

Is My Speech Improving?: The Use of Voice Board in Japanese Language Learning

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Abstract: For learners of Japanese as a foreign language, raising awareness of their individual speech patterns and building confidence in speaking skills is of critical importance for the continued improvement of their ability to communicate in Japanese. However, in the university context, there are limited opportunities for learners to experience and participate in authentic Japanese communication. The literature shows that learners need consistent and conscious guidance by language instructors if they are to improve their oral skills, yet limited face to face class time and limited access to the instructor in that class time available make it difficult for learners to have real opportunities to express themselves in Japanese. In this case study, the use of Voice Board integrated into a course website is investigated for its potential to improve the oral skills of learners with limited class time who are at the late beginner and early intermediate levels of Japanese. Each group of students completed two or three units of work per semester. Each unit was broken into a sequence of steps. The preliminary steps involved students preparing their thoughts in Japanese and working with feedback from instructors to improve their Japanese expression. The critical steps involved students recording their thoughts and receiving feedback from peers on what they had said. At the same time students were able to receive individual feedback on their oral skills. This knowledge and raised self-awareness was then utilised in their next oral task. Based on instructors' observations, learners' feedback on their own motivation, and awareness and actual improvement noted in learner's speech in this trial, the presentation discusses the potential of the use of web-based Voice Board for improvements in the teaching of oral skills.

Keywords: Foreign Language Acquisition, Japanese Language Learning, Voice Board, Awareness Raising for Oral Expression

Background of the Study

Raising Awareness of Speech Patterns and Building Confidence

FOR LEARNERS OF Japanese as a foreign language, raising awareness of their individual speech patterns and building confidence in speaking skills is of critical importance for the continued improvement of their ability to communicate successfully in the target language. Until recently, learners' acquisition of speech patterns was regarded as something that could happen naturally, as long as a learner kept studying the target language (Kashima, 1995). Now, however, the literature shows that learners need consistent and conscious guidance by language instructors if they are to improve their oral skills. In the last decade, raising learners' awareness of their speech patterns, even from the beginning stages of teaching, has been claimed to lead to more effective communication in Japanese (Kashima, 1995; Kinoshita & Toda, 2005). It has also been pointed out that in terms of pronunciation and intonation, learners should be guided to improve their self monitoring ability (Sato, 2005).

Learners' Motivation and Self-Confidence, and the Need for Careful Planning of Learning Activities

Building self-confidence in speech is a motivating factor in foreign language learning. It is important for a learner to be motivated for learning to continue, and without motivation, little learning occurs (Lim, 2002). Motivation can be generated and increased by an instructor in classroom teaching if learning activities are carefully planned (Biggs, 2000). According to Dörnyei (2001), motivation has a cycle of three distinct phases: generation; maintenance and protection; and retrospection by learners on their progress. Foreign language learners with a favourable attitude or perception toward the target language and its culture or with a positive evaluation of its value as an instrument for their needs, find it relatively easy to remain motivated and continue learning. Furthermore, learning a foreign language is not merely the learning of a communication code; it can also involve learning about a different culture, a different value system, and a different perception of the world represented through the target language. It has great potential to further learners' intercultural

understanding at a deep level, which can also contribute greatly to their level of motivation. There is, therefore, a need to carefully plan learning activities which help learners foster motivation and encourage reflection on their learning and progress.

Linguistic self-confidence is regarded as a subsystem of motivation in second language acquisition (Clémont, 1980). In order to raise learners' self-confidence in their speech, feedback by the instructor plays a significant role. Clémont argues that learners' innate linguistic self-confidence is not an objective indicator of their language abilities, but, rather, a subjective evaluation based on their personality and general beliefs. It is important, therefore, for learners' 'linguistic self-confidence' to be adjusted, based on appropriate and timely feedback by an instructor and that instructor's objective assessment.

Limited Opportunities of Authentic Communication and the Use of Information Communication Technology (ICT)

In a foreign language learning context, there are often limited opportunities for learners to experience authentic communication. Furthermore, the recent trend to reduce face to face class time coupled with limited access to the instructor during that class time makes it difficult for learners to have real opportunities to express themselves in Japanese very often at all, much less receive comprehensive individual feedback to raise their awareness of their own individual speech patterns. In this context, it is thought that the use of ICT could be advantageous.

