

## English and Media Courses: Then and Now

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### **Preface**

Let's be frank. One thing that is lacking in many Japanese university English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) classrooms is genuine communication for a real audience. Take for example the typical "Speaking" or "Oral Communication" course (usually consisting of 30 or more students, meeting once a week, 90 minutes per session). The only substantial speaking practice that the students really experience is essentially between the students themselves during paired communication activities, group discussions, or during the sparse interactions that might occur with the instructor or CD-player. Of course, the students may have other opportunities to use English outside of class, but a vast majority do not. How do I know this? Simple. Many of my students tell me.

The situation described above is exacerbated by the fact that some of the students genuinely do not want to be taking an English course in the first place but are required to do so. Of course, there are many factors and issues to consider when examining the realities within the EFL classroom. And delving into the historical background of English language education in Japan, and analyzing the inherent problems of the system requires a discussion which goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the bulk of discussion will focus mainly on the genuine use of English for second-language learners; specifically with task-based projects involving digital technologies.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to examine a task-based, technology-oriented, English-as-a-second language (ESL) course conducted at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto (Fowlie, 1999) and compare it to what language instructors are doing ten years later. By examining the course contents, standards, and methods employed during Fowlie's course, and comparing it to how foreign language instructors integrate "current" Information Tech-

nologies (IT) into the second language classroom, practitioners will be able to see how digital tools and language learning practices have changed and / or have remained constant during the past decade. I raise caution to the term “current” when discussing technology because by the time of this writing, whatever is the standard now may very well be outdated in just a few months.

### **OISE 1999 Course Description**

Jamie Fowlie, an ESL instructor at the OISE taught a course entitled “English and Media” which revolved around a student-generated news publication. Students formed news production teams and were taught a variety of concepts and terminology related to IT and journalism; their objective was to essentially create a newspaper or magazine of some sort. “Chief editors” of each team also had to have regular meetings with the instructor to provide progress reports of their news production.

Fowlie’s English and Media course contents consisted of two main parts: IT and Journalism. In the IT portion, students were taught vocabulary words related to computer hardware, software operations, design fundamentals, etc. Some of the terms included *diskette*, *zip drive*, *cut and paste*, *text boxes*, *printing quality*, *compressing images*, *e-mail attachments*. As can be expected when working with technology, some of the terms / items that were taught in Fowlie’s 1999 course have become for the most part obsolete — particularly, *diskettes* and *zip drives* (a device used for reading and writing computer data).

In the journalism section of the English and Media course, students were taught specific concepts and terms related to the organization and “writing” aspect for the news production project. Students were taught terms such as *editor*, *art director*, *layout editor*, *feature article*, *interviewing techniques*, *non-biased language issues*, etc. In order to efficiently organize and manage the operations of their news production, students would presumably have to incorporate the terms and concepts into their routine discussions amongst team members as well as with the instructor.

Fowlie’s instructions to the students were simple: “form a group and produce a newspaper or magazine of your choice.” For teaching materials, Fowlie used actual newspapers, magazines, and headlines to show examples of the possible types of articles to include into their project.

Fowlie notes that task-based learning fosters an environment which enables students to develop their second-language skills, as well as facilitates the following:

- Co-operative learning (group work, co-ordinating activities)
- Collaborative learning (socially shared knowledge in learning)
- Autonomous learning (prioritizing, decision making, non-hierarchical learning)
- Self-Access learning (using IT to achieve personal and group objectives)
- Social development (working and communicating in a variety of social contexts)
- Social Autonomy (introducing the concept of shared social responsibilities)

How much or how little of the above would be fostered in a task-based course would be difficult to assess, but it seems natural that when a group of people work together towards a single goal, cooperation, collaboration, individual reflection and growth would somehow be activated (Littlewood, 2003). Similarly, Canilao (2009) goes further to suggest that task-based learning also enhances students' creativity, cognitive development, and global personality.

## **Discussion of Fowlie's Course**

Looking closer at Fowlie's description of the 1999 English and Media course, there are some basic questions surrounding the logistics and course of action of the project itself. Perhaps it was Fowlie's intention to focus more on specific pedagogical issues rather than on basic information regarding the course. However, some background details would have been helpful in understanding the nature and dynamics of the course itself.

