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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LEARN A LANGUAGE?  
STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ESL AND JAPANESE

by

Andrew Tracy Mikesell

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of

MASTER OF SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Logan, Utah

2017

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## ABSTRACT

What Does It Take to Learn a Language?

Strategies for Teaching ESL and Japanese

by

Andrew Mikesell: Master of Second Language Teaching  
Utah State University, 2017

Major Professor: Dr. DeJonge-Kannan

Department: Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies

This portfolio reflects what the author believes to be effective tools and methods for teaching a second or foreign language. The first section includes the author's teaching philosophy which addresses teacher and student roles, communicative and meaningful tasks, learning environments, and the importance of literacy development. Following the teaching philosophy are three research perspective papers which discuss the use of digital storytelling as a tool for developing language proficiency, how blogs can be used to help students develop writing skills in their second language, and alternative approaches to teaching and learning *kanji*, which are one of three sets of Japanese characters. The final section of this portfolio includes three annotated bibliographies that are a record of the author's exploration of various tools and strategies for improving students' literacy skills, classroom interactions, and task-based language teaching.

(136 pages)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During my time in the MSLT program I have had the great fortune of meeting many wonderful and supportive individuals. First, I would like to thank the members of my committee: Dr. de Jonge-Kannan, who not only agreed to serve as the chair of my committee, but continually guided and supported me throughout the entire program. Second, Prof. Nolan Weil, who mentored me during my internship in the Intensive English Language Institute and from whom I learned much about teaching ESL to adult learners. Third, Ms. Yurika Izumi, for her encouragement and for always being willing to help. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Maria Luisa Spicer-Escalante, Dr. Joshua Thoms, and Dr. Abdulkafi Albirini for sharing their expertise and introducing me to new ideas, which have helped me to grow as a second language teacher.

I also must thank my colleagues in the MSLT program for their friendliness, constant support, and willingness to share ideas and insights. Many of my fellow instructors kindly permitted me to observe their classrooms which helped me to reflect on my own practices and improve my teaching. Most of all, I have enjoyed the comradery that I have felt with my fellow MSLT students and the many engaging conversations that I have had with them.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Aiko for her unwavering love and support, willingness to discuss ideas with me, and the late nights she spent with me as a study buddy. I also thank my children for their patience, love, and for lifting my spirits at times when I really needed it.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACTFL = American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

ANU = Australian National University

APALL = Application Assisted Language Learning

AWL = Academic Word List

CA = Conversational Adjustment

CALL = Computer Assisted Language Learning

CFL = Chinese as a Foreign Language

DJ = Dialogue Journal

DMN = Digital Micro Narrative

DS = Digital Story

DST = Digital Storytelling

EFL = English as a Foreign Language

ESL = English as a Second Language

ESP = English for Specific Purposes

ICT = Information and Computer Technology

IELI = Intensive English Language Institute

JFL = Japanese as a Foreign Language

L1 = First Language/ Native Language

L2 = Second Language

LLD = Learner Lead Discourse

MALL = Mobile Assisted Language Learning

MSLT = Master of Second Language Teaching



NTRI = Next Turn Repair Initiator

OVC = Orphans and other Venerable Children

PPP = Presentation Practice Production

SLA = Second Language Acquisition

TBLL = Task-based Language Learning

TBLT = Task-based Language Teaching

TLD = Teacher Lead Discourse

TPR = Total Physical Response

USU = Utah State University

ZPD = Zone of Proximal Development

## INTRODUCTION

This portfolio is a collection of some of the major work that I have completed during my time in the MSLT program. The teaching perspectives section is the center piece of the portfolio and includes references to my own experience as a language teacher and learner, where I hope to be in the future, my teaching philosophy, and what I have learned from observing myself and others teach.

My teaching philosophy focuses on what I consider to be four crucial aspects of effective second language teaching and learning. First, I discuss the roles of teachers and students as well as the importance of both working together toward the same end, which is the development of students' ability to use the target language. Second, how communication and meaningful tasks are essential to classroom success and some of the activities I already make use of in my classes or plan to make use of in the future. Third, how the classroom environment is a critical factor and can either work towards or against the success of class activities and students' overall language development. Finally, I address the importance of literacy development in becoming a fully proficient user of the target language, especially in today's digital world, and discuss some of the methods and tools that can be used to accomplish this.

## TEACHING PERSPECTIVES

## APPRENTICESHIP OF OBSERVATION

My very first attempt at learning another language was at the age of 16. I walked into a local bookstore, determined to find something that would help me to learn Japanese, a language that I had been interested in learning for quite some time. At the time, I knew very little about how to learn a new language and I simply chose a book/CD Japanese language course that looked interesting and wasn't too expensive, from the limited options that were on the shelf. I remember putting one of the CDs into my car's stereo and listening to the words and attempting to repeat them. The book had a nice explanation of how to pronounce Japanese vowels and taught some very basic words and sentences. Unfortunately, the book did not include any information on how to read and write Japanese characters and everything was written in "romanji", or the roman characterization of Japanese. I felt a little disappointed because a fascination with the Japanese writing system was one of the reasons that I had wanted to learn the language. The book and CD also mostly consisted of repetition drills and I quickly became disinterested in studying from them.

My first formal experience with language learning was at Utah State University in the Japanese 1010 class. There I was introduced to the Japanese writing systems of *hiragana*, *katakana*, and eventually *kanji*. The first two are phonetic and are fairly easy to master after a couple months of repetitive writing and study. *Kanji*, however, is pictographic and one character can have several readings and meanings. This makes it quite difficult to learn for someone from a language that uses only a phonetic alphabet such as English. The method that was employed to teach *kanji* in my 1010 class, all the way through to my

3020 class, was very traditional, emphasizing drilling and memorization. We practiced the characters over and over, often in little boxes on a drill worksheet and tried to memorize the characters and all of their readings. When we had reading tasks, I found it very difficult to remember all of the different meanings and readings of the *kanji* and I often became frustrated due to an inability to decode the words.

After my first semester of Japanese, I met my wife Aiko who is a native speaker of the language. She has not only been a great source of motivation, but also a very helpful and reliable resource during my efforts to learn Japanese. During our engagement, I went to Japan for the first time in the summer of 2008 to meet my wife's family. I stayed with them for about a month and during that time I experienced some of my very first, real-life successes in using Japanese to communicate with native speakers. The following fall semester, when I began Japanese 3010, I noticed some improvement in my speaking and listening skills, which was very encouraging. Yet, I still struggled to read and write *kanji*. By the end of three years of language study in college, a student is supposed to be able to read from 500 to 600 *kanji*. In order to function in Japanese society, for example to read a newspaper, one needs to be able to recognize and read about 2000 *kanji*. However, it seemed like I was forgetting the characters almost as quickly as I was being introduced to them and this became an area of concern for me.

While my four years of studying Japanese at university gave me a good foundation, I believe that my "real" language learning occurred when I moved to Japan to work in the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET). I believe two major factors contributed to this. First was a vast increase in exposure to the language and culture on a daily basis. Second was a major increase in motivation due to my need to communicate with my

fellow teachers and a desire to make friends and socialize. Another major source of motivation for me was the fact that I wanted to be able to communicate with my in-laws better, especially since my wife and I were seeing them a lot more frequently. I feel strongly that it is important for me to be able to communicate with my in-laws because we are family and I also happen to really enjoy their company.

Hearing Japanese all around me, all day helped my listening skills tremendously. It is almost as though my ears could suddenly tune into the sounds of the language. It became much easier to pick words out of sentences and this was an especially useful skill when it came to finding words that I didn't know because I could repeat the word and ask what it meant. I also believe that having had more contact with the Japanese culture, in a personal way, furthered my ability to understand the language as well. Many idioms are culturally specific and impossible to understand without knowing their cultural background. For example, in Japan there is an expression "*ichi hime, ni taro*" which translates literally to "one princess, one Taro". Taro is commonly part of names given to Japanese folktale heroes. Without an understanding of the culture, this saying makes little sense. However, knowing that in Japan having a daughter as the oldest child followed by a son is considered lucky, brings the phrase into context and makes it comprehensible.

The level of motivation that I experienced while living in Japan was also a major factor in my learning. My desire to interact with those around me led to some very intensive personal study. As I learned new vocabulary I would often notice the very same words being used around me. This was a great reinforcement as it gave me something to link the words to. Gradually my speaking and listening skills greatly

improved. However, my goals were not limited to just these two skills as I was also very determined to improve my reading and writing skills.

*Kanji* remained a major obstacle to my literacy development at this time and in my search for a better way to learn the characters I came across a book titled “Remembering the Kanji” by James W. Heisig, which uses an approach that is very different from the traditional Japanese methods. Instead of trying to learn the characters by rote memory the learner first learns the root meaning of each character in their native language and creates a story to help remember the character’s form. In the second volume, the learner then starts to tie Japanese readings to the characters. With the Heisig method, I was able to learn how to read and write 2000 characters in about a year and a half. One aspect of this approach to learning *kanji* that I found particularly helpful was the fact that it didn’t overload my memory. It was much easier to focus on the shape and base meaning first, then move on to learning the Japanese readings later. Often, I didn’t even need to see the characters in the second volume of the book because I knew the words in Japanese already and when I saw the characters in context I was able to make connections. For example, one day I was driving to work and saw a truck ahead of me with the characters 温泉 written on the back of it. Having just learned that the character 温 means ‘warm’ and that the character 泉 means ‘natural spring’, I was able to figure out that the word written on the back of the truck was one I already knew in Japanese, ‘onsen’ which means ‘hot spring’. As I continued to use this method to learn *kanji*, my reading and writing skills vastly improved and as a result, so did my vocabulary and grammar use.

Based on my own personal experience with learning Japanese, I believe that the communicative and social components of language must be incorporated in teaching if students are to be successful. Teacher centered, dry boring lecture type classes are not going to inspire the type of motivation students need to have in order to become effective language learners. By providing opportunities for students to interact with and learn about the target language's culture and people we might can increase students' interest in learning the language. Also of great importance is understanding the language and cultural backgrounds that our students come from and the unique challenges that go with these backgrounds in learning the target language. This is of utmost importance in multilingual classrooms if teachers are going to be able to address the unique challenges of their individual students. My desire is to become a teacher who is able to address the unique needs of each student and to provide the type of support they need to be successful second language learners.



## PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

For as long as I can remember I have always been curious about other countries and cultures. This fascination only intensified as I began my college career. I became more and more interested in language learning and this is what lead me to join the MSLT program.

During my experience teaching in Japan I got to see some of the struggles faced by students learning English as a second language. I came to realize that each language background comes with its own particular set of challenges. It is my desire to further understand how language teachers can best help their students and ways in which they can determine students' learning needs effectively.

My struggle to learn Japanese also kindled an interest in how Japanese can be better taught to Japanese as Foreign Language (JFL) students. I am particularly interested in discovering better ways to teach literacy in the Japanese language. I believe there are more effective methods for teaching *kanji* and this is an area I will explore in this portfolio.

The primary focus of this portfolio will be teaching ESL/EFL in a university setting and successful methods and strategies for teachers and learners. Upon completion of the MSLT program my hope is to teach English at a university, either in the United States or abroad. The secondary focus of this portfolio will be effective methods for teaching Japanese to students from western language backgrounds. I have a desire to teach Japanese in the future as well and my ideal situation would be teaching both English and Japanese at a university.

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY STATEMENT

My interest in second language teaching was first sparked by my experience as a Japanese language student at Utah State University. As I struggled to learn Japanese, I began to wonder if there was a way to learn the language with less difficulty. Eventually, I also became curious as to how people learned other languages and whether their first language had an impact on their ability to learn the second. Gradually this led me to join the Japan Exchange and Teaching program, through which I taught English in Japan for four years as an Assistant Language Teacher. Having developed a passion for language teaching, I decided to return to USU and join the Master of Second Language Teaching program.

My experience teaching in Japan made very clear to me the importance of communicative teaching and opportunities for students to use the target language through task-based activities (Lee & VanPatten, 2003), which is something that was sadly lacking in many of the classrooms that I observed. The learning environment also has a crucial role in whether students will have a desire to use the language and ultimately affects their overall learning experience. Furthermore, as an instructor in the Intensive English Language Institute at USU, and as a second language learner of Japanese, I have come to understand the importance of developing strong literacy skills in the target language, which goes far beyond simply being able to decode individual words. In this teaching philosophy, I will focus on the roles of teachers and students, communication and meaningful tasks in the classroom, learning environments, and the importance of literacy development in my classroom.

## **Roles of Teachers and Students**

Both teachers and students have important roles to play in the second language learning process. For this reason, a classroom that is teacher-centered does not often lead to successful language learning outcomes. Students are also less likely to succeed in learning the target language if they become passive in the classroom. For this reason, the ability of my students and I to work together on their language development has a significant impact on the success or failure of my second language classroom.

### ***Roles of Teachers***

In the early stages of second language learning, I have the crucial role of providing my students with comprehensible input. Comprehensible input is language which is at a level that is appropriate to the students and consists mostly of words and structures that the students already know (Krashen, 1982). Comprehensible input is also meaning bearing, in that there is some message that the learner is supposed to attend to (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). One of the first steps that teachers can take in providing comprehensible input is to ensure that the input matches students' background knowledge. For example, it would be pointless to select advanced physics as a classroom topic for students who have little to no knowledge of physics, even in their first language. I must also take into consideration that my students may not have some of the same basic background knowledge that many others have. This is especially true in the context of ESL at the university level. For example, I have learned from experience students from Asia or the Middle East might not be familiar with ancient Greek mythology, while most of their Western counterparts likely at least know who Zeus and Hades are. Even

advanced students will struggle to engage in an activity in which they have very little background knowledge. If an activity requires a certain degree of background knowledge, it is my responsibility to provide that knowledge to students. In fact, by providing students with background knowledge, I can increase students' comprehension in activities such as listening (Yazdanpanah & Khanmohammad, 2014). Another way I can make input comprehensible to students is to use visual aids, especially when learning basic vocabulary. When introducing new vocabulary, I can show pictures, photographs, or drawings, and use gestures to convey meaning, or even Total Physical Response (TPR), in which students physically carry out commands given by the teacher (Lee & VanPatten, 2003; Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001). These approaches to input give students an opportunity to make direct connections between words and their meanings, also known as *binding* (Terrell, 1986), which bypasses the need for translations. In my classroom, I often make use of visual aids such as pictures and drawings to assist students' comprehension of vocabulary. When teaching reading, I also use maps or charts as a way to help students comprehend texts or relationships between topics and main ideas. Furthermore, I often find myself using gestures to help guide students to the meanings of certain words or phrases.

Another role I have as a teacher is that of an architect, in which I carefully design activities that are meaningful and encourage students to communicate in the target language (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001; Lee & VanPatten, 2003). As an architect, the teacher "is not responsible for the final product[...]...[Instead, the] students become builders or coworkers, who put [the task] together" (Lee & VanPatten, 2003, p. 71). I can accomplish this by getting to know my students well and making sure that tasks

are relevant to their needs and interests. Furthermore, tasks need to have a clear goal that students are to accomplish for themselves (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). For example, an activity that I have used in my reading class is to have students find information in a text that either supports or contradicts a given claim and then decide whether the claim is valid or not. Another activity I have used is to have students work in groups to research a famous figure, create a power-point, and then present their findings to the rest of the class.

Teachers also have the role of resource, in which they provide support when requested by students. In this role, teachers do not make assumptions about what students understand or need help with (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). The easiest way to find out what students know or do not know is to ask them, or make them responsible for letting you know what they need help with. Before starting a new activity that will require new vocabulary, rather than going through each word one by one in a monotonous manner, I can give students a vocabulary knowledge self-assessment task and then elicit the words that they would like me to cover. By doing this, the students and I both avoid wasting limited class time on things that they already know.

Finally, I have a very important role in the classroom as a facilitator and scaffolder. It is my responsibility to guide the class in learner-centered activities and avoid creating a teacher-centered environment in which students become passive learners (Anton, 1999). I do not need to assume the role of ultimate authority to facilitate learning. In fact, I can act as a 'co-learner' along with my students and allow them opportunities to be 'co-teachers', which creates a learning environment of collaboration and equality (Kim, 2012).

Teachers who are skilled at scaffolding *calibrate* the amount of support they provide to

be just enough to allow students to accomplish tasks for themselves (Kim, 2012). Furthermore, I can give students opportunities to practice previously learned language and engage in language play by affording them chances to interact freely with one another without my interference (Ohta, 1995). Finally, by setting up activities in a way that will allow students to experience many small successes, I can increase their confidence and motivation to participate in activities (Pyun, 2013).

### **Role of Students**

Students also have important roles to play in the classroom. The first and most important role that students have is that of communicators (Anton, 1999). As communicators, students are expected to interact with others, negotiate meaning, share ideas and opinions, and be responsible for their own learning (Anton, 1999). Students also assume the role of negotiator in a communicative classroom. Students are not limited to negotiating for meaning, which is when, “in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers...[make] adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved” (Long, 1996, p. 418). Students can also negotiate language forms and classroom rules, if given opportunities to do so (Anton, 1999). In my classroom, I believe it is important to have open communication and that my students should feel that they can tell me when they need extra time or assistance. I often allow students to negotiate time frames for completing tasks, within reason, and do my best to plan my lessons in a way that allows me to be flexible.

Students can also act as ‘co-constructors of knowledge’ (Kim, 2014). For this to occur, the teacher must create an environment in which students are not only comfortable in making contributions but are expected to do so regularly. This cannot be done using ‘traditional’ teaching methods but requires a communicative approach. Through scaffolding, I lead students to find solutions to language problems they encounter for themselves and become more responsible for their own language learning (Anton, 1999; Ohta, 1995). Furthermore, my students can also act as ‘co-teachers’ and scaffold each other during the language learning process (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Li, 2012). I have witnessed students scaffolding one another on several occasions both while teaching in the IELI program and in Japan. Thus, I believe that group and pair work should be utilized frequently in the classroom, so that students can have opportunities to learn from each other. Young, Ducate, and Arnold (2011) note that, “students are their own best teachers and can rely on their previous knowledge and experience of the world as they collaborate with each other in order to improve the learning environment and move beyond their current level of mastery” (Young et al., 2011, p.32). Rather than simply providing answers to students when asked, I refer the question to the rest of the class and see if a peer knows the answer. Sometimes students will have partial answers and will need scaffolding to create a more complete answer. This often comes from me, but it can also come from another peer. Often my students can come up with solutions without needing me to step in at all, as they scaffold one another and ‘co-construct’ knowledge together (Anton 1999; Kim, 2012). Of course, this kind of peer-scaffolding cannot take place without communication and meaningful tasks in the classroom (Lee & VanPatten, 2003).