The potential of ICT for educational use in general and language learning in particular has been extensively discussed, experienced and explored over the past few decades (Coppola, 2004; Havelock & Reza-Hernandez, 2005). In the nineties, there was even a stage when ICT was seen as a panacea to solve many of the problems of language teaching (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). This over-application has been recognized. Garrison and Anderson (2003) question why we should expect significantly different outcomes from essentially doing the same thing we have always done (in terms of both teaching and learning activities) if only the medium of communication has been changed. Deficient approaches, even though technologically enhanced, are still deficient. Recently, teachers are becoming more discriminating in their usage of ICT in the teaching context, but educators and researchers still look to technology for solutions (Gosper et. al., 2007; Hoadley and Pea, 2002). Speech technology is seen as one area of ICT which has significant potential if it is well integrated into the teaching curriculum.

Over the last twenty years, a substantial increase in the use of ICT in many contexts has been experienced, particularly in the everyday lives of the young. This has been brought about through the advent of such innovations as the instant messaging of text based, voice based and photographic/video images; web based self publishing and so on. Such technological and software advances have also enabled language teaching professionals to have more opportunities to provide individual and timely feedback through asynchronous voice communication with their students.

The lowering of learner anxiety in TL usage is one area in which ICT has been advantageous. Wimba, an asynchronous web-based voice communication tool, was used in a Spanish teaching context and the influence of asynchronous computer voice conferencing on learner's anxiety levels was investigated. A number of students reported a reduction of anxiety levels due to the elimination of classroom time pressure and the opportunity to edit their contributions (Poza & Isabel, 2005).

Necessity for this Study

The need to increase learners' awareness of their individual speech patterns right from the elementary stages of language acquisition was briefly discussed above. This is seen as important to foster confidence in TL usage and also to increase motivation. The reality of traditional language teaching situations, however, is that there is usually neither enough time in class, nor sufficient opportunity for students to be provided with individual, effective and comprehensive feedback. Integration of ICT into the language learning activities was seen as a possible solution to these problems.

The current case study examined the effects of the use of a voice board housed on a course website. The trial focused on the oral skill development of late beginner and intermediate level Japanese learners who had limited class time.

Project Work as Learning Activities Integrated into Course Curriculum

This trial was conducted over a period of two years and three months and involved a total of 26 students comprised of three cohorts. One group (Group A) of seven learners had five semesters experience with the integrated use of Voice Board. They were at late beginner level when the trial began. The Second group (Group B) of six learners had two semesters experience and began at intermediate level. The third group (Group C) of 13 began at late intermediate level and only used the Voice Board for one semester before the data was collected.

Each group of students completed two to three units of work over each semester they were involved in the trial. The projects were designed to foster cultural understanding of Japan and raise students' awareness of their own cultures through exploration of the given topics. These topics included 'Gift giving/shopping', 'Holidays', 'Festivals', 'Leisure activities', 'Stress management', 'Employment', 'Education' and 'Sense of humor'. Each unit was broken into a sequence of steps. The preliminary steps involved students preparing their thoughts in Japanese and working with feedback from instructors to improve their Japanese expression. The critical steps involved students recording their thoughts and receiving feedback from peers on what they had said. At the same time, students were able to receive individual feedback on their oral skills from teaching staff. The new knowledge and raised self-awareness fed into their subsequent oral tasks. The individual steps involved in each unit varied depending on the topic area of that unit of work.

Included below are examples of the staged tasks involved in two units of work. The first was entitled 'Holidays' for beginner level students.

Example 1

Stage 1: Learners write a short passage about their recent holiday experience.

Stage 2: Learners receive individual feedback from an instructor for improvement of their passage.

Stage 3: Learners record their amended written scripts onto Voice Board on the course website in an allocated group of 3 or 4 learners.

Stage 4: Learners are given individual feedback on their pronunciation and intonation by an instructor.

Stage 5: Learners exchange questions and answers by listening to each other's recordings and posting a voice message on Voice Board.

Example 2

The second example is from the unit of work 'Education' for the early intermediate level.

Stage 1: A different topic related to Education in Japan is selected by each group of three to four students.

Stage 2: Information is gathered from web search by each group for the allocated topic.

Stage 3: Each learner summarizes what they have found and writes a comparison with their own culture. Each group then discusses these written comparisons to determine the structure of the group presentation.

