

**Report on paper presented at Education Reform – IT Strategy
Conference September 2009 in Tokyo.**

**Paper title: Practice and pedagogical effectiveness of online interactive
bi-directional learning project**

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This presentation explains how the online project was set up between AUT students and Japanese university students and discusses how the use of these technologies improved motivation and communication in the target language with overseas peers based on the students' feedback.

Background

Unlike second language learners who hear and use the target language every day, it has been a challenge for teachers to create opportunities for foreign language learners to use their target language in a meaningful way for communication. However the development of CMC (computer mediated communication), such as blog, wiki, SNS, Skype and so on, has provided ways of overcoming that challenge.

To have authentic communication and practice, AUT students learning Japanese have been involved in an online interactive learning project with university students in Japan, which facilitates BA Japanese 5 paper.

I would like to explain briefly how this project started.

I used to have a challenge to make my students write essays (sakubun) in Japanese. I gave essay-writing assignments every two weeks but the submission rate was always very low, around 30%. While searching for a solution to this problem, I encountered the popularity among young people in writing blogs. In 2007 semester one, as a trial, I instructed my students to submit their essays in blog form instead of writing on Japanese manuscript paper. I asked my colleague in Japan, who teaches at Kobe Women's University (KWU), to ask her students to write comments for AUT students regarding the blogs.

This was very successful and the essay submission rate increased from as low as 30% to over 95%. Most students wrote and uploaded their essays every two weeks. It seemed that the fact that their essays were read by other people and received comments motivated AUT students to write. The interaction with similar age native speakers from the comment to answer back stage developed real communication.

From this experience, we decided to organize our project using more IT technology to provide an authentic environment for the benefit of both AUT and KWU students. We added new interactive practices each year along with the availability of new technology. The first year started with essay practice using blogs, then the following year we added listening practice using podcast

and Wimba voice tools and this year (2009) we have set up live speaking practice using Skype.

AUT uses "Blackboard" as its LMS (Learning Management System) and it is called AUTonline. We have been using Japanese 5 on AUTonline for an interactive platform. AUTonline has Web 2.0 technologies. The KWU students were invited to AUTonline as guest members each year.

This project allows students to learn from both NZ and Japanese directions, so called interactive bi-directional learning system.

All activities were carried out in the students' own time out of classroom hours.

This presentation was based on the Japanese 5 course in semester 1 2009.

The target students and the purpose of this project

The whole group consists of AUT year 3 students who are the most advanced level of our Japanese paper and KWU year 3 students (native Japanese speakers) who take the Japanese Language Education paper as part of their language teacher trainee program.

The purposes for AUT learners are as follows.

1. To encourage writing essays in Japanese, using different forms of technology.
2. To increase listening and speaking practice.
3. To use more of the Japanese learnt in the classroom in more authentic situations.
4. To learn formal and informal styles of Japanese in an integrated way.
5. To increase intercultural awareness and motivation for autonomous learning.

The blog based interactive learning – for reading and writing practice

AUT and Kobe Women's University students were combined and we created four mixed groups. Each group made a team blog on AUT online.

Each of the AUT students were given essay writing assignments every two weeks and KWU students commented for their essays on the blog. Topics were chosen from the textbook that AUT Japanese 5 students use. In small groups members can help each other and have less personal problems.

Please see the example below.

Top half is the AUT student's essay and below that is the comment from the KWU student.

KWU students who are trainee Japanese language teachers can see the language students' way of writing and practice giving constructive comment and feedback.

The screenshot shows the AUT online interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, All My Courses, My Old Courses, Content System, Community, Staff Support, Course Requests, and Scholar. Below this is a sidebar with various menu items: Announcements, Paper Information, 文法, 漢字・語彙, 聴解, 読解/作文, みんなのブログ, みんなのWIKI, 練習, Podcasts, Reflective Journal, Shopping Mall, AUT Library, Support, Library, Assessments, and Staff Information. The main content area displays a student's essay in Japanese. The essay discusses stress and offers three tips: stretching, listening to music, and drinking tea. Below the essay, there is a comment from a KWU student, which discusses the definition of stress and the effectiveness of writing and listening to music. The interface also includes a 'Tools' section at the bottom left with options for Communication and Course Tools.