### *I. Who were the students?*

The ESL students enrolled in the English and Media course were second and third year philology students. However, Fowlie does not indicate from which country / countries the students originally came from or other background information pertaining to their first language (L1). Presumably in an ESL classroom setting where the students currently reside / study in an English-speaking country, but are originally from different countries and speak different languages, they would have to use English to communicate with one another. However, if a large portion of the students in the class spoke the same L1, then there could possibly be a tendency for them to simply rely on their mother tongue during group work or other activities when the instructor is not directly monitoring their activities. From personal observations of ESL courses in the San Francisco Bay Area, a majority of the students came from Hong Kong or Central America. In large classes, it could be expected that Cantonese or Spanish might be used among the students as a kind of communication crutch during group work. Of course, each class is different and it is difficult to assess the frequency of L1 vs L2 use, or even each instructor's policy regarding in-class communication. Assuming for a moment that a large percentage of the students in Fowlie's course (100 students were enrolled) spoke the same first language (L1), how did the instructor address this issue (L1 reliance) if it ever became an issue; especially in a large classroom setting where presumably group work consisted of a significant part of the course?

### *II. What did the students write about?*

Another point in Fowlie's paper which needs more clarification is that of the students' actual publication contents. Were the students allowed to choose their own themes and subjects or did the instructor provide specific reporting tasks? Dornyei (2001) suggests that instructors should allow for students to create explicit goals accepted by them. Did the contents of the newspaper or

magazines have an effect on the students' participation in the project and overall motivation? Simply put, what did the students write about and how involved were they with the project? This seemingly fundamental piece of information would have been helpful.

### *III. What was the end product?*

Considering that the students used applications such as *Microsoft Word* and *Adobe Page-Maker* (a now defunct application used for desktop publishing) for their news production projects, stories and articles were presumably printed out as a hardcopy in some form or another; perhaps in newsletter or a small booklet, etc. and mass printed by the instructor for distribution. If hardcopies were printed, then it would have been useful to know the frequency of publications (weekly, bi-weekly, etc.) or did the news teams create just one final publication at the end of the course? Were the student publications distributed to people only within the course, or was it somehow made available to the general university population? By providing some details of the final product itself, this would illustrate the level of interaction the students have had to use in order to complete the task, as well as offer a glimpse as to how much English usage / practice they actually needed during the course.

Considering that not much was discussed regarding shape, form, or contents of the students' final project, Fowlie probably takes the position that the learning process is more important than the end-product. The "journey" of working on a team, learning about journalism, using digital tools, while practicing English should be the focus of discussion rather than being concerned about the product itself or what the students put together. I couldn't agree more. The process of creating something, and learning a variety of media production concepts and skills in the process is certainly a valuable experience, but the outcome of the students' work and effort should also be addressed. Offering some discussion and putting some weight on the final product will provide students and others with something tangible to evaluate and relive.

### **Fast Forward to 2009**

Jamie Fowlie's 1999 English and Media course is one example of how task-based projects involving digital technologies can be integrated into a second-language learning classroom. Perhaps language instructors even these days still carry out similar activities using the same methods as that of Fowlie's (paper-based publications). However, with the available technology these days, teachers can still accomplish the same course objectives, but with a more dynamic range of tools to reach a much broader and real audience via the Internet. Blogs, audio and video podcasts, YouTube, social networking sites (SNS) and other rich-media technologies were either not available ten years ago or were simply just catching on. However, in 2009 these web-based applications are practically a given on the tech-scene these days.

Student generated newspapers and magazines still make worthwhile EFL projects, however

these days creating “the message” is becoming more digital, more mobile, and more democratic, i.e., practically anyone can make and distribute news. According to the Newspaper and Association of America (2009), print circulation is down 7 million readers over the last 25 years, however, unique readers of online newspapers are up 30 million in the last 5 years. Cifford (2009) in a New York Times article reports that traditional advertising is in decline, meanwhile digital advertising is increasing (mobile phone-based advertising: 18.1%; personal computer-based advertising: 9.2%). An even more interesting projection for the future of the Internet is that “The mobile device will be the world’s primary connection tool to the Internet in 2020” (Raine, 2008). What does this mean for educators? Teachers (including EFL instructors) ought to consider that the students in their classes are the people that are also included in the numbers stated above. And the types of classroom activities and assignments students in the classroom should reflect this trend.

### **iReport.com**

A recent phenomena which can be correlated to the advancements in mobile phone technology is that of “citizen journalism.” With amount of technology crammed into a typical cell phone these days (high resolution cameras, video cameras, 3G wireless networks, high-capacity memory) there has been an increase in people from the general public taking photos and videos of various news-making events from around the world (accidents, natural disasters, police brutality, political demonstrations), and sending these images directly from their phones to family, friends, and the entire Internet population. Eventually these images become “viral” (sent and viewed through the Internet by a large number of people in a short amount of time) and make their way to major media outlets worldwide; oftentimes, the event is broadcasted literally within minutes of the actual event. Despite the poor quality of the images sent in by citizen journalists, they still make an impact and aid in stimulating particular social and political movements.

