Chapter XIV
Producing Cell Phone Video Diaries
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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on an ongoing project conducted at Tohoku University in Sendai, Japan. A mixed group of seven advanced EFL learners produced weekly cell phone video diaries that were then delivered online via blip.tv. Participants completed this task as an independent learning project. Using the video recording feature of their cell phones, participants produced videos between 15 and 30 seconds long. As a piece of preliminary research, the aim was not to gather evidence about the linguistic gains that such technology affords, but rather to assess whether or not such a learning approach was feasible and suitable for students. The findings revealed that while the majority of the students found merit in this project, some had reservations. The outcome of this project demonstrates how Web 2.0 is redefining the Internet as a platform for individual content delivery, especially in terms of audio and visual productions.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on cell phone education is developing quickly. While some assert that cell phones can be integrated in the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) classroom (Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Thornton & Houser, 2005), others argue that technological limitations render such a teaching method inappropriate for the enhancement of language learning development (Wang & Higgins, 2006). Given this ambivalence, the aim of this chapter is to assess the feasibility of integrating cell phone video recording devices in the language learning classroom and to evaluate students’ opinions about such a project and learning approach. Since this is an ongoing project, the objective of this specific research is not to assess students’ linguistic development gains, but rather to explore and document the teaching approach and the learning outcome from this project.
The significance of this type of research provides invaluable reflections on the meaning of the term Web 2.0 and its influence in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. O’Reilly (2005) defines Web 2.0 as a transformation from a corporate structure to a subscriber platform, whereby services are provided for the emancipation of free knowledge delivery. Such a transformation allows anyone with access to the Internet free services which empower them to deliver content in either a text, audio or audio-visual format. It empowers subscribers to share and exchange opinions, to link and comment on Internet searches, and thus reshapes how individuals interpret information. Grossman (2006) defines Web 2.0 as “a massive social experiment” (p. 23). That is to say, Web 2.0 is a convolution between subscribers who are willing to interact independently online to develop projects voluntarily, not for the benefit of the greater good, but for the simple joy of network socializing with other subscribers who share a common interest. In this way, Web 2.0 is defined by the horizons of the user’s imagination. The implication for teachers is that students no longer need to be passive consumers of third party productions. Language learners are now able to create audio-visual files of authentic speaking materials and access them directly from sites such as youtube.com or blip.tv. These can then be downloaded on personal portable devices and utilized as resources in order to improve the pronunciation of a target language of interest to students (Gromik, 2007a). Compared to computers, handhelds and cell phones are compact, light and filled with a wide variety of features such as text, audio listening, photo and video recording. The presence of cell phone technology and usage is growing, for example in Japan the ratio of cell phone subscribers is 84 per 100 people (Economist Intelligent Unit, 2008, p. 120). Based on this context, this chapter demonstrates how to combine cell phones with Web 2.0 technology to develop student-centered, project-based activities.

The chapter begins with a review of the literature to explain the rationale for investigating cell phone video recording by Japanese EFL learners. The second section positions the research within sociocultural theory. The third section describes the participants as well as the project. This section evidences the in-class experimentation to ensure that students could undertake this project independently, and reports on the observations gathered from students’ cell phone video productions. The fourth section details students’ feedback collected via the end of term examination. Since this project is ongoing, the discussion section attempts to elucidate the findings in the hope of improving future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cell phone-based education is still in its infancy (Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Thornton & Houser, 2005) compared to research on Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) (Corlett, Sharples, Bull & Chan, 2005; Facer, Joiner, Stanton, Reid, Hull & Kirk, 2004; Klopfer, Yoon & Rivas, 2004; Lai & Wu, 2006; Ramsden, 2005; Trinder, Magill & Roy, 2005), wireless handheld devices (Zurita & Nussbaum, 2004) and the use of handheld technology to explore music composition (Polishook, 2005). Nonetheless, some of the findings reveal similarities. For example, Thornton and Houser (2005) comment that preparing videos of idioms (vidioms) for delivery on cell phones in Japan was time demanding. Moreover, Levy and Kennedy (2005) concur that “preparing the mobile phone message did take some time, about four hours a week in fact” (p. 79), and Lai and Wu (2006) observe that developing educational audio-visual resources suitable for PDA devices for nursing undergraduates required much preparation.

In the second part of their research, Thornton and Houser (2005) explain that students were encouraged to view vidioms on either a “video capable mobile phone or a PDA” (p. 224). The