## **Communication and Meaningful Tasks**

While I could make use of any number of tasks and activities in my classroom, the most important factor is that the activity has a communicative purpose or goal. In fact, “We may say that the goal of the language class is to learn how to carry out specific communicative tasks rather than to produce specific grammatical forms” (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001, p. 61). Ellis (2012) also gives four useful criteria for designing a communicative task.

“1) The primary focus should be on meaning. 2) There should be some kind of ‘gap’ or need to communicate information, express opinions, or infer meanings, 3) Learners should have to rely largely on their own resources to complete the activity. 4) There needs to be a clearly defined outcome other than the use of the language.” (Ellis, 2012, p. 199).

The ACTFL proficiency guidelines and ‘Can do Statements’ are a tool that I use to guide the design of classroom activities. These guidelines give clear goals for what my students should be able to do with the target language in the areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing when they reach certain levels of proficiency (Shrum & Glisan, 2009). By referring to these guidelines, I can ensure that the activities I design have a communicative goal that is appropriate to students’ current proficiency levels.

Some of the activities I might employ as a teacher include: information gaps/exchanges, group/pair discussions, classroom polls, a class census, etc. (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001; Lee & VanPatten). Whatever the activity happens to be, it should be student centered and I will play the role of architect, resource, or scaffolder. Each activity type has its own advantages, therefore, rather than relying on the



same activity type for every lesson, I believe it is important to use a variety of activities and ideally multiple activities in the same class. This way I can utilize the benefits of each activity type while preventing boredom among students.

I believe that task-based language learning (TBLL) is a useful framework for planning lessons with communicative activities. TBLL lessons have three phases: a pre-task, a during-task, and a post-task (Ellis, 2006). While only the during-task is required, the pre- and post-tasks are very useful and should be used as often as possible. The pre-task phase helps students to get ready to perform the task and the post-task phase provides students with an opportunity to reflect on the outcome of the task, address problematic areas or unanswered questions, and sometimes another chance to perform the task itself. In my classroom, I frequently make use of pre-tasks because they often help students to feel more confident in performing tasks and the outcomes are usually more successful. One pre-task that I like to use in particular are group discussions, which are good way to find out students' level of background knowledge and often reveal possible areas of difficulty for students before they engage in the main activity.

Task-based lessons are typically a series of activities that lead up to the accomplishment of a long-term goal. One activity that I believe fits within this framework particularly well is the creation of digital stories. Digital storytelling (DST) was first developed in the United States in the 1990s and involves the integration of technology, the use of multimedia, and video editing software or Web 2.0-based applications (Hayes & Itani-Adams, 2014; Nishioka, 2016; Thang et al., 2014). During the process of creating a digital story, students' must engage in a number of steps that involve: writing, editing, researching, audio recording, giving and providing feedback,

collaborating, discussing, presenting, developing audience awareness, learning technical skills, etc. (Castaneda, 2013; Kimura, 2012; Kronenberg, 2014; Oskoz, 2016; Ribeiro, 2015; Yang, 2012). As such, I could use a DST project as a long-term activity over the course of several weeks or even an entire semester, depending on my goals. While designing meaningful, communicative activities is an essential part of communicative language teaching, the degree to which their implementation will be successful can be greatly impacted by the learning environment.

### **Learning Environments**

It is of utmost importance that I create a learning environment in which students feel comfortable and are unafraid to make the mistakes that are an unavoidable part of language learning. The learning environment should motivate students to take responsibility for their own language learning and enable them to make use of their various individual talents and background knowledge (Antón, 1999). In other words, the learning environment should lead students to become ‘active learners’. Classrooms that are teacher-centered, focus only on grammar, and don’t provide opportunities to communicate in a meaningful way not only lead students to become ‘passive learners’, but ultimately set them up to be unsuccessful in learning the target language.

DiNitto (2011) notes that teachers cannot simply take a collaborative task and suddenly use it in a classroom that has been using a ‘traditional’ approach and expect students to be successful. In order for students to do well with collaborative or communicative tasks, they need to be in a learning environment in which communication and collaboration are the norm from the very first day of class. When students begin their

language learning experience in a teacher-centered learning environment, they are likely to end up with a negative view of collaborative tasks and are unlikely to be successful (DiNitto, 2011). By setting the expectations of collaboration and communication from day one of class, I can set up students to be successful.

One way in which I encourage collaboration is by designing group or pair activities in which each participant is responsible for a certain part of the task. For example, I might have students create a presentation in which each member of a group finds information on a certain aspect of a topic individually, then reports their findings back to their group so that they can complete a poster or power-point for their presentation together. When each member has a role to play that is critical to the success of the group, it is more likely that all members will participate in the activity.

Furthermore, through careful and ‘calibrated’ scaffolding, I can lead students to be more responsible for their own language learning and find solutions to linguistic problems for themselves, either as individuals or collaboratively (Kim, 2011). This could be in the form of metalinguistic feedback, in which I say something like, “Remember that since you are talking about yesterday you should be using the past-tense” or with a clarification check, in which I ask, “Did you mean yesterday?”. Another method I often use in whole class discussions is writing out an utterance on the board and asking the class if they see anything that needs to be changed. If no one has any suggestions, I then underline the error and continue to try and elicit answers from the students. If I simply provide the answer, this robs the students of an opportunity to solve the problem for themselves, possibly to the detriment of their language development.

Another way in which I can create a positive language learning environment is by providing students with opportunities for contact with the culture and people of the target language. This can be done through cultural exchange projects or by attending local cultural events. However, it is important that I am careful in my planning so that such interactions are enjoyable for my students and contribute to fostering positive attitudes toward the target language and culture. Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan (2000) state that “More important than verbal intelligence are students’ attitudes toward the language and its speakers, the level of motivation that a student has to learn the language, and how relaxed the student feels in the second language classroom context” (p. 52). Therefore, it is essential that I do everything possible to create a classroom atmosphere in which my students feel at ease and motivated to learn the language and more about the culture that is part of it. One relatively safe way that I could introduce my students to the target culture is through reading authentic materials. However, one of the biggest obstacles that many students face in learning a second language is in obtaining literacy. This is especially true for English speaking students who are learning Japanese.

### **The Importance of Literacy Development**

I believe that the development of literacy in the target language is critical to the success of the language learner. I feel that this is especially true in today’s digital world, where much of the communication that takes place occurs online through email, blogs, forums, and social media, all of which require at least basic reading and writing skills (Wang & Vasquez, 2012). If students are planning to use the language outside of the classroom, they will need to be able to read and write in the target language.

Reading and writing can also be a very useful tool in the language learning process. When students have a way to write things down, they can record newly encountered language and reference it for later study. Some languages are more limited in possible phonemes and students may be at a disadvantage if they are only able to write in their L1. For example, in Japanese there are only 5 vowels and 17 consonants compared to 20 vowels and 24 consonants in English (Kavanagh, 2007). Furthermore, in the Japanese writing system all consonants, with the exception of 'n', are bound to a vowel. This can present a problem for Japanese L1 speakers learning English if they do not know how to write using the Roman alphabet because they are not able to represent the sounds of the language accurately. However, by learning the various sound combinations that can be represented by English letters, Japanese EFL learners gain a useful tool for recording newly encountered words, in a phonologically accurate way.

Students quite often have very different backgrounds than those of native speakers. For this reason, approaching literacy in the same way that native speakers learn how to read and write may not always be the most effective approach. An example of this is an American student learning Japanese for the first time. Native Japanese speakers often learn *kanji*, which is a morphemic script, over the course of 12 years of school and don't have the hurdle of learning new words in a foreign language (Mori, 2014). Most Japanese L2 learners do not have 12 years to learn how to read and write in Japanese and they have the additional disadvantage of having to learn new words. However, in the case of adult learners, they have a set of other skills which can be implemented in their learning of the characters, namely analytical ability. Instead of having Japanese language students memorize *kanji* by rote, I can introduce the characters in a 'component' based order

which will enable them to take advantage of their abilities to see patterns and ‘chunk’ parts of the characters that make up more complex characters (Chen et al., 2013; Flaherty & Noguchi, 1998; Paxton & Svetenant, 2013; Toyoda, Firdaus, & Kano, 2013).

As a teacher, there are many useful tools that I can use in my classroom. One such tool is Dialogue Journals (DJs). DJs create a safe space for students to communicate with me without fear of making mistakes (Larotta, 2009). When having students write DJs it is essential that I remember that these are not intended to be an evaluation tool, but an opportunity for students to communicate freely and openly. This type of type activity will not only help students to develop their writing skills, but will also give me the opportunity to get to know them and build rapport. A similarly useful tool that I have at my disposal thanks to technology are blogs. Dujsik (2012), found that many students have a positive view towards using blogs and they can be very motivating. I can use blogs as a tool for literacy development and cultural exchange activities (Dujsik, 2012). I also believe that it is important for students to develop computer and information technology literacy skills in addition to traditional literacy skills (i.e. reading and writing) in the target language. In our modern world engaging with technology is an everyday reality and if students are to participate in the wider world of the L2 outside the classroom, then they must be able to engage with the technology side of it as well.

## **Conclusion**

Every classroom is unique and as a teacher I need to be flexible and have the ability to adapt to students’ various needs and interests. Thus, it is of great importance that I get to know my students well and build rapport with them. This will not only give me insight

on how I can best further their language development, but create a fun, motivating, and relaxing classroom atmosphere. Both teachers and students have important roles in the language learning process and need to work together toward the same language learning goals. As a teacher, I can promote student success by establishing a communicative and collaborative environment on the very first day of class and making my expectations clear to students. Furthermore, I must carefully design classroom activities that are meaningful and provide students with opportunities to use the language in authentic ways. Finally, reading and writing are a crucial part of language learning and I must take into account the different literacy backgrounds that my students come from. My students will not be able to become fully proficient users of the language and participants in the target culture if they cannot read or write.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TEACHING OBSERVATION

I have had the privilege of observing several of my colleagues as they taught various languages such as English, Spanish, French, Chinese, and Arabic. It has been a wonderful opportunity for me to see good teaching in action and to contemplate practices that I might improve upon. Through these observations, I have learned much about the different roles teachers have in the language classroom.

### **Providers of Comprehensible Input**

Certainly, if students are to learn a language they must have opportunities to hear and see it in its written form. One common good practice among all the instructors that I observed was that they all stayed in the target language for the majority of the lesson. Often students would ask questions about the language in English, but most of the time the instructor would stay in the target language and use other methods to clarify meaning. There were occasions when the instructors briefly used English to explain a particular cultural item or to clarify a more complex grammatical form. However, all of the instructors would immediately return to using the target language and limited their use of English to just a couple of minutes. In my own classroom, I strive to stay in the target language. However, I feel that brief moments of L1 use to provide cultural or background information, in order to make input more comprehensible to students, is acceptable.

One of the major roles that language teachers have is to provide comprehensible input to their students. Many of the teachers that I observed make input comprehensible by using visuals or pictures. This is one of the simplest and most effective ways to convey



meaning and I feel that this is especially true when introducing simple vocabulary to novice-level students. Some of the instructors also implemented the use of gestures when students didn't understand or recognize the vocabulary used. A couple of the instructors that I observed also used drawings as a means to convey meaning.

Another important factor in whether input will be comprehensible to students is if it matches their background knowledge. It is difficult for students to comprehend something that they have no knowledge of even in their native language. Most of the instructors that I observed seemed to have carefully taken into consideration the types of background knowledge their students possessed. The activities implemented in the classroom often included popular characters from North American media that were easily recognizable to students. For example, one of the instructors used several characters from cartoons and comics in North America as subjects in a preposition information-gap activity. The instructors also selected topics that were relevant to their students' lives. One instructor had students describe different cities in Utah and which one they would recommend to someone visiting from a foreign country. Choosing the location in which students live creates a personal connection with the activity and increases motivation.

### **Facilitators**

Another important role of teachers is that of a facilitator. Teacher-centered learning environments should be avoided at all costs as they lead students to become passive. One instructor that I observed was able to make the introduction of vocabulary into an interactive experience for the students. This instructor would follow the introduction of a phrase by immediately eliciting responses from the students using the target phrase

through questions. Many of the instructors also implemented discussion activities or information gaps as a means to get students talking in the target language. These kinds of activities put students at the center of the classroom and require students to be actively involved.

Part of what a teacher might do when facilitating a communicative teaching environment is to scaffold students. The idea behind scaffolding is to provide students with just enough support that they can complete tasks or solve linguistic problems mostly on their own. This is more conducive to students' language development than simply providing the students with answers. One instructor that I observed missed an opportunity to provide students with a chance to work together to co-construct knowledge. This instructor was going over some vocabulary that students had indicated they did not understand. Rather than eliciting answers from the students, they simply provided students with definitions of the words. In contrast, another instructor that I observed while going over unknown vocabulary with students provided examples and had students come up with definitions or synonyms for the words. When I go over vocabulary in my own classes, I often employ the same strategy. I always see if one of the students knows the word before I move on to providing an example. Occasionally I will need to simply give students a definition after I have exhausted all other options, but this is very rare. Students are usually able to work out the word's meaning after seeing a couple of examples in context.

## **Architects**

Another important role of the teacher is that of architect, in which they design classroom activities that are engaging and motivating. Connecting activities to students' personal goals and interests is one of the easiest ways to accomplish this. However, if the teacher doesn't know the students well, this will be difficult to do. Many of the instructors that I observed began their classes by having casual conversations with their students in the target language. Not only does this help the instructors to build rapport with their students, but also makes communicating in the target language meaningful and fun. I noticed that in classes where instructors started in this manner, students seemed more eager to use the target language in class and did so regularly.

Activities don't need to be complicated to be fun and interesting. Many of the activities I saw used by different instructors were very simple but because of how they were implemented and designed, were very engaging and enjoyable for the students. One activity I observed required students to design a 'dreamhouse' as a pair. In the following lesson, they would be trying to sell their house to their classmates. This activity gave students a chance to be creative and I think this is what made it so engaging. While watching the students do this activity, I noticed that nearly every pair was using only the target language and I heard very little English.

Group discussions were also a common activity used by the instructors. In some classes the discussions were a lot smoother and engaging. One thing that was illustrated to me was the importance of careful group management. When instructors know their classes well, they are better able to predict which students will work well together and which students will not. It was also clear to me that background knowledge, or lack

thereof, affects the outcome of such discussions. In one class that I observed the instructor had failed to take into account that some of the students might not be familiar with Greek and Roman mythology. This lack of knowledge made it very difficult for one of the groups to participate in the discussion and they ended up being rather silent.

### **Conclusion**

I learned much from observing my peers teach and am very grateful to them for allowing me this opportunity. Staying in the target language is of great importance, as the time spent in class is often the only opportunity that students have to hear, see, and use the language. When introducing new vocabulary, especially to novice learners, the use of visuals, pictures, drawings, and gestures to convey meaning are effective strategies that enable the instructor to remain in the target language. Moreover, classroom activities need to be designed carefully and will be more engaging if they connect to students' interests. To be able to do this, the teacher must make an effort to build rapport with students and get to know them well. Furthermore, when designing activities, background knowledge is a crucial factor and failing to take this into consideration could lead to frustration and confusion for students. Finally, rather than simply providing answers to students when they are struggling, teachers should scaffold students just enough to enable them to complete activities mostly on their own. Eliciting answers from students is also a good strategy and turning the activity into a group discussion provides students with an opportunity to co-construct knowledge together.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT OF TEACHING

During the fall of 2016, I had the opportunity to record and observe myself teaching the level 3 reading class, “Reading Authentic Texts” (part of the core Intensive English Language Institute curriculum at Utah State University), which I taught during the fall 2016 semester. During this class my advisor, who kindly visited my class, also observed my teaching and took notes, which I then requested after viewing the recording myself and taking notes of my own. The following are my thoughts and observations, as well as some of the observations of my advisor.

One aspect of the class that I have found challenging is finding ways in which to make the class interactive, since the primary focus is on the development of reading skills and not speaking or writing. In most of the foreign/second language classes here at Utah State University, skills are integrated and not taught as separate subjects. My experience has been somewhat different from that of most of my colleagues in the MSLT program. However, this is not to say that the skills of speaking, listening, and writing don’t have a role in the reading class. Indeed, these three skills are quite essential to the success of the class.

The lesson that I had planned for this day was centered around an article about ecotourism which can be found in the textbook used for the course. The objectives I had set for the lesson were that students would be able to: 1) identify information that either supported or contradicted two given statements about the article, 2) identify main ideas in the article and represent them visually through the use of a chart or map, and 3) write a brief response to the article demonstrating their comprehension of what they had read.

While these objectives are mostly process oriented, they are in support of the long-term objective of the course, which is to build students' vocabulary, as well as raise their awareness of different types of text structure and organization. It is my understanding that this helps ESL learners to improve their overall reading comprehension. The long-term goal is that students will be able to participate in regular college courses and develop the ability to find and understand key information in the academic texts that they are likely to encounter.

I arrived well ahead of time to prepare for the lesson, which was also noted by my advisor. I believe this a good practice for any teacher and arriving early ensures that there is enough time to setup and address any issues, technical or otherwise. Another benefit to being early is that it provides me with an opportunity to converse with my students and build rapport with them. I had a rather positive and relaxed relationship with this class, which I believe helped to create an enjoyable learning environment for the students as well. At the beginning of the lesson I gave students an opportunity to ask me about any vocabulary that they didn't understand. In the prior lesson, I had given them an Academic Wordlist (AWL) self-assessment sheet to work with and had covered five of the words already. The AWL self-assessment is based on a corpus analysis of written English and I use an online tool to analyze each reading from which I create the world lists. When I first began teaching the course, I would go over each word in the list in order, which was not only boring but also took away from class time that could have been spent on other activities. At the suggestion of my mentor, I made a change and had the students start supplying me with the words that they wanted me to cover. This allows the students to let me know what they need help with and avoid wasting time on vocabulary items that they

already know. In this class, there weren't any further questions on the vocabulary and we could get right into the reading.

