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Articles

- **A Case of (Mistaken?) Identity: The Authorship Controversy Surrounding the Sherlock Holmes Canon** 7
Jeroen Bode
- **Recollections of a Jewish-German Businessman in Early Shōwa Japan** 14
Christian W. Spang

Language Learning and Teaching

- **Using Blog-Based Communication to Prepare for Study Abroad** 32
Kiyomi Fujii
- **Content and Language-Integrated Learning and English as a Medium of Instruction** 38
Gavin O'Neill
- **Lifelong English Learning Motivation and Identity: A Case Study** 46
Shinichi Nagata

Special Section: Teaching Ideas from OkiJALT

- **Teaching Pronunciation of the “S” Morpheme** 53
George Robert MacLean
- **Where Should I Go? Encouraging Learners to Put Their Place into Learning** 57
Kurt Ackermann
- **Thoughts on Vocabulary, Internationalization, and Culture** 61
Tokuya Uza
- **A Communicative Way to Teach Article Use** 64
Michael Bradley
- **Utilizing the Pecha-Kucha Format for Presentation Activities** 67
Norman Fewell
- **Aprendizaje y Fijación de los Verbos Regulares en Español: Una Idea Más** 70
Fernando Kohatsu
- **“Welcome to Nago” Website: A Sophomore English Writing Project** 72
Meghan Kuckelman
- **A Focus on Functional Language** 75
Tokuya Uza
- **Psychological Considerations in Teaching** 79
Timothy Kelly

Technology

- **What Are My Students Thinking? Setting Up an Online Survey to Gather Student Feedback** 84
Brent Wright
- **The Text-to-Speech Function** 88
George Robert MacLean



Language Learning and Teaching

Using Blog-Based Communication to Prepare for Study Abroad

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Abstract: This paper explores a language exchange activity using blogs between university Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) students in the US and English as a foreign language (EFL) students in Japan. Blogs are now used as language-teaching tools/materials, and provide an engaging addition to the classroom. This research describes a blog activity prior to the beginning of a study abroad program. The results suggest that the blog activity aided and encouraged students to create a learning community and provided opportunities for language exchange with native speakers. Students were able to raise their awareness of the differences and similarities between themselves and Japanese students, and to better understand people who study their language. This paper reports the positive effects of utilizing blogs to interact with native speakers of a target language prior to arrival in the target country.

Note: Preliminary results from this study were presented at the 2011 International Conference on Japanese Language Education (ICJLE), Tianjin Foreign Studies University, August 21, 2011.

Introduction

Many researchers have extolled the benefits of computer-assisted language learning. They claim that it enables learners to perform at their own pace and maintain higher motivation levels, while functioning as a labor-saving device (Oki, 2005). Learners get the chance to receive sufficient feedback and “work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level” (Egbert, Chao, & Hanson-Smith, 1999, p. 4). Researchers also found SNS data to be beneficial in assessing the learning processes of language students (Back 2013; Stewart 2010). Moreover, some studies have argued that collaborative activities with target-language speakers are highly effective and richer than the traditional education setting (Jauregi & Canto, 2012).

Previous studies have shown that using blogs develops learners’ autonomy and motivation (Fujii, Elwood, & Orr, 2010; Uchida, 2010). Blog activities also develop intercultural competence and enable participants to create relationships (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Fukai, Nazikian, & Sato, 2008; Sadler & Kim, 2010; Sato & Fukai, 2001). However, blog activities in previous studies were limited to the duration of a given course. The present study focuses on an activity in

which students created blogs before arrival in Japan. It aims to explore the blog’s effectiveness in terms of its motivational benefits and efficacy for language learning done in preparation for study abroad.

Blog Project

Issues of a short study-abroad program

It is crucial for short-term study abroad students to immerse themselves in a target-language country as soon as possible. In other words, learners need to get used to Japan and its culture, and use the brief time allotted to communicate actively. However, in reality it is often the case that the program ends just as students get used to being in their new environment.

“They [the students’ counterparts] were very helpful, and made certain things easier. They made the program a lot of fun, and helped improve my Japanese a lot.”

“I didn’t meet them soon enough.”

“It’s very hard to break the ice.”

“I would to have more time to get to know and have fun with Japanese students.” (Kanazawa Institute of Technology, 2010)

The above comments are from students who came from four sister schools in the U.S. to participate in a 6-week summer intensive-

Fujii, K. (2014). Using blog-based communication to prepare to study abroad. *OTB Forum*, 7(1), 32-37.

Japanese program at a private college in Japan. As the comments indicate, some students mentioned that Japanese students helped them and their Japanese improved through their interactions. On the other hand, some students pointed out that they needed more time to develop a relationship with Japanese students. These comments indicate that even though the students had some opportunities, it was difficult to actually make friends. It is for this reason that the blog project was started.

