

COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE OF THE STUDENTS OF JAPANESE

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ABSTRACT

For foreign language learning/teaching, it is essential to equally develop four skills, speaking, listening, reading and writing. Adult learners especially show a tendency to be slower in the acquisition of the first two skills, speaking and listening. There are several factors involved in explaining this tendency. One in particular is due to the fear of speaking and being too shy to talk. Speaking practice is inevitable in language learning. Yet somehow the learners' confidence has to be maintained within a non-threatening environment.

The introduction of y-talk (a multi-user chat program) between a Japanese university and a Japanese language class at the University of Wollongong has demonstrated some possible solutions to these concerns. As far as the degree of simultaneousness and unexpectedness is concerned, the use of y-talk is reasonably comparable with a normal conversation. Yet this gives the learners time to think about their response or time to consult the meaning in the dictionary next to their computer. Furthermore this y-talk communication enables the learners to access real updated information on Japan and the Japanese culture and can also be a source of motivation for the learners.

At the same time, the introduction of computer mediated communication in language learning opens up some possibilities for flexible delivery of resource based learning materials.

This project will investigate the effectiveness of the introduction of computer-mediated communication as a resource based language learning class, as well as a teaching tool to be used in flexible delivery.

KEY WORDS

Japanese, y-talk, foreign language learning, communicative, authentic resources, self-esteem.

1. INTRODUCTION

As many foreign language learners have experienced, our students prefer to have native speakers of Japanese as their sounding board in order to practice their language. In class it is common for students to evaluate the perceived levels of competence of their fellow students, often at their own expense. Though a student may be particularly talented in reading and writing, his/her lack of self-confidence in speaking may create a false impression of his/her true ability among peers. According to our survey conducted among third year Japanese language students, fourteen students out of seventeen answered that they like speaking to native Japanese speakers but four out of the fourteen do not like to speak Japanese in the presence of classmates, and five students expressed speaking as the most difficult component of Japanese language skills. As Brown (1994) suggests the feelings, perceptions, self-image and attitudes of the learner are

very much a part of the language learning process, and it is possible that the successful adult language learner is someone who can bridge this affective gap. Many researchers have reported various affective factors on computer mediated communication use as well as the effects of computer use on human behaviour in various settings (Nilan, 1993, Zimmerman, 1987, Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984). Hiltz(1986) indicated more than a decade ago, the importance of the study on the better use of the computer in educational settings. Commensurate with Hiltz's suggestion the focus nowadays is more on experimenting with a better and more effective way of using email in educational settings. Many studies have also been carried out on the effect of computer mediated communication in educational settings (Althans, 1997 and McComb, 1994 in university settings). Investigating the potential of better computer usage in foreign language class is not exceptional. Tao(1995 &1996)has provided a guide for future research in the area of email education, yet as far as foreign language learning is concerned there are many areas to be explored (Chapman,1997). Beauvois(1992) has reported on the use of computers as communicative foreign language learning and teaching tools in Portuguese and French language classrooms, where student to teacher and student to student interaction was employed, and the computer was innovatively used in the university foreign language classroom.

In this paper we will explore the effectiveness of a simultaneous and real-time conversation made possible by computer link with Doshisha University in Japan. The computer was also seen as a facilitator to overcome the personal and transactional barriers presented by the learner's own and target language cultures. In the classroom, the possibilities of utilising computer mediated communication as a tool to fill the affective gap of the adult learner of Japanese was explored, and these possibilities will also be examined in this paper. The potential use of the conjunction of y-talk class with a traditional Japanese language class is also discussed.

Y-talk communication, real-time simultaneous talk, was introduced between Doshisha University in Japan and the University of Wollongong, as a part of a language learning program which had the concrete aim of using 'real' Japanese language, which is not always possible in the context of the classroom, to develop Japanese language skills in a non-threatening environment, and to cultivate the student as an autonomous learner.

2. HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were set based on existing research together with our observation of the students of Japanese.

1. Y-talk would become a tool to communicate with native Japanese speakers in a manner similar to speech.
2. Y-talk would provide a non-threatening environment for the students learning a foreign language.
3. Y-talk would assist in decreasing the cultural barriers between the Japanese culture and their own.
4. Y-talk would provide a learner-centered flexible delivery.

3. METHOD

3.1 SAMPLE

Seventeen Japanese language major students (fifteen (15) females and two (2) males), enrolled in a third year level compulsory language subject at the University of Wollongong, participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 20 to 31 with an average age of 20.9. Their years of studying Japanese ranged from 2.5 years to 9 years with an average of 5.2 years.