I had the class take 10 minutes to read the article individually and reminded them to practice using the strategy of 'reading without understanding every word', which basically means that they should just read through the text and not stop to look up every word that they don't know. At this point I felt that my instructions were quite clear. Initially, I had said, "5 to 7 minutes" but after seeing the reactions of some of my students, asked if they needed more time. I allowed them to negotiate with me and this is how I ended up giving them additional time to complete the activity. I believe that a good teacher should be flexible and carefully assess the needs of the students, both in the long run and on a moment-by-moment basis. While the students were reading, I set up for the next activity and monitored carefully to see where each student was in the text. I introduced the next activity after everyone had finished reading the article.

I explained to the students that they would be working in pairs for the next activity and gave everyone a handout. I then explained the objective of the activity, which was to find and write down key words or sentences from the article that supported or contradicted one of the two statements on the handout. I held up a copy of the handout in front of the class while doing this and pointed to the sections I was discussing. At this point, something that I could have done differently would have been to use the document camera to project the handout on the screen at the front of the class, which would have likely made it easier for students to see what I was pointing at. However, the students seemed to have understood my instructions and began working on the activity after finding a partner. During the activity, I circulated throughout the room and acted as a

resource, addressing questions from students on a group-by-group basis. At the same time, I was also carefully monitoring their progress and watching for points of difficulty or confusion that might need to be addressed individually or as a class. My advisor noted that many of the groups were mixed language, but some had a shared L1 and were using it as a resource in completing the activity. She also observed that there was some quiet talking but many of the pairs seemed to be working silently in parallel. This is something that I also noticed and think could be addressed with a redesign of the activity, possibly with some kind of an information gap and/or by having each partner responsible for a part of the task. I could also preselect pairings that I know are more likely to engage with one another instead of having students choose their own partners.

After giving the students some time to work on the assignment, I then explained that they would be submitting the assignment on Canvas later. As a class, we discussed some of the things they had found in the text and co-constructed understanding together. Rather than simply provide students with answers, I elicited answers and comments from the class. I believe this added more active engagement to what would otherwise have been a very passive lesson. It can be challenging to get some students to participate actively in class and my advisor noted that, except for a couple of students, most seemed to prefer being silent. It could be that these students are hesitant in their language abilities and are afraid of making mistakes in front of the entire class, which is something I have tried to mitigate through the use of small group and pair work. Although, I have found that silence is often a signal that students do not understand or are struggling with an activity.



At this point I introduced the next activity, which was based on the same text. The task was to identify the topic and the overall main idea of the article. I asked the students to think about the structure of the text and create a visual representation using an appropriate map or chart. We had been discussing text structure and different mapping options for quite some time prior to this lesson and the students had been introduced to several different types of text structure along with possible charting/mapping techniques that could be used to represent them visually. This time I asked the students to work in groups of three or four instead of working in pairs. During this activity, I noticed that the groups were fairly silent and not talking much, which was also observed by my advisor. This might have been because they were looking through the text again for information that they needed to complete the activity but it equally could have been due to not knowing how to approach the task. My advisor noted that one group started talking about ethnic restaurants in Logan and everyone became very actively engaged in the conversation. She noted that they were “negotiating meaning, eager to share their experience, talking about their actual lives” and while they may have no longer been engaged with the assignment this highlights an important finding: When students are interested in a topic they are likely to engage in discussing it enthusiastically. With this group in particular, a reading on ethnic restaurants in America, or other related topic, maybe have resulted in more motivation toward engaging with the task since they would have been able to relate their own personal experiences to it.

Since we had run out of time I didn't introduce students to the written response activity I had planned and decided that I would just introduce it in the next class. I wrapped up by reminding students when certain assignments were due and then ended

the class. While I felt that overall this was a successful lesson, I also observed some areas that could be improved upon.

At the time, I was somewhat new to teaching the course and still getting to know my students. I seemed to still be somewhat shy at this point in the semester. There were times where I could have done better at getting the attention of the class by increasing the volume of my voice or by being more animated. Another thing I noticed was that I sometimes asked the class, “Does that make sense?” which isn’t really a good strategy for confirming students’ understanding. Instead I could have asked a student to explain things back to me or had them summarize my instructions. Additionally, while circulating the room is good, I perhaps did this a little too much and it almost looked like I was pacing, which might cause some students to feel nervous. Finally, the set-up of the room made it difficult to move around when monitoring or going to assist students. This might have been addressed with a different arrangement of the desks. Although, the number of desks and the size of the room may have made this difficult.

Overall, I believe this was a successful lesson and it was helpful to be able to see some of my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. I am good at building rapport with my students, carefully monitoring their progress, and making myself available for assistance. I plan to continue working on the design of my classroom reading activities and find new ways in which I can encourage more interaction among my students. Finding more readings relevant to their personal interests could be a method for achieving this.

## RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

LANGUAGE PAPER

Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Developing L2 Proficiency

## INTRODUCTION AND REFLECTION

An earlier version of this paper was originally written together with my colleague I-Chiao Hung for LING 6500 *Second Language Acquisition: Theory and Practice*, taught by Dr. Joshua Thoms in fall 2016. Originally, we reviewed literature on the use of digital storytelling (DST) as a classroom tool in developing students' oral proficiency and writing skills in Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) and Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) classrooms. I have since made changes to the paper and have adapted it to focus more on the advantages of using DST as a tool in second language classroom. Furthermore, I have added a section in the paper to address some of the potential disadvantages that might be encountered when implementing DST.

I am highly interested in DST partly because it is a relatively new tool and has yet to be widely used. I think that DST has a lot of potential in helping students to develop their language skills in a motivating and creative manner. I particularly like the fact that DST simultaneously incorporates all four language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This paper will explore some of the benefits, as well as some of the challenges, of using DST as a classroom tool.

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING L2 PROFICIENCY

How can language teachers encourage students to become more productive and to express their own personal ideas, feelings, and knowledge in a foreign language? Traditional storytelling is a communicative activity that requires storytellers to creatively express their imaginations and ideas. If one considers the social dimensions of using a language, storytelling is not a one-way presentation but a form of interactive communication with others. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital storytelling has become a possibility. “Digital storytelling (DST) involves the integration of technology and the use of interactive media (which may include digital audio, video, movies, digital comic books, and multimedia images)” (Thang et al., 2014, p. 490). Digital storytelling combines the art of storytelling with multiple media tools which can benefit language learners in a variety of ways. Research has shown that digital storytelling enhances learners’ motivation to learn, communication skills, and technological skills (Hayes & Itani-Adams, 2014; Thang, et al., 2014), which promotes the development of interactive communication skills, technology literacy skills, and language skills. During the process of creating stories, learners need to work on a draft and narration for their story, as well as consider its impact on their audience. From the perspective of holistic communicative skills, learners must develop the ability to express themselves in the foreign language by writing and performing creative texts (Thang et al., 2014).

### ***What is Digital Storytelling?***

Storytelling is an instructional approach in which students put effort into creating narrative sentences to interact with others in the target language (Hwang et al., 2014). It is an effective exercise in communication and a creative process that requires learners to visualize their stories and use their imaginations (Thang et al., 2014). Technology has continued to evolve at a rapid pace and has become increasingly used in education to facilitate learning, resulting in the presence of digital devices being more common in the classroom.

DST emerged from the integration of multi-media and storytelling to meet the various needs of learners, such as self-expression and communication, and to gain competence in multiple language skills. Digital stories were first developed in the United States in the 1990s as a way of assisting young learners to create narratives in a globally accessible mode (Hayes & Itani-Adams, 2014). Norton (2015) defines digital stories as “brief personal narratives told through images, sounds and words, and which use new media technology” (p. 388). The process of digital storytelling involves the integration of technology, the use of interactive media (e.g., digital audio, video, movies, written texts, transition effects, digital comic books, and multimedia images), and video editing software or Web 2.0-based applications (Nishioka, 2016; Thang et al., 2014).

Since DST is a dynamic tool, it can be used for a variety of purposes in different contexts and digital stories can be created either individually or within groups (Sarıca & Usluel, 2016). According to the book *Digitales, the Art of Telling Digital Stories* (as cited in Thang et al., 2014), DST helps build and practice a number of 21st century skills, such as: interactive communication, interpersonal skills, personal and social responsibility,

technology literacy, visual literacy, project management mentality, curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking. DST enables learners to achieve the previously mentioned goals by using interactive media to engage an audience ranging from peers to transnational communities. Yuksel, Robin, and McNeil (2011) found that DST allows students to improve their understanding of subject area knowledge, as well as writing, technical, presentational, and research skills. They also claim that DST facilitates collaborative activities in which students work in groups and promotes in-class discussion. Furthermore, DST can be used for multiple subjects (e.g., technology literacy in Austria) and purposes (e.g., for therapy in Canada) (Yuksel, Robin, & McNeil, 2011). In the foreign language classroom, DST has been increasingly applied as a pedagogical tool for enhancing target language skills, increasing interaction, and facilitating collaboration.

The internet offers a number of resources for particular elements and projects of digital storytelling and its learning applications. One of the pioneers of digital storytelling, Joe Lambert, created the Center of Digital Storytelling (<http://storycenter.org>) to promote migrant stories and public workshops for society and educators. Scribjab (<http://www.scribjab.com>), initiated by Kelleen Toohey and Diane Dagenais at Simon Fraser University in Canada, is a website and iPad tool for transnational learners to create and read digital stories in multiple languages, view digital images, and create voice recordings. The African Storybook (<http://www.africanstorybook.org/>), developed by the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide), opens access to learners' stories which include text and pictures in African languages of which over eighty languages have been used by learners in sub-Saharan Africa. An extension of this project, the Global African Storybook Project



(<http://global-asp.github.io/>), has been developed by Liam Doherty at the University of British Columbia. It is an accessible translation system website that lets readers translate digital stories from the African Storybook Project into multiple languages worldwide, including Mandarin, Japanese, Hindi, and Nepali (Norton, 2015). These online resources have much potential to be beneficial in increasing learners' investments in language practice and the development of various language skills.

### ***Why Use DST for Language Learning?***

One reason that DST is an effective tool is the fact that almost all students are familiar with stories. Afrilyasanti and Basthomi (2011) note that students “grow up surrounded by stories told with pictures, words, and music particularly on television and in movies” (p. 81). It has even been argued that “Stories are essential to human communication, learning, and thinking” (Ribeiro, 2015, p. 42). Every culture has its own stories and storytelling is a very natural experience for most human beings, whether the story is a folktale or simply telling a friend about an event that occurred over the weekend. As such, storytelling is an authentic, communicative language activity that many students are already familiar with.

DST requires students to create a personal story and as such could be considered a form of creative writing that also has the benefit of including presentation as part of the task. When students include audio recordings along with text in their stories, they end up practicing and developing both speaking and writing skills simultaneously. Furthermore, DST creates an environment where students are surrounded by the target language and in

which they learn actively through the creation and continuous improvement of their own personal stories (Hwang, Shadiey, Hsu, Huang, Hus, and Lin, 2014). This environment and the various steps involved in creating a digital story engages and motivates students (Ribeiro, 2015). Moreover, digital storytelling has been claimed to provide a meeting space which combines textbook with communicative practice and promotes interaction between student storytellers and their audience (Hayes & Itani-Adams, 2014). Not only encouraging students to collaborate and work together, but to also make efforts to interact with those that they present their stories to in meaningful ways.

Additionally, revision and peer-review are often features of DST projects. During these phases students are constantly interacting with the language, both while writing and making revisions, and during interactions with their peers. Through this process students “change from passive information receivers to active knowledge developers” (Hur & Suh, 2012, p. 324). DST has the benefit of combining the advantages of individual work with more opportunities for collaboration and co-construction of knowledge.

### ***Platforms for DST***

There are many programs, apps, and platforms through which DST projects can be conducted, ranging from programs such as *Photo Story 3*, online applications like *VoiceThread*, or even the use of social-media websites such as Twitter or Facebook (Kronenberg, 2014). No matter which medium is used “[d]igital stories are constructivist in nature because they allow learners to connect their existing knowledge, experiences, and skills with new material” (Kronenberg, 2014, p. 124). The ability to draw on already existing knowledge and experiences is an advantage to both novice and advanced

language learners and could even boost their confidence in their ability to learn the language. Hur and Suh (2012), found that *Photo Story* was a particularly useful tool for students with limited speaking skills. Each platform for DST has its own particular advantages and teachers should carefully consider which are most applicable to their instructional goals.

### ***Advantages of DST in Literacy Development***

The first major advantage of using DST as a tool for L2 learning is that it helps students develop the ability to express themselves creatively in the target language (Hayes & Itani-Adams, 2014; Thang, 2014). For example, through the creation of digital-stories, Japanese as a Foreign language students in Australia were able to “develop the ability to express themselves in Japanese by writing and performing creative/imaginative texts” (Hayes & Itani-Adams, 2014, p. 177). Furthermore, the use of digital tools in a DST project can have positive effects on how students engage with the activity. Oskoz (2016) notes that the use of digital tools for storytelling can result in “innovations and changes in... L2 learners’ writing practices” (p. 338). Indeed, the use of certain tools can have an impact on the very task or activity itself and this is why teachers must be careful in selecting which tools to use in their classrooms.

In 2009, the Intermediate Japanese Digital Storytelling Project (DS Project) conducted at Australian National University (ANU) was implemented to encourage learners to develop more holistic communicative skills. Hayes and Itani-Adams (2014) explain that as the project progressed, it became clear that learners have to focus on the narratives of their stories and consider the impact they have on the viewing audience

(readers), if they are to effectively tell their stories. As a result, students develop an awareness of their audience and a sense of authorship. Several researchers have noted the development and importance of audience awareness among students engaged in creating a digital story (Castaneda, 2013; Kimura, 2012; Kronenberg, 2014; Oskoz, 2016; Ribeiro, 2015; Yang, 2012). Often one of the main objectives in creating a digital story is to have some type of an impact on the audience. Thus, students must be conscientious of the audience they will present to during the DST project, which may include not only their instructor and peers, but parents, community members, or even a global, online audience. In a study by Oskoz (2016), it was discovered that students tailor the vocabulary in their digital stories in an effort to move their audience. However, vocabulary is not the only factor that students take into consideration when developing digital stories. Castaneda (2013), who studied the use of DST in a Spanish language classroom, found that even audience members who did not speak the language were able to get a sense of what was portrayed in the story due to the students' careful selection of background music and supporting visuals. This is because students take audience comprehension into account when writing digital stories (Yang, 2012).

Another benefit in writing skills is the fact that students often become aware of the oral nature of creating a digital story, which is quite different from writing an academic paper, and this may force them "to question their assumptions about the use of the written word" (Oskoz, 2016, p. 335). It is important for teachers to make clear the differences among various genres of writing, especially in the beginning, since students may not be able to make the distinctions at first. Certainly, DST could be a useful tool in familiarizing students with narrative genres of writing.

### *Advantages of DST in Oral Skills Development*

A highly useful feature of almost all software used for DST projects is the ability to record and re-record. Hwang et al. (2014) note that students can share or reflect upon audio recordings they have made in their digital stories for further practice of speaking and listening skills. Similarly, Kimura (2012) found that the use of the recording feature in *Photo Story 3* helped students to make significant improvements in their pronunciation. Afrilyasanti and Basthomi (2011) also discovered that by repeatedly listening to and re-recording the narratives to their stories, Indonesian EFL students were able to assess their own oral fluency and improve their pronunciation. Furthermore, the ability to re-record and edit stories as often as they want gives students the ability to “...improve their work until is it to their liking” (Ribeiro, 2015, p. 50). Indeed, the ability to record and reflect on orally produced language is an advantage that DST has over traditional storytelling and something that teachers should take advantage of when using DST as a language teaching/learning tool.

In a study on elementary EFL learners in Taiwan, Hwang et al. (2014) found that an experimental group using DST significantly outperformed a control group using traditional storytelling in a post-test that assessed five dimensions of speaking performance: accent, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. It was also discovered that there was a higher learning gain between pre-test and post-test for the experimental group, showing that learners make greater gains in speaking performance when they use a multimedia tool compared to traditional storytelling methods. Kim (2014) in a study on the use of DST with five ESL students in an ESL video class at City College of San Francisco, discovered that students made significant progress in their

“overall proficiency in terms of vocabulary, sentence complexity, and pronunciation” (p. 24). Kim also noted that participants had a positive attitude towards the use of the two programs — Vocaroo and VozMe — which were used in the study.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about DST is the use of multiple modes of communication all at once. Kimura (2014) studied the use of DST as a tool in developing the oral reading proficiency of nursing students at Tokyo Women’s Medical University in Japan. Kimura found that students improved significantly in prosody which was measured by accuracy of pronunciation, pace, smoothness, phrasing (combing individual words into phrase groups), expression, and volume. This suggests that DST is a useful tool for teaching students how to read with emotion and guiding them to take into consideration the factors that tone of voice and stress have in the overall meaning of a text. In fact, “voice cadence and style may be used as an additional meaning-making element” (Ribeiro, 2015, p. 47) in digital stories. Speaking and reading tend to be thought of as separate skills. However, how words are pronounced or stressed often changes their meanings and inaccuracy can lead to misunderstanding or confusion. Reading with emotion also makes the activity much more interesting. Kimura (2012) notes that the improvement in students’ prosody while reading also lead to an increase in their reading comprehension, further demonstrating the link between speaking and reading.

### ***Development of Technical Skills***

Another area in which students benefit from by engaging in DST projects is in the development of technical skills, which are an integral part of creating a digital story. This may result in learning how to use new software or applications for some students, or

increasing their skills in using a computer in general. Ribeiro (2015), found that in addition to improving students technical/ICT skills, the use of DST also provided opportunities to discuss legal and ethical issues related to the use of internet content. Similarly, Castaneda (2013) claims that DST provides instructors with an opportunity to teach students valuable technical skills. The ability to use technology comfortably and effectively is an increasingly vital skill in today's world and DST could provide an effective means of developing computer literacy skills alongside the acquisition of a second language.