Capitalizing on this rich new source of digital content, CNN has created *iReport.com* which allows practically anyone to report on events from around the world. Registered users are invited to file news briefs, provide commentaries combined with still and video images, i.e., anyone with a video recording device and access to the Internet can become a reporter; an amateur journalist. Essentially, *iReport* provides an organized outlet for anyone (even EFL students) to tell a story to the rest of the world.

The point of all this is that documenting world events as they happen, recording the sights, sounds, and events around us using digital / mobile technology has never been so easy and accessible that it too has already become a common everyday event. Perhaps such “real” communication activities can somehow be adapted or replicated as a foreign-language learning project.

### **Implications for EFL Students**

Who, what, where, when, and how news / information / stories are transmitted worldwide

is now open to anyone and this impact on how people communicate is still nebulous and uncertain at this point, and should be seriously researched; not only in terms of its impact on traditional communication patterns, but also more specific to this paper, how EFL educators can organize new media production activities for students to communicate using the target language. Actually, the implications of communication change go well beyond the language classroom, and impacts our students on a much larger scale. However, for this paper, we will keep the discussion boundaries within the realm of the EFL classroom.

The average high school / college-age student in 2009 are digital natives. They were born at a time when the tools and mode of communication are primarily digitally-based. Their expectations, and abilities are different from the generation before them. And these students' concept of academia, research, etc. are oftentimes a collection of copy-and-paste materials from various websites (just ask the average student these days how often they refer to Wikipedia.org for "research" information). Does this mean that there is an incongruity between students these days with the educational system currently in place? Possibly. However, it is more common than not that educational approaches have not changed or are still playing catch up.

Language instructors are in the business of teaching people how to communicate using another language. As such, instructors should consider how new media can enhance the language learning experience; especially in large classroom situations where interaction between the instructor and the individual student is minimal. As stated above, mobile devices will be the primary connection device to the Internet. The modern version of "The pen is mightier than the sword." might sound something like "The mobile phone is mightier than the sword." and we educators need to consider this notion carefully.

In an ESL / EFL course which focuses on teaching English through IT and journalism, developing students English writing skills would probably be the main skill to focus on. In addition to teaching students' writing mechanics, grammar usage, vocabulary, etc., students would also have to be taught how to write in a style that fits the type of publication they happen to be working on and that requires a lot of practice and skill. The additional challenge for such an English and Media course would not really be how to get students to master writing in English, but how to get students to express their ideas using their second language skills in combination with multimedia; how to weave words, sounds, and images (both moving and still) to form one message.

For second language instructors that are considering to integrate IT and journalism into their own task-based language course, a paper-based news publication is obviously one option. Of course, there is now a range of newer web technologies that can also be utilized, e.g. student-produced blog sites, video news reports uploaded onto YouTube. Depending on the nature of the course, and the motivation of class, students might also be encouraged to submit real news reports to *iReport.com*. In addition, course websites can be established as a permanent gallery of students' work and for future students to use as references; show-and-tell type classroom assignments do not

have to be contrived anymore — communication using English for a real purpose and to a real audience is now possible.

### **Some Things Never Change**

Despite the use of digital technology in the second language classroom, the pedagogical issues underlying such courses remain constant, i.e., classroom objectives of English language instructors today are pretty much identical to Fowlie's teaching goals in 1999. Co-operative learning, collaborative learning, social autonomy are still buzzwords that we hear among practitioners even today. Getting students to use computer / tech-based activities as part of "interactive instruction," or to have students go out and do fieldwork with group mates has its role in the instructional process; however, the social interaction between teacher and students, and students and students is still a valuable part of the language learning experience. Formal instruction, student dialogue, and openly sharing experiences combined with traditional means of foreign language instruction should still be the emphasis in the second language classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Task-based EFL courses integrating IT and journalism are an excellent opportunity for English language learners to acquire useful skills, and to use the target language in a unique and meaningful way. Traditional (paper-based) methods of student-generated newspapers and magazines is one option, while recent Internet-based applications combined with mobile phone technologies is another more dynamic option. The push for EFL instructors to use digital tools because they are simply available is not what I hope to stress in this paper. The point really is that digital technologies is the here and now, and the projects and tasks that we require our students to engage in should reflect this reality. Otherwise, we are preparing our students for a communication reality that has already come and gone.

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