

## TO TECH OR NOT TO TECH, THAT IS THE QUESTION...



This is an article I wrote for The JALT Journal in anticipation of my Featured Speaker lectures. It is a more personal entry, talking both about some of the difficulties I've had in the past in implementing use of technology in the language classroom as well as some of the successes...

Ever since the late 80s when I worked as Coordinator for a large chain of English language learning schools owned by Sony Corporation, I have been intimately involved with trying to figure out ways to utilize technology to improve and enhance Japanese student's language learning experience. Unfortunately, much of what I've learned was through the painful process of "trial and error" As a featured speaker at JALT this year, I would like to share some of my insights, so that your own use of technology in and out of the classroom, especially with regard to teaching vocabulary and developing reading skills will be more successful than my own first attempts!

When I was at Sony, I remember that during summer vacations they would send me to visit junior and senior high schools around the country to help the schools to be able to make more effective use of the high tech Sony language laboratories they had purchased. Back in the 80s, the only room in the entire school that has air conditioning was usually the language lab room, so I has assumed that the language lab would be the most popular room among both teachers and students as a way to escape the terribly hot and humid Japanese summers. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that in almost every school I visited, the rooms were empty and the machines were unused and covered in dust!

Why did this happen? Well, there are several reasons. Perhaps the biggest problem was that both teachers and students were unfamiliar with and a little intimidated by the technology of the language laboratory. Most schools, when budgeting for the purchase of a language laboratory, would spend almost their entire budget on expensive hardware, but almost nothing on training for teachers and students or on hiring the very necessary support staff (in almost EVERY case of the successful use of language labs I observed, there was inevitably good full or part-time support staff to help teachers and students to use the equipment more effectively).

Another very important reason is that the approach to teaching English with language labs was based on the so-called "Audio-Lingual" method of language teacher, an ineffective and outdated approach to teaching developed in the 1950s, based on the principles of repetition, error-correction, and rote memorization.

As unsuccessful as the methodology for language lab-based English teaching was, I've found that vocabulary instruction, especially in Japanese high schools, to be equally problematic. Although there are more than 250,000 word families in the Oxford English Dictionary, which is considered to be the largest dictionary of English in the world, research in corpus linguistics has shown that a very small number of these words are actually used in daily life. In an excellent overview of vocabulary research to date, Nation (2001), found that knowledge of just the 2000 most frequent words of English cover approximately 81-85% of words that appear in general English texts, and that the top 5000 words covers approximately 95% of such texts. Researchers such as Hirsch & Nation (1992) argue that knowledge of these 5000 high frequency "core" words give enough coverage and context to allow second language learners to function more successfully and independently. The problem is that even after 800-1200 hours of instruction, Japanese students do not know even half this number (Shillaw, 1995, Barrow 1999) and that the words they do know, tend to be the "wrong" words (Browne, 2008), in other words, they have huge gaps in knowledge of core words at even the 1000-2000 word level while knowing many extremely low frequency words in the 50-100,000 frequency range.

Why do such vocabulary knowledge gaps occur? Although it is not within the specific scope of this article, research by the author and others (Browne, 1996, 1998, 2002, Kitao and Kitao, 1995, Butler and Iino, 1995, Kikuchi, 2006) have pointed to both the extreme difficulty of reading texts used in high schools and on college entrance exams as well as the undue emphasis that Japan's secondary education system's places on teaching English in order to pass college entrance exams (rather than for purposes of communication) as contributing factors.

In the early 90s, as language laboratories lost their popularity, CALL (computer assisted language learning) became the new buzz word, and schools began to shift their huge budgets to creating high-tech computer laboratories. While at Aoyama Gakuin University, I was asked to help my department implement a several million dollar Ministry of Education grant to create (among other things) a new CALL center for our school. After my experience at Sony, I was hesitant to get involved and said that I would only be willing to help if (1) the CALL center would be "low-tech" rather than "high-tech" so that the center would be more likely to be used by teachers and students who were not yet that confident in using computers, and (2) that a large part of the budget would be devoted to hiring CALL staff that could support teachers with training and lesson prep and students with training in using the lab. Their reply? Surprisingly, they said NO to both conditions but said that I had to help them anyway! Their reasoning was that since Waseda University was going high-tech, that they had to be "state-of-the-art" as well, and that there wasn't enough money in the budget to hire CALL staff or do training. What was the result?... A brand new high-tech CALL center that went almost as unused and gathered almost as much dust as the Sony language laboratories!

The first thing I did after these difficult experiences was to get much more active in the field of CALL, especially the wonderful organizations of JALT-CALL here in Japan (<http://jaltcall.org/>), Euro-CALL in Europe (<http://www.eurocall-languages.org/>), and in working together with an amazing group of CALL experts to publish an edited volume on how to do things RIGHT with technology in the classroom (Fotos & Browne, 2004). I also swore to myself that any future projects related to technology in the classroom would be done on my own terms, meaning that they would (1) be based on sound pedagogy, (2) utilize technology that teachers and students were familiar and comfortable with, and (3) would be intuitive enough to use that no training or manuals would be required.

I have since become much more involved in the process of software development itself, first in making software based on my doctoral research in vocabulary acquisition ([www.wordengine.com](http://www.wordengine.com)), using authentic materials such as video for teaching vocabulary in context, improving pronunciation skills, and extensive listening ([www.englishcentral.com](http://www.englishcentral.com)), developing pedagogically sound approaches for improving speaking and listening skills via Skype ([www.gofluent.com](http://www.gofluent.com)), making simple iPhone apps to help quickly increase student knowledge of important vocabulary lists such as the General Service List (West, 1953) (<http://www.charlie-browne.com/services/appde/gs/>), and Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) (<http://www.charlie-browne.com/services/appde/aw/>), a small blog devoted to the discussion of use of tech in language learning and teacher training ([www.elearnguy.com](http://www.elearnguy.com)), and a web-based solution for combining extensive graded reading with a direct and systematic study of important vocabulary words (soon to be announced...).

In my workshops and lectures for JALT this year, my hope is to help participants to better understand the whys and hows of helping Japanese students to quickly build their knowledge of core vocabulary, the wonderful contribution both to vocabulary development as well as overall language proficiency that extensive reading can make, as well as introduce participants to a wide range of online tools which can be used for materials development, research and teaching and learning, in these two very important areas.

With all the new technological possibilities inside and outside the classroom, it is a very exciting time to be an English teacher. A good portion of the undergraduate teacher training courses I am in charge of at Meiji Gakuin University are devoted to helping my students not only to become familiar with, but also to create new ways of using technology in motivating and stimulating ways. I am often amazed at the innovative ideas they come up with! For already practicing teachers, I think it is important to try and familiarize yourself with with the latest trends and look for ways to bring some of these ideas to their students. In addition to the organizations mentioned above (which hold wonderful, informative conferences here in Japan and abroad), there are also several excellent CALL-related journals worth looking at: Language Learning and Technology (<http://llt.msu.edu/>), ReCALL (<http://www.eurocall-languages.org/recall/index.html>) and the JALT-CALL Journal (<http://jaltcall.org/journal/>).

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