

The role of on-line learning for second foreign language learning

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English abstract

In this paper, we will consider the general characteristics of network-based language learning with respect to serious problems of second foreign language teaching situation in Japan. Concretely, we will sketch historical changes of the relevance of the second foreign language teaching in Japan, and discuss, mainly in the context of Hiroshima university, ramifications of the recent second foreign language reduction (part 1), propose compensation for the lacking contact time by using web-based language learning methods (part 2), and mention active roles for teachers in a creative language learning process in a classroom (part 3). Thus, web-based second foreign language learning enables the students to process authentic learning materials with rich cultural information.

Japanese abstract (translation)

本論文では、日本の第二外国語教育の危機との関連でネットワーク型外国語学習の特徴と長所を考察する。まず、第二外国語教育の歴史的変遷を辿り、主に広島大学における第二外国語授業時間の削減の結果と現状を議論する(第1節)。次に、インターネット利用学習による授業時間数の減少の補正の役割を考え(第2節)、更に文化情報に満ちた実際の学習素材を処理する際の教師の積極的役割を強調する(第3節)。

Bio Blurb

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Introduction

In this paper, we will consider the general characteristics of network-based language learning with respect to the problems of second foreign language teaching situation in Japan. Concretely, we discuss, mainly in the context of Hiroshima university, ramifications of the recent second foreign language reduction (part 1), propose compensation for the lacking contact time (part 2), and mention active roles for teachers.

A foreign language is an elective subject on the middle and high school level, but most middle and high schools offer only English, so English is, in fact, a required course. Very few schools offer other languages such as French, German, Chinese, or Korean. Therefore, most students learn a second foreign language for the first time at university.

1. Reduction of second foreign language teaching

One of the serious problems for the second foreign language (FL) courses in many universities is the reduction of teaching hours. Until the beginning of 1990s, almost all university students learned a second FL besides English, usually German or French, as this was required in the guidelines for establishing universities. Most students had these language classes twice a week, and the course usually lasted for two years as part of the general education requirements. On the assumption that foreign language learning is useful for acquiring general cultural knowledge, second FL teaching focused on grammatical competence and reading skills (cf. Sekiguchi 2000). Actually, most of our older colleagues could hardly speak German, partly because they had no chance to learn it well, and thus they always translated German texts into Japanese and read them in Japanese (Sekiguchi 2000).

However, there has been growing concern that the Japanese education system did not have the flexibility needed to respond to actual global problems because of rapid changes taking place in the world.

In 1991, the guidelines for establishing universities were relaxed by the Japanese Ministry of Education. On the one hand, this led to a more flexible curriculum at many universities. On the other hand, however, the importance of the liberal arts was reduced. In some cases, liberal arts departments have even been dissolved. Accordingly, many second FL courses were greatly affected by this reduction policy. As a result, the curriculum for second FL learning was considerably reduced. In fact, there are now private universities without second FL courses. Thus, we second FL teachers now face

the following problems:

- Overwhelming dominance of English in FL courses.
- Neglect of other FL in the university curriculums.

It has been sometimes said that Japanese Government should introduce English as the second official language ¹⁾ and that learning of a second FL is rather an obstacle to the improvement of English learning (cf. Funabashi 2000). We think that English as a tool for global communication is indeed very important in order to communicate with people all over the world. Thus, it is only natural that English proficiency is emphasized at universities, At the same time, it should be stressed that people are now accepting more and more multicultural and multilingual values in the world, and to learn different languages would contribute to a more relativized and tolerant view (cf. Suzuki 2001). Furthermore, we have observed that many students understand English better than before after they begin to learn a second foreign language.

Table 1 demonstrates the changes in language curriculums at Hiroshima University.

Table 1

English teaching and other language teaching at Hiroshima University

	until 1991	1992 - 1996	1997 – 2001	since 2002
English	optional	optional	obligatory	obligatory
(credits)	8	6-8	6-8	6-8
Other foreign	optional	optional	optional (or free)	optional (free)
language(s)	4-8	4	0-4	0-4

Nowadays, most students (about 95 % at Hiroshima University) have a second FL course only for one year, usually once or twice a week (2 or 4 credits). This is, of course, not sufficient for any minimal language learning requirement. Afterwards, these students do not even have any opportunity to continue their second FL learning. Hiroshima University optionally offers foreign language advanced courses in the third and fourth semesters, but only few (around 60-80) students can attend these classes,

because the curriculums are not flexible enough. Even if students are interested in a foreign language, the time of the classes does not fit their schedule. Since the students begin to learn a second FL at university, the reduction of learning hours by half causes severe damage.

