Combining technology and language learning :

A course example

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Abstract

This paper seeks to outline the possibility of one course at Toyo University that combines the two indispensable skills of English and computers.   The English will be in the form of idioms, moving away from grammar-based instruction into the actual practical production side of language.   These idioms will be combined with technology in the form of computers.   This combination has been found to increase student motivation and provide authentic language.   This paper covers a rational, and advice on implementing such a course.

Introduction

The impetus for this report came after a resolution at a meeting at Toyo University.   That resolution addressed the problem of declining student enrolment, and included the results of a recent government survey that showed that a record low of 73.5% of university students graduating in 2004 managed to find jobs (that figure was at its lowest point since the survey was first taken in 1996, Richardson & Kawanaka, 2004).   In response to the need to both increase enrolment, and a realization that Japanese universities need to play an important role in shaping and training students to deal with this harsh environment upon graduation, teachers agreed to build a new curriculum for implementation in the near future.   In the new curriculum English and computers were designated as indispensable skills that all students will need to be proficient in to face the future job market.   Separately, proficiency in English and computers will be advantageous to students, but if a way could be found to combine the two in one class, students could learn skills and practically apply them.   Therefore, this paper seeks to outline the possibility of one

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course (from a selection) at Toyo University that combines the two skills of English and computers.   In the rest of the paper I will discuss a theoretical rationale for such a course, what the students will be expected to do for the course, and how the course could be implemented.

Theoretical rationale

Unless a course specifically requires practice in one skill only (reading, writing speaking etc..), I believe that all skills should be employed to enhance each other and provide a different way of practicing the same content.   For the new course I shall use idioms as a base to combine the language skills.   I chose idioms to move my course away from grammar-based instruction, and more into the actual useful production side of language.   The English language is full of idioms that native speakers easily understand and employ.   One study by Glucksberg (1989), proposed that a single native speaker person may produce more than 20 million metaphors over a 60-year period.   Therefore, language students need to learn a lot of them to understand English proficiently, and as Fernando (1986) stated, "their high frequency in discourse make them an important aspect of vocabulary acquisition and language learning in general...".   Part of the problem of idiom comprehension is their "guessability", or as some writers call, it transparency.   Transparency is a continuum, with idioms at one end that are close to notions in the learners' native language, and comprise of words that give clues to their meaning, and, as such, are easy to guess.   At the other of the continuum idioms are a lot harder to guess as their constituent parts offer no clue to their meaning, other than the context in which they appear, and require the learner "...to test the hypothesis against the context", (Boers & Demecheleer, p.260).   I want students in my classes to be aware of a range of idioms that require skills of word recognition, and those that encourage more problem-solving because the reader must look at clues in discourse level such as the relationship between the speakers, and situation to infer the meaning, and confirm the hypothesis that the student makes about an idiom's meaning.

Language in the form of idioms will be combined with technology in the form of computers. The technology incorporates two types of learning views that Warschauer (2004), calls cognitive and socio-cognitive learning. Cognitive learning uses technology to "develop their (students) mental linguistic systems", and the socio-cognitive learning view involves "helping students to enter discourse com-

munitiest, and "the content of the interaction and nature of community are extreme-ly important". Even though the cognitive view has been superseded by the socio-cognitive view, studies are still being done that use technology as purely a learning tool. One study in Japan by Thornton & Houser (2004), covered technology, through mobile phones as a way that students could successfully learn idioms outside the class. Also, websites that seek to test individual student's skill and knowledge of discrete parts of English have proliferated the Internet, and students can access such sites by themselves at a time that suits them. These sites are a way of focusing students' attention for periods of time beyond the dedicated class time. Furthermore, computer-based student self-access has been shown to increase student motivation, provide authentic language, and develop global awareness (Meloni, 1998).

Along with the cognitive view, the socio-cognitive view will provide the rationale for connecting students to wider groups of students as part of a discourse community. In this course students not only practice language through technology, but also produce their own versions of the materials they have used for learning. The production and eventual publication of students' materials on the web satisfies the socio-cognitive view of language learning, and covers six essential principles for successful web-publishing, outlined in Chapter five of Warschauer, Schetzer & Meloni (2000). The six principles are using the web as a medium, not a vehicle ; empowering students with autonomy ; integrating skills ; dual immersion ; issue of audience, and emphasizing meaningful communication. The first principle sepa-rates technology as a tool and as a way of producing English. For my course students shall combine both views to learn idioms, and to produce them for the Net. Students will have autonomy, the second principle, when they choose topics for idioms and how to present these on the Web. The third and fourth principles cover a combination of not only language skills, which my course does, but will also combine language with technology. The fifth principle requires consideration of the audience. When students produce their own idiom quizzes, they will need to think about, and, certainly, modify what they post on to the Net to connect to student communities. Finally, emphasis on communication will come through students working together to produce their work, and the content of the work that they put on the Net for others to use to practice idioms. Once the students have produced enough idioms and quizzes to upload onto the Net this could be a source for self-access, which future classes of students can add to. Such student-produced

worksheets are generally well received by other students and can be seen as an investment that "can grow as a result of their own effortst and "...result in dividends that enrich all those who have a stake in the institution", (Malcolm, 2004, p.352).

What students are expected to do for the course?

