

# **E-learning in a Communicative ESL Class**

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Can online materials be used in a communicative ESL class? This paper describes an online course where students had to cooperate in communicative activities such as discussion boards and then create wiki pages. The paper explains the background of the students, the nature of the activities, and discusses students' reactions to the course.

## **1. Course Overview**

This course was intended for students of English as a foreign or second language. The course includes several content focused language lessons for low to mid-level intermediate students. The course includes vocabulary, listening practice and opportunities for students to practice expressing opinions. Additional opportunities for analyzing and summarizing information will be given when students create original wiki pages dealing with the topics raised in the lessons.

The students in this project came in two groups. The first group consisted of nine students to trial the materials. These nine were volunteers from Nagoya Institute of Technology (NIT), a national technical university and the school where I am employed full time.

These students all had TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores of over 500. TOEIC scores range from 0, no English proficiency, to 990, native-level proficiency. Employers in Japan often use the test to determine candidates for overseas job placement. The lowest score for overseas placement is 600 points. These students then could be considered solidly intermediate.

The second group of students consisted of students from two face-to-face classes at Nagoya Institute of Technology. 36 students were registered in the first class and 42 students were registered in the second class. The total number of students in this second group comes to close to 80. Students in this group are all under 500 points on the TOEIC test. Scores range from 150 to 485 making the students in this group of a lower level.

## **2. Online Program Outline**

The title I chose for the online course was English Communication and its stated general purpose was to help students develop the ability to express themselves accurately in English. I listed the below objectives for the course.

Objectives: Students at the end of the course should be able to

- demonstrate knowledge of the vocabulary relating to the topics
- be able to grasp key points from listening files
- be able to express opinions dealing with a variety of topics
- be able to express agreement or disagreement with others' opinions, using appropriate grammar and expressions
- demonstrate the ability summarize and synthesize a variety of sources in the creation of an original wiki page.

The requirements for the course required students to complete all of the quizzes, participate in the online forums and work in a team to create a wiki page

The activities were organized around discussion topics that should be of interest to 19-year old college students. Topics included women & work, drugs, and young people's growing pains. Each topic contained the same set of activities:

Vocabulary Quiz

Sound File

Listening Quiz

Sentence Combination Activity

Discussion

Wiki Page Creation

Students were first required to study vocabulary that appeared in the sound file that presented the topic. The vocabulary quiz acted as a preview for the sound file and was intended to ensure that students would understand key vocabulary in the file. After studying the vocabulary, students listen to the sound file that presents a problem. The students then took a comprehension quiz. The sentence combination activity asked students to create a series of opinions that deal with the topic presented in the sound file. These opinions were recycled as topics in the discussion area. Finally, students in groups were assigned on of the topics and must make a wiki page about it for the class.

### **3. Analysis of the Objectives**

#### **3. 1 Logging In**

For the first group logging in and setting up accounts was no problem. About half of the volunteers were familiar with the procedure. Three students had not logged in by the deadline and I ended up logging them in. Once this group was set up they participated in the activities successfully.

The second group had more problems. About 80% of the students logged on without any problems so in regards to percentages, a greater percentage of students from the second group actually succeeded in logging in. Still, because of the greater numbers, getting the second group online was more difficult. Students lost instructions, forgot the access code, did not know how to input roman writing. And because of the lower level, students had difficulty understanding the instructions.

Also just as half of the second group was getting started, a system error occurred and the data was lost. Students who had created accounts, complained that they received an error message saying that the username

or password had already been used. For students with limited English and computer skills, the system crash was a big set back.

Still, everyone managed to get logged in. Because of the confusion caused by the system error, I cut the self-introduction activity for the second group of students. Some students had completed it, but the data was lost. Some students went back and redid their self-introductions, but I did not require it.

### 3. 2 First Activities

For the first group of students, the nine volunteers, the Vocabulary activity worked well. I was surprised that few students took it more than once. All nine students in the class took the quizzes and most students scored well on both the vocabulary and the listening comprehension quizzes.