### ***Digital Micro Narratives***

Kronenberg (2014) suggests that a subset of DST known as “Digital Micro-Narratives” (p. 124) or DMNs, are particularly useful for novice learners. The advantage in using DMNs is that they are shorter and thus can be used more frequently. Teachers could use DMNs as a frequently integrated task throughout the course, for example, as a journaling project (Kronenberg, 2015). DMNs also create the potential for collaborative work and many sources of feedback other than the instructor. In today's society, DMNs are a regular occurrence if the wide use of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are taken into account. Most students already use some form of social media, thus, using social media (i.e. DMNs) as a tool for language learning could be useful. Wang and Kim (2014) found that Facebook offers a “stress free environment” (p. 51) for Chinese language students. Moreover, many students also reported that they enjoyed free posting because it allowed them to interact with peers in the target language on topics they were interested in and had selected themselves. There are also many benefits to

using Facebook or other social sites as language learning tool, such as an increased awareness of grammar and syntax, higher confidence in reading and writing, and a sense of accomplishment (Wang & Kim, 2014). However, one potential drawback in the use of social media as a language learning tool is that the social function itself could become a distraction (Wang & Kim, 2014). Research on the use of DMNs in language learning is still lacking and further exploration of its effectiveness as a classroom tool could be very beneficial to instructors across a variety of language teaching settings.

### ***Challenges in Using DST***

Like any other classroom tool, DST is not without its own disadvantages. First of all, starting a DST project in a classroom for the first time can be difficult due to the personal and revealing nature of storytelling (Ribeiro, 2015). It might be possible to mitigate students' potential fears by creating a safe and supportive environment in the classroom, where students feel that they can be open with each other. Another potential challenge lies in the fact that DST projects often take a significant amount of time to complete and often involve repetitiveness. Working on the various steps involved in creating a digital story for an extended period of time can become monotonous and there is a risk that students will become bored with the project (Castaneda, 2013). Furthermore, not all students are receptive to the idea of creating digital stories or enjoy creating them (Castaneda, 2013; Hur & Suh, 2012). Oskoz (2016), highlights an interesting point in that while some students may already be familiar with academic writing and conducting research, there is a possibility that they will experience "...some difficulties in understanding the transformation needed to portray the personal nature of [a digital



story]” (p. 335). Finally, since DST projects often involve research or the use of photographs/images not created by the students themselves, it may become necessary for the teacher to address issues of copyright and plagiarism (Yang, 2012).

### ***Conclusion***

Research has shown that DST can be effective not only in developing students’ oral proficiency skills but also in listening, writing, and reading development (Hayes & Itani-Adams, 2014; Hwang et al., 2016; Hur & Suh, 2012; Ribeiro, 2015). The use of DST encourages students develop a sense of authorship and to consider other factors besides grammatical accuracy and pronunciation. For example, how to make their stories interesting and engaging as well as the impact it will have on their audience (Castaneda, 2013; Oskoz, 2016; Yang, 2012). DST can also be implemented for a number of purposes and not just for writing and speaking development. For example, DST might be used to increase students’ reading comprehension (Kimura, 2014). Furthermore, in addition to the development of critical language skills, students also gain useful technical skills, which are increasingly important in today’s digital world (Castaneda, 2013; Kronenberg, 2014; Oskoz, 2016; Ribeiro, 2015).

While a very useful tool, it is important for teachers to remember that “...the focus of digital storytelling is the story, rather than the digital aspect” (Castaneda, 2013, p. 46). DST comes with its own disadvantages, just like any other tool, and teachers must assess whether the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. DST might not be appropriate for all classrooms and individual student factors are also likely to affect the success of its implementation in the classroom.

As DST is still a relatively new tool there has not been as much research on its use when compared to other classroom tools. Future research on the use of DST for a variety of learning purposes will be very beneficial to classroom instruction. More research on the use of the subset of DST known as Digital Micro-Narratives could be particularly useful for low-level language classes.

LITERACY PAPER

The Use of Blogs for ESL Writing Development

## INTRODUCTION AND REFLECTION

This paper began as a final project for my LING 6520 *Technology for Language Teaching* class. During the course, I became very interested in how online tools can be used in language teaching and particularly, in how blogs might be used to help second language students to develop their writing skills. I think blogs have a lot of potential as a tool that is both convenient and motivating for students. Technology has an ever-increasing presence in our everyday lives and many students already use social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Furthermore, many students also either write blogs or enjoy reading them in their L1. Thus, blogs might be a tool that students are already familiar with or would at least find interesting to use. In the future, I would like to have the opportunity to try using blogs as a tool for writing development among ESL/EFL learners and perhaps one day also explore their use in developing Japanese language skills as well. This paper explores several studies on the use of blogs as a second language teaching tool and discusses teacher and student perceptions toward using them, some of the advantages in using blogs, and some of the obstacles instructors might encounter when trying to implement blogs as a classroom tool.

## THE USE OF BLOGS FOR ESL WRITING DEVELOPMENT

The world is constantly changing and often this change is shaped by the technology used in our daily lives. Computers and the internet serve as a medium for a significant amount of the communication that takes place in modern society. For this reason, it is also important for language students to develop computer literacy in the target language. With the rise of Web 2.0 came blogs, an online medium of communication that has the potential to serve as a language-learning tool. Since blogs are online and usually free, they are also readily accessible, as long as one has an internet connection.

I believe that blogs have much potential as a tool in the ESL classroom setting. Blogs can be used to create an environment where students can exchange not only writing, but ideas, interests, passions, hobbies, cultures, and experiences (Dujsik, 2012; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Güttler, 2011; Wu, 2005). They can also receive feedback on their writing from sources other than the teacher and peers inside the classroom environment, such as from other learners and fluent speakers anywhere in the world. Blogs also make it possible for students to work collaboratively with others on writing projects or cultural knowledge exchanges. For example, students learning English in Thailand have shared their culture's holidays and traditions with students in Japan while learning about Japanese culture by using their target language as a lingua franca in a blog exchange (Dujsik, 2012).

### **Perceived advantages of blog use**

It is important to consider how both teachers and students perceive the use of blogs in the classroom as this will likely affect outcomes in using them as a classroom tool.

Yunus, Tuan, and Salehi (2013), in interviews with four ESL instructors at the University of Kebangsaan in Malaysia, found that many teachers have positive perceptions toward using blogs. Some benefits mentioned by teachers include: the ability to integrate sites with other multimedia components, the components and functions in blogs encourage students to improve writing skills, students have more opportunities to communicate in written English, and students tend to be less shy when using blogs. One instructor even claimed that students put forth more effort into writing when compared to an earlier semester before blogs were used in the class. Many instructors also claimed that blogs helped to “seal the connection between students and the lecturer” (Yunus et al., 2013, p. 111). It was also recognized that students were able to interact more freely due to the informal nature of most blogs.

Some students share the view that blogs can be beneficial in improving writing skills. In a study by Wu and Wu (2011), 63% of students stated that their writing had improved through using blogs because they could write more fluently, were able to improve their grammar, used more vocabulary, had improved sentence structure, and thought more carefully about writing. Djusik (2012) also found that students claimed that the use of blogs had improved their overall language skills. Lin, Groom, and Lin (2013) note that students reported that learning writing skills through blogging “help[ed] them to write more effectively in English” (Lin et al., 2013, p. 133). It is possible that students’ perception that using blogs improves writing skills could lead to further motivation and

effort toward the improvement of writing skills while engaged in a blog writing project. One reason for this perception might be that students find peer feedback and opportunities to view classmates' writing useful. In the Lin et. al (2013) study, students reported learning through viewing their peers' work and appropriating the "good bits" into their own writing (Lin et al., 2013, p. 134). Along with the perceived improvement of writing skills, some students also see the use of blogs as beneficial in the development of reading ability. In a study by Wu and Wu (2011), 86% of students stated that reading blogs helped improve reading skills. Students also claimed that after blogging they could read in English faster and more fluently, had better reading comprehension, and had learned new vocabulary.

Students also often perceive using blogs as motivating and this may be due to the fact blogging is often enjoyable. Dujisk (2012) found that 74% of students enjoyed writing blogs, 83% enjoyed reading their classmates' and Japanese students' blogs, and 57% planned to use blogs in the future. When asked what they liked about using blogs, the majority of respondents mentioned the opportunity to learn and share culture while some said they liked the opportunity to share their writing with others. Lin, Groom, and Lin (2013), in their study with EFL students at a university in Taiwan, found that students appreciated the use of blogs in the classroom as a "fresh and novel" approach (Lin et al., 2013, p. 133). Students also viewed the public online setting as convenient and one student in particular liked the ability to retrieve past assignments. In another study with EFL students in Taiwan, Wu (2008) found that 66% of students stated that it was easy to create their own blogs and 85% of students claimed that posting articles on their blogs was a good idea. More than half of the students in the study also thought that using blogs

in an English class was a good idea. Furthermore, 75% of the students indicated an interest in a future cross-cultural project with a class in another country through blogs. Wu and Wu (2011) found that a majority of students find using blogs to be easy, which makes the overall experience more enjoyable. However, not all perceptions toward the use of blogs are so positive.

### **Perceived disadvantages of blog use**

Many instructors have perceived a number of obstacles associated with the use of blogs in the classroom, such as lack of time, students' lack of skills, low participation from some students, lack of effort from students, and a lack of computer literacy skills (Yunus, Tuan, & Salehi, 2013). Yunus et al. (2013) note in their study that one instructor found that several of their Middle Eastern graduate students had very little experience in using computers and that this was an issue that had to be addressed before using blogs in the class. A potential drawback to using blogs in the classroom is that teachers may have to spend significant time developing students' technical abilities prior to starting a blogging project if students are to be successful.

As do teachers, some students also hold certain negative perceptions toward the use of blogs for language learning. Many students who perceive blogs to not be beneficial do so because they find them difficult to use. Dujsik (2012) notes that 11% of students stated that they did not enjoy using blogs and that some students found using blogs challenging while others experienced technical difficulties while uploading images or videos. Wu and Wu (2011) similarly discovered that 10% of the students in their study found blogs difficult to use due to having rarely used blogs or simply finding them



difficult to navigate. When asked whether they would use blogs in the future, 18% of students responded that they would not because they found them troublesome, did not have time to use them, or felt that there was no interaction with others. Also of note in the Wu and Wu study is that 18% of students believed that their reading had not improved and 37% believed that their writing had not improved, which likely affected their overall perception of blogs' usefulness.

Among the studies a common factor affecting students' perception of blog use in the classroom appeared to be a sense of discomfort when using blogs. Lin, Groom, and Lin (2013) found that many students are self-conscious about low English proficiency levels and are "particularly embarrassed and worried about making grammatical mistakes" (p. 134). Students in the study also expressed concerns about the number of times it took them to ensure that they were using language correctly. Wu (2008) found that students can be reluctant to share their writing with peers. Wu found that most students did not invite their friends or classmates to view their blogs and cited concerns about privacy, embarrassment, lack of confidence in sharing ideas, and a feeling that the articles they posted were not adequate. Dujsik (2012) noted that two participants felt uncomfortable commenting on other blogs while three others found some of the blogs to be simply uninteresting.

Given the mix of perceptions, many being positive, about the use of blogs among teachers and students, it is important to assess whether using blogs will be beneficial to students. It is also essential that teachers consider how their implementation of blogs as a classroom tool might affect their students' perceptions toward blogs as a learning tool,

which will ultimately affect learning outcomes. The use of blogs as a classroom tool has been found to have many benefits.

### **Benefits of blog use found in research**

Research has uncovered a range of advantages for writing instruction associated with the use of blogs. First of all, since blogs are online they are accessible from almost anywhere which can be very convenient for students. For example, Arslan and Sahin-Kizil (2010) noted in their study on the use of tutor blogs that students “were able to access all course materials including explanations and exercises at any time and place even if they missed a class” (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010, p. 188). In this way, blogs can enable students to stay caught up in their classes and with course assignments even when they are absent from class. The use of blogs also provides students with more exposure to written forms of the target language. Arslan and Sahin-Kizil (2010) state that students in the blog group were able to view more model paragraphs than the control group, thanks to the blogs. The blog group was also exposed to more input “which would otherwise be impossible during class hours” (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010, p. 188). Having more access to a greater variety of models and input could be very beneficial to students’ writing development.

Blogs also make it easy for students to receive and provide feedback on writing to each other (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010; Dujsik, 2012). It is not only easier to get feedback from classmates and the instructor, but blogs make it possible for students to receive feedback from a much wider audience, including family or even peers studying at other universities (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010). Additionally, blog enhanced classes have

an advantage over traditional classes in that there are no time restrictions on when students or peers can view each other's writing and feedback (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil). Wu (2008) shows that teachers can use blogs to create a collaborative learning environment in which students can work together to develop and improve their writing skills. Sun and Chang (2012) also note that "blogs may be regarded as constructivist learning environments, for they provide their users with opportunities to reflect on their experiences, posing contradictions, addressing misconceptions, and negotiating ideas with their readers" (Sun & Chang, 2012, p. 45). Additionally, Fellner and Apple (2006) found that a comment feature in the blog used in their study provided students more opportunities to engage in meaningful negotiation with one another.

Furthermore, the sharing of written work with more people other than just the instructor could lead students to develop an identity as a writer rather than just simply completing writing tasks for the sake of a grade. Sun and Chang (2012) claim that blogs help students to gain a sense of authorship while also providing a medium for students to share their feelings about writing and show mutual support to one another. Dujsik (2012) found that the use of blogs can have an influence on how students approach writing tasks: 94% of students reported planning prior to writing, 86% thought about the purpose of their writing, 80% considered their audience, 97% considered the teacher's feedback and 89% peers' feedback when making revisions, and all of the participants reported writing their first drafts on blogs (Dujsik, 2012). The process of making revisions and re-writing after receiving feedback from multiple sources very likely contributes to the improvement of students' writing abilities (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010; Dujsik, 2012; Fellner & Apple, 2006). Blogs can be used as a tool in facilitating the writing process

early on by encouraging students to think about their audience, enabling them to receive feedback quickly, and giving them the opportunity to publish their work instantly.

Research has shown that the use of blogs as a classroom tool does in fact lead to improvements in students' writing (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010; Dujsik, 2012; Fellner & Apple, 2006). Arslan and Sahin-Kizil (2010) show that both a traditional class and a blog-enhanced class improved students' writing skills, however, the control group went from a pre-test score of 47.17 to 60.09 whereas the experimental, or blog enhanced group, went from a score of 44.15 to 72.29, significantly outperforming the traditional class. It was further noted that the blog integrated class especially improved students' writing in the areas of content and organization. Dujsik (2012) also found that the use of blogs contributes to improvements in content.

...a weblog acts not only as a powerful communication tool linking the authors and the readers almost instantly anywhere and anytime, but it also contributes to the quality of writing in terms of writing content and accuracy due to multiple revisions. (p. 1410)

Sun (2010) similarly found that blogs helped students to improve their writing with particular gains made in organization and mechanics. Many students also self-perceived improvement in content organization, vocabulary, idea development, grammar, and reading comprehension (Sun, 2010). Fellner and Apple (2010) also found improvements in vocabulary among students. In their study on Japanese students in a seven-day intensive English course, students increased their average word count in blog postings by 350% and tended to use a greater number of less-frequently occurring words by the end

of the program. Some of these might also be attributed to the fact that blogs often provide a safe space for students to practice their writing skills.

Blogs provide an ideal platform for extensive writing online by providing students a personal space where they can write: (1) on a wide range of interesting topics of interest to the authors; (2) at their own pace; (3) for various audiences; and (4) free from teachers' corrections and judgment (Sun, 2010, p. 328)

While using blogs in the classroom has many advantages, blogs, like any tool, also come with some disadvantages which must be taken into consideration by instructors.

### **Challenges in using blogs as a classroom tool**

One of most notable disadvantages of using blogs as a classroom tool is the fact that they often require a lot of work and maintenance on the part of the instructor. Lin, Lin, and Hsu (2011) compared the use of blogs in the classroom with traditional teaching methods and found that while both methods significantly improved students writing abilities, no significant difference was found between the groups studied. Blogs can be a platform for enhancing students writing abilities but if traditional methods are just as effective, the extra time and effort required for implementing blogs in the classroom may not be justified (Lin et al. 2011). Lin et al. further note that "The use of blogs is very labor-intensive as a methodology" (Lin et al., 2011, p. 148). Thus, if using blogs doesn't significantly improve students' writing over other methods the effort required of the teacher to implement their use is not justified. Wu (2008) also mentions that it can be tiring for instructors to monitor several students' blog updates and the more students that one has the more difficult this becomes. Wu suggests the use of RSS feeds could be a

potential solution to this set back, as they can make it easier to follow several students' blogs at once.

Lin, Groom and Lin (2013) highlight how technology can sometimes become a barrier to social interaction. In this particular class students were in a computer lab and the arrangement of the classroom made it difficult for students to interact face-to-face. One student stated that the computer monitors blocked the teacher from seeing the students' faces and that she could interact only with those sitting right next to her which left her feeling less incentivized to participate in the class (Lin et al., 2013). Teachers need to be aware of how the set-up of the classroom may impede certain interactions. It might be argued that the use of blogs is more appropriate for out-of-class tasks and activities or as a way to free up classroom time for more face-to-face interaction among students. Lin et al. (2013) also found that technology can sometimes become a distraction: "participants admitted that they would spend class time checking email or doing online window shopping, instead of collaborating with each other on an in-class task or conducting blogging activities, as they were supposed to be doing" (Lin et al. 2013, p. 135). While computers and other devices are useful tools, teachers need to monitor their students carefully and ensure that they are utilizing them for their intended purpose. Otherwise, they could end up becoming detrimental to the learning environment.