The wiki based interactive learning – for reading and writing practice

The wiki was prepared to allow free writing. At the beginning some students uploaded photos with stories, which have gradually tapered off. This may be caused due to workload in other areas. Some students mentioned a difficulty in finding suitable topics by themselves.

The podcast based interactive learning – for listening and speaking practice

The Japanese short TV program called “Portraits” were podcasted every week on AUTonline Japanese 5. This is a series of short interview programs of people from different age groups and permission of use these was obtained from the makers.

The KWU students prepared the questions for each video podcasting to check the AUT students’ comprehension. They recorded questions using AUTonline’s Wimba voice tool or their mobile phone and uploaded onto Voice Board. The AUT students watched video podcasting and listened to the questions. Then they recorded their answers onto Voice Board. KWU students gave the feedback orally on Voice Board.

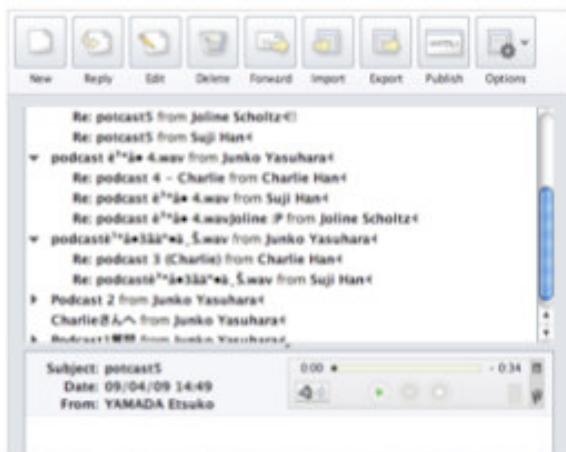
The followings are some examples.

The top image is one scene of Portraits and the bottom image is the Voice Board used by one of the groups.



さくらグループのVoice Board

Charlie Hanさん、Joline Scholtzさん、Suji Hanさん、窪田 有希 (KUBOTA Aki)さん、山田 恵津子 (YAMADA Etsuko)さんたちのVoice Boardです。



Skype conversation

The time difference between New Zealand and Japan plus students schedule were hard to match up perfectly for using Skype. This was a voluntary base practice and held twice after Thursday classes.

All students that participated enjoyed speaking in Japanese and AUT students even led the conversation. There is a huge potential for real time discussion and conversation practice however not only the time difference of two countries but also the computer environments are not quite ready for all students to use at AUT.

Pedagogical effectiveness

The feedback was taken from students' reflective journals and group interviews after the course.

One of the interesting findings is that the style of comments affected each student's motivation differently. Some students asked for more detailed feedback and wanted to have all their mistakes corrected so that they could learn more. On the other hand, some students never wanted their essays corrected by KWU students and their reasons were it's too embarrassing and that discouraged them to write. However these students enjoyed receiving KWU students' comments and the interaction without grammatical corrections.

The style of learning was obviously changed by the employment of technology. Some students downloaded video podcastings onto their mobile device. They said that they watched or listened to video clips while waiting for buses or waiting for their friends in cafés and so on. They found it is very convenient and useful. However the quality and the size of files suitable for the devices need to be carefully considered.

As an overall result, both AUT and Japanese students received the pedagogical benefits from this project. AUT students communicate with people of the same age group in Japan using the target language beyond the classroom situation. Both group of students had much in common and shared their work. AUT students used the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills they have learnt in the classroom and applied them.

There seems to be a lot of enjoyment and in most cases their motivation seems increased, as this project is by far the most authentic language experience offered to both sides.

However the Web 2.0 technologies are still relatively new and more study is necessary to discover their most effective pedagogical use along with students' interpersonal aspects. I am still analyzing the feedback from 2009 students carefully.

The conference presentation was delivered together with my colleague Junko Yasuhara, associate professor of WKU. She spoke from her student's points of view.

In addition to this report, I would like to thank the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund for providing me a Conference Paper Presentation Award. This award gave me the opportunity to go to Tokyo to present this paper. I am very grateful. The conference was very successful and I came back fully inspired.

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October 2009