

## How to make active interactions in Japanese as a Second Language in the web-based classes

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### Abstract

*This paper analyzes Japanese language classes at Dalarna University in Sweden that are held through a web conferencing system. It discusses how students' learning and language acquisition can be supported by making better use of the available features of using a web conferencing system for language lessons. Of particular interest is the existence of an "information gap" among students, created because of the limits posed by distance communication. Students who take Japanese courses at Dalarna University usually access classes from their home, which are located all over Sweden or even abroad. This fact can be utilized in language classes because the "information gap" can lead to interactions that are essential for language learning. In order to make use of this natural "information gap" and turn it into an opportunity for communication, our classes used a teaching method called "personalization" [Kawaguchi, 2004]. "Personalization" aims to persuade students to express their own ideas, opinions, feelings and preferences. The present analysis suggests that "personalization" in web-based language classes is a surprisingly effective teaching method. By making students explain about things at home (why they have them, what they use them for, or why they are important), students become motivated to express themselves in Japanese. This makes communication meaningful and enhances students' interest in improving their vocabulary. Furthermore, by knowing each other, it becomes easier to create a "supportive classroom environment" [Nuibe, 2001] in which students feel able to express themselves. The analysis suggests that that web-based education can be seen not simply as a supplement to traditional face-to face classroom education, but as a unique and effective educational platform in itself.*

### 1. Introduction

Recent years have been witness to a rapid development of teaching technologies. Numerous learning tools have been introduced. They have been widely adopted by teachers and learners all over the world. It is worth noting that while such tools may enhance the possibilities of learning, they may also limit them. This raises the important question of how best to utilise web tools in ways that enhance learning.

Before we talk about the specific technological tools for language learning, it is important to think about what languages are and what teachers aim to achieve through language education. This leads to the central discussion of this paper: how can web tools support those aims? To answer this question, this paper discusses the possibilities of technology for an effective educational platform for language learning.

### 2. Background

#### 2.1 The importance of interactions in language learning

What is important when learning a language? What is a language? Why do we need a language? The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky [1986] describes language as having two central aspects: "external speech" and "inner speech". By "external speech", Vygotsky refers to language used to communicate with others. By "Inner speech" he means language used for thinking; thus "inner speech" supports the development of higher mental functions. Vygotsky argues that children learn their mother tongue through interactions with others, which means that "external speech" cannot be developed without interactions with others. The development of "inner speech" occurs simultaneously

with the development of "*external speech*". Vygotsky's theory highlights the importance of interacting with others in order to develop language skills.

Such interactions are important not only for language development, but also for social competence. We need to use languages not only to communicate our ideas with others but also to organize social activities and cultural life. Without language, mutual understandings and shared action are almost impossible to achieve. Vygotsky's argument implies that one of the central roles as a language teacher is to facilitate interaction so that learners can improve both language skills and social competences.

## 2.2 Supportive Classroom Environment

Nuibe [2001] proposes that creating a "*supportive classroom environment*" is essential in order to facilitate interaction among students in language classes. A "*supportive classroom environment*" is an environment where learners respect and support each other. He suggests that learners can learn in a relaxed atmosphere insofar as such a supportive environment is created. It is important that students feel relaxed. If learners become anxious, they will respond defensively, focusing on their fear and losing their motivation, rather than learning. In an anxious atmosphere, learners will therefore refuse to express themselves and there will be few opportunities to interact with others. Accordingly, facilitating a "*supportive classroom environment*" is one of the most important roles for language teachers. This is the case whether we are speaking of traditional campus-based education or web-based education. In all cases, interaction must be supported by a "*supportive classroom environment*".

Let us quote an opinion about web-based courses formulated by one of our former students before she took our Japanese course.

I took one distance course at XX University, where the teacher's teaching style was more perhaps old fashioned and a bit strict. I noticed in those classes that there was less interaction between the students and for my own part, I never felt very safe or comfortable in this classroom. I sometimes wished that my webcam would go kaput so at least I could hide my face. Because every time I made a mistake, I felt very uncomfortable in front of the camera. And sometimes the mere nervousness made me fail to answer a question correctly. So, with a very strict teaching style, maybe distance learning is not the best option, because then you invite a very stressful moment into your house. To have a stressful class in a reality classroom, then at least you can go home and leave it all behind. So, concluding, I think leadership is (almost) everything when it comes to the social aspects of distance learning.