Finally, Fellner and Apple (2006) discuss how the potential immediacy of feedback might lead to frustration for some students when their peers fail to comment on their blog posts. They claim, however, that this seemed to create a kind of 'facilitating' anxiety and became a push for students who were previously lacking motivation (Fellner & Apple, 2006). Teachers might need to set certain timeframes within which students

must provide feedback as well as expectations for the minimum amount of feedback students are to give their peers. This could potentially be incorporated as a percentage of a participation grade.

### **Conclusion**

The majority of studies reviewed reflected that students generally have positive attitudes towards using blogs in ESL writing classes. However, not all students are able to use blogs easily or find them interesting and this can result in negative views towards them (Dujisik, 2012; Lin et al., 2013; Wu, 2008; Wu & Wu, 2011; Yunus et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important that teachers make sure that they provide adequate training to students in using blogs before integrating them into the classroom. Some students will likely struggle and may not have the requisite basic computer literacy skills (Yunus, Tuan, & Salehi, 2013). By providing students with the proper training prior to starting a blogging project, teachers can help their students to avoid frustration and becoming discouraged.

Only one of the studies addressed teacher's perceptions toward the use of blogs in the classroom. Most teachers in the Yunus et al. (2013) interviews seemed to have a favorable view toward using blogs and perceived many benefits despite some of the challenges associated with implementing them in the classroom. This is an area in which more research is needed.

Although some state that blogs are not any more effective than traditional writing (Lin et al., 2011) this may have more to do with how they are implemented and less to do with their usefulness as a tool. There seems to be a significant amount of evidence that

blogs are in fact beneficial to the development of students' writing abilities, especially when it comes to content and organization (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010; Dujsik, 2012; Sun, 2010). Blogs also have a lot of potential to motivate students, especially if the writing activities are interesting, such as an international cultural exchange (Dujsik, 2012), or when students are given the freedom to choose their own topics. Blogs provide a great opportunity for students to learn from their classmates and other peers as well (Arslana & Sahin-Kizil, 2010).

I believe that blogs have great potential to be a useful tool for language teaching, particularly when it comes to writing. However, any tool is only as good as its user. Simply using blogs in the classroom without much thought will not lead to drastically positive outcomes for students. Teachers need to plan carefully with specific language learning goals in mind before proceeding to use blogs in the classroom. Through careful, pedagogically oriented planning, teachers can increase the likeliness of positive and effective learning experiences for their students.



JAPANESE LANGUAGE PAPER

JFL Students and Learning Kanji

## INTRODUCTION AND REFLECTION

I originally wrote this paper in the form of a research proposal as part of a final project for my LING 6010 *Research Methods* class which was taught by Dr. Albirini. I have since adapted it and added resources as I delved further into my exploration of *kanji* teaching and learning. As a second language learner of Japanese, learning *kanji* has been one of the most challenging obstacles that I have faced in becoming proficient in the language and because of this I have become extremely interested in how *kanji* can be learned and taught more effectively.

As mentioned in the Apprenticeship of Observation, I came upon James Heisig's book series *Remembering the Kanji* while teaching in Japan through the Japan Exchange and Teaching program. I found that the way the characters were presented in the book to be incredibly useful and wondered how this could be implemented in the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) classes. Heisig breaks down the characters into smaller parts which he refers to as 'primals', which I have since discovered are called 'components' by others. In the process of researching different approaches to teaching *kanji* I discovered a method known as Component Analysis, which I believe is a promising approach to *kanji* instruction and learning. This paper explores the ways in which *kanji* have traditionally been taught and some alternative, potentially more effective methods for learning these characters.

## JFL STUDENTS AND LEARNING KANJI

The mastery of *kanji* is essential for all who wish to read authentic Japanese materials and participate in Japanese society and culture in a meaningful way. *Kanji* are a part of everyday life in Japan and are seen practically everywhere. They are used in street signs, restaurant menus, newspapers, train stations, etc. Mori (2014) notes that learning *kanji* is important for Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) learners because:

...*kanji* words constitute a crucial part of Japanese written vocabulary [therefore] the acquisition of efficient *kanji* processing skills, which involves graphemic, phonetic, and semantic analyses of characters, is vital in fluent reading not only for L1 readers... but also for L2 readers. (p. 404)

However, the learning of *kanji* poses one of the biggest obstacles to JFL learners in the acquisition of literacy skills. This is especially true for students whose L1 uses an alphabetic writing system.

### **Why learning *kanji* is challenging**

While the roman alphabet is phonetically based, *kanji* are morpheme based and this creates a reading experience that is very different for most students from western backgrounds. There is no way to ‘sound out’ a *kanji* character and this can be very frustrating for JFL students. “For readers of alphabetic languages, in addition to the orthographic unfamiliarity, character based languages, especially Japanese, present complex recognition tasks” (Toyoda & McNamara, 2011, p. 384). It is essential that teachers keep in mind the complexity of the task that learning *kanji* presents for students

of western backgrounds when considering teaching approaches. Furthermore, what makes learning the Japanese writing system challenging is that in addition to *kanji*, there are two syllabaries, *hiragana* and *katakana*, which must be learned. Often *hiragana* interact with *kanji* in a way that changes the reading and meaning of the characters. Mori (2014) further illustrates the complexity of learning *kanji*:

*Kanji* knowledge is a multifaceted notion. Students need to gain various types of knowledge even for a single *kanji* character or word, including meaning(s), sound(s), orthographic features, compositional structures, stroke order, semantic or phonetic congruence with context, grammatical function, and prototypical or nonprototypical usage. (p. 414)

As a result of the historical background of how *kanji* were incorporated into Japanese from Chinese, the way that *kanji* function in Japanese is more complex than the way Chinese characters are used in the Chinese language (Kuriya, 2005). Presently *kanji* have two types of readings, ‘*on*’ readings which are derived from the original Chinese pronunciation and ‘*kun*’ readings which are derived from Japanese words which were already in existence before Chinese characters were borrowed into the language (Kuriya, 2005; Toyoda, 2000). Unfortunately, there is no phonological relationship between the two reading types which further complicates things for JFL learners.

In addition to having two types of readings, many *kanji* are homographic in nature, meaning that one grapheme will represent multiple words and/or readings (Honda, 2009). Although written Japanese has many *okurigana*, which are *hiragana* characters used at the end of *kanji* words that can disambiguate the *kanji* in certain contexts, it isn’t always the case they do. Honda notes that “*okurigana* can specify target readings in two ways:

by their very presence and by spelling out the final mora(e) of words or word elements” (Honda, 2009, p. 224). For example, in the word 飲み物 (*nomi-mono*/a drink) the middle *hiragana* character hints that the first *kanji* is read as ‘*nomi*’. However, in the word 飲食 (*inshoku*/ food and drink) this same *kanji* is read as ‘*in*’ which is indicated by the lack of an *okurigana*.

In the case of spelling out final morae, in the word 生きる the two *hiragana* after the *kanji* indicate that the reading is ‘*ikiru*’ which means ‘to live’. In the word 生む the *hiragana* following the *kanji* indicates its reading is ‘*umu*’ which means ‘to birth’. Although both words use the same character, the readings and meanings of the words are very different. While *okurigana* can be useful to JFL learners in this way, “it is important to emphasize that *okurigana* does not specify the target readings in all graphemes” (Honda, 2009, p. 224). An example of this situation given by Honda is found in the character 後, which when presented without an *okurigana* can have three different readings: ‘*ato*’, ‘*go*’, and ‘*kou*’ (p. 225). While pronounced differently depending on the context in which the character is used, the root meaning ‘after’ remains intact. However, this means that JFL learners can’t always rely on *okurigana*, or the lack thereof, to disambiguate the pronunciation of all *kanji* characters. However, *okurigana* can still be a useful tool for disambiguating many *kanji*, with the understanding that there are many exceptions.

It is also important for teachers of JFL to take into consideration that while there are similarities among L1 and L2 learners of *kanji*, there are also many differences. In a study conducted by Kuriya (2005), it was found that learners, regardless of whether they

were native or non-native speakers, developed the ability to recognize ‘*kun*’ readings first. It was also found that native Japanese speakers, both adults and fifth graders, named *on*-compound words faster than *kun*-compound words. However, in the case of JFL learners, both compound groups were read at similar rates. Additionally, the role that spoken language plays in learning to read and write must be taken into consideration (Kuriya, 2005). When L1 speakers of Japanese learn *kanji* they already have a lot of background knowledge of the spoken language. JFL learners face difficulty in that they:

...are still learning to speak at the same time they are learning to read in Japanese... [and] if the meanings and sounds of the vocabulary are introduced at the same time the written forms for these words are introduced, learning *kanji* may become more labor-intensive for JFL learners than it should be, while also placing an excessive burden on their memory capacity (Kuriya, 2005. p 98).

In order to avoid overwhelming JFL students it is important to understand this key difference between L1 and L2 *kanji* learners and consider methods that can make the task less burdensome. Furthermore, there is often a gap in L2 learners of Japanese in their recognition and production skills. Typically, the “acquisition of competent *kanji* writing skills comes later than recognition skills” (Mori, 2014, p. 411). Mori claims that L2 learners from a phonographic language background, such as English, “demonstrate more phonological reliance and less visual reliance in L2 word recognition than those from a logographic language that uses a morpheme-based orthography” (p. 411) such as Chinese. Machida (2001) found that L2 Japanese learners from a Chinese speaking background outperformed their non-Chinese counterparts in *kanji* comprehension tasks. However, there was not a significant difference between the Chinese and non-Chinese

JFL learners when they were compared in their approaches to reading texts. For example, both groups used ‘guessing’ and ‘avoidance’ as strategies. Additionally, “the non-Chinese group even outscored the Chinese group in reading comprehension tasks both with and without context” (Mori, 2014, p. 412). Therefore, even among L2 *kanji* learners there can be many differences in how they approach reading and processing the characters. This is another aspect that JFL teachers must take into consideration as their classrooms may have L2 learners from a variety of L1 backgrounds.

### **The traditional approach to teaching *kanji***

Traditionally *kanji* have been introduced to JFL students in the order of frequency in which they appear in Japanese texts and often this involves the use of rote memorization (Paxton & Svetenant, 2013; Shimizu & Green, 2002; Toyoda, 2007). This is the same method that is employed by native Japanese speakers when they begin to learn the characters in elementary school and has been referred to as the “Whole-*kanji* Method” (Flaherty & Noguchi 1998, p. 62).

The Japanese Ministry of Education (Monbukagakusho) has arranged the Jouyou *kanji* into a specific order for which they are to be taught in the Japanese educational system. The *kanji* are arranged in a frequency-based order, that is, the most commonly used *kanji* are taught first. (Paxton & Svetenant, 2013, p. 90)

Mori (2012) notes that the logic behind introducing *kanji* by order of highest frequency is that it should enable learners of Japanese to read a greater percentage of authentic Japanese materials in a shorter period of time. For example, the ability to read just “...200 basic characters...enables students to recognize over a half of *kanji* used in

published materials, and 500 characters cover three quarters” (Mori, 2013, p. 145). This ordering of *kanji* may be useful to native Japanese speakers who are exposed to *kanji* on a daily basis outside of the classroom. However, this arrangement may not prove to be as useful for JFL learners as most are exposed to the Japanese writing system only in their Japanese language classrooms. Furthermore, unlike JFL students, native Japanese speakers learn the *kanji* over the course of 12 years in school (Paxton & Svetenant, 2013). Most JFL learners do not have 12 years to learn how to read and write *kanji*.

Another point to consider is that native Japanese speakers have a lot of initial background knowledge when they begin to learn *kanji*, particularly in the form of oral proficiency (Paxton & Svetenant, 2013), which is not something that can be said for JFL students. Therefore, using the traditional method to teach *kanji* may be a mismatch to JFL students’ needs and fails to take advantage of the knowledge, skills and experiences that adult learners bring with them into the classroom (Noguchi, 1995). This can lead to much difficulty and frustration for JFL students, as they don’t learn to recognize recurring patterns, become confused by numerous readings of a single character, encounter homophonic *kanji*, assume certain characters have multiple meanings, come to believe there is no system for learning *kanji*, and are unable to use *kango* or compound vocabulary in the right context (Toyoda, 2007). Another issue with the random, rote memorization approach is that “...without proper guidance the characters [may appear to be] nothing but complex, seemingly arbitrary combinations of bars and boxes, and their correspondences with meanings and readings are random” (Yamashita & Maru, 2000, p. 160). Indeed, approaching *kanji* in a seemingly random manner may be the least effective approach of all (Lu, Webb, Krus, & Fox, 1999). Furthermore, it is important to note that



simply knowing individual characters does not enable JFL learners to determine the meanings or readings of compound *kanji* words (Mori, 2012). Considering the drawbacks of the traditional method of teaching and learning *kanji*, it is essential that JFL teachers explore other non-traditional, and potentially more effective, methods and strategies.

### **Alternative methods and strategies for teaching *kanji***

The frequency-based order fails to take into account the cognitive skills and linguistic knowledge that adult learners of Japanese have that Japanese L1 speaking children lack. Furthermore

...the order in which the *kanji* are taught to native Japanese seems to have no logical progression other than the fact that the more frequently used *kanji* are taught first. For JFL students who have limited exposure to real Japanese, frequency is perhaps not the best criteria for ordering *kanji* (Paxton & Svetenant, 2013, p. 90).

It is possible that teaching *kanji* to JFL students in a component-based order might be a more effective approach. Complex *kanji* are made up of multiple parts called radicals, which are often simpler *kanji* when they stand alone. This can be very useful as many *kanji* share the same radical (Chen et al., 2013; Mori, 2012). By learning the simpler *kanji* first, learners might be able to use ‘chunking’ (Chen et al., 2013; Paxton & Svetenant, 2013) as a strategy in learning the more complex characters in a less difficult manner rather than by simply trying to memorize the entire character. In fact, research on the use of radicals in teaching Chinese characters conducted by Lu, Webb, Krus, and Fox

(1999) showed that learners are better able to recognize characters and recall their meanings when they are learned in a radical-based, hierarchical order.

In a study on differences between L2 Japanese readers with different levels of *kanji* knowledge and L1 Japanese readers, Toyoda and McNamara (2011) found that less-experienced L2 readers had a tendency to rely on component-level information whereas advanced L2 readers used character-level information more often. They also found that “character recognition initially relies on component-reliant processing and moves to more character-level dominant processing” (Toyoda & McNamara, 2011, p. 401). Therefore, introducing *kanji* in a component-based order could be useful for beginning and intermediate learners as a heightened awareness of the different components that make up a *kanji* could help JFL learners in decoding newly encountered or forgotten characters (Toyoda, Firdaus, & Kano, 2013).

Toyoda (2000) notes that components often provide important clues about the meaning or pronunciation of a *kanji* character. There are two different types of components in *kanji*: meaning symbols and pronunciation symbols (Toyoda, 2000). Knowing these different components can be very useful in processing *kanji*. By teaching JFL students about the compositional features of each character, instructors introduce each character “...not as arbitrary combinations of curves and straight lines, but as [a] combination of meaningful units” (Yamashita & Maru, 2000, p. 162). It could be argued that knowledge of these components is necessary because “when native speakers [of Japanese] access information on the meaning and the pronunciation of the character itself, at the same time, they are accessing information conveyed by its components” (Toyoda, 2000, p. 4). Flaherty and Noguchi (1998) conducted research comparing the use

of the Whole-kanji Method, traditionally used in Japanese elementary schools, and the Component Analysis Method which:

...involves analyzing each kanji to be learned by breaking it down entirely into components (i.e., not simply pointing out the radical), attaching meaning to each of these components, and then having learners remember a story which ties the components together and calls to mind the essential meaning of the kanji. (p. 62)

This approach goes even beyond simply learning radicals, which can be characters on their own, by breaking *kanji* down into smaller pieces (i.e., components) that appear in many characters but have no meaning when they stand alone. Flaherty and Noguchi found a significant difference between the two methods when they tested students' short term and long term memories, with Component Analysis being the more effective method. However, in a post-long term memory test, they found that there was only a difference for JFL learners who were living in Japan and had constant exposure to the characters from the environment. Perhaps Component Analysis is a useful tool for initial learning of the characters but needs to be followed with content in order for recognition skills to be maintained. It is also important for JFL teachers to be aware that students generally have more difficulty with pronunciation symbols than they do with meaning symbols (Toyoda, 2000). In fact, beginning students rarely make use of phonetic components (pronunciation symbols) when learning on their own (Chen et al., 2013). It may be beneficial for students to spend more time with pronunciation symbols since, despite being more difficult to learn, they are quite useful in decoding the pronunciation of *kanji* compound words.

Instead of traditional approaches, a number of alternative strategies for learning *kanji* can be implemented by teachers. First of all, teachers should familiarize their students with the Japanese writing system and teach them about the radicals that make up *kanji* characters. By teaching students how to recognize radicals that give a semantic or phonetic hint, teachers can give students a strategy for dealing with new words (Toyoda, 2007). Semantic radicals are frequently referred to as ‘main’ radicals and are often needed to look up characters when using a traditional, printed *kanji* dictionary (Toyoda, 2007). Additionally, students could be encouraged to use mnemonic devices when learning characters, radicals, and components (Komori & Zimmerman, 2001; Lu, Webb, Krus, & Fox, 1999). Lu et al. (1999) found that the use of mnemonics in combination with ordering Chinese characters based on radicals had a significant, positive effect on learners’ abilities to recall the characters in both the short and long term. Engaging in contextualized reading activities after studying *kanji* in isolation could also be an effective strategy for some students (Flaherty & Noguchi, 1998; Kondo-Brown, 2006). JFL teachers might also attempt to simulate the meaning-focused input that Japanese learners who live in Japan experience on a daily basis through authentic Japanese materials or cultural exchange activities (Flaherty & Noguchi, 1998). Furthermore, JFL students could study target *kanji* independently, prior to classes through online/e-learning platforms (Chen et al., 2013; Komori & Zimmerman, 2001; Mori, Omori, & Sato, 2016) or through books such as *Remembering the Kanji* by James Heisig and *Kanji isn’t that Hard!* by Yoshiaki Takebe (Noguchi, 1995).