The first language of the students is English (13), Chinese (2), and Mandarin (2). Most students (16) were familiar with the use of email (average use of two years), while seven students reported having used y-talk (average use of 2.5 years) prior to this subject.

3.2. Y-TALK CLASS DESCRIPTION

The third year students of Japanese participated in a simultaneous talk, y-talk, as a part of their compulsory language subject with the students of English at Doshisha University, Kyoto Japan once a week over a seven week period for sixty minutes.

Prior to the first session, the students of Japanese were required to activate their own wumpus account (UNIX file computer server) as well as to be able to use basic 'wumpus' commands. The first y-talk class offered a brief lesson on y-talk.

Each student was paired up with a y-talk Buddy in Japan with whom they would communicate for the year. The Buddies were arranged by the coordinators prior to the session.

Each week the coordinators from both of the Universities decided on a topic for y-talk via email. The topic was briefly discussed in regular class prior to the y-talk class. Some examples of the topics used in the class were; self introduction, holidays, social issues, and differences between Japan and Australia. The English language was used as the language of communication in the first 1/2 hour and the Japanese language for the second 1/2 hour or vice versa.

A temporary Buddy was arranged by the coordinators for the students whose partners were absent for the day. When a temporary Buddy could not be arranged, the student wrote an email message on the day's topic to his/her own Buddy.

All students were encouraged to 'talk' and exchange information with their Buddy through email outside the class time. Three language computer labs were used for the y-talk class.

3.2.1 Y-talk methodology

Firstly students would log-in and 'call' their buddy. Once the buddy pairs were on line, they would 'talk' to each other using the keyboard. Each buddy could see in real time what their counterpart was writing, as their composition appeared immediately on screen. The questions and answers appeared on the both screens. The students keyed in Roman script. The conversation was free flowing with the supervising language teacher acting as a resource for understanding and writing.

3.2.2 Assessment

Students were not assessed on their grammatical accuracy during the y-talk session. As the assessment task, the students were required to produce a y-talk logbook which consisted of three sections; 1) a y-talk buddy profile, written in Japanese, 2) a summary of the first five sessions of y-talk, written in Japanese, e.g. the things they talked about, their thoughts and opinions on the communication and topic exchange, and 3) an evaluation of self-studying with the use of email and y-talk, written in English.

3.3 PROCEDURE OF DATA COLLECTION

When completed the log books were marked and returned to the students in the first week of Session Two, together with an information sheet and a consent form, the students were asked if they would like to participate in this research project. All participation was voluntary and did not affect the students' academic record in any way. The research participants were asked for permission to use the section of their logbook, and to attend an individual five to ten minute semi-structured interview. The purpose of the interview was to increase validity, to collect background information from the students, and to clarify what the students wrote in their logbooks.

After the collection of the consent form from seventeen students, each participant was interviewed. The questions were set to maintain a level of stability between the two interviewers. The interview was recorded onto an audio tape recorder. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

4. RESULT

On the basis of the data collected, the responses from the students were categorised mainly into three areas; y-talk as an authentic resource, y-talk as a tool to develop self-esteem, and y-talk as communicative language teaching and learning tool.

4.1 Y-TALK AS AUTHENTIC RESOURCE

Most students viewed y-talk as an authentic resource which can enhance their knowledge on Japan as well as offer the means to enrich one's self at a personal level.

4.1.1 Authentic materials

Fifteen students reported that they had obtained information on Japan and the people such as life style, food, social issues, social aspects, trends, national holidays, culture, history, traditional life, how the people talk to each other, and differences in comparison with their own country. Three students reported that they had learned man's talk, a specific way for a Japanese man to talk, and natural and conversational styles, while one viewed y-talk as unnatural Japanese due to the use of Roman script and the absence of voice.

4.1.2 Personal resource

Y-talk seemed to bring a unique experience to the students. Despite the fact that this kind of communication lacks non-verbal cues and is considered 'impersonal', eleven students reported that their Buddy had become not simply a means of obtaining information about Japan but had become a friend who "shares similar interests and problems" and who "exchanges cards, letters, and email outside of class" and the students showed appreciation of opinions exchanged with the Buddy at a personal level. One commented that "as y-talk employs written style, this might have helped Japanese people, who are considered to be shy, to express themselves better". Also two reported that "it was possible to tell the Buddy's emotion, if the Buddy was in a good mood or not" and enjoyed "the opportunity to observe the buddy's thinking process and opinion changes on some topics over time". Other responses were that y-talk "enriched one's ideas and understanding by exchanging thoughts, feelings and emotions with the Buddy", "developed self openness to the target culture", "made me realise the possibility of learning through actual experience", which led to individual self-reflection.

