

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



Pocket CALL: No cost and little preparation

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This article introduces a teaching technique that utilizes students' cell phones for university foreign language classes. Using the video and voice recording functions of cell phones students practice conversations, and then review them in order to raise awareness of grammar points and pronunciation. The article introduces aspects of using cell phones that make them superior to other recording devices. Finally, the author presents voices of participants to evaluate the success of this activity.

本稿では大学の外国語の授業で携帯電話に搭載される機能を用いる学習方法を紹介する。人数の多い大学の授業において、教員が一人一人の学生のミス直すということが難しい。その状況で、本稿の著者は授業で携帯電話による技術的な対策を取り入れている。学生は英語で話している自分の姿を携帯電話のムービー機能によって録画し、その映像を見て学習者は言語形式に注目(Focus on Form)する。自分のビデオによって学生たちは文法、単語、発音などの間違いを自分で探し、自分で修正するというアプローチである。本稿では携帯電話がその他の録音機より便利だと説明する。最後にこの研究に参加した学生たちの「声」を取り入れて、この学習方法が効果的であるということを論じる。

This short paper discusses a partial solution to a problem faced by many university instructors in Japan regarding ways of focusing on form and pronunciation in large oral communication classes. These activities are aimed at leading learners to use more accurate and therefore more comprehensible grammar, lexis, and pronunciation. The technology discussed exists on the cell phones that the overwhelming majority of students carry around in their pockets everyday: the video and voice recording functions.

Cell phones offer a range of functions that can be used in English classes. Carney (2006) reports on successful cross-cultural (and inter-continental) collaborative learning, using cell phones. In these projects, students in Japan used their mobile phones to e-mail students in foreign countries who were studying Japanese. Students communicated with one another by texting in both their L1 and L2. Additionally, a

number of articles focus on providing language input to students in the form of vocabulary lists and reading assignments. For example, Jerrell (2007) reports on a daily e-mail magazine he writes, which students (and the general public) read on their cell phones. Thornton and Houser (2003) describe how to develop interactive classes where students use cell phones to answer quizzes and questionnaires right in class. There are a number of interesting and intriguing uses of cell phones for input and communicative opportunities. However, there appears to be few examples of how learners could improve the quality of their own linguistic production.

Communicative activities and beyond

Among the possible uses of cell phones in language classes are a large number of student-centered communicative activities, which lead to an increase in student speaking time. The author has used an activity based on the camera function to motivate students to speak and ask each other questions in class. The instructions are as follows:

1. Take your cell phone out.
2. Display a picture you have taken recently.
3. Explain it to two other students. Make sure you discuss the following points:
Where was the picture taken?
Who appears in the picture?
What are their relationships to you?
What did you do on that day?
4. Speak freely about your experiences.

Because students speak about their own personal lives, instead of practicing conversations prepared by textbook writers, this activity brings with it a much deeper level of student ownership as compared with prewritten conversations. Students are given some time to prepare their speeches, and therefore have the opportunity to consult dictionaries, peers and the teacher, bringing a little more sophistication to their oral practice. Students start with a situation that they *want* to describe, and then must find the English to achieve communication. From this point of view this activity using cell phones is language enhancing.

However, the activity described above is quite limited in many respects. It leaves little opportunity for students to improve their performance ability. In my personal experience, feedback on language output is key for high beginners or low intermediate students to improve. With large university communication classes of 25 to 40 students giving such personalized feedback is very difficult for teachers to do. Fotos (1994) suggests that in large university courses, consciousness-raising tasks can improve the accuracy of sentence structure. Therefore, building on this idea, my research question is: *how can cell phones be used in class to promote awareness of form within conversation activities?*

Research context

Students participating in the study were first-year non-English majors at a university in central Japan. The main course goal, prescribed by the department, was that at the end of the semester, students were to be able to conduct a five-minute conversation on one of five topics related

to their interests (family, university life, favorite foods, shopping, hometowns). The course offered a lot of talking time for students to activate language received in secondary school. However, due to the large class size, there was little opportunity for teacher feedback on a personal level. In the past my colleagues and I have offered feedback by explaining “common errors” introduced between conversations on the blackboard. Although effective to a limited degree, many students ignored error correction aimed at the class as a whole. My hypothesis is that these students were unaware that the errors raised were ones that they themselves were making.

Video recording and voice recorders

In order to raise awareness of common problems, I asked the students to take out their cell phones and turn on the video recording function. Students were asked to conduct a two-minute conversation with the cell phone video cameras pointing at themselves. This meant that all students were making a digital video recording of only themselves while they spoke. At the end, I asked the students to view and listen to their own video, taking care to listen for a key point that I wrote on the blackboard.

This key point was adjusted depending on what problems seemed pertinent or salient on that day, including usage of the past tense, time and discourse markers (“next”, “after that”, “in the morning”), and vocabulary. For example, before a discussion of future goals, students were asked to include the expressions “hope to”, “would like to” and “will” in their speech. After viewing the video, students were asked to check if they had used all of the expressions. One more

practice focused on pronunciation problems. After recording a conversation, students were asked to listen and check pronunciation points introduced by the instructor.

An alternative cell phone function that teachers can take advantage of is the voice recorder. This function existed on all the cell phones that I saw during the study. This function works identically to the video function, but lacks the visual aspect. It can be used to achieve the same goals, and since students are only dealing with the aural aspect of their conversation, they can concentrate on their speech. In this study, using the voice recorder function of their cell phones, students were asked to transcribe their dialogues. Then on their transcripts, with a colored pen, they were asked to circle the points that the teacher had highlighted on the blackboard. As above, using the students’ cell phone eliminates the need for the teacher to carry around recording equipment. Recording could be done in any classroom, not just a language lab. There was no need for students to buy tapes. Since students found their own errors in class, there was no added grading for the teacher to do after class, though teachers do have the option of collecting transcripts. This activity required almost no preparation nor did it require follow up grading, moreover it came at no additional cost to the university, students or the teacher.