Stage 4: Each learner writes a draft of their part of the group presentation.

Stage 5: Individuals receive written feedback from an instructor on their draft.

Stage 6: Individual speeches are recorded using the Wimba Voice Board on the course website.

Stage 7: Learners receive individual feedback on their pronunciation and intonation from an instructor.

Stage 8: In class delivery of the prepared group presentation.

For the intermediate level learners, the use of Voice Board involved recording their own ideas on the chosen topic and then receiving individual feedback from an instructor.

As shown above, the use of Voice Board was planned carefully to be well integrated within class learning activities. This approach was designed to generate and maintain learners' motivation in relation to both Japanese culture and the language itself. The use of Voice board was an integral and vital part of the process of completing the assigned tasks. For every use of Voice Board, feedback was given to each individual student in a timely manner.

Observations and Learners' Feedback

Learners' feedback was obtained in two ways. The first was a part of the students' course evaluation prepared by the university's Centre for Professional Development. It included open ended questions where students could comment on the unit and give advice for its improvement. The second type of feedback was in the form of responses to the researchers' questionnaire which had been created specifically for this study to obtain focused feedback on the learning activities using Voice Board.

Research Questionnaire for Students

The ten questions on the research questionnaire are shown below.

1. I'm now more aware of my own pronunciation/intonation than I was at the beginning of the unit.
2. This is due to practice in recording and receiving feedback through the use of Voice Board.
3. I think my intonation/pronunciation has been improved.
4. Improvement in my intonation/pronunciation is due to practices in recording and receiving feedback through the use of Voice Board.
5. I feel less stress/anxiety in recording my speech onto Voice Board compared to speaking in front of classmates in class.

6. Using the Voice Board gave me more confidence when giving spoken presentation in class.
7. I prefer speaking in front of my classmate in class than recording my speech into Voice Board
8. When I record my speech, I pay more attention to my pronunciation and intonation compared to speaking in front of classmates in class.
9. I would like to keep using Voice Board as a tool for improving my intonation and pronunciation.
10. Voice board technology was easy to use.

This researchers' questionnaire sought information regarding the learners' awareness of their own speech patterns, the use of Voice Board, stress/anxiety, and their evaluation of Voice Board as a tool for assisting learning. The format was a Likert scale, with 1 representing 'Strongly disagree' and 5 indicating 'Strongly agree'.

Participation in completing the course feedback and questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. It was made explicit to participants that the results of the feedback and the questionnaire would not be shown to their lecturers until after their course results had been submitted to avoid influencing students' responses to the feedback. Unfortunately, the small number of participants means that the data collected is not statistically significant; however, it provides valuable qualitative information.

Questionnaire Results

Raising Awareness of Pronunciation and Intonation

70% of participants chose 'strongly agree' or 'agree' for increased awareness of their own pronunciation and intonation. Notably, 86% of group A participants, i.e., those with the greatest experience with participation in Voice Board tasks, agreed with this question. 71% of group A participants attributed this to the feedback they received through the use of Voice Board. 67% of group B and 69% of group C participants also attributed this to Voice Board feedback. In terms of attention paid to their own speech, pronunciation and intonation, 86% of group A, 67% of group B and 83% of group C agreed that they paid more attention to these elements when using Voice Board.

Anxiety/Self-Confidence

In terms of anxiety, 86% of group A participants agreed that communication via Voice Board was less stressful than speaking in class. For group B, 67% reported Voice Board was less stressful, as did 62% of group C. As for the statement, "Using Voice Board gave me more confidence when giving spoken presentations in class", Group A participants un-

animously agreed. In contrast, however, 0% of group B and only 34% of group C agreed with this statement. In terms of self-confidence in pronunciation and intonation, 57% of group A, 50% of group B and 62% of group C agreed that they had improved in terms of their pronunciation and intonation. However, the majority of participants still felt less confident and less favourable about speaking in front of classmates and expressed a preference for speaking using Voice Board. The results show that only 14% of group A, 17% of group B and 17% of group C preferred to speak in front of classmates over using Voice Board.