4.2 Y-TALK AS A TOOL TO DEVELOP SELF-ESTEEM

The focus of this section is on affective aspects of y-talk use.

Nine students reported that they "did not feel embarrassment, pressure or stupidity when unwanted questions arose, when making mistakes and having grammar corrected, and when they took time to respond". They also felt it was "less confronting to type into a computer as opposed to meeting a person for the first time", and there was "no bias in regard to their physical appearance". Two students commented that because they were forced to respond they became more motivated, while one reported the same experience as making him/her feel "frustrated, nervous, scared, and horrified".

As a result of being in such a non-threatening environment, some reported that this form of learning gave "confidence to communicate with Japanese native speakers if you put your mind to it", "an opportunity to realize how much I know of Japanese. Actually I know quite a lot" and the "self satisfaction of understanding each other quite well". Also some "looked forward to coming to y-talk class more than other classes" and "felt good as the Buddy was always apologizing for their English". One commented "y-talk was fun as the topics were more open".

4.3 Y-TALK AS COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING TOOLS

4.3.1 *Simultaneousness and Unexpectedness*

Ten students reported that they had enjoyed the simultaneousness of y-talk, such as the immediate responses and the chance of evaluating their knowledge instantly, while one reported the same experience as ‘frustrating and nervous’ for the same reasons. Five students said that they had to push themselves hard to respond. Three described this y-talk experience “as if they were facing the Buddy and the Buddy was waiting for their answer”. One commented on the appreciation of ‘unexpectedness’ of y-talk such as not knowing what questions would be asked. Another commented in a similar respect saying “y-talk is a fast form of communication like speaking on the phone, being nervous about what to say and how to start the conversation”.

4.3.2 *Linguistics aspects*

Nine students reported that they had learned a lot of grammar, vocabulary, and expressions within context, which were not in the textbooks and which were used mainly by native speakers. Also they learned through mistakes which were corrected by the Buddies. Although Roman script was used for y-talk, three students reported a positive side saying “some of the spelling became clearer as these have to be spelt correctly in order to communicate”, and they gained “more appreciation of Kana and Kanji”. Five students reported having learned informal structures, slang, casual speech, and conversational Japanese, while one reported being more formal in trying to make grammar correct. Also one appreciated the written aspect of “y-talk as conversation” because of its visibility during conversation.

4.3.3 *Communication strategies*

The students seemed to have developed unique communication strategies in order to cope with y-talk. Although most students reported having used dictionaries during y-talk, eight students reported having asked the Buddy for clarification when they did not understand. Three students tried other expressions or skipped words, two used English words in replacement when they did not know how to say something. Some students considered that “the use of the dictionary was wasting time” and “asking the Buddy was quicker” as they felt “the Buddy was waiting behind the computer screen”.

Also one reported having “developed conversational skills” and another “developed communication strategies such as what questions to ask and how to put it without being too direct”. One reported having “practiced the sacrifice of good grammar in favor of getting the point across.” On the other hand, three reported that they had experienced some misunderstanding perhaps due to “a lack of body language and non-verbal cues which resulted in the difficulty of judging if the Buddy was being serious or joking”, and “not enough time to respond yet had to type correctly and quickly without fully understanding the whole message”.

4.3.4 *New direction*

Four students commented on y-talk as a “different way of communicating”, a “different type of learning style, ‘speaking’”, and “you are in charge of your own learning and things you can get out of it are different too”. One appreciated the ease and simplicity of y-talk. Also one appreciated having learned from a native speaker who was in a same situation of being an English language learner. One reported having discovered a new learning strategy through y-talk.

5. DISCUSSION

As individuals begin to accept the differences in thinking and feeling that surround them, they slowly become more empathic with other persons in the second culture (Brown 1994, Ch.7).

In contrast to many studies which mention the depersonalization of computer use, this study received positive feedback about personal level of interaction between students. In other words, y-talk communication helps to increase an intimate relationship between the language learner and a buddy from the target culture. It helps students to overcome the personal and transactional barriers presented by the two cultures in contact, and the relationship of cultural learning to foreign language learning. A reasonable self-image is especially important in language learning settings as making mistakes is so apparent to others when having grammar and pronunciation corrected, and speaking with an incorrect accent. The students seemed to enjoy the non-invasive nature of y-talk particularly in regard to their self-image, as there is no face-to-face contact, no actual speaking, and little or no teacher interference involved. It also encourages on-going unsupervised communication as indicated by the more lasting continuing relationships which developed. As far as providing a non-threatening environment is concerned, positive responses outweighed the negatives.