This student obviously had some bad experiences with web-based education, prior to joining our class. She emphasizes the old fashioned teaching style, which meant that the focus was more on providing correct answers than on supporting her in expressing her views. Thus, this student was afraid of answering questions. All in all, the lesson she experienced was far from the ideal classroom environment for language learning. In particular, in web-based education, where teaching is "invited into your house", as the student says, it is crucial to ensure a supportive learning environment.

## 2.3 Personalization

We have argued that the achievement of a "*supportive classroom environment*" requires teachers to focus more on learners' motivation to express their ideas rather than on their cognitive development in a narrow sense. If teachers listen carefully to learners' messages, the whole class will also start listen to others and respect each other.

Kawaguchi [2004] proposes the notion of "*personalization*" as important for creating a "*supportive classroom environment*" and facilitating interactive language classes. The concept of "*personalization*" entails the idea of asking students personalized questions. The purpose is to make them express their thoughts and ideas. Kawaguchi [2012] characterizes "*personalization*" as follows.

Since language is a means of expressing oneself to show that you are a unique existence different from all the others in the world, and also a means to understand others telling that they are unique in their own ways of existence, it is critical for a language learner to be fully allowed and encouraged to express his or her meaning, which is real for him or her even if the language used for it is not his or her mother tongue. If you talk about things that you like, using

a sentence pattern SUKI DESU, or "I like it", you should not be asked to say "I like football" only because it is, say, one of the sentences in the practice No. 3 in the Lesson 9 of your textbook, unless you really love football. If what you like is samurai battle internet games or black gothic maid fashion, you have to be allowed and encouraged to say so. Almost all the basic grammar of Japanese, or of any languages in the world, I suppose, can be used to let the learners in your class express their own emotions, experiences, ideas and opinions. Once learners realize that it is really and completely OK to say what they want to say, they usually try their best to convey their meanings in the target language and help their peers to do so. The notion of KOJIN-KA, or personalization, therefore, suggests you to take every single chance of your foreign/second language instruction, regardless if it is about grammar or vocabulary, to encourage the learner to express their facts and ideas using the items that is the aim of your today's lesson.

Based on Kawaguchi's "*personalization*" approach, the following discussion centres on how students' learning and language acquisition can be supported by making better use of the available features of web-based education. Of particular interest for this analysis is the existence of a natural "information gap" among students in web-based distance classes. The students who take the Japanese courses at Dalarna University usually access classes from their home, which are located all over Sweden or even abroad. This can be utilized in language classes because the "information gap" can lead to interactions that are essential for language learning. In order to make use of the natural "information gap" which our students have and using it as a starting point for communication, we used the concept of "*personalization*" in our classes.

### 3. Methodology

This research was conducted through two terms from autumn 2011 to spring 2012. Data was collected through those two terms with teaching journals from each lesson and students' replies to the questionnaire after each course.

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants of this research are students who are first year undergraduate students enrolled in one particular Japanese course at Dalarna University: Japanese I – Oral proficiency. Around 70 students joined our research, all of them web-based students. They were divided into small groups with around 10 students in order to create a suitable size for language classes.

#### 3.2 Japanese I – Oral proficiency

Japanese I – Oral proficiency is a course for complete beginners. Students do not need any pre-knowledge about Japanese language. But by the end of the course, the aim for them is to be able to handle daily conversation. Students receive online lessons twice a week for fifteen weeks. They also have assignments outside of the classes: they include online grammar tests, online listening tests, vocabulary tasks and group works with classmates. All the information is uploaded on *fronter*, which is a learning management system used by Dalarna University. The system used for online classes is *Adobe® Connect*. We chose to focus on this course in our research because it is particularly important to create a safe and effective learning environment for beginners who usually have double difficulties, since they are both learning a new language and using a new web system.