With the second group of students, the number of times that students took the quizzes was much greater than the first group. This suggests that the materials were at an appropriate level for the students. It also shows that the students were motivated enough to get a perfect score which was heartening as a teacher.

Some students in the second group complained that they could not hear the sound file. I tried it on a number of computers, but did not have any problems. The students who had problems were using university computers and I came up with two possible explanations. First, the pop-up blocker, active-x, function on Windows Explorer might have been causing problems. The second, and I think more likely explanation, is that on public computers the volume had been turned down / off. Some of the students claimed that the sound file page opened and they could see the file moving on screen, but could not hear anything. This definitely sounds to me like a volume issue.

The more important issue to me is to what degree the online teacher should feel responsible for students' technical difficulties. The students definitely see the teacher as responsible. I asked if they asked the

computer room support staff for help and to a one, they all answered, 'no'. They waited until the deadline for the assignment had passed or was really imminent and then told me about their problems.

Considering the above problems, I think some training time for students is necessary. Many of the students have limited basic computer skills. In an online environment, I am limited as to what I can do. A couple of face-to-face classes for online orientation could go a long way to alleviate a lot of these problems. Also, as many of the students are using computers on campus, I should liaison with the IT aides who will have direct contact with the students. I should let them know what I am doing, what kind of materials are online and make sure that the security issues do not interfere with the materials.

I also was intrigued by this idea that a computer problem could be presented as a legitimate excuse in a way that more traditional media problems would not be.

### **3. 3 Discussion Boards**

The discussion boards were a mixed bag of success and disappointment. First, all of the students participated and were able to post interesting and solid opinions. The first group, whose data were lost in the system crash, were in general more talkative. The group was smaller and while there was little cross poster dialogue, there was some. Students expressed agreement with previous posters and in general they wrote longer posts.

Originally, I posted five opinions and students had to explain whether they agreed or disagreed. Because of the large number of questions, students' posts were short. When I was working with the second group, I changed the "questions" to more open-ended questions and hoped that students' responses would be longer. Results were mixed. Some students wrote long, interesting posts and some people wrote little.

The most disappointing thing regarding the discussion boards was the lack of inter-student response. Students posted and then never looked at the board again. Some modeling and previewing for this kind of activity

are certainly necessary.

Whenever a new business opens in Japan, the store will hire or more likely a friend or relative will volunteer and pretend to be a customer. This is to encourage other people to come. It is uncomfortable to enter an unfamiliar, empty store. They call this person a “sakura” which means “cherry blossom” I may create a Sakura for lower level groups to write a model answer to the question. The first poster in the first group was a kind of “sakura” for the weaker students. Everyone wants to do as much as, but not more than, the first poster, so I think it important to have a strong first poster.

### **3. 5 Wikis**

Only the first group finished the wiki part of the class. The group that made the first wiki, women’s rights in Japan, did a very good job. They followed their roles, researched and created interesting original material. The first role was “historian” and the student mixed three important aspects Japanese culture: language, the ideal and the right to vote. She researched and summarized information from a variety of sources and added some of her own editorial comments. The second role was the biographer. She was supposed to research three Japanese feminists, but did only one. Still the information was interesting and well organized. The third role was supposed to discuss what is happening today. I am not sure she did much research, but she touched on a number of concerns for Japanese women. It is interesting that two of the writers talked about Japan’s falling population. I was unaware of the extent to which young people were concerned with this.

## **4. Best Teaching Practices In My Online Class**

The seven best teaching practices, and how my online course relates to them are outlined below.

#### **4. 1 Encourages Contacts Between Students & Faculty**

With the smaller trial group, this was certainly true. Students would send e-mail with questions or problems and I could respond immediately. This resulted in a connection that was missing with a once a week, face-to-face class. With the larger group, I felt a bit swamped, especially when the system crashed. I was inundated with e-mail and had to resort to group mailing. Still the online component of the class led to greater communication. Writing an e-mail explaining a problem could itself be seen as a worthwhile language task.

