

Creativity in the language classroom via *Animoto*

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For EFL instructors looking to help their learners engage with English in creative ways, Internet-based applications offer numerous exciting possibilities to provide learners with authentic reasons for using English. Nevertheless, many learners and teachers in Japan have minimal computer literacy. As a result, these resources are under utilized, perceived as being too difficult to learn and use. Indeed, the vast array of online resources can be overwhelming. Therefore, this paper will introduce *Animoto*, an easy to use web-based application ideal for creating professional looking short videos and demonstrate its efficacy in two different EFL learning contexts. Based on this evaluation, advice for using *Animoto* will be given.

創造的な方法を用いた英語学習を支援したいと考えている教員にとって、インターネット・アプリケーションは学習者に実際の言語使用の機会を与えることができる点で魅力的である。しかしながら、日本の多くの学習者や教員のコンピューター・リテラシーは必要最低限のレベルに留まっており、インターネット上のリソースは敬遠されて使いこなされていないという実情がある。実際、オンライン上に数多く存在するリソースの羅列を見ると圧倒されてしまうこともある。そのような背景に基づき、本研究は、本格的な短編ビデオを簡単に作ることができるウェブ・アプリケーションAnimotoを紹介し、2つの異なる英語学習場面でのその有効性を提示する。また、Animotoの有効的な使い方についてもアドバイスする。

The need to know the capital of Florida died when my phone learned the answer.
—US student Anthony Chiveta

ADVANCES IN communications technology and the subsequent rise in cooperative networks and collaborative dialogs between individuals and organizations are influencing perspectives on how learning takes place. Current learning theories, pedagogical practices, and the evolving Internet are converging. Theories of how learning actually takes place are moving from an external, independent-of-the-mind *objectivist* point of view to a socially, interactive *constructivist* perspective. As a result, learner-centered pedagogical practices are becoming more common. Simultaneously, the Internet has also evolved from a top-down, corporate-centered, read-only *Web 1.0* to the current socially networked, user-focused, read-write *Web 2.0* that relies on user-generated content. In such an emerging world, imagination and creativity have become essential elements of the generation and production of successful



new ideas. If creativity is therefore a key to future success in a rapidly changing world (Brown & Tatsuki, 2010), it follows that EFL instructors need to find ways for learners to creatively engage with language.

Helping educators make sense of this rapidly developing convergence between theory and technology is the *learning ecology* concept (Sealy-Brown, 1999). As described by Campbell (2006), learning is viewed as a holistic, organic process that emphasizes learning as it occurs within a network of naturally occurring relationships. The role of technology is to serve and enable this process, and is not seen as an end to itself. Teachers therefore act more like gardeners than experts, planting seeds of knowledge and skill as they go about inducting students into ecologies by teaching best use practices. The ultimate aim is to help students create a personally meaningful English network for themselves that exists beyond the classroom, one where they can express themselves naturally in the language as they move forward in their education and beyond: “Once students have experienced for themselves what is possible, they are then positioned to care for their own language learning needs beyond the confines of the institution and its school calendar” (Campbell, 2006, para. 4).

Despite the reality of our changing world, however, many learners and teachers are not meeting the challenge due to insufficient computer literacy. In Japan, a 2003 survey by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology found that more than one third of all teachers were unable to use computers, much less provide computer instruction (MEXT, as cited in Vallance, Vallance, & Matsui, 2009). In addition, most teens and young adults in Japan rarely use computers to surf the web, preferring instead to access a scaled down wireless web from their mobile phones, a practice which contributes to the growing computer illiteracy problem (Clark, 2003):

Indeed the primary motivation for a Japanese student to go online these days is not to use the Internet but to get

an e-mail address, far cheaper and easier to do with a cell phone than a computer. Mobile phones have replaced computers as the de-facto e-mail terminal of choice for the majority of Japanese who are not in technology, finance, engineering or other computer intensive occupations. (para. 7)