Learners' Evaluation of Feedback given through Voice Board and their Evaluation of Voice Board as a Learning Tool

The responses showed 71% of group A, 33% of group B and 69% of group C agreed that their improvement in speech, pronunciation and intonation was due to the practice and recording of their speech and from receiving feedback from their instructors. 88% of all participants felt comfortable and at ease in using Voice Board. 77% of all participants wished to keep using Voice Board as a tool for improving their speech, pronunciation and intonation and for receiving feedback from their instructors.

Instructors' Observation and Participants' Open Comments

Several instructors were involved in teaching these groups of students over the trial period. Their comments included observations of some cases of significant improvement of learners' speech, pronunciation and intonation. From learner feedback, it was observed that most learners tried to produce better speech, pronunciation and intonation by recording and listening to their own recorded speech a number of times before final submission to Voice Board. Some students commented that due to this process, they felt more confident and more aware of their own speech patterns.

From feedback based on the research questionnaire, it was interesting to note that group A, who had the longest experience in participating in units of work that used Voice Board, generally showed a relatively higher positive evaluation on improvement and confidence in their speech patterns, and a more positive evaluation of the use of Voice Board. Group A participants were more used to these learning activities and it seems that over the two and a quarter years, the use of Voice Board had come to be perceived as a standard tool for their learning process.

The most common problem that students reported was difficulty in accessing the unit website in which

their Voice Board tasks were housed. This was due to system wide infrastructure problems that can slow the students' network during peak periods of the day. Although this is not a direct issue relating to Voice Board itself, it is an important point to note. If infrastructure maintenance and support of ICT is not of a high standard, ICT based teaching and learning initiatives such as this become vulnerable to failure.

Additionally, it was noted by teaching staff that giving individual feedback to learners is very time consuming - an expected outcome, but still of concern. It is also to be expected that learners are happier and more motivated if they receive individual feedback for their work. We are aware that the role of feedback is important for learners' motivation and that there is an increasing demand from learners in the university context for appropriate and timely feedback from instructors. Notwithstanding the instructor workload involved, it would seem that the use of Voice Board has the potential to support such feedback processes in the development of students' speaking skills.

Conclusion and Further Research

In on-going trials, the authors are continuing to research ways to maximize the effectiveness of this use of Voice Board. In a current project, after an initial semester where students receive individual

feedback, instructors are subsequently providing whole class feedback. The belief is that much of what is essential in terms of students' self awareness will be achieved from the initial tasks they participate in during their first semester. If it is shown that group feedback in the second semester is sufficient to maintain the momentum for students' improvements in speech, it will have a significant impact on the lecturer workload aspect of this teaching/learning process.

Based on instructors' observations and learners' feedback from the research questionnaire, it has been shown that the use of learning activities using Voice Board integrated into units of work gives learners the opportunity to become more aware of their own speech patterns. Learners reported that they paid more attention to their pronunciation and intonation due to instructors' feedback and comments to them as individual learners. Although many learners were still not confident in their conversational skills, they evaluated their speech as having improved through this learning process using Voice Board. Students' strong support for the continued use of Voice Board based learning tasks to develop their speaking skills and their expression of a generally high level of comfort in completing Voice Board based learning tasks are strong indicators that this particular use of ICT has an important and on-going place in the teaching and learning program.

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My major research interests are second language acquisition, computer assisted language learning, Japanese as foreign language acquisition, autonomous learning, task based teaching and kanji acquisition. I have been involved as a co-author development and implementation of Kantaro (CD-Rom for Kanji learning), Gengoro (CD-Rom for beginner level Japanese language), and WebCT content. I did investigation and study mainly in five areas; mechanism in second language learning, task study in second language learning, kanji acquisition in Japanese, use of technology to facilitate kanji learning, use of technology to improve distance education. In 2005 and 2006, I was involved in the project, "Whole Curriculum Approach to ICT Supported Teaching and Learning" trial conducted in Japanese Studies at Macquarie University.

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My research interests involve work with ICT supported teaching and learning in languages and issues of teaching and learning in Japanese language. This research covers the areas of teaching of intercultural understanding and generic skills in the higher education context. I have co-authored CD-ROM initiatives including the later volumes of the Kantaro kanji teaching series and the Gengoro CD ROM for the teaching of introductory level Japanese. My latest project was the "Whole Curriculum Approach to ICT Supported Teaching and Learning" trial conducted in Japanese Studies at Macquarie University in 2005 and 2006.

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