Students will deal with other parts of English during classes in the course, such as listening exercises, but the idiom section will incorporate technology. Each week students will learn idioms that contain certain groups of words, like body parts (head to head) or animals (dog tired), which they should learn before the following week's lesson. An example of the idioms is temporarily available at the following site (http://astro.temple.edu/~tua00820/idioms/firstpageidiom.html) until they can be uploaded on to the school intranet. Students first see a top page and all the instructions are there for students to read (Appendix A). Next, students work through ten idioms exercises by themselves through self-access, in which they are required to look at the situation and the short conversation, and try to guess the meaning of the idioms from three choices, which require top down guessing from context skills (an example can be found in Appendix B). After students have worked through the idiom exercises they try a quiz (an example can be found in Appendix C), which tests the students' knowledge of the idioms just learned. Once this test is finished they return to the top page and print a page to start working on their projects. For the project they work in small groups to produce their own version of five idioms, each with three choices, and a final quiz that tests those idioms, so other students can learn these idioms. The project page invites the students to write down ideas to discuss in class with group members. These ideas include the following :

1) The situation that the conversation takes place.
2) Who is speaking.
3) The conversation itself, with the idiom.
4) Two incorrect and one incorrect answer to test the idioms.

The top page also provides links to other sites for student ideas, but asks them not to copy. Finally, students use special software called Hot Potatoes (other software can be used) to make an overall quiz of the five idioms, which will also be posted on the net in the future.

Appendix A

WELCOME TO MY IDIOMS PAGE

Each week we will deal with a different topic for idioms

1) Try the idioms and guess from the three choices
2) Look at who is speaking (friends, husband and wife…)
3) Look at the introduction to the conversation
4) Look at the 3 choices for meaning and choose one
5) Reading all the information (introduction, who is speaking and conversation) will help you guess
6) Then try the timed quiz

Try the idioms now

Your Project for this Class

Now that you have seen the teacher's version, for this course your project will be to create your own 5 idioms in use based around one topic and a quiz. Here are some basic things to think about:

1) You will need to find a group of three
2) Decide on one topic together for your idioms (look at the sites below for ideas)
3) Each print off the ideas form and create your own ideas first (use sites below for ideas, PLEASE don't copy)
4) Share your ideas together and choose the best five in class
5) Your finished version should include a situation, who is speaking, the two-part conversation and the 3 choices (including the correct answer)
6) Finally, make a short story using all of the five idioms you have chosen, and turn it into a quiz
7) Create your versions on HTML and your quizzes using Hot Potatoes software
8) Deadline for completion will be January 10th (one week before the last class)

Try some of these sites for ideas

1 http://a4esl.org/q/h/idioms.html
2 http://www.idiomsite.com/
3 http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Idioms_and_Slang/ (you can find a collection of idiom sites here)

PRINT OUT FOR HOMEWORK

Appendix B

Idiom number one

IDIOMS RELATED TO ANIMALS

A wife greets her husband after his long day at work:
Wife: Hi, how was today?
Husband: I'm dog tired, I just want to go to sleep

He thinks the dog looks tired>Choice 1

He wants to sleep with the dog>Choice 2

He is very tired>Choice 3

Implementation

As computers are an integral part of the production in this course, students will need access to computers. That does not mean every class, but students should spend some time during class working in front of a computer, and more time outside of class doing so. The work in progress can be stored in their computer accounts from the school. School computers will provide a platform for self-study, and to work on the project, as well as hold necessary software. All students, as a result, will need access to a computer at university. After working on their projects students can upload their work to the school intranet, or any of the free websites available on the net (free with yahoo groups etc..) for others to see and engage in as part of the class or self-study. Along with a basic knowledge of html format and source codes, which the course will cover, students will need to use the software Hot Potatoes (available through Half-Baked Software Inc.) to produce the final quiz of their idioms. This software is relatively user-friendly, but all is in English, so explanation will need to be provided. Hot potatoes is a software that allows the user to build simple quizzes using, in this instance, target language, and will be bought for use before the course starts. If Hot Potatoes is unavailable for purchase there are many sites that offer free downloads similar to Hot Potatoes, which can be found after a net search.

Appendix C

Animal Idioms

Gap-fill exercise

1:53

Fill in all the gaps, then press "Check" to check your answers. Use the "Hint" button to get a free letter if an answer is giving you trouble. You can also click on the "[?]" button to get a clue. Note that you will lose points if you ask for hints or clues! You only get 2 minutes to finish all of it.

Last night something happened to me. I was just about walking home when I stopped

about 100 meters from house, where the road [   ] [?] around in front of the park. I

saw my neighbour kissing with another woman, not his wife. It was clear he had been

[   ] [?] because he was walking and talking strangely. After he said goodbye to

the woman, I went up to him and asked him what he was doing. He just said he was

[   ] [?] and was going to bed. He told me to keep this secret from his wife, but I

know that if I met her, she would [   ] [?], and I would probably accidentally let

the [   ] [?].

Check   Hint

Conclusion

For the future students will need proficiency in English and computers, so a course that combines the two will be advantageous. Part of the rationale for combining these two skills comes from a cognitive view of learning, which uses technology as a tool for students to learn by themselves. Another part of the rationale implies a socio-cognitive view of learning that sees technology as a way to connect students in discourse learning communities (other students). For this part

students will work collaboratively to produce their own idioms in use and quizzes for other students. After some time, there will be a large database of idiom quizzes, which could be uploaded onto the school's webpage for all users to access. Furthermore, success of this course would hopefully lead to more classes that can combine English and computers at Toyo University.

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テクノロジーと言語学習の併用
—— コースの例 ——

要　　旨

　本稿では東洋大学における、それぞれ独立した英語とコンピュータを併用できる科目の概要を調査する。英語はイディオムの形式をとり、文法基本の英語指導から離れて言語の実際的産出の側面の指導となる。イディオムはテクノロジーとコンピュータ形式で併用される。この併用により、学生の動機を向上させ、真正の言語が提供されることがわかっている。本稿はその併用科目の実施に関する合理性と診断を範囲としている。