The Purpose of the blog project

The purpose of this project was to create a smoother adjustment to being in Japan for short-term Japanese as a foreign language study abroad program participants by facilitating interaction with Japanese students prior to their arrival in Japan. Furthermore, the project was designed to raise the participants' awareness of the differences and similarities between students who are studying Japanese and Japanese students. We hoped this would allow them to better understand people who study their respective languages, and keep the students motivated.

This blog project was continued during their stay in Japan, this time allowing participants to share interesting things they found in Japan with their classmates, friends, and anyone else. The purpose of this portion of the project was for students to improve their Japanese language skills, develop an e-portfolio that would act as a record of their language study and time in Japan, and to become more aware of what they could do beyond the textbook and classroom materials. These materials also proved to be illuminating to Japanese students, because many of the things that non-Japanese students found interesting were taken for granted by Japanese students. Seeing their own environment through a different lens provided Japanese students with the opportunity for the development of intercultural competence.

Project activities

The blog project was conducted between JFL (Japanese as a foreign language) students in the US and EFL (English as a foreign language) students in Japan. Participants were 17 students from four American universities and 27 students from one Japanese university.

JFL students were students who applied for a summer intensive program at this Japanese university.

Table 1. *Participants Profile*

<i>Study history</i>	<i>JFL students</i>	<i>EFL students</i>
1 yr. – 2 yr.	1	0
2 yr. – 3 yr.	14	0
3 yr. – 4 yr.	0	0
More than 4 yr.	2	27
N	17	27

First, an invitation and directions handout about participation in the blog project were sent by email to students who applied for the short-term intensive summer program in Japan. During the project, students were asked to create a blog, which was then linked to their name on the blog project page. The blog project page consisted of two columns; one for JFL students and another for EFL students (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Blog front page with links to student blogs

The students who were studying Japanese used Japanese on their blogs, and students who were studying English used English on their blogs. However, when leaving comments, the JFL student commented in English on the ESL students' posts, and used Japanese to comment on the JFL students' posts.

Two tasks were assigned before students arrived in Japan. The first was a self-introduction. JFL students posted their self-introductions in Japanese on their own blog pages and other participants and ESL students in Japan left comments in Japanese. Conversely, ESL students posted their self-

introductions in English, to which JFL students provided their own comments.

The second assignment for JFL students was to list things they wanted to do in Japan, or some questions about the school or local area, and the Japanese students commented, or answered the questions, in Japanese. The ESL students' assignment was to introduce their school and town, to which JFL students commented in English.

During the program, students were asked to post entries once a week. They could upload a picture of "cultural artifacts" and add a short description about each item in Japanese. Cultural artifacts were anything they used/saw daily, or found interesting while living in Japan, such as a town map, a photo, a drawing, a menu, a receipt, a snack container, etc. Students were required to present one of their blog entries to the class on the assigned day.

The posting policy for the blog was limited to student-use only, to avoid influencing student interactions. Instructors adding comments, or getting otherwise involved in posting on student blogs, may have altered the space or created a different atmosphere. Also, grammar mistakes were not corrected, because the primary purpose of this project was for students to get to know each other.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study is to find out how effective the blog project was in allowing students to: (a) communicate with Japanese students before arriving in Japan, (b) make the adjustment to Japan smoother through interactions prior to arriving in Japan, (c) keep students motivated, and (d) provide opportunities to use the Japanese language.

Methodology

Materials

The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to collect three kinds of information: Section 1 asked about participants' backgrounds, if they have been using any SNS, and the reason for

participating in the blog project. Section 2 contained questions regarding the blog activity's effectiveness, with participants indicating their answers on the 5-point Likert scale: 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neutral, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree. Finally, in Section 3, the participants were asked to list the strong and weak points of this activity.

Participants

Because this study focused on the blog activity prior to the program's beginning, the participants of this study were 14 students who joined the blog project before arriving in Japan. They were from two American private and two state universities.

The background questions revealed that 11 out of 14 participants (78.6%) already had an SNS account, such as on Facebook. The frequency with which all 14 participants accessed the blog site was as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Frequency of Accessing the Blog Site*

<i>Frequency</i>	<i># Access</i>
1/ week	5
2-3 times/ week	6
4-5 times/ week	1
Every day	2
Total	14

Results

The reasons that students participated in the blog project were as follows:

Table 3. *Participants' motivation for joining the project*

<i>Reasons</i>	
To make friends before coming to Japan	8
To practice Japanese	2
To make friends and practice Japanese	3
Other	1
<i>n</i>	14

As Table 3 indicates, more than half of the students participated in this project to get to know each other.

