

HOW TEACHERS CAN ASSIST LEARNERS TO ACQUIRE SKILLS REQUIRED IN THE
21ST CENTURY IN ELEMENTARY JAPANESE COURSES: PEDAGOGICAL
IMPLICATIONS BASED ON AN EXPERIENCE

学習者が二十一世紀に必要なスキル獲得を初級レベルにおいて教師はどうサポートできるのか：実践による教育指導提案

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages known as CEFR puts emphasize on these skills: promoting plurilingualism and diversification in the choice of languages in the curriculum, supporting the development and demonstration of the plurilingual profile of individual learners and developing and reviewing the content of language curricula and defining positive ‘can do’ descriptors adapted to the age, interests and needs of learners (Okumura, Sakurai & Suzuki, 2016). These statements indicate the importance of raising a learner’s language skill and choice.

Another pedagogical idea suggested by Tohsaku (2016) introduced three by three plus three at CAJLE annual conference at Niagara. Skills contain understanding, use, and connect while domains have language, culture, and global society fields. They are multiplied and create nine categories. The categories under understanding, use, language, and culture are emphasized in traditional class. For example, compare language and culture with one’s own and notice the difference and making use of language and non-linguistic strategies, cultural information and compare or analyze them with one’s own. However, connect and global society sets are often overlooked, such as 1. building relationships mutually using target languages, 2. involving with people with various backgrounds and overcome discords, 3. understanding global society and acquire the skills required in the 21st century, 4. making use of resources and technology to solve problems, 5. be a member of a group with different cultural backgrounds to achieve a goal, 6. accessing people, products, and information to achieve a goal in a network and make a global society by assisting each other. In other words, we need to take a community into account when we teach languages. Also, due to technological advances today, people need to deal with frequent change and complexity. Similar to Tohsaku’s proposal, Saito (2016) states language teaching can address this challenge by shifting from merely teaching language toward teaching language to raise people who can survive in the modern competitive world. Information technology(IT) is a key to making this objective happen.

As these scholars propose, language teaching needs the shift from merely teaching to incorporating language to survival skills in the modern world. Although teachers are trying hard to change the curriculum for achieving the goals, current language teaching, especially beginner levels, tends to focus on grammar instructions due to the tight schedule and many textbooks for beginners are structured by grammar points. Also, many courses and programs still evaluate a student performance based on completion of the grammar-focused textbook. Thus, teachers need to finish instructing the basic grammar structures. Language teachers must foster learners’ creativity, autonomy, problem-solving skills, and encourage them to go beyond the classroom to connect a variety of people while employing IT tools. Japanese classes, including the beginner level, needs to start offering these occasions so that learners can practice the skills in Japanese. These skills will help learners prepare for joining in the society while enhancing their language proficiency.

2. DISCUSSION

The new task, called video project, was created and carried out in the academic year 2016-2017 to move forward to the new teaching styles in the Japanese elementary course at Yale University in America. This project was taken as a final project in Spring semester 2017 and was mandatory in Elementary Japanese, and all 39 students in the course participated. Most of them were undergraduates, and half of them were freshmen. Their majors varied from Engineering to undecided. Eleven students in Japan were majoring in cross-cultural studies in a foreign language department. Their academic years were sophomore and above. Goals to achieve were promoting learners' creativity, autonomy, problem-solving skills, and encourage them to go beyond the classroom to connect a variety of people while employing IT tools. Also, a linguistic goal was set as "you can give a simple presentation about a place clearly enough for Native Japanese people to understand." Five elements were emphasized based on the goal above: 1. employing the IT tools, 2. balancing the workload, 3. offering freedom, 4. minimizing teachers' interference, 5. bridging students in America and Japan.

The project started in Fall 2016. A professor in Japan kindly accepted the offer from our program. Due to the number of the schedule/time difference and the IT availability, asynchronous communication was chosen for the format. The two components of the project were as follows.

1. Groups of students make promotional videos in Japanese to attract Japanese college students to visit places in the U.S.
2. Students in America share the video online with students in Japan so that Japanese students can watch the videos and offer comments in English to American students.

The tools used in the project were as follow:

1. Course website: Canvas for communication between teachers and learners
2. Google Docs (integrated into Canvas) for communication among learners, writing a progress report and drafts
3. Panopto (integrated into Canvas) to upload videos
4. Qualtrics to distribute and collect questionnaires

To understand the applications fully, the rest of the fall semester was spent investigating and understanding the IT tools and planning all due dates. The entire schedule was created by the end of fall and shared by other instructors in the Japanese program and the professor in Japan. The project was announced to the students in January in Spring 2017 via Canvas. Students made a group of 3-4 people and were instructed to produce a promotion video, which was less than 3 minutes. Every step of the project was assigned every week throughout the semester to balance the workload with other assignments. Meanwhile, learners wrote a progress report every due date on Google Doc so that they could communicate with me for any questions and concerns. The example of the report included reflection as follow:

Assignment #4

What do you have done so far?