Recently, more and more people are beginning to access the full Internet via *smartphones*, which are devices that fill the gap between mobile phones and PCs (Shiraishi, 2009). In addition, with the advent of *netbooks* and *tablet computers* (such as the iPad), PCs themselves are also becoming more widely used as mobile computing devices. For example, sales figures for the iPad are projected to top 208 million units per year by 2014 (Gartner, 2010, as cited in Rowe, 2010). With the advent of this advanced communications technology, there are fewer barriers for teachers and students in Japan to using advanced online tools such as blogs, wikis, and social networking services.

Professional development is the key issue in using this technology to improve the quality of classroom learning (Rodriguez, 2000). In order to facilitate this process, teachers need to see successful model projects that make it easier for them to explore and implement creative lesson plans. This paper will therefore introduce *Animoto*, an easy-to-use web-based application ideal for creating professional looking short videos and discuss its efficacy in two different EFL learning contexts from practical and theoretical perspectives. Based on this evaluation, advice for using Animoto with learners at varying levels will be given.

A brief overview of Web 2.0

The term *Web 2.0* was first coined in the mid-1990s by Tim O’Reilly and Doug Dougerty of O’Reilly Media to describe the evolving state of the Internet (Budd, 2005). Although difficult to pin down, Web 2.0 can be considered as a knowledge-oriented



environment where users cooperatively create malleable content that is synchronously (in real time) and asynchronously (at different times) distributed in wired and wireless networks to fixed and portable technologies such as personal computers, mobile phones, and other devices (Vallance, Vallance, & Matsui, 2009). Web 2.0 characterizes the next level of the Internet's development. Previously, content was created by a few highly skilled professionals whilst the majority of users merely consumed. In contrast, today users are actively engaged in producing content both individually and collectively. Web 2.0 companies base their services and business models on an architecture of participation, one that leverages the power of collective intelligence. In other words, Web 2.0 facilitates connections between people and ideas. The larger and more active communities are, the better and more profitable online services become. Also known as the read-write web, the Internet has become populated with numerous web-based applications that resemble and mimic the functionality of traditional computer-based software. The interactive nature of Web 2.0 technologies and their close resemblance to a social-constructivist model of learning make them attractive to English language teachers. Furthermore, given the global reach of the Internet, they provide an authentic purpose for English language communication. This potential for a world-wide audience provides both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learners.

A brief overview of Animoto

Animoto is a web-based application accessible at animoto.com that quickly and easily produces high quality music videos from user-generated photos, video clips, music, and text. The procedure is simple: after creating an account, users are led through the three basic production steps: acquiring images, selecting music, and finalizing details. In the first step, users are prompted to upload their own photos or short video clips from their computer or to acquire them from various photo-

sharing or social networking sites, such as Flickr or Facebook. Likewise, music can be uploaded or chosen from a list provided by Animoto. After adding titles and text, Animoto automatically synchronizes the images with the text and music based on the chosen style template. The resulting video clip can then be downloaded, shared on various social networking sites (including YouTube and Facebook), embedded in a blog, or emailed directly to friends.

The screenshot shows the Animoto website interface. At the top, the Animoto logo is on the left, and navigation links for 'Features', 'Sample Videos', and 'Plans & Pricing' are on the right. The main content area has a blue background with the text 'Create stunning video slideshows' and a 'Get Started' button. Below this, there are six video thumbnails with titles: 'I love you', 'Holiday', 'Birthdays', 'Wedding day', 'Promote a business', and 'Photography showcase'. To the right of these thumbnails is a testimonial quote: 'I was honestly blown away by the quality of the video produced.' attributed to Michelle Maltais, LA Times.

Figure 1. Animoto home page (animoto.com)

Animoto in two different learning contexts in Japan

In order to provide practical guidance in different learning contexts, the following section focuses on detailed 1st person

accounts of how each author used Animoto in their classes, one with beginner level students and one with upper intermediate learners.