#### 3.3 "*Personalization*" in online meetings

In this research, we observed how students interacted with each other and how they learned Japanese through "*personalization*" approach. In the beginning of the course we focused on "*personalization*" by means of web-cameras. We asked students to show their things at home using web-cameras and encouraged them to describe them in Japanese. As the course progresses the topics will gradually become more complex. The following are examples of early "personalized" topics:

- ◇ The 2<sup>nd</sup> week – "What is that?" (Each student shows something through a web camera and the other students ask what it is in English/Swedish/Japanese.)
- ◇ The 3<sup>rd</sup> week – "How much was that?" (Each student shows something Japanese through a web camera and the other students ask how much it cost.)
- ◇ The 4<sup>th</sup> week – "What is in your house?" (Each student describes his/her house)

- using a web camera and the other students ask about the details.)
- ◇ The 7<sup>th</sup> week – “I like this” / “I don't like this because...”
  - ◇ The 11<sup>th</sup> week – “I think that.. “
  - ◇ The 12<sup>th</sup> week – Memories from the holiday

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Early relationship building among students

Our analysis shows that “*personalization*” is a surprisingly effective teaching method for making students active in classes. By making students show their personal things at home and offer explanations (such as: why they have them, what they use them for, or why they are important), students become motivated to express themselves in Japanese. They also get to know each other. In turn, when students know each other, it becomes easier to create a “*supportive classroom environment*” where students can feel relaxed about expressing themselves. A particularly positive aspect of the “*personalization*” approach in web-based language classes is that relationship building is easily enabled from very early on in the courses. By showing their own things and being shown interesting objects that classmates have, everyone is “personalized” in an easy-going and “natural” way. This point is highlighted by one of our students, who responded to our questionnaire question about “*personalization*” activities in the course in the following way:

It became an even more personal encounter than what is usually the case in a reality classroom. I will explain why. In the exercises we were often asked to show, in front of the webcam, personal items (such as Japanese souvenirs or foodstuff) from our own house or from the room where we spent the session (actually the Japanese word for room 'heya' was one of the first new words I learnt in this course). The other students fed back whatever you showed and there was a distinct feeling of having visitors in your house every class. Also we got to know about each other's hobbies and interests

This student wrote that “*personalization*” in web based classes made her feel like she had a face-to-face encounter each time she had class. She felt like she was inviting guests to her house every class and this feeling meant that she could show her own interests and hobbies and get to know those of other student learners. Her experience may hardly happen if it was in campus-based courses. Also her experience exemplifies that “*personalization*” in web-based language classes is an effective teaching method for reducing students' nervousness and making language learning interactive.

### 4.2 Vocabulary expansion

Our further analysis has indicated that “*personalization*” in web-based classes make communication meaningful to students and enhance interest in improving their vocabulary. In the third week, our activities focused on numbers and prices. We asked students, “Please show each other something Japanese in your house and ask each other how much it cost.” Thus, the task was to practice numbers in Japanese and ask about prices. At this point of the course, students had learned no verbs or adjectives. Yet, seeing each other's things stimulated their motivation to ask questions such as: “where did you buy it”, or make comments like: “It is nice”, “I also want to buy it” and so on. Of course, teachers need to support students' expression, especially in the beginning of the course, but in this way, students learn new vocabulary, new phrases and new grammar in a natural way. In the latter part of the course, students help each other to find words together. What is important is that students learn new vocabulary or grammar naturally; that is, without tight control imposed by teachers or textbooks and the process of learning become within students' control.

Vocabulary expansion occurs not only in one student but in the whole group. For example, one group had a student who loves knitting. The word, “knitting” is not a typical word, introduced in Japanese beginners' textbooks, but the student needed the word for “knitting” in order to express what she wanted to say. Thus “knitting” became a shared word in the group. Therefore, words that are important to particular students become known to whole groups. By personalizing, student vocabularies expand beyond textbooks. Thus, the natural information gap between students facilitates interaction.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis shows that "*personalization*" in web-based language classes is a surprisingly effective teaching method. By making students explain about things at home (why they have them, what they use them for, or why they are important), students become motivated to express themselves in Japanese. This makes communication meaningful and enhances students' interest in improving their vocabulary. Furthermore, by knowing each other, it becomes easier to create a "*supportive classroom environment*" in which students are motivated to express themselves. The analysis suggests that that web-based education can be seen not simply as a supplement to traditional face-to face classroom education, but as a unique and effective educational platform in itself if we make use of the available features of using a web conferencing system.

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