Some issues using y-talk as a part of the language learning program were expressed by the students. Some stated that y-talk was much more difficult than face to face conversation because body language cannot be seen, and higher levels of language were needed in order to fill the gap made by losing body language or facial expression. Because of this need students were required to develop language which would facilitate their learning. Also some students pointed out that the grammar mistakes were not of concern, and did not check each others' mistakes. Although some negative issues were identified, y-talk class still proved to be a useful language learning tool.

According to Johnson & Morrow (1981) activities involved in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are engaging learners in communication, which includes processes such as information sharing, negotiation of meaning and interaction. Unexpectedness is a crucial part of the activities. Brown (1994) describes CLT classrooms as an environment where students ultimately have to use the language productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. This y-talk communication successfully provides the students with a meaningful learning task.

The simultaneousness which is necessary for the development of speaking communication competence was reported by the students. This shows that y-talk can be a supporting tool to partially reinforce speaking skills.

Also in this y-talk class environment, the students were forced to use the Japanese language, and this language production and reception were unexpected and immediate. As the results reveal, y-talk is capable of fulfilling some aspects of communicative language teaching in a new way. Material authenticity by using native Japanese speakers as the learning resource is highly appreciated by the students. The communicative approach of foreign language teaching encompasses language as a system for the expression of meaning whose primary function is interaction and communication. In communicative language teaching, language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes (Brown, 1994, Ch. 9). This y-talk helps nullify the geographical distance between the students and Japan and enables Japanese students to communicate with a student of English in a Japanese university to exchange information, and discuss the current social issues as university students. Also 'simultaneousness' and 'unexpectedness' which are the characteristics of speaking and appreciation of these factors were observed.

The demonstration of the capabilities of y-talk as a communicative language tool also suggests that the y-talk class could be presented as a language class in flexible delivery form. For language learning/teaching, it is essential to develop four skills equally, speaking, listening, reading and writing. Y-talk class includes many aspects of communicative orientation of tasks to better develop these skills with the exception of 'listening' skills. Currently y-talk is exercised using Romanised characters, not Japanese characters, and most of the students who participated in this research expressed disappointment in the fact that the letters used were not in Japanese. Despite this fact, many students expressed that they learnt a great deal in grammar, vocabulary, and expressions within the specific context. These comments suggest that the students were developing some autonomous language learning skills. Here, student-centered flexible delivery

was exercised by using the Buddy as a learning resource and language teacher. As a by-product of autonomous learning, the students developed unique y-talk communication strategies. Such strategies became evident when the students needed to clarify unknown words and try other expressions in order to get the message across. At the end of a seven week session, the students successfully produced the logbook by negotiating with the Buddy while using this new strategy. The purpose of the log book entry was to also include a buddy profile, and a description of the conversations in which they exchanged their opinions. All the students completed these tasks using the appropriate language skills. Such tasks could not have been accomplished without employing these skills. Thanks to speedy development of the technology, regular email currently enables us to communicate in Japanese characters, and hopes are quite high that we soon will be able to use Japanese characters in y-talk communication. Even though 'listening' skills do not benefit from y-talk class, foreign language teaching could be delivered in this new y-talk style, in conjunction with more traditional teaching methods.

Further, although it was not included in this research, it is necessary to identify an appropriate assessment method in order to measure the effectiveness of this new style of learning.

Moreover, enforcing the listening skills which cannot be developed in y-talk communication should not be ignored. The aural practice which is missing from the y-talk class could be easily implemented in conjunction with other class room activities. Y-talk will benefit greatly when it is used in conjunction with other teaching and learning tools. Therefore even if the three skills (speaking, writing, and reading) can be developed using y-talk it is wrong to assume that y-talk can replace conventional Japanese language teaching methods.

6. CONCLUSION

Although the traditionally structured language teaching class is still an indispensable part of foreign language teaching, the findings have brought to light the significant contribution of the y-talk class as a Japanese language teaching tool. Many students expressed that supplementing y-talk with Japanese language classes provided them with a non-threatening, enjoyable environment. Most of the students were actively involved in this class, and this helped to increase their motivation. Not only did the students have fun, they expressed that they learnt a lot about the language in context while 'talking' to their Buddy via a computer, and they developed an intimate relationship with the buddy which may also help their language development by breaking down some of the barriers between the two cultures. However, much more research is needed on classroom application of y-talk consisting of a constructive curriculum design using the y-talk class to develop the students' language skills, and developing an assessment method for the y-talk class.

This research suggests that y-talk is highly capable of incorporation with traditional language learning and teaching classes as a new tool to be employed in foreign language classes.

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