## Conclusion

The process of learning *kanji* is a complex and often frustrating endeavor for many JFL learners. The traditional approach to teaching *kanji* has often been ineffective in making this process easier for students whose L1 uses an alphabetic writing system. It is critical that teachers of JFL understand the differences between L1 and L2 Japanese learners in the acquisition of *kanji* recognition and reading skills, as well as the differences among L2 learners from alphabetic and logographic writing system backgrounds. By taking into consideration these differences, teachers can find and implement the strategies that will most effectively help their students to develop Japanese literacy skills.

Introducing *kanji* to students in a component-based order may be more beneficial than the traditional frequency-based order, as adult JFL learners have many cognitive skills that L1 Japanese speaking children lack. Components are also very useful in providing hints in how to pronounce a character or what the character means. Research has found not only that JFL learners can use component information in processing *kanji* (Toyoda, 2000), but that the Component Analysis Method is more effective than the traditional method in the short and long term, even more so when learners continue to have constant contact with the language (Flaherty & Noguchi, 1998).

Little research has been conducted on introducing *kanji* in a component-based order rather than in a frequency-based order when teaching learners from alphabetic backgrounds. Such research could have significant implications for future *kanji* instruction, as well as strategies for developing reading and writing skills in Japanese. If the task of learning to read and write in Japanese were to become less of a burden, due to

improved teaching and learning techniques, it is possible that there would be a lower attrition rate in intermediate and advanced level Japanese language classes.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHIES

## TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Developing the ability to read and write is a critical component of L2 learning. This is especially true for students who wish to study abroad using the language they are learning. In order for teachers to help their students to become successful readers and writers in the L2, certain knowledge and strategies, such as knowing how to identify a text's structure and using it to aide reading comprehension or knowing the parts of an essay and how to organize one's writing, are of the utmost importance. As an English teacher in Japan, I observed that many students struggled with reading and particularly with writing. Furthermore, as a second language learner of Japanese, reading and writing have been two of the biggest obstacles that I have faced. For these reasons, I am interested in techniques and strategies that aid students in their efforts to become literate in the target language.

While reading the article *Journaling in an Adult ESL Literacy Program* by **Larrotta (2009)**, I learned how the use dialogue journals (DJs) helps students to develop their literacy skills. She discusses how DJs are a pleasant activity for both the student and the teacher and create a communication environment that is not possible during a class session. The DJ creates a type of private communication between the student and the teacher which seems to help students to open up more and discuss topics of interest to them. A DJ is a meaning-focused conversation between two participants which gives it authenticity. The topic is determined by both the learner and the teacher and is thus a form of two-way communication. According to Larrotta (p. 36), "The goal with the DJ is to provide a space for the learners to express themselves freely writing in English; this



activity is not intended to serve as an evaluation tool”. It is important for students to have an opportunity to write freely without fear of making mistakes. If students are fearful of making mistakes they will be less motivated to write, yet the practice of writing is a necessity in developing writing skills. Like any other skill, writing can improve only with practice. She also mentions that the aim of DJs is for the students to develop fluency in writing, not for them to use correct English in their first attempt at writing. As time went on, the conversations in the journals between Larrotta and her students evolved. As the students made progress in their literacy skills, their journal entries became longer and more elaborate. Lorotta’s study took place in an ESL context, in which students are surrounded by the target language every day and the interactions that took place were only between the teacher and individual students. I wondered how students in a non-English speaking country or in the EFL context might react to exchanging journal entries with their classmates or peers in another country. This led me to Dujsik (2012).

Through reading *You Blog: An Exploratory Study of EFL Students’ Blogging Experience in the Thai-Japanese Weblog Exchange Project* by **Dujsik (2012)**, I discovered how useful blogging can be as a tool for developing student’s L2 literacy. In this study, Thai university students engaged in a cultural exchange project with a group of Japanese university students, using English as a common language. When Dujsik investigated student attitudes towards the use of blogs in the exchange project he found that 74% of students enjoyed writing blogs, 83% enjoyed reading their classmates’ and Japanese students’ blogs, and 57% planned to use blogs in the future. When asked what they liked about weblogs, the majority of respondents mentioned the opportunity to learn and share culture, some said they liked the opportunity to share their writing with others,

and some stated they liked that they had improved their language skills (Dujsik, 2012). I believe that blogs can be very helpful in motivating students and making writing activities more fun and exciting, especially when students get to write about something that is interesting to them.

However, not all students felt positive about the use of blogs in the class. 23% of the students were undecided in whether they liked writing blogs or not and 11% said that they did not enjoy writing blogs (Dujsik, 2012). On this note it is also important to take into account the potential problems that may be encountered when trying to implement the use of blogs for writing development. Students who lack computer literacy skills or simply have little experience with using blogs could become discouraged and thus demoralized. To counter this, it is important that teachers take the time to train their students on how to use the blogs, just as they should for any language learning tool. Dujsik's study gives us a look not only into how students felt about exchanging writing with their peers—whether it was their classmates or students in another country— but also their attitudes towards using an online tool, in this case blogs. What other online tools might be useful to students in developing their literacy skills?

In reading *Online collaborative note-taking strategies to foster EFL beginners' literacy development* by **Yang and Lin (2015)**, I learned how online note taking can be a major advantage to students trying to improve their literacy in a foreign language. In their study with a control group using traditional note taking methods (i.e., paper notebooks) compared to an experimental group using an online collaborative notetaking platform they found that the experimental group made more progress in their reading comprehension. Students were given a pretest at the beginning of the study and posttest at

the end. “EFL beginners in the experimental group increased [their reading scores] from 66.59 in the pre-test to 82.54 in the post-test... While the EFL beginners of the control group made [less] progress, their mean scores increased from 64.48 in the pre-test, to 70.68 in the post-test” (Yang & Lin, 2015, p. 133). The experimental group’s results had a medium Cohen’s effect size of  $d = .61$  and the control group had a Cohen’s effect size “without practical significance” (Yang & Lin, 2015, p. 134). One of the key differences between the two groups was access to feedback and comparisons. The online platform enabled students to receive feedback from more students than those that were using paper notebooks. Students in the online collaborative notetaking group were also able to see more examples and compare their notes to those of others. The usefulness of the feedback students received from their peers in Yang and Li’s study made me want to know more about how sources of feedback other than the teacher and outside from the classroom can assist students in developing literacy in the target language.

In *Alternative Sources of Feedback and Second Language Writing Development in University Content Courses* by **Séror (2011)**, I learned about the difficulties faced by advanced-level University Students, in the ESL context, who take regular content courses and the alternative sources of feedback that they sometimes turn to. For most students, the ideal source of feedback would be the instructor but often students felt the instructor was unable to give them useful feedback due to demands on the instructor’s time. Students also often received feedback that they felt was too focused on their grammatical mistakes with little to no comment on the content of their writing. It is important that teachers recognize that students desire feedback on the content of their writing, such as whether their ideas connect or are properly supported, rather than focus entirely on

language errors. Many of the students found alternative sources of feedback in friends, roommates, writing centers, etc. One student in particular became involved in a research project and was able to have his writing reviewed by a PhD student and receive suggestions and commentary on the content of his writing from him as well as other members of the research team. This student ended up getting an A+ on the paper he was working on. Sources of feedback other than from the instructor obviously play a large role in the development of L2 learners' writing/literacy. While the previous studies have addressed journaling, online tools, and alternative sources of feedback other than the instructor, I wondered what role authentic texts read for enjoyment might play in students' literacy development.

While reading **Fukunaga (2006)** "*Those Anime Students*": *Foreign Language Literacy Development Through Japanese Popular Culture*, I learned about the role popular culture can play as a tool in developing students' literacy. Pop culture can be a motivating and useful tool in developing students' literacy skills. Fukunaga found that students who were highly interested in *anime* received more exposure to Japanese outside of the classroom, especially in the form of different contexts of Japanese, than students who weren't interested in *anime*. Inside the classroom students are mostly exposed to polite form, which is the standard in the classroom context, and this is the form students become most familiar with. Through different plots and settings in *anime* and *manga*, 'anime students' encountered a greater variety and often more casual forms of Japanese language. *Anime* also created a more personal connection for many of the students in their learning of Japanese. When teachers use material that is interesting and meaningful, students are going to be more motivated to engage with it. Therefore, it is important that

teachers make an effort to find texts that connects to students' personal interests, or even better, gets students interested in the culture of the target language. While Fukunaga addresses the potential of reading for enjoyment, students often learn a language for more academic purposes. This is especially true for international students, such as those who come to the United States to study.

In *Displaying Critical Thinking in EFL Academic Writing: A Discussion of Japanese to English Contrastive Rhetoric* by **McKinley (2013)**, I learned about the role culture plays in writing styles and the particular difficulty faced by students from Japan when tasked with academic writing. Due to differences in culture, students from Japan may not be as able to express their critical thinking in writing in the ways that are expected by western instructors. McKinley (2013) discusses the differences between the English writing style, which tends to be deductive, and the Japanese writing style, which is considered to be inductive. "...in ... Japanese writing the main ideas do not appear until the end and ... paragraphs before the main ideas do not constitute the reasons or evidence for the main ideas" (McKinley, 2013, p. 198). It is important that teachers take into account differences in writing styles among cultures. For example, knowing that writing in Japanese is organized differently than in English informs teachers that their students may not be familiar with how an essay is organized in English. This then makes a case for explicitly teaching students the rules for writing an essay and for providing examples. It is also important to note that when students lack the ability to express themselves in English it does not necessarily mean that they lack critical thinking skills, rather they just need to be taught how to express critical arguments in English. Teachers can gain a better understanding of how to approach teaching critical argument in English

writing if they familiarize themselves with the writing styles in the language backgrounds that their students come from. Teachers can learn more about different writing styles by asking students how they write in their native languages or by doing some research and reading up on the writing styles of students' language backgrounds.

In conclusion, teachers can employ a great number of useful tools to develop their students' literacy skills. DJs create a safe writing space for students in which they can communicate with the teacher in a meaningful way without fear of making mistakes, which is essential for students to make progress in their writing skills. Blogs can also be a useful tool in that they give students access to a much wider audience and create opportunities for cultural and language exchange. However, if teachers are to use this tool they must ensure that their students have the computer literacy skills required to participate in a blog exchange.

Another helpful tool/approach is the use of collaborative online notetaking. While traditional, paper-based note taking still helps students progress in their literacy skills, online collaborative notetaking creates more opportunities to make comparisons and offers more access to feedback, which can lead to greater gains in literacy skills. It is also noteworthy that alternative sources of feedback (i.e., from sources outside the classroom) can be very beneficial to students. Making students aware of this and informing them of resources outside the classroom, such as writing centers or tutoring labs, could be very beneficial to their literacy development. It is also important to keep in mind that students desire feedback on not only grammar but on the content of their writing. By maintaining a focus on content, teachers can avoid discouraging their students. Teachers also need to keep in mind that students from different backgrounds often have very different

understandings of writing style and structure. Teachers can help their students greatly by being aware of different writing styles in other languages and by explicitly instructing their students in the writing style typical of the target language they are teaching.

## CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

I first became interested in sociocultural theory when I encountered it in a graduate course. Since then I have learned more about the theory through various readings, in an SLA Theories course with Dr. Thoms, and more in depth during an independent study on Sociocultural Theory with Dr. Rogers here at USU. I believe that social interaction and collaboration are vital to any language classroom. Therefore, I decided to delve further into sociocultural theory.

In *The Discourse of a Learner-Centered Classroom: Sociocultural Perspectives on Teacher-Learner Interaction in the Second-Language Classroom* by **Anton (1999)**, I learned about the roles of teachers and students in the classroom as viewed within a sociocultural framework. Anton identifies the main role of students as that of communicators, which consists of four different aspects. Students are expected to 1) interact with others, 2) actively engage in negotiation of meaning, 3) have opportunities to express themselves by sharing ideas and opinions, and 4) be responsible for their own learning. The role of the teacher is to act as a facilitator, moving away from the traditional teacher-centered focus of the classroom to a learner-centered classroom. Anton notes that “in traditional approaches teacher-student interaction is minimal and dominated by the teacher” which should be avoided in a communicative foreign language classroom (p. 304). In her study, in which she compares the interactions in a university first-year French class with those of a first-year Italian class, Anton argues that “teachers can engage learners in the negotiation of meaning, language forms, and classroom rules by using various discursive moves, and in doing so can also promote learners’ active



participation, which may have a role in L2 learning” (p. 304). The teacher accomplishes this through what is known as *scaffolding*. Scaffolding has six functions: 1) to enlist the learner’s interest in the task, 2) to simplify the task, 3) to keep the learner motivated and pursuing the goal, 4) to highlight certain features and indicate discrepancies, 5) to reduce stress and frustration during problem solving, and 6) to model an idealized form (Anton, 1999). The French teacher in this study uses scaffolding to lead students to find solutions to problems they encounter with the language on their own and thus gets them to participate more actively and be more responsible for their own language learning. Much of the time, the students are learning from their peers and coming up with their own hypotheses about the language as a group or individually. By contrast, in the Italian class, in which the teacher uses a traditional approach, all answers to problems come from the teacher and students are passive learners, having virtually no responsibility for their own language learning other than to memorize the information presented to them by the teacher. After reading Anton, I wanted to know more about how scaffolding can be used to improve specific skills, such as listening comprehension.

While reading *Sociocultural Theory and Listening Comprehension: Does the Scaffolding of EFL Learners Improve Their Listening Comprehension?* by **Yazdanpanah and Khanmohammad (2014)**, I discovered how teachers can improve their students’ listening comprehension by simply providing them with background knowledge. In their study, Yazdanpanah and Khanmohammad compared the performance of a control group, which wasn’t provided with any background information prior to a listening test, to the performance of an experimental group in which students were asked questions related to the topics of the story and conversation they would hear in the listening test. The

instructor in the experimental group also shared related experiences and encouraged students to share their opinions about the topic. Students were given an opportunity to discuss the topic, although it is unclear whether this was done as a class or in groups. Both groups were given a listening comprehension test and the experimental group outperformed the control group despite starting at similar levels of proficiency. The authors suggest that the use of more “social and cooperative techniques” (Yazdanpanah & Khanmohammad, 2014, p. 2393) could lead to improved EFL instruction in Iranian universities. While this study gives evidence of the importance of providing second language learners with background knowledge and opportunities to interact, I was left wanting to know more about the role of collaboration among students.

**DiNitto (2000)** discusses the importance of the classroom setting and its effect on the success of collaborative tasks. *Can Collaboration Be Unsuccessful? A Sociocultural Analysis of Classroom Setting and Japanese L2 Performance in Group Tasks* analyzes differences in outcomes during a collaborative task between two groups in a first-year Japanese language class at an American university. The students were divided into two groups of four and were given a picture of a building with 9 floors. In each group one student was to play the role of ‘boss’ and the others played the role of employees. The task was to ask each other about the locations of different stores, services, and employees in the building. The first group was able to work together to produce language that they would not have been able to on their own through peer scaffolding and cooperation. DiNitto notes that the first group remained in the target language for the majority of the activity while the second group used the target language only one-third of the time. The second group was unable to move through the task as quickly or efficiently as the first

group. DiNitto describes a major difference among the two groups in that one student in the second group assumed control of the group and acted as a ‘surrogate teacher’, which made it difficult for other members of the group to contribute. It is interesting to note that groups can easily fall into the same authoritarian trap as a teacher-centered lecture and end up focusing on grammatical rules without attention to meaning. DiNitto cautions that “The introduction or testing of one methodology in a classroom where it is in direct opposition to the dominant ideology of language learning may not yield positive results, or be a true indicator of either the effectiveness of the methodology or the students’ linguistic abilities” (p. 180). She concludes that the first group’s results are in reality an anomaly and that what happened with Group 2 was more expected due to the setting of the class, which was very teacher-centered and “emphasized memorization and accuracy over communicative skills” (p. 180). Teachers cannot simply create a communicative classroom by inserting collaborative tasks into a teacher-centered instructional approach. The entire dynamic of the class must be changed to that of a learner-centered environment in which students can clearly see the value and benefit of participating in collaborative tasks. Without such change, students are likely to view collaborative work negatively and the success of such activities will be severely hindered. This article demonstrates the possible benefits of group work when the classroom setting allows for it, but I still wanted to know more about how interaction influences learning.

In *Second Language Acquisition as Situated Practice: Task Accomplishment in the French Second Language Classroom* by **Mondada and Doehler (2005)**, I encountered a different view on classroom interaction. Mondada and Doehler refer to what they call the ‘interactionist approach’, of which there is a weak and a strong version. In the weak

version interaction is seen as beneficial, in that it provides opportunities for learners “to be exposed to comprehensible, negotiated, or modified input” (p. 463). In the strong version of the interactionist approach interaction is seen as “a fundamentally constitutive dimension of learners’ everyday lives” (p. 463). This view further claims that social interaction not only provides “an interactional frame in which developmental processes can take place...[but also] involves the learner as a co-constructor of joint activities, where linguistic and other competencies are put to work within a constant process of adjustment vis-à-vis other social agents and in the emerging context” (p. 463). Mondada and Doehler adopt the strong view of the interactionist approach in their study of interactions among immigrant children acquiring French in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and high school students learning French as a second language in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Mondada and Doehler claim that “a great deal of learning is profoundly socio-interactional in nature...learning is interactional because it is always rooted in activities, in language games, in forms of experience” (p. 469). This view seems intuitive because the fundamental purpose of language is to mediate a variety of social interactions. Almost every aspect of people’s daily lives involves some form of social interaction and learning is no exception. Mondada and Doehler also take a view of tasks as processes and not products. “[Tasks] cannot be understood as stable predefined entities. Rather, these tasks are configured by the learners’ own activities and interpretation processes” (p. 468). It is certainly true that teachers can and do design activities or tasks with a particular purpose or goal in mind. However, what is accomplished by engaging with the task will ultimately be decided by the learners, whether intentionally or not. The social interactions that take place during tasks or

activities are also likely to shape the final outcome and what learners gain through engaging in them. A final point of interest in this article is the claim that in an interaction between expert and learner, “it is not simply experts that help learners to solve specific linguistic problems but also learners who can help experts adapt their mediation to their own needs and possibilities” (Mondada & Doehler, 2005, p. 479). In a communicative classroom, students always have something to contribute to the environment of learning in the classroom. This can be useful to the teacher in addressing the particular needs of a class, especially due to the fact that each class will be unique in what challenges them. In a teacher-centered environment this type of interaction is not possible. Seeing further evidence for the role of interaction in language learning, I wanted to know more about how this might look in an EFL/ESL classroom, in which I am more likely to be teaching.