The Homestay English class at Toyo Gakuen University (Michael Stout)

The *Homestay English* class is an elective course open to a maximum of 30 first- and second-year students. It is designed to prepare students for doing a homestay in one of the university's study abroad programs. Classes are 90 minutes in length and are held once a week for a period of 13 weeks. There are no prerequisites for the course, and any student may join regardless of ability. Consequently, the classes include students ranging from beginner to intermediate levels of communicative competence.

The syllabus for this course is based on a textbook and several supplementary projects on topics pertaining to communication with the homestay family. While secondary school students are often asked to make scrap books or photo albums of their hometowns or families to use as a conversation prompt, I decided that making a music video would be a more interesting project for university students. Also, by sharing their videos with their classmates and others on the Internet, my students would get authentic practice describing themselves and their environment. The project was done over the course of five ninety-minute class periods, with about 30 minutes of each class devoted to the project.

Here is how I used Animoto in my Homestay class, step by step:

- I introduced Animoto by showing a video called "What makes Brazil a unique country," made by Ronaldo Lima Jr., a teacher in Brazil whom I connected via my Personal Learning Environment (PLE). In this video, Ronaldo had asked each of his students to come up with a word or phrase and a few images to answer this question. From this input he constructed his video. I showed Ronaldo's video to my students, who then noted the images and words they saw.
- I then made a similar video of my hometown (Toronto), embedded it to my class blog, and showed it to my students.
- Next I contacted Ronaldo directly, told him of my video, and asked him if he and his students could take a look at it. They did and left some comments as well.
- I showed my students these comments to demonstrate how Animoto videos can encourage English communication.
- Now that my students had a clear idea of what Animoto was all about, I replicated Ronaldo's project with my class. I began by asking students to think of a word or phrase to describe why Japan was special.
- My students were then asked to take some photos of places or things in their hometowns and upload the photos to a Flickr account I had set up for the the class.
- Using my students' words and images, I created an Animoto video.
- After that, Ronaldo, his students, and a teacher based in Dublin, Ireland commented on the videos.
- To facilitate communication, I instructed each of my students to reply to one of the comments my video had received.
- Next I taught my students how to make Animoto videos of their own, which they completed for homework.
- To enable students to see their classmates' work, I posted each video to YouTube, created a YouTube playlist of them, then embedded this playlist in my class blog. This created an easily accessible location for viewing and commenting on each clip.
- In the final lesson of this project, the students commented on their peers' videos and received some more comments from Ronaldo's students in Brazil.



Upon reflection, I felt the project was only marginally successful. Only eight students in the class managed to make their videos. Since the project was supplemental to the textbook, there was insufficient time for working on it in class, so much of it needed to be done as homework. In addition, no students requested my help in completing their projects despite my standing offer to make time available for assistance. The participation rate was slightly higher with the commenting. Ten students commented on their peers' videos and 15 students replied to comments from students and teachers overseas. Despite these difficulties, comments from students who had completed the project indicated it had been a positive experience. Below is a sample of some of these comments:

RenaK: Because everyone took a lot of beautiful photographs, I thought it was terrible [*sic*]. (This comment sounds negative, but what she meant to say was, "I thought it was terrific.")

Yuta: All were very good works.

It came to be able to know that everyone's town was easy by ANIMOTO, and to want to go.

Masanori: All were very good works. I think your photographs are beautiful Rena. I hope to see more in the future, and learn more about some of the places! Everyone's movie was beautiful.

Sohei: The animation of all was very good and it matched music unexpectedly and was splendid.

A number of things are evident from the comments above. First, the students were supportive of each other's work. There

was real L2 communication occurring between Rena and Masanori, which was notable because this was the first time they had interacted in English at all during the course. Finally, Yuta and Sohei's comments reflect how some students were impressed by Animoto.

The Workshop class at Chukyo University (Jerry Talandis Jr.)