#### **4. 2 Develops Cooperation Among Students**

Originally I intended the Wiki pages to be a collaborative learning exercise, but in fact the new nature of the online exercises encouraged students to work together. In fact, with the large number of students, I would often tell students to find someone who had finished it and ask him/her for help. I think this made students a little more responsible for their own learning and encouraged them to work out their problems on their own, rather than expecting the teacher to be the end all resource for everything.

The one point of disappointment on this was that in the discussion area students very rarely responded to other classmates' posts. If I wrote a response, students would respond, but I think this exists because of a lack of understanding of the online learning experience. Students viewed the posts as short reports that they handed in and were done with. The idea that this was a dialogue or a discussion and that the learning would come from the students own content was an idea that many students were unprepared for. I believe some training or orientation is necessary to prepare students for what is quite a different style of learning than they are used to.

#### **4. 3 Uses Active Learning Techniques**

All of the activities require the students to do something. They are either

acting on the materials provided or actively seeking their own knowledge for their own presentations. Some students resisted being responsible for a subject outside their major subject and again I think I did not prepare the students as well as I could have to deal the type of activities that I asked them to do. Still the good news is that, now, I have solid examples with the Wiki pages of what I expect and how they can fulfill the goals.

#### **4. 4 Gives Prompt Feedback**

The online quizzes give immediate feedback and the opportunity for repetition and reinforcement. Here again, with the discussion board activities, students did not see their role in the feedback process. They operated under the expectation that the only authorized person to give feedback was the teacher and were reluctant to comment, criticize or support others' comments.

#### **4. 5 Emphasizes Time on Task**

The online materials can be used efficiently at the student's convenience. There is not a lot of sitting around time. Again with the discussion boards, students did not grasp the idea of an ongoing dialogue where they logged in several times a day. Instead they saw their contributions as a once off submission.

#### **4. 6 Communicates High Expectations**

I hope so. I hope the evaluation and expectations are clear. Here again, the examples that I developed during this class will be useful to future classes.

### **5. Student Feedback**

I handed out the below survey to the first group of students. Of the nine students, eight returned the survey. Students completed the Student Survey For Online Learning Materials below and using a scale of 1 - 5 indicated their agreement with the statements below. 5 indicated strongly



agree, 1 indicated that students strongly disagreed.

	Question	Average Score
1.	The online materials were easy to use.	4
2.	The materials were interesting.	5
3.	The materials were useful to my English study.	4.5
4.	I enjoyed studying English by computers.	4
5.	I enjoyed reading what other people wrote on the discussion board.	5
6.	I enjoyed expressing my opinion on the discussion board.	3
7.	The materials were appropriate to my level	4
8.	I learned new vocabulary.	5
9.	My grammar improved	4
10.	I want to study like this in other classes.	4
11.	Making the wiki page was useful	4
12.	I learned new information by making the wiki page	5
13.	I enjoyed working with others to make the wiki page.	3

Comments:

- Making the account was difficult.
- I could not find the homepage at first
- I could not hear the sound file.
- I hate other people reading my English sentences.
- Some people in my group did not work hard on the wiki page.
- Sometimes the computer does funny things.

Overall the scores were high and the comments were negative. This follows the pattern for other surveys I have administered in Japan. One point of interest was the response to questions 6 and 13. The two cooperative, interactive elements were the least highly evaluated. Students enjoyed reading others' opinions and comments, but did not make the connection that they were the "others".

## 6. Conclusions

Overall the web-class was a good experience. Students demonstrated their knowledge of new vocabulary, comprehension of complex issues and were able to express opinions about difficult topics. Students who completed the wikis, researched topics, gathered information, synthesized the information and presented it to be read by others. The points that need work are the need for more modeling and orientation for students with little computer experience. There is a fundamental difference between students who choose an online learning experience and those who have an online learning experience thrust upon them. Teachers need to make amends for students who are being introduced to online learning.

### References

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