*An ESL Instructor's Strategic Teaching in a Collaborative Learning Community* by **Kim (2012)**, taught me about the many benefits of instructional scaffolding. Kim observed the class of an instructor at an ESL institute affiliated with a university in Western New York. Kim gives the following description of a scaffolded classroom. “In a scaffolded classroom, the teacher mediates students’ learning by providing calibrated, contingent assistance and having them explore learning interactively with their teacher and peers” (p. 214). Kim describes in this book chapter how the ESL instructor often played the role of ‘co-learner’ and provided opportunities for students to act as ‘co-teachers’, which created a learning environment of collaboration and equality, which is in stark contrast to the authoritarian environment created by ‘traditional’ methods. The instructor in this study was very careful in how he managed groups during collaborative tasks. He paid careful attention to how students interacted with one another and when he

found that certain pairings resulted in one student doing most of the work, or that certain members of a group did not get along, he would make adjustments accordingly in the next class or activity to ensure a collaborative environment. Kim also notes that when asked a question by a student, the instructor often responded by soliciting possible answers from other members of the class. This encouraged students to work together and provided opportunities for peer-peer scaffolding. The instructor provided only the support that was needed to allow students to solve linguistic problems mostly on their own, rather than just providing them with a solution. This type of collaborative learning and scaffolding lead students to learn several other skills in addition to English language skills such as: how to work with others in a various grouping formats, communication and interpersonal skills, turn taking, mediation, and higher order thinking skills. In addition to students learning these extra skills, Kim explains that they also became strategic learners and developed skills in listening intently, note taking, and elaboration, all of which are useful to international students entering regular college courses at an American university. After reading Kim, I wanted to know more about the scaffolding that takes place in peer-peer interactions.

**De Guerrero and Villamil (2000)** show how peer-peer scaffolding can lead to furthering the development of language skills such as writing in their article, *Activating the ZPD: Mutual Scaffolding in L2 Peer Revision*. In this study the authors analyzed the interaction between two male ESL students whose L1 was Spanish in a writing revision task. The two students adopted the roles of ‘writer’ and ‘reader’ in which they worked together to revise the writer’s paper. At first the reader was the primary initiator of the

revisions and possibly had a higher level of English proficiency. De Guerrero and Vallamil note a number of behaviors used by the reader to mediate the activity:

...(a) recruiting the writer's interest and not letting it flag throughout the interaction, (b) marking critical aspects or discrepancies in the writer's text, (c) explicitly instructing or giving minilessons to the writer on issues of grammar and mechanics, and (d) modeling (p. 64).

Gradually, the writer became a more active participant in the task, which the authors attribute partially to the reader's use of what they term "Contingent Responsivity" which is the ability of the 'expert' or more 'capable peer' to read the other participant's mood and determine their needs (p. 58). De Guerrero and Vallamil also note the reader's use of humor to destress certain situations and create intersubjectivity between himself and the writer. The reader also plays the role of "communicative ratchet" and keeps the writer engaged in the interaction, without which the scaffolding would discontinue. These same techniques can and should be used in teacher-student interactions as well, since students will benefit most from being an active participant in their own learning. Another point of interest, and one that teachers might want to be cautious of, is that peer-peer scaffolding can sometimes lead to instances of regression. De Guerrero and Villamil state:

Sometimes the tone and persuasive skills of an authoritative peer who is less knowledgeable may cause the other to regress in his thinking, particularly if his or her level of confidence is low. Regression, however, is a normal feature of growth in L2 learning... (p. 61)

For this reason, it is important that teachers monitor student interactions as much as possible so that they might address any points of regression later on. This study provided

a lot of insight on how peer-peer scaffolding can occur in a specific task, however, I wanted to know more about how interactions might be affected depending upon the individuals engaged in them.

Through reading *Peer–Peer Interaction between L2 Learners of Different Proficiency Levels: Their Interactions and Reflections* by **Watanabe (2008)**, I discovered the different ways in which learners might approach collaborative tasks. Just as no two individuals are the same, interactions among different pairings and groups of students are very different and this will ultimately affect the outcome of any task or activity. Watanabe investigated the types of interactions that occur among learners of different proficiency levels and their perceptions and attitudes toward such interactions. The data used in this study was taken from another study Watanabe conducted in 2004, which investigated 12 Japanese learners in a non-credit ESL program at a university in Canada. Watanabe focused on 9 of the original participants and their interactions with a higher- and lower-proficiency peer. She designed the study so that each ‘core participant’ would interact with both a lower-proficiency and a higher-proficiency peer in a joint writing task. The interactions that occurred between each pair were very different in nature and participants’ attitudes also varied. Three of the interactions were collaborative, one was dominant/passive, one was expert/novice, and one was expert/passive. Watanabe notes that participants reported a preference for working with peers that shared many ideas. Certainly, it is likely that some students will feel more comfortable sharing ideas with some of their classmates than with others. Additionally, it was found that the participants’ attitudes toward interaction were more related to their interactional patterns than to the proficiency level of their peers. The most positively perceived interactions were those



that were collaborative. Interactions in which all students are actively participating are the most likely to promote skill development in all students. For this reason, teachers need to get to know their students and their personalities in order to determine which pairings or groupings will lead to successful, active interaction. Wanting to know more about how scaffolding might benefit Japanese learners lead me to a study conducted by **Ohta (1995)**.

*Applying Sociocultural Theory to an Analysis of Learner Discourse: Learner-Learner Collaborative Interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development* by Ohta (1995) investigates peer-peer scaffolding that takes place among Japanese language students at U.S. university. The author collected video and audio recordings from a 100-minute second-year level Japanese class, in which 6 students were present the day of recording. One student under the alias of Becky was equipped with a personal microphone to gather data more closely on peer-peer interactions. Ohta found that students reacted differently in teacher-fronted interaction than during peer-peer interactions. For example, when students were asked what they would like for their birthday, one student under the alias Mark engaged in the activity and formulated a sentence using the target structure, *itadakitai n desu ga* (use for polite requests) with the help and support of both the teacher and fellow classmates. Becky, perhaps in an attempt to avoid embarrassment, gives the answer *nandemo ii* (“anything is fine”) and gets around using the target structure altogether. However, Becky engages very differently during a one-on-one pair activity with Mark, not only in becoming a very active user of the language but also by making accurate use of the target form. Mark’s engagement with the interaction changes as well and he uses Japanese to set up the role-play activity. During their interaction, both Becky

and Mark use Japanese for practical purposes, limiting their use of English. Ohta states that during the interaction Becky and Mark create a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the distance between what a learner is able to currently do on their own and that which they can do with assistance from an expert or more capable peer. Ohta further notes that in a ZPD between two learners, strengths are combined collaboratively and each learner can benefit from the other, even when one is less proficient in the language than the other. Indeed, this can be seen in the interaction between Mark, who is considered a less proficient user of Japanese, and Becky, who is seen to have relatively high proficiency in the language. At one point in the interaction Mark has difficulty understanding when Becky uses the word *atarashii* (new) and confuses it with the word *ashita* (tomorrow) and uses a 'Next-turn Repair Initiator' or NTRI (p. 104) to clarify Becky's meaning. This results in Becky making multiple changes to her utterance, correcting a couple of lexical errors that had nothing to do with Mark's source of confusion. While it was likely not Mark's intention, his use of an NTRI lead Becky to reflect on her language use and thus engage in self-repair. Another point of interest is how the freedom of the one-on-one activity permits students the opportunity to engage in language play, which enables learners to use the language authentically. In one instance Becky uses the language to talk about the cameraman recording the lesson and asks her partner, Mark, about his vest. This freedom, which was not possible in the teacher-fronted activity, allows Becky and Mark an opportunity to experiment with the language and further practice forms that they had previously learned in an authentic manner. Certainly, pair and group activities are very beneficial to students' language development

and teachers should implement them as much as possible. Ideally, every lesson would include at least one group or pair activity.

Having learned much about peer-peer scaffolding during pair and small group work, I wondered how scaffolding might work when occurring simultaneously with both the teacher and other peers. This led me to the article *Scaffolding adult learners of English in learning target form in a Hong Kong EFL university classroom* by **Li (2012)**.

Li (2012) did a study on scaffolding with 30 adult EFL learners, 19 females and 11 males, and two English teachers at a university in Hong Kong. The students were in their first year of college and were either majoring in Arts or Social Sciences. They were assigned a task in which they were required to rewrite underlined sentences in an essay, using relative clauses without altering the content. Additionally, they were asked to make the essay more coherent. The task was divided into two parts, 35 minutes of discussion and 5 minutes of writing. Students worked in groups of three with one of the two English teachers. Li collected data by videotaping 10 sessions in total and transcribing the interactions for further analysis of scaffold episodes. Scaffold episodes were defined as “a conversational sequence where a student may not be able to participate without interactive assistance in the writing activity” (p. 131). Li gives seven possible kinds of scaffolds that may occur in a scaffold episode: recruitment, simplifying the task, direction maintenance, marking critical features, frustration control, demonstration, and feedback. All types of scaffolds were used at some point by students and teachers alike in this study. Li claims that the “students completed the task with great independence as a result of dialogic discourse with the teacher and with their peers” (p. 132). Li notes that there was a balance of focus-on-form and focus-on-meaning during the dialogic activity. Both

form and meaning play an important role and when mutually present, the chances are higher that students will make connections between the two. Additionally, Li states that students negotiated meaning through both teacher and peer scaffolding. For example, in one of the excerpts “the teacher encouraged the students to clarify the main idea of the paragraph by discussing the topic sentence” (p. 136), which was then followed shortly after by one of the students directing attention to the main idea of the paragraph they were working on. The flow of the interaction was not controlled exclusively by the teacher, but by both the teacher and the students. Li claims that students are scaffolded collaboratively by their peers by “negotiating meaning and form, and assisting each other in the production of meaningful and accurate messages” (p. 136). Students also often worked together to co-construct meaning and certain target structures that were required to complete the task. At times, students would perform the role of teacher during the task and it wasn’t always the more capable peer. Li states that “there is evidence that less proficient peers are able to provide assistance to more proficient partners” (p. 139) and thus interactions between partners of different levels can be beneficial for both parties. Li claims that the assistance provided by both the teacher and peers led students to monitor and modify their speech, leading them from other-regulation to self-regulation. While the teacher’s support is helpful and often essential, it is of utmost importance that they keep a balance between too little and too much scaffolding. Li states that excessive scaffolding may in fact impede learners’ language development. Instead of being the center of the classroom or activity, the teacher should be more “like a background mother...providing a holding environment and scaffolding for self-regulation. The key is that the teacher leaves ‘center stage’ for some portion of the learning period ...” (p. 140). By being aware

and conscientious of this need to 'leave center stage', teachers can ensure they provide an interactive and balanced learning environment for their students in which they can develop toward being able to use the language independently.

In conclusion, students are more likely to be motivated and active learners when the teacher acts as a facilitator and creates a student-centered learning environment. This can be done through carefully calibrated scaffolding that enables students to complete tasks or solve linguistic problems on their own without simply providing them with the solution (Kim, 2012). In order to accomplish this, teachers need to take care in balancing between too much and too little assistance (Li, 2012). It is also important to note that collaboration can be successful only if it is set as the expectation for the class right from the start (DiNitto, 2000). Student views of language learning tend to be shaped by the first learning environment that they encounter and it is important that teachers create an environment that will set them up to be successful language learners. One final point to take away from the literature is that ultimately the kinds of social interactions that students engage in will determine the outcome of classroom tasks and activities (Mondada & Doehler, 2005; Watanabe, 2008). Ideally, students will be able to scaffold each other in a way that leads both/all to be active participants in the activity (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000). For this reason, it is important that teachers carefully monitor interactions and guide students during tasks and activities.

## TASK-BASED LEARNING APPROACHES

Task-based learning is a concept I encountered very early in the MSTL program. It was a topic that appeared in both the *Foundations of Dual Language Immersion* and *Technology for Language Teaching* courses that I took during my first semester. While most second language classes incorporate some type of task during lessons, some activities tend to be more engaging and effective than others. I am interested in which types of activities are most effective in promoting students' language development and how to incorporate those activities into my classroom.

*The Methodology of Task-Based Teaching* by **Ellis (2006)** discusses the three main phases of a task-based lesson: pre-task, during-task, and post-task. Ellis states that only the during-task phase is absolutely essential but that the pre-task and post-task phases add a great deal to the overall effectiveness of a task-based lesson. According to Ellis, "The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition" (p. 21). It is important that teachers present tasks in ways that motivate students and increase their interest in engaging with the task. Ellis notes that some students may come from learning backgrounds in which they were expected to be passive in the classroom; learning through experience might be a new prospect for them. It is essential to explain the purpose of engaging in tasks and to make their value known to the students, both of which can be addressed in the pre-task phase. Ellis gives four strategies that can be utilized in the pre-task phase:

- (1) supporting learners in performing a task similar to the task they will perform in the during-task phase of the lesson, (2) asking students to observe a model

of how to perform the task, (3) engaging learners in non-task activities designed to prepare them to perform the task or (4) strategic planning of the main task performance (p. 21).

Using a pre-task, the teacher can scaffold learners' performance of the task in an effort to help them reach a point of 'self-regulation', in which they can perform the task in the during-task phase on their own. Essentially, this is an opportunity for students to develop the skills necessary to complete the task in the during-task phase, enabling a focus on acquisition while avoiding distractions due to not knowing how to perform the activity. Alternatively, the teacher can present an "ideal performance of the task" to students which "can help reduce the cognitive load on the learner" (Ellis, 2006, p. 22). Teachers might also opt to use a non-task preparation activity during the pre-task phase. Ellis notes that while there are a variety of such activities, the most recommended are those that "focus on vocabulary rather than grammar... because vocabulary is seen as more helpful for the successful performance of a task than grammar" (p. 23). However, Ellis also cautions that the pre-teaching of vocabulary can lead students to use the task as an opportunity to practice pre-selected words which can pull away from the main goal/purpose of the task. The final of the four options, strategic planning, provides students with time to plan how they will perform the task. In this type of pre-task activity, students are given access to the task that they will be performing later. Ellis states that students can either be given complete freedom to decide how to plan for the task or they can be given some guidance by the teacher. The former typically results in students focusing on content in the during-task phase.

In the during-task phase, teachers have many options related to task performance including: whether to give students unlimited time or set a time limit, whether to allow access to input data or not, and whether to introduce a surprise element. Ellis notes that enacting a time limit can lead to greater gains in fluency, however, giving students time to complete a task at their own pace often leads to more complex and accurate language. The ideal situation would be to provide a mix of both types of activities in order to develop both fluency and accuracy over time. Allowing students access to input data, such as text or pictures lowers the complexity of the task. Ellis mentions the term ‘borrowing’, in which learners make the decision to use language samples or models provided by the instructor, and claims that it is compatible with a sociocultural perspective of language acquisition. Providing students with sample language may help to ensure that all learners are able to engage in the task and those that don’t need it have the option of ignoring it altogether. The final task performance option, introducing a surprise element, can increase the amount of talk, time on task, and students’ interest in the task. However, whether including a surprise element has a direct effect on fluency, language complexity, or accuracy remains unclear.

The post-task phase consists of three options with different pedagogical goals: a repeat performance of the task, a reflection on how the task was performed, or an attention-to-form activity. Ellis claims that “when learners repeat a task their production improves” (p. 36). In a reflection, students report on (and sometimes evaluate) their performance of a task either orally or in written form. The benefit of this type of activity is that it can lead students to develop “...metacognitive strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluating, which are seen as important for language learning” (Ellis,



2006, p. 37). Students can also be asked to evaluate the task itself and teachers can use the feedback to assess the effectiveness of the activity or in planning future activities. Ellis states that focus-on-form activities can be implemented in any of the three stages of a task-based lesson. Teachers should select forms that their students performed incorrectly during the task or those that are useful. Ellis notes that forms can be addressed through a review of learner errors as a class or in groups, consciousness-raising tasks, production-practice activities, and noticing activities. While this article was very informative and laid out the phases of a task-based lesson in an easy to follow manner, I wanted to know more about specific aspects of task-based learning, specifically how students interact with tasks. This led me to the next article on task complexity.

In *Task Complexity, Focus on L2 Constructions, and Individual Differences: A classroom-Based Study* by **Revesz (2011)** I learned about the effect that task complexity has on learner outcomes and interactions. Revesz conducted a study with 43 ESL learners in the Community English Program in New York City which investigated the effects of task complexity on accuracy and complexity of L2 speech production, as well as effects on quality and quantity of interaction-driven learning activities. The participants were mostly female, with only 6 male participants, their ages ranged from 21 to 45 years old, and they came from a variety of L1 backgrounds with the majority speaking Spanish, Korean, or Japanese. The students worked in self-selected groups of 3 or 4 on a decision-making task in which they imagined they were members of a personal trust board and had to decide on projects in the city to fund. In the simple version of the task they had \$500,000 that they could use to fund 3 projects and in the complex version of the task they had \$10,000,000 that could be used to fund 6 projects. The second task was

considered to be more complex because it required learners to deal with more elements and decisions for which they would have to provide reasons and justifications. Data was collected through audio recordings and questionnaires.

Revesz found that while participants produced more sentences in the simple task, their lexical diversity was higher in the complex task. The complex task also resulted in a lower rate of errors than the simple task. During this study Revesz also specifically looked at the types of conjunctions learners used in language production during the two tasks and discovered that during the complex task, more participants made use of all type of conjunctions which included: 'and', 'but', 'so', 'because', and 'if/when'. In addition to the positives effects on language production, Revesz also found that “for all interactional measures, greater task complexity generated a higher rate of language-learning opportunities” (Revesz, 2011, p. 173). Teachers and students both perceived the complex task as being more useful for language learning, more interesting, and more effective in directing learners' attention to linguistic output, including their own and others'. While teachers perceived students as being equally relaxed during both tasks, students reported feeling more tense during the complex task. Most tasks presented in textbooks are simple. Although simple tasks are certainly appropriate in certain cases, this study demonstrates that more complex tasks are more effective in promoting students' language production skills. I found the results of this study very promising and reading this article made me want to know more about how students perceive task-based learning.