I used Animoto in my freshman *Workshop* class at Chukyo University in Nagoya during the spring and fall terms of 2010. This upper intermediate level content-based course requires six groups of 16 students to study and discuss various subjects in English rather than learning the language directly. Subjects vary depending on the special interests of each teacher, and each group rotates teachers three times throughout the year, with each session meeting for approximately ten weeks. In this way, students learn three different subjects within one year-long course.

My Workshop class was entitled *Photography & the Internet*. It was designed as an introduction to the basics of digital photography and social networking, of mixing art with technology to help students simultaneously develop creative, technical, and communicative skills. In addition to learning about the importance of proper focus, light, and composition, students used *Facebook* to share their photos and required projects, of which Animoto was one. This project, which lasted for two 90-minute class periods, went as follows:

- In preparation, I planned on having my students tell a story with a series of photos. To show them what I wanted, I created an Animoto video of some experiences I had had while on vacation during Golden Week.
- In the first class, I presented the task in very specific terms: create a short video clip consisting of still photos, text, and



music that related an experience or told an original story. Students could make 30 second clips on a free account or use my personal Pro account if they were interested in making longer videos. Minimum required elements were between five and eight photos, three to six text slides, and music that matched the mood they wanted to create. Text on the slides also needed to be in the past tense in order to describe what had happened in their story.

- After introducing Animoto and showing my demonstration video, students made 30-second clips from a free account using photos they had previously taken, then shared their practice videos on our class Facebook group.
- For homework, students were required to view their classmates' practice videos, leave/respond to comments, and collect photos for the story they wanted to tell.
- In the 2nd class, I began by reviewing the project requirements and the basics for creating an Animoto video.
- Students then spent the remainder of the class creating their story videos, posting them to our class's Facebook group, and then viewing and leaving comments regarding their classmates' clips.

Overall, I was very pleased with the results of this project. Comments from the students' Action Logs (Kindt & Murphy, 1999), such as the one below, indicated a positive reception:

Today is the last class and I made animation with Animoto.com. I thought Animoto is very useful system. We can choose background and music in free. I was very surprised it was so easy to make animation. I want to try to take good pictures and make videos sometime!

The process of making the videos went fairly smoothly, outside of an occasionally slow Internet connection. Nearly every student completed their story video during class time, but a few

were not able to view classmates' clips and leave comments. They were asked to do so for homework. A few students with low confidence in their computer skills required extra assistance, as this Action Log comment indicates:

I finished my Animoto video. It is very fun. Thank you for your help. Without your help, I couldn't finish my work.

In addition to working one on one with several students, I also put students with higher computer skills to work as assistants. Their help was instrumental in supporting classmates with lower level skills. Facebook greatly facilitated the sharing and commenting of videos and also made it easy for me to monitor student progress and the quality of their interaction. While all the videos were fine in terms of overall quality, longer ones made with my personal account turned out better than the free 30-second clips. Without the 30-second limit, students could relate richer, more creative stories. At the time of this project I was not able to set up free education accounts for my students. This is clearly the way to go in the future if I choose to repeat this project with another class.

Discussion

This section will compare and contrast the use of Animoto in two different teaching contexts, one with lower level learners (Stout) and one with higher ones (Talandis Jr). By examining each experience from a practical perspective, clear guidelines for best-use practices will be highlighted. Despite the differences in student language ability, each teacher followed the same overall workflow for implementing their respective projects, a series of steps that can be used by EFL teachers in various contexts with Animoto or other similar sorts of services.



Preparation

This stage consisted of searching Animoto's *Sample Videos* page for ideas, general project planning, creating a demonstration video, and in Stout's case, making contact with the creator of a video he wished to emulate. Other technical details were also completed, such as booking a PC lab and testing out the Internet connection and browser software. For teachers new to Animoto, preparation is facilitated by the site's extensive *Helpdesk* page that contains a well-documented *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQ) section with many video tutorials covering basic issues pertinent to new users.