Table 4. Questionnaire results

Questions	
1. Blogging helped me to communicate with/to meet/to introduce KIT students	4.1
2. Blogging helped my preparation for coming to KIT/Japan	3.2
3. I enjoyed blogging	3.6
4. Blogging improved my motivation for learning Japanese	4.0

Note. 5-point Likert scale.

Communication with Japanese students before arriving in Japan

When asked whether the “students achieved their goals by participating in the blog project before arriving in Japan,” 9 students (56%) answered that they did. Those who answered “yes,” commented that they could meet their counterparts at the welcome party that was held right after their arrival. Most of the students who answered “no,” said that the reason they participated in the project was to practice Japanese. Because students made only two posts before their arrival, they did not feel that this was sufficient Japanese practice.

Overall, the participants’ comments about the activity were highly positive:

It was nice to get to know people before I came.

Fun to communicate with other students.

Meet new people and share ideas

Being able to make friends

I like getting comments from the Japanese students”

Making adjustment smoother by facilitating interaction with Japanese students

As the results above show, conducting the blog activity prior to student arrival in Japan helps students to get to know their Japanese counterparts and make friends.

For the research question – whether the blog activity helped to make adjustment smoother by facilitating interaction with Japanese students – the questionnaire yielded positive results, as corroborated by items 1 and 2 in Table 4. Furthermore, 11 out of 14 (78.6%) participants posted their self-introduction and received comments from

Japanese students, and 7 participants replied to the comments that they received (Figure 2). This indicates the participants had interaction with Japanese students actively before their arrival. In addition, 9 participants answered that they could meet Japanese students, whom they communicated with through the blog, at the welcome party. 2 participants met 5 to 6 Japanese students who were already in contact through their blogs.



Figure 2. Participants repeatedly interacting with each other

The most common topics the participants chose to share during these interactions were hobbies, favorite music, and favorite artists. They also took the opportunity to exchange more detailed information and asked more questions about their posts. Participants left comments to Japanese students in English and had a few interactions on the English blog page, as well. Given these interactions, we can surmise that the blog activity does ease participants into communicating with

Japanese students. moreover, these interactions might facilitate a smooth adjustment to life at a Japanese university, and assist students in making Japanese friends.

The same can be seen on the program evaluation. When asked if the program provided students with enough opportunities to meet and to interact with Japanese students, 82.3% participants answered yes, compared to only 15% in 2010 when the program did not provide a blog activity. The total number of participants is different, but all other program activities were the same, including the welcome party and overnight field-trip with Japanese students.

Table 5. *Did this program provide you with enough opportunities to meet and to interact with Japanese students?*

	2010 (n = 27)	2011 (n = 17)
Yes	15.0%	82.3%
No	70.0%	11.8%
N/A	15.0%	5.9%

Keeping students motivated

As the questionnaire results indicate, the participants enjoyed the blog activity. Likely, it motivated students, as shown in item 4 in Table 4. The first task, self-introduction, was not too difficult for the participants, because most learners began by repeatedly practicing their self-introductions early on. However, reading the Japanese students' comments and replying proved more challenging, requiring students to use and apply creatively what they learned. The instructor posted useful links to the blog page so that participants could reference them when posting their comments to Japanese students. Although the participants expressed what they wanted to say freely, they had to face their language limitations. This may have led them to want to study more Japanese and raised their motivation.

Providing opportunities to use the Japanese language

Free comments from the participants reveal that the blog activity created opportunities to learn Japanese:

Good practice writing sentences

Great practice typing Japanese

Good grammar practice

Helps you organize thoughts and feelings like a journal

The participants also noted that they could learn about Japanese schools, students, and culture through interaction with their Japanese counterparts:

It was nice to get to know people before I came.

Great to learn about other students and the school.

Got to learn about KIT and some of the students.

Learn more about Japan an its culture.

The above comments indicate that participants were able to apply what they learned in a classroom to actual usage, and to practice Japanese.

Conclusion

The results demonstrate the positive effects of utilizing blogs to interact with native speakers of a target-language prior to arrival in the target country. The blog activity helps and encourages students to create a learning community with the opportunity for language exchange with native speakers. Through this activity, students were able to raise their awareness of the differences and similarities between themselves and Japanese students, and to better understand people who study their language.

Although the blog activity was tremendously effective, there is room for improvement, as the following comments show:

Did not have a lot of time between start of blog and start of program, maybe start earlier.

Encourage more blog post.

Due to the nature of this pilot study, the data we collected were not extensive and focused only on JFL students. Moving forward, the study should be expanded to include EFL students who participated in the blog activity and to investigate the impact on

their motivation and intercultural-competence development.

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