The question, then, is how to overcome the shortage of teaching hours in the second FL courses. Usually, students learn a second FL for 90 hours within one year. One might wonder what students can actually learn in such a limited time? It is almost impossible to teach even basic communicative skills within this short term.

2. Compensation for insufficient second FL teaching hours

We then have to guarantee that students can learn a second FL more intensively outside the classroom, too. On-line learning as a virtual university course offers itself as a suitable place for foreign language learning; students can access the on-line learning material every time they want and wherever a computer with access to the Internet is available (Nowadays, the Internet is accessible per telephones or wireless!). Web-based on-line language learning can then function as a complement to a regular language course.

Because the time available for a second foreign language teaching is very limited, some teachers now think that instead of language training, cultural knowledge or reading ability should be stressed in a second foreign language course.

The on-line FL learning can also play an innovative role with respect to the restricted learning environment in a traditional classroom. As there is too much stress on culture and reading/grammar skills in traditional second language learning, it lacks communicative training. We think, however, that we should further develop the communicative abilities of our learners in order to solve global social and intercultural problems. Then, for example, grammar exercises can be assigned to the drills with a computer outside the classroom, so that the teacher can spend more time for communicative and creative language training in the classroom (=outsourcing). The Internet is famous for its sheer volume. It has the following advantages:

a) Authentic information in multimedia:

Using the World Wide Web, students can search through millions of files around the world within minutes to locate and access authentic materials (e.g., newspaper and magazine articles, radio broadcasts, video skits etc.) that correspond to their own personal interests. (cf. Kern & Warschauer 2000)

b) It is interactive:

The internet enables learners to call up information themselves and choose what they actually want to get.

c) It is communicative:

The internet enables real interaction with other people. Learners with access to the Internet can now potentially communicate with native speakers or other language learners all over the world twenty-four hours a day, from everywhere, be that school, home, or work. Thus, the complaint that we have little cultural information in Japan, and we can therefore not motivate our learners, does not hold in the face of the Internet. On the contrary: We now have enormous cultural information resources available.

3. Active role of language teachers

Following Kern & Warschauer (2000), the cyberspace world of the Internet is full of multilingual resources and useful for the learning of every language: "The very existence of networked computers creates possibilities for new kinds of communication. Because these new forms of communication are now so widespread, it is imperative that language students be exposed to them in the classroom. This is particularly important in English-language teaching, because so much international on-line communication is conducted in that language, but it is likely to become increasingly important in the teaching of other languages as well, as cyberspace continues to become more multilingual." (Kern & Warschauer 2000: 12)

While this observation seems to be rather trivial, there is still a gap between the enormous authentic resource in the Internet and the learners' interests, because the information resources are too difficult to understand for most learners of the second FL on the beginner level. As texts in the WWW tend to be too difficult for beginners, too much information overwhelms the learners. Here, the teacher has to take over and play an active role by developing an appropriate method. The interest of the learners has to be linked up with the available topics and a way to bridge the complexity of authentic information needs to be developed. For example, we can carry out a virtual trip to Germany by making use of the World Wide Web. The virtual trips are already famous as WWW-projects and very useful in motivating learners. (Rüschhoff & Wolff, 1999) In our project, step-by-step procedures such as introducing Japanese web-sites at first and German web-sites in the second stage will help to stimulate learners' understanding of cultural information. We hope that our on-line learning materials can function as a gateway to other interesting authentic learning material on the World

Wide Web.

4. Summary

To summarize, web-based language learning, including our virtual university project for German learning, should contribute to an autonomous self-study, as well as a creative, collaborative forming of language classrooms as one part of a rich language-learning environment.

Notes

1) “In the long term, it may be possible to make English an official second language, but national debate will be needed. First, though, every effort should be made to equip the population with a working knowledge of English. This is not simply a matter of foreign-language education. It should be regarded as a strategic imperative.” (“Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium”, Report of the Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/21century/report/overview.html>)

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Yoshida, M. (to appear). Cultural Information (Landeskunde) and the Internet. PAC3
at JALT2001 Proceedings