Chapter 11
Evaluating Web Content for Self-Directed Language Learning

Yoko Hirata
Hokkai-Gakuen University, Japan

ABSTRACT

Recently, information and communication technology (ICT) in Japanese tertiary institutions have begun to play an increasingly important role in teaching and learning of foreign languages. This technology helps students have access to various kinds of language learning materials and resources through the websites any time and anywhere. Online or web-based language courses provide Japanese students with the variety and flexibility to work at their own level and pace through this technology. However, a major issue to be considered when implementing these courses is the fact that traditionally Japanese students are not culturally self-directed or autonomous language learners. The purpose of this study was to examine how Japanese students perceived two different approaches of self-directed language learning projects through the evaluation of English language websites. The findings suggested that the students’ perceptions of the research-based project using websites were positive and they were able to regulate their own learning process.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, online or web-based courses have been recognized to be one of the effective methodologies in foreign language education (Felix, 1999; Kung & Chuo, 2002; McBride, 2002). This is for the purpose of maximizing the efficiency and quality of these approaches and improving students’ overall language proficiency levels. In Japanese educational settings, online education is regarded as effective in dealing with the diversity of language learners (Jung & Suzuki, 2006). Unlike classroom learning materials, however, materials on the websites often require students to engage in solitary activities (Egbert, 2005; Walraven, Brand-Gruwel, & Boshuizen, 2009). Although
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a variety of websites, either free or commercial, have been used in the classroom, there appears to be very little research on how to help students make the most of them (Coates, James & Baldwin, 2005). Since using various web-based teaching tools and methodologies in the language classroom is a new development in Japan (Jung & Suzuki, 2006), the implementation of this technology in combination with self-directed approaches should be thoroughly explored. This chapter aims to explore self-directed English learning by reporting on a websites evaluation project which uses self-directed language learning methodologies to examine the Japanese university students’ thoughts of the web evaluation processes.

SELF-REGULATED LANGUAGE LEARNING

It has been widely acknowledged that students’ more active and direct involvement with the learning process leads to a clearer understanding of the language (Aston, 1993; Dickinson, 1995). According to a research finding that focuses on students’ attitudes and beliefs about their own learning capacities, incorporating autonomous and self-directed learning is useful (Usuki, 2007). There are several research studies which offer various kinds of approaches and they suggest that language learning is best facilitated by the development of students’ responsibility to learn by themselves (Dickinson, 1987; Sturtridge, 1997). It has been argued that the development of autonomy and the improvement of the various language skills are closely connected with each other (Little, 2007). Nguyen (2008) claims that students can take initiative and assume responsibility for their own learning if they have some control over the learning process. In addition, studies have indicated that autonomous and self-directed learning approaches do not necessarily work well simply when students are given plenty of opportunities to explore their various practical options outside the classroom (Galloway & O’Brien, 1998). In spite of this recent growing interest, the effectiveness of self-directed online learning approaches has not yet been fully examined. It is still unknown to what extent students’ self-directed tasks or activities successfully promote their independence and autonomy in a certain educational context.

Self-directed or self-regulated language learning is impeded by Asian cultural factors (Nguyen, 2008). When implementing autonomous and self-directed learning in Japanese educational settings, a major issue to be considered is the fact that traditionally students are not culturally self-directed or self-regulated learners. Like many Asian students, Japanese students are still widely perceived as passive learners and, therefore, accustomed to the teacher-centered learning environment and the controlled teaching methodology (Wei, 2008). Therefore, as Usuki (2007) points out, learner autonomy is not promoted to any meaningful extent in Japan. The instructor’s role is to be in charge of the class, have a greater initiative and “transmit knowledge to the students” (Kennedy, 1991, p. 63). Students are not likely to “see learning as exploration, but instead wait for the instructor to lead them” (Galloway & O’Brien, 1998, p. 5). Another issue to be considered is the fact that the Japanese educational setting does not value independence nor assign creative or imaginative tasks (Usuki, 2007). The focus in the Japanese secondary school is on rote-memorization for examinations and communicative language activities, although the latter has not been fully emphasized (Shucart, Mishina, Takahashi & Enokizono, 2008). Therefore, Japanese students in general tend to display a lack of engagement in any language learning activities (Usuki, 2007). In the online learning environment, in particular, these students often have problems choosing by themselves websites or resources which are appropriate for their own needs and preferences. This results in the situation where the instructor generally has control over the materials that the students use (Friedman, 2009). In addition, students’ cultural reticence to