becoming proficient in Japanese, the instructor should find a balance between communication and accuracy. In this context, students were given pronunciation feedback to improve their pronunciation accuracy while focusing on communication, namely the meaning of the message a student attempts to communicate. The balance between communication and accuracy is important when students learn grammatical structures (grammatical accuracy) and also when they practice speaking (pronunciation accuracy).

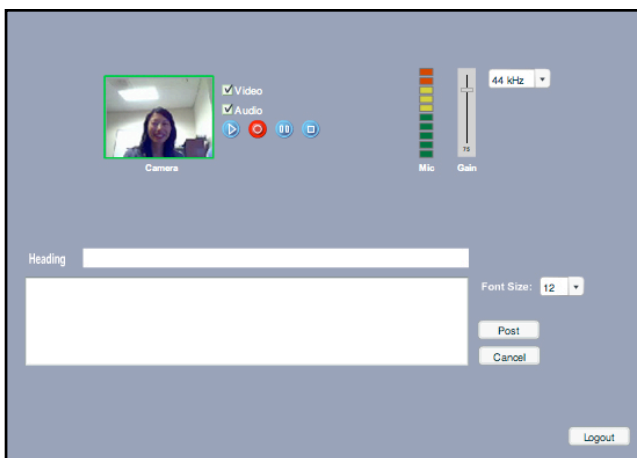
The Japanese phonetic system is different than that of from English (Vance, 2008). When English speakers learn Japanese, they encounter pronunciation difficulties arising from differences

between phonetic systems. Specific trouble areas include (a) moraic nasals, (b) geminates, (c) long vowels, (d) vowel devoicing, and (e) palatalized consonants (Aoki, 1990; Imada, 1997). Much research has been conducted in this field including other language speakers learning Japanese (Isomura, 1996; Muroi, 1995; Yamada, 1994, 1996). However, providing detailed feedback to every student in a classroom setting proves difficult. Students are encouraged to find language partners and attend the language table, an extracurricular activity in which they can use their Japanese in conversation with native Japanese speakers, but their options are limited when it comes to speaking practice and pronunciation checks.

The OLE Broad was created to address this limitation. The Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and Literacy (CERCLL) and the Learning Technologies Center (LTC) at the University of Arizona originally started the OLE project to support second language learning and researching languages. The system is capable of a wide range of instructional devices including voice and video recording functions, as well as connections to D2L or BlackBoard, which are university-wide interactive management sites for instructors and students.

Using the OLE Board for speaking practice was ideal. Computer-assisted language learning has several advantages. It enables learners to perform at their own pace and maintain higher motivation while functioning as a labor-saving device (Oki, 2005). Learners get the chance to receive sufficient feedback and “work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level” (Egbert, Chao & Hanson-Smith, 1999, p. 4). Moreover, there is evidence that interactions that use computer-assisted language learning ‘display’ activities, entailing repeating and pronunciation practices, are highly effective (Oki, 2005). When the instructor assigns computer-based activities, accessibility needs to be considered.

Figure 1. The OLE Board from the D2L course site at <http://www.arizona.edu>



Students can access the OLE Board from on-campus computer labs and also from their own computers, provided these computers are equipped with a web camera, a headset with a microphone and speakers, access to the Internet, and macromedia Flash 7 plug-in (Forger, 2006). The OLE Board is simple to operate, and students can easily access it from their D2L course site. They choose a conference and click ‘Enter,’ then choose ‘Video’ and ‘Audio’ to record the assignment (see Figure 1). After they record their assignment they enter the title and post it.

OLE ASSIGNMENT

The OLE Board was used in the Elementary Japanese Course at the University of Arizona. The class met five days a week with 50 minutes per session. The class had 129 students and three teaching assistants. In this course, D2L was used to post announcements, grades, and materials.

The OLE Board was used as an extra-credit assignment. The purpose of this assignment was for students to practice self-introductions and to receive a pronunciation check, since self-introductions were a part of the midterm oral exam. On the oral exam, students’ introductions needed to be more conversational, but the OLE assignment allowed students to have their pronunciation and fluency checked, both of which were among the midterm grading criteria.

This assignment was divided into two tasks and students needed to record (video and audio) their self-introductions for each task. For task one, they needed to record the self-introduction and receive feedback. In task two, after reviewing the feedback on problem areas, they needed to make the appropriate corrections and record the self-introduction again.

In the self-introduction, students needed to include: (a) an opening greeting, はじめまして [hajimemashite,] (b) name, (c) hometown,(d) school

and status (a student at UA),(e) year in school,(f) major, and (g) closing greeting, どうぞよろしくおねがいします [dôzoyoroshikuonegaishimasu].

FEEDBACK FROM INSTRUCTOR TO STUDENTS

After students submitted task one, all participating students received feedback by email. The feedback evaluated students' strengths and indicated points for improvement. Because the feedback provided a few specific points deemed most important for improvement, students could focus on those.

RESULTS

Although this was an extra credit assignment, 42 students (32.6% of enrolled students) participated in task one and 31 students (24.0%) completed both tasks one and two. Some students paid close attention to the corrections from the first part of the assignment and showed immediate improvement when they recorded the second task. In addition, even those students whose pronunciation did not seem to improve immediately indicated that they became aware of the problematic areas and improved their pronunciation by the end of the semester.

Students gave very positive feedback about this activity, noting that it was a very good exercise and that videotaping self-introductions was a very valuable activity in that it allowed them to practice this essential skill, receive feedback, and remedy mistakes. They also praised the low-stress environment and mentioned that the exercise helped greatly in improving their Japanese fluency.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS ASSIGNMENT AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Technical problems are a constant possibility when using technology. Some technical problems did, indeed, occur such as D2L glitches, which inhibited access to the OLE Board. Another problem was

compatibility with Macintosh built-in cameras, which necessitated accepting movie files by email instead of uploading to the OLE Board.

Since this course had 129 students it was impractical to make this assignment mandatory. Moreover, that may have contributed to the decline in participation: although 42 students participated in task one, 31 students completed both tasks one and two. To close this gap perhaps sending a reminder could have helped.

This assignment was due before the midterm oral exam, but it would have been useful to have had one more assignment just before the semester ended.

CONCLUSION

The OLE assignment allowed students to have their pronunciation and fluency checked and proved helpful for beginning-level students, especially for students in large classes. Students and teaching assistants needed only a short orientation to use the OLE system. Due to the small learning curve, video-based online assignments like this provide an efficient way for students to receive valuable feedback on their verbal skills.

While my goal as an instructor of Japanese is to facilitate an increase of the students' procedural and declarative knowledge of Japanese language and culture, I realize that learning to function successfully within that culture is an endless process. I believe that the students' active involvement in their learning is essential for their success. Since students' learning careers extend well beyond the classroom, the role of formal language training is to enhance and sustain that lifelong endeavor. Instructors should not only teach the language, but encourage independent skills and nurture students' autonomy (Benson & Voller, 1997; Sheerin, 1997). Assignments such as the OLE self-introductions help accomplish this goal.

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