Some problems encountered

Several problems arose during the study that should be considered. Firstly, are cell phones truly ubiquitous? In one study by Thornton and Houser (2005), 100% of a sample of university students had cell phones. However, in my experience, on a number of sessions, students forgot their

cell phones at home or had dead batteries. Therefore, from informal observation, I would argue that cell phones are *nearly* ubiquitous in Japanese university settings, but not always available for use. To avoid this problem, it may be a good idea to carry one or two tape or digital recorders to make available in case of technical problems. Otherwise, some students may not be able to participate fully in the class or will have to share with a peer.

Another technical difficulty encountered was that about one in 20 students had cell phone memories that lacked room for recording. These students needed to erase old files to make room for class recording. A further problem was that about 20% of students had phones that did not allow for more than one minute of recording. This was because the phones were set up to make short video recordings that could be appended to text messages. In my classes the students helped each other to make the proper adjustments to allow for longer recordings. Yet another problem, noise interference, was encountered in a trial run before the main study began. I attempted this activity with a very large class, which was crowded into a medium-sized room, but the large number of students in a small classroom caused echoing, making the recordings inaudible in some cases. I found that classes with large student numbers can do this activity, but it is best done in an oversized classroom.

Feasibility and versatility

With all of the problems discussed above, it might be argued that standard video cameras would be superior to cell phones for this kind of awareness-raising task. However, cell phones offer a much higher level of versatility when compared to

other equipment. First of all, it is unfeasible to organize 25 video cameras for twenty-five students in a class. Recording students on university-owned equipment also poses some privacy questions. For example, what will become of the videotapes after the lesson is over? Moreover, when one considers that a large number of university courses in Japan are taught by part-time teachers who may not have easy access to equipment securely stored away, or may lack the time to deal with set-up and take-down, student-owned equipment becomes more attractive. Videotapes require rewinding and viewing on televisions, whereas the digital video recordings done by cell phones are ready for instant private viewing and have no need for tapes or batteries to be provided by the teacher. This activity can be done as an after-thought, with no set up time once the students understand the basic idea of self-recording. In short, the problems encountered using portable phones are far outweighed by the versatility that they provide.

Results of using cell phones to raise awareness of language

The critical test of cell phone usage is whether or not it actually leads to improvements in language skills. Without a controlled experimental situation it would be difficult to confirm improvement. However, as the goal of this classroom research was primarily to raise student awareness, student voices may give some insight to the success of this activity. First of all, this was not a one-off type of activity. Ten to 15 minutes of class time was used on a weekly basis over a six-week period. Students were asked to look at their tense usage and a number of pronunciation points, including

so-called “katakana-pronunciation” (speaking English with Japanese intonation and stress patterns). Finally, students responded to a questionnaire at the end of the cycle.

Learners were first asked if they preferred the video or the voice recorder. Additionally, they were asked the open question, “what did you learn when you made the recordings?” Students had been informed that the instructor was doing some kind of research related to the use of cell phones, but they were not told specific details.

A minority of students noted negative aspects of the activity. Five students (out of 50) indicated that they would have preferred the teacher to make more corrections directly, rather than searching for the mistakes by themselves. About the same number of students complained that their phones had not been set up to make longer recordings (despite the fact that that problem had been overcome.) One student indicated that she didn’t like the activity, but gave no details. However, the majority of responses were positive.

Before each student comment appears the preferred method of recording, video or voice recording, in parentheses.

- (video) I could see my facial expressions, and I could hear where my pronunciation was bad.
- (video) I could hear my voice and check my mistakes; I could see my facial expressions.
- (video) I noticed that I wasn’t looking at my partner’s face, my pronunciation was weak, and that I did not know what to say in English.

- (video and voice recorder) The cell phone video recorder let me see my facial expressions. With the voice recorder, I was able to listen again and again to check my pronunciation.
- (voice recording) I think that hearing one’s own voice recorded is very important. In class we are never able to hear our own voices, which is not good.
- (voice recording) When I am talking, I never know what I am saying and my grammar is just a mess. I am just trying to get my idea across. With the voice recorder, I can listen again and think about what I have said. This recorder is a very good idea.
- (voice recorder) I could hear how my voice would sound to other people. I was able to hear my errors and correct them.
- (voice recorder) It took me too long to answer questions. I have to answer more quickly.
- (voice recorder) I need to speak more smoothly.

(Student comments have been translated from the Japanese by the author.)

According to the above examples, which were typical of the entire sample, it appears that this activity was particularly helpful for pronunciation practice. Pronunciation checking seems to have stuck out in the students’ minds and appears in the most number of comments. Before the activity, students

were aware that their speaking skills needed to be improved, but after the activity, they had a more concrete idea of which aspects to work on immediately.

Conclusion

In this short study, I have argued the convenience of the use of cell phones as recording devices to focus on form and pronunciation. I noted that cell phones were nearly ubiquitous, and provided functionality that made them uniquely applicable to awareness-raising activities. Despite problems related to phone set-up and dead batteries the student feedback indicated that overall the use of cell phones led to a positive learning experience. Those student voices signify that using cell phones in class to focus on form and pronunciation was helpful in raising student awareness, in the context of communicative student-centered activities. Possibly the most positive aspect of the cell phone is its versatility, whereby teachers can help improve their students' grammar and pronunciation 'on the fly' when particular problems crop up unexpectedly. Finally the activity requires no financial investment and very little time investment, but potentially provides a great deal of form related improvement, which will translate into a higher quality of communication in the outside world.

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