Demonstration & explanation

Creating a demo video helped both teachers learn how to use the service and served as a valuable visual aid in explaining the project to students. Especially for Stout's beginning level learners, seeing what to do was more productive than simply listening to an L2 explanation of the project. In effect this class had the benefit of two demo videos, one from the Brazilian teacher and one from their own. Nevertheless, given the students' low English proficiency and computer skills, providing bilingual instructions could have made this introductory process smoother. However, these students would have probably ignored the English in the bilingual instructions, thus depriving themselves of potentially useful English learning. Therefore, with low level learners, teachers need to decide whether the learning focus should be mainly in the process or in the product.

Set up

After demonstrating and explaining Animoto, it became time for students to begin using the service on their own. The first step involved creating user accounts. Stout had his students

use their school numbers and email addresses, while Talandis Jr encouraged his class to duplicate their Facebook login info. Overall this process went fairly smoothly for both teachers. However, neither teacher kept a record of student user names and passwords and both felt afterwards that doing so in the future would allow them to better handle occasional problems with forgotten information.

Practice & production

Stout's students, having received a relatively extended demonstration phase consisting of two demo videos, jumped right into producing their own projects, which began by taking photos outside of class time. Talandis Jr's class, on the other hand, went right into a simple and free practice video designed to provide time for students to figure Animoto out on their own. His students used photos taken for a previous project for this practice video, so they were able to complete a short clip with guidance and supervision within the class period. Armed with practical knowledge of what to do, they were then all able to produce their story video by the end of the following class, which was devoted to project completion. Stout's experience with beginner level students is instructive in how it emphasizes the importance of making class time available for completing this project, at least for the students' first attempt at an original video. Explanations can be clear and easy to follow, but nothing is really more effective than giving supervised time, guidance, and support. Making the videos part of the students' overall assessment can also help motivate lower level learners to complete their work.

Sharing

The final sharing stage is critical to the overall success of using Animoto in an EFL setting. One common element in both classes



was that each had a single centralized location where students could watch classmates' videos and leave comments (Stout's class blog and Talandis Jr's class Facebook group page). While it would be possible to get by without such a central viewing place, having one greatly facilitated the language exchange process and made for more efficient use of class time. In addition, Stout's efforts at making connections with teachers and students outside Japan paid off by allowing his class of beginners to engage in some authentic L2 communication. A key element to this success was the highly structured and facilitated nature of the language exchange. In other words, his students were directed clearly on where and how to respond. With Talandis Jr's higher level class, the requirement of having students follow a positive comment and question pattern worked quite well by helping facilitate the expression of genuine interest, enthusiasm, and interaction.

Through using Animoto, both teachers were able to put the learning ecology concept into practice by introducing their students to the idea of creating a self-sustaining, personally meaningful L2 network. While the project did not work well with every student, it did at least provide an opportunity for them to express and share their creativity while simultaneously building language and computer skills. Many found the experience an enjoyable one and were excited to see how their creative efforts helped provide energy for communication in another language.

Conclusion

In the introduction of this paper, US student Anthony Chiveta's quote pointed towards the massive changes taking place in society and learning as the pace of technological development quickens and the realm of intellectual accessibility expands exponentially. He follows on by eloquently capturing the ramifications of this change for members of his generation:

My generation will be required to learn information quickly, use that information to solve new and novel problems, and then present those solutions in creative and effective ways. The effective students of tomorrow's world will be independent learners, strong problem solvers, and effective designers. (para 2)

Activities using free, online Web 2.0 tools such as Animoto can be a productive means for supporting this sort of learning, of promoting creativity and authentic language use even with students at the beginner level. Using the basic workflow outlined above can help provide interested teachers with clear guidance on how to plan and implement not only an Animoto project, but one using other Web 2.0 resources as well.

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Bio data

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