What do you need to do next? Also, provide the timely manner.

How does a TA assist your work? What kind of part improved?

How and when do you film the video?

Are there any questions or concerns that you want to consult with the teacher?

This project was aimed at mutual learning, and students exchange Japanese and English. Also, since students in Japan were in a seminar about sightseeing industry in English and would take a graduation trip, “places to recommend to Japanese college students” became the broad topic. Also, the teacher provided some suggestions to look at guidebooks if students had no idea what to write. The learners’ freedom and choice were emphasized, they freely chose places, contents, and materials under this subject. The teachers didn’t interfere and said nothing unless they reported concerns on the progress report.

The fourth feature of the project was to encourage autonomy and problem-solving skills. The learners developed the scripts and practiced the speech for their videos based on feedback provided by both the teaching assistants and classmates, instead of depending on the teacher’s assistance alone. Students prepared questions, went to a teaching fellow’s writing session, and went through to the peer review to minimize the teacher’s intervention before teachers checked the finalized version. Learners also had an opportunity to practice pronunciation and intonation of their speech with the teaching assistants.

Most importantly, the last characteristic of the project was aimed at going beyond the classroom to promote mutual learning in two different cultures. The learners uploaded their video on Panopto secure folder, where I added the professor in Japan to access. The professor showed the videos her students in Japan. While they watched the video, they took the questionnaire that was designed to evaluate the content, quantity, and quality. The assessment is based on two parts: 1. completion of the task and submission of the progress report and 2. the evaluation by the Japanese students. The teachers didn’t evaluate the videos but kept the record of the submissions. Lastly, students in the U.S. sent thank you messages to Japanese students.

The assessment was based on two parts: 1. completion of the task and submission of the progress report and 2. the evaluation by the Japanese students. The progress report and draft submission were five points maximum. Japanese students evaluated the video based on quality, quantity, smoothness, and preparation. The score was seven points maximum, including the extra point for good videos praised by Japanese students. We didn’t tell students in Japan to grade but told them to write their opinions because we didn’t want the students, who never evaluated someone’s work, to feel nervous. They chose one of the categories of “you worked hard,” “Good,” and “amazing!” under each criterion. The teachers didn’t evaluate the videos. The total points weighted 3% of the total grade. Since it was our first attempt, this grade was the maximum we could offer for this project.

Students in Japan and America received a questionnaire at the end of the project. All students in Japan thought this kind of project was meaningful and helpful for their studies, such as English, cross-cultural study, and tourism industry. They were willing to expand this sort of learning approach. Similarly, 97 percent of the students in America reported the positive response to this project and agreed that this kind project was effective to learn Japanese. They also believed this method was a good way to express themselves in Japanese as well as speaking, vocabulary, creativity, and grammar. As for the personal feeling, all students were satisfied with the video project. Learners answered that the teaching assistants were useful even though they had to prepare their questions and go to a session to ask them. Learners found the progress report was also helpful to plan their schedule and get the teacher’s assist. Overall, students found the project was useful for their language learning, self-expression, and mutual learning.

There were some hardships and issues to address, so I’d like to provide some suggestions on ways to solve them. All language instructors need to learn tools, and it takes time. Thus, we

need to search for ones available at school and collaborate with your IT office far in advance. There are tools available through school, program, and Google. Learn them first and go beyond if you cannot find one you like. Learning or mastering a new web tool usually takes a semester. Instructors need not only to learn but also teach how to use the tools to learners. Although learners are digital natives, they also need support. Thus, teachers need to make sure that IT team are ready for the students and bridge two. Also, being on the schedule isn't easy progress. In the case, a progress report is useful for learners to reflect what they have done and what to do next. Students appreciate the guidance for what to do and space to address a concern or communicate. Most importantly, teachers need to create a task designed to connect people outside of class. New IT tools make it possible to build a space for mutual learning and connecting to people even for novice level learners.

Some modifications will be required to improve the project for the future. As for the final product, I must incorporate other kinds of formats so that learners can choose because not all learners prefer talking. Our program will add a magazine choice next year. Additionally, some videos are easy to understand while some are not because the video quality is not always good. It's a good idea to share the scripts made by learners in U.S. with learners in Japan. Next, we need different measurements to validate the effectiveness of the task. To do so, we can offer can-do statements, as CEFR suggests, and conduct pre- and post-interviews/presentations. Also, we plan to share the Japanese students' project with American students.

3. CONCLUSION

Creating and conducting this type of task is time-consuming and challenging. However, it is necessary to assist learners from the novice level to obtain the skills required in the 21st century, go beyond the classroom to connect people and community and utilize IT applications while learning a language. I hope learners explore the world and grow through acquiring the Japanese language.

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