While reading *Perceptions of Task-based Language Teaching: A Study of Iranian EFL Learners* by **Hadi (2013)**, I came across an example of how cultural background can sometimes be an obstacle when implementing a task-based learning method. Hadi notes

that in Iran, teacher-centered, lecture-oriented classes are the norm. As a result, most students in Iran are not accustomed to the task-based learning teaching (TBLT) method and this can lead to resistance in its implementation. Hadi conducted a survey with 88 female English language learners at the Kish Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran, investigating their understanding of TBLT and their perceptions toward its implementation in the classroom. It was discovered that a majority of the learners had a high level of understanding of TBLT concepts and the advantages of using tasks in second language teaching. Most of the learners also had a favorable view toward the use of TBLT in their classrooms and 40.9% strongly agreed that TBLT provides a relaxing atmosphere that promotes language use. Hadi states that the students were “willing to adapt themselves to the new language learning approach” (Hadi, 2012, p. 108), despite TBLT initially being unfamiliar to them. In regard to why many learners held favorable views toward TBLT, some stated that they enjoyed the collaborative and interactional nature and some said they felt it was appropriate for small group work. However, some learners stated that they avoided participating in task-based activities because they felt that their teachers lacked proficiency in the target language or did not have the ability to implement TBLT effectively. Hadi states that it is important that EFL teachers in Iran have the opportunity to be “educated in fields relating to...task-based planning, implementation, and evaluation” (Hadi, 2012, p. 109) and that they are proficient in the languages that they are teaching. This article was insightful about how attitudes toward teaching/learning methods can change over time and with effective implementation. However, I still wanted to know more about how task-based learning/teaching can

promote L2 acquisition. Consequently, this lead me to another article on Iranian EFL learners.

Through **Farsani, Tavakoli, and Moinzadeh's (2012)** article, *The effect of task-based instruction on the acquisition and use of English existential constructions by Iranian EFL learners*, I discovered how the use of focus-on-form tasks framed within task-based learning can be an effective way to teach students specific grammatical structures. Farsani, Tavakoli, and Moinzadeh note that existential constructions in English present a particularly difficult form to acquire for Iranian EFL students. They claim that this is due to the fact that Farsi is a 'pro-drop' language in which the subject of a sentence can be dropped entirely. Some other examples of pro-drop languages include Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Russian, and Spanish. Farsani et al. (2012) investigated the effectiveness of focus-on-form instruction in acquiring English existential constructions with a group of 60 male EFL learners, 14 to 23 years of age. The study included an experimental group which was instructed through the use of focus-on-form tasks as framed within task-based instruction, a control group which was instructed through traditional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) instruction, and a second control group which received no specific instruction and were exposed to input through classroom materials only. Prior to instruction, participants were given an oral pre-test which indicated that they were all of a similar level. After the treatment, participants progress was assessed through an oral post-test and after a two-week delay, again through a written post-test. All tests included pictures or other description tasks that required the use of existential constructions. Farsani et al. discovered that the experimental group outperformed both the PPP control group and the input only control group. They also

report that the PPP group outperformed the input only group. Farsani et al. conclude that focus-on-form instruction has a positive effect on the acquisition of existential constructions for EFL learners and that this can be applied to other difficult grammar forms as well. Farsani et al. additionally make the claim that the results of their study reinforce the idea that input alone is not sufficient for “effective acquisition of and correct use of grammatical structures in a foreign language” (Farsani et al., 2012, p. 58). Having seen how a particular aspect of task-based instruction, focus-on-form tasks, can be an effective tool in helping students to acquire a grammatical form that they struggle with, I wanted to know more about how task-based instruction could be used to help second language learners.

*Bridges to Swaziland: Using Task-Based Learning and Computer-Mediated Instruction to Improve English Language Teaching and Learning* by **Pierson (2015)** explores how task-based learning can be combined with technology to help L2 language students who are in disadvantageous situations. Pierson conducted a project with a mission school in Swaziland that worked with orphans and other vulnerable children (OVCs). The project started with a visit by Pierson and another teacher to the mission school in June of 2011, where they worked directly with 10 teachers at the school and 30 students aged 10 to 17 years old. Over the course of 14 days, Pierson worked with the teachers and students in using Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Task-based Language Learning (TBLL) approaches to design English language learning activities. Additionally, workshops were conducted with the teachers for 7 consecutive schooldays during the project. In the second phase of the project Pierson returned to the mission school in Swaziland and worked with 7 of the teachers from the previous project

to conduct an English language learning camp with 100 teenage English learners. They introduced a task to the students based on an adapted version of the *Bizworld* curriculum, in which students produced and marketed a unique product in groups or “companies”. Pierson explains that the students were allowed to negotiate most of the task through their L1 but were required to present their work, in the form of business proposals or advertisements, in English. Pierson notes, however, that one potential drawback of a “purely task-based” approach is that students “may not receive sufficient instruction in new vocabulary and grammar” (p. 111). This drawback can be overcome through a mixing of tasks. Certainly, as demonstrated by Farsani, Tavakoli, and Moinsadeh (2012), focus-on-form tasks can be incorporated into TBLL lessons in order to further students’ grammar skills. At the end of the camp, Pierson surveyed 20 of the campers and 5 of the teachers. The results of the survey were overwhelmingly positive, with many teachers reporting the implementation of CALL and TBLL increased their confidence and motivated the students. Additionally, teachers stated that they enjoyed presenting TBLL materials and that they believe the students’ English proficiency had increased. The students also had a very positive orientation toward the use of CALL and TBLL, stating that they “enjoyed the activities, believed their English proficiency improved as a result of their experiences and wished to continue using cell phones and iPads” (Pierson, 2015, p. 115). Finally Pierson notes that since the project began at the mission school, a higher number of students have passed their English exams, enabling them to pass on the next grade. After reading this article I wanted to know more about how technology can be used to incorporate task-based learning into the classroom.

*In Significance of Social Applications on a Mobile Phone for English Task-based Language Learning*, **Ahmad and Farrukh (2015)** investigate the use of Application Assisted Language Learning (APALL), a sub-branch of Mobile Assisted Learning (MALL), as a way to implement task-based learning. The authors state that the use of such tools should be assessed through the lens of seven principles proposed by Nunan (2004): scaffolding, task dependency, recycling, active learning, integration, reproduction to creation, and reflection. Ahmad and Farrukh discuss the use of four applications in particular: Skype, Viber, Whatsapp, and Hike Messenger. Skype can be used for a variety of tasks and allows users to interact through video, audio, and text. Skype also allows users to share screens, which Ahmad and Farrukh claim can be used as a scaffolding strategy. Additionally, Skype can be utilized in information gap activities or through the conference call feature, debate tasks which promote active learning. Viber has some useful features such as ‘stickers’ and a ‘doodle’ option, in addition to allowing users to interact through audio, video, and text. Ahmad and Farrukh state that the sticker function can be used to communicate emotion or clarify the meanings of certain words while the doodle option can be implemented in problem-solving tasks. Whatsapp is very similar to Viber but has a voice and video messaging feature that allows users to send pre-recorded messages, which can be used as a type of recycling strategy. Hike is an instant messaging application which allows users to “use illustrative stickers, images, music files, videos, contact files, voice messages and documents” (Ahmad & Farrukh, 2015, p. 99). Users of this app can share screens, which could be useful in a reproduction to creation strategy, which is “[t]he process of taking the learner from a phase of simply reproducing the learned material to creatively incorporating it into different contexts” (p. 101). If

implemented carefully, APALL can offer useful tools for expanding task-based learning outside of the classroom. After reading this article, I wondered how else technology might be used to support task-based learning.

**Tsai (2013)** studied the implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courseware, using a task-based approach, in an EFL class at a university in southern Taiwan. The article *Implementing courseware as the primary mode of task-based ESP instruction: a case study of EFL students*, compares a courseware-enriched class with a traditional, non-ICT control group. Tsai states that in the enriched class, “the courseware provided not only the target ESP learning materials but also content-based and language learning activities with instant self-evaluation” (Tsai, 2013, p. 172). The content of the course involved reading ‘target articles’ which were followed by a number of different tasks. Tsai found in a post-test writing task that the ICT group significantly outperformed the non-ICT group in the areas of idea count and word count. In a survey conducted at the end of the course it was found that most students had a positive attitude toward the implementation of the ESP courseware. Tsai notes that some of the advantages of using the courseware were instant feedback, a more active and flexible learning environment, and the variety of language activities students were exposed to. While courseware can be an effective tool, I believe that it is by no means a replacement for the instructor. Courseware would be better implemented as a tool in support of instruction, perhaps as an outside-class component, rather than as the core feature of a class. Courseware definitely has potential to be a useful tool in language instruction. However, I wanted to know more about how interactions between teacher and learners, as well as between learner and learner, affect overall learning outcomes.



*Teacher- and Learner-Led Discourse in Task-Based Grammar Instruction: Providing Procedural Assistance for Morphosyntactic Development* by **Toth (2008)** examines differences between tasks conducted as a whole-class activity, using teacher-lead-discourse (TLD) versus tasks conducted in pairs or small groups, through learner-lead-discourse (LLD). To compare these two types of discourse, Toth conducted a study with 53 native English-speaking Spanish L2 learners. One class was designated as an LLD group and the other as a TLD group. Furthermore, 25 students from a nearby university with a nearly identical curriculum served as a control group. The LLD group engaged in tasks requiring two-way or three-way information exchange. The TLD group engaged in very similar tasks but as an entire class activity led by the teacher. Toth states that it has been “argued that LLD confers greater linguistic autonomy, creativity, and self-regulation upon learners, all of which are necessary if they are to master the L2 as a tool for communication” (p. 145). As such, it would be expected that learners who are afforded the opportunity to work on meaningful tasks together in small groups would make greater progress than learners in a class in which all discussions are led by the teacher. However, Toth’s study had some surprising results. In a post-test, while it was discovered that both groups had greatly improved in their use of anti-causative ‘*se*’ in a guided production task and a grammatical judgment task, the TLD group outperformed the LLD group in both tasks. Furthermore, in a delayed post-test given 24 days later, the TLD group had regressed less than the LLD group. In an analysis of video and audio recordings, plus their transcripts, Toth found major differences in the interactions among the two groups. In the LLD group, since no one was designated as an L2 expert, the focus of attention was controlled through “questions, feedback, and metatalk, without the singular focus on

one linguistic issue and with greater negotiation among participants” (p. 170). Thus, the linguistic focus of the groups was much wider than in the TDL group. Toth notes that in one particular instance, the group seemed to be more focused on the formation of past-tense than the use of anti-causative ‘*se*’. In the TDL group, the instructor managed turn-taking and was able to direct the flow of the conversation to maintain focus on the grammatical target, anti-causative ‘*se*’. Although teacher directed, this was done in a collaborative manner and the teacher directed questions toward individual students and encouraged them to help one another. Toth also found that teacher feedback often had “the function of assisting with utterance formulation rather than merely evaluating performance (i.e., feedback) or posing an additional question and nominating a speaker (i.e., initiation)” (p. 167). It was also noted that teacher discourse often seemed to have the purpose of lightening the cognitive load of “mapping the target L2 form onto meaning... during production” (p. 167). Furthermore, the ongoing assistance provided by the teacher in the TDL group lead some students to monitor their own speech in attempt to prevent making errors. Toth concludes that while findings of this study show that TDL can in fact be beneficial for students, and in some cases more so than LLD, that both types of discourse have their own particular advantages. For example, LLD is more learner-centered and allows for a greater amount of autonomy, self-selection in turn-taking, and the ability to adopt a wide range of speaking roles. Ideally, classes would use a mix of both types of discourse and make full use of their advantages. While this article was informative, I wanted to know more about how learners themselves affect the tasks that they engage with.

In *Rethinking task-based language learning: what we can learn from the learners*, **Slimani-Rolls (2005)** investigated the occurrence of conversational adjustments (CAs) during one-way information exchange tasks, two-way information exchange tasks, and decision-making tasks among twenty students enrolled in a French for business purposes class at an international higher education institution in London. Slimani-Rolls also investigated how learners modify their interactions during negotiation and how they explain their involvement, or lack of, in the meaning negotiation process. The author states that many studies have claimed that two-way tasks result in better conditions for negotiation of meaning to take place through the CAs learners make during interaction. However, it is also noted that this consensus has been challenged by other studies and some researchers advocate a mix of two-way and one-way exchange tasks. Slimani-Rolls found that there were 73 instances of meaning negotiation in the form of confirmation checks and clarification requests, however, no other strategies were used. The two-way information exchange task resulted in the most instances, the one-way task the least, and the decision-making task in the middle. Slimani-Rolls cautions that while the two-way task resulted in a high quantity of CAs, it would be superficial and even inaccurate to assume that task type is influential based only on this data. In interviews with students, a very different account of what took place during interactions in the different task types appeared. From the student interviews on their use of negation strategies it was discovered that most of the clarification requests and all of the confirmation checks were simply used to confirm what the listener had “already understood, recalled, or heard correctly” (Slimani-Rolls, 2005, p.203). This seemed to be related to a sense of anxiety about getting missing information, which was especially noticed in the two-way tasks.

Slimani-Rolls claims that “it...[was] the decision-making task and the one-way task that prompted the learners most effectively to modify their output in a meaningful way” (p. 204). Additionally, the negation that took place in the two-way task, despite being more frequent, appeared to be motivated more by a desire to complete the task rather than to clarify cases of incomprehension. Slimani-Rolls states that students reported that they sometimes sacrificed pedagogical goals out of a desire to preserve social relationships with their classmates. It is also noted that “an abnormally frequent use of ...[negotiation] strategies can jeopardize social interaction in general and social rapport in particular” (Slimani-Rolls, 2005, p. 205). Furthermore, students often get to know one another quite well, often outside of classroom contexts, and as a result negotiating meaning becomes less needed as they often guess what is meant through context and shared experience. Slimani-Rolls concludes that there is great value in involving learners in the research process and that by doing so we can learn more about what actually takes place in the classroom. While having learned more about the role of conversational adjustments in tasks, I still wanted to know more about how learners perceive task-based learning.

**Pyun (2013)** researched Korean learners’ attitudes toward task-based language learning (TBLL) in the article *Attitudes Toward Task-Based Language Learning: A Study of College Korean Language Learners*. In the study ‘task’ was defined in a broad sense, including both focus-on-form and meaning-focused tasks. Pyun was concerned with the influence of anxiety, integrated motivation, instrumental motivation, and self-efficacy on students’ attitudes toward TBLL. Data was collected from 91 students enrolled in Korean language classes at a U.S. university through a questionnaire given to students during the last week of the semester. All learners in the study participated in a communicative

classroom in which they engaged in activities such as: “dialogues, role-plays, problem-solving tasks, and information-gap activities” (p. 111). Pyun found that on average students experienced a moderate amount of anxiety, with 1/3 of the participants reporting a high level of anxiety, 1/3 reporting a moderate level of anxiety, and the last 1/3 reporting either a low or very low level of anxiety during task performance. There was a negative correlation of anxiety and learners’ attitudes toward TBLL, meaning that more anxious learners were less receptive to TBLL. Since anxiety has a significant impact on learners’ receptivity toward TBLL, Pyun argues that teachers “should be more aware of the range of task anxiety students experience in the classroom and should make efforts to provide a relaxed and unpressured atmosphere for task performance” (p. 115). It was also found that students, on average, had a high level of self-efficacy, which had a positive correlation with students’ attitudes toward TBLL. Pyun notes that students with a high level of self-efficacy also tend to have “stronger L2 motivation and feel less anxious when performing tasks” (p. 114). Additionally, self-efficacy was the highest predictor of a positive orientation toward TBLL. One way in which teachers might help to increase self-efficacy for all students is by providing tasks with small attainable goals that build up to a long-term goal. By experiencing many small successes in using the L2, students are more likely to feel confident and thus more motivated to participate in classroom tasks.

To conclude, task-based learning has been proven to not only be an effective approach, but one that is motivating for students as well. This is likely due to the fact that tasks can be representative of real-life activities which makes learning more meaningful. Task-based learning can also be used for a number of purposes. Focus-on-form tasks are a promising approach to teaching grammatical forms while maintaining a focus on

communication. Task-based learning approaches can also be enhanced through the use of technology, which is an area likely to have even greater influence on language learning in the future.

While task-based learning is certainly effective, like any other method or approach, teachers must plan carefully to ensure its successful implementation into the classroom. Teachers also need to be aware of student backgrounds, especially in the field of ESL in which students come from a great variety of different cultures. Some students are likely to be unfamiliar with task-based learning approaches and may need to be convinced of its value. Through careful planning and by ensuring that students understand the goals of the class, teachers can increase the chances that the implementation of task-based learning will be successful and that their students will have a positive learning experience.

## LOOKING FORWARD

During my year and half in the MSLT program I have been very fortunate in having the opportunity to explore several areas of language teaching that are of great interest to me not only in ESL/EFL but in Japanese as a foreign language as well. I wish to continue my development as a teacher and gain even more practical experience teaching in a university setting. It is my desire to eventually pursue a doctorates degree in either applied linguistics or second language acquisition. For now, I plan to find a position teaching English to second language learner at a university here in the U.S. or at a university abroad and further sharpen my skills as a teacher. While I am teaching, I would like to continue to explore effective tools and methods for second language teaching and perhaps even submit some papers to an academic journal.

One day I would also like to have the opportunity to teach Japanese as it is a language that I find fascinating. I am especially interested in researching new methods for teaching literacy skills to Japanese language learners who come from western language backgrounds. To work toward this goal, I plan to continue to develop my own Japanese language abilities, especially in the areas of reading and writing. I believe that returning to Japan is the best way to accomplish this and if given the chance, I will likely do so.

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