ABSTRACT

Web-based interactive lessons are potentially more engaging and enhance the quality of learning. This paper presents results of an online survey on the perceived experience of first year advanced and second year beginner's stream Japanese language students using a web-based learning tool. Findings indicate that collaboration by stakeholders during the learning process leads to improved approaches to achieving the optimum learning experience and outcome. Moreover, a learner-centred approach combined with appropriate learning strategies frees up the learning process, providing a positive and rewarding experience for all involved.

INTRODUCTION

The advances and developments in the use of new web-based tools for teaching and learning enables students to work at their own pace, in a time and place convenient to them. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has traditionally been a leader of the use of technological developments in education. Learners come to the foreign language (L2) classrooms with a diversity of experience, motivation, capabilities and learning styles. In order to cater for this diversity, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers advocate a learner-centred approach [1], [2], [3].

TUTOR OR TOOL AND DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Levy [4] provides a description of the benefits of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL as a “tool” rather than a “tutor as the preferred alternative when the aim is to engage, empower and emancipate the learner and teacher. Learner autonomy in SLA enables the student to develop independence as well as interdependence. Furthermore, learner autonomy also enhances the construction of knowledge, skills and creative potential in L2 learners [5, p.135]. CALL promotes learner autonomy by developing learner-centred material that enables students to choose materials compatible to their needs and objectives, at a pace suitable to them, using a learning style that better caters to their individual wants and needs. Vance [6] recommends that every teacher actively teach learning strategies if we want our students to become self-directed L2 learners.

METHODOLOGY

An online survey method was utilised to collect the data from students enrolled in the combined class of first year advanced and second year beginner's stream students of Japanese. A Likert scale (1-7) was used to gather data on student ratings across a number of variables [7]. In addition there were four text boxes included through the survey requesting students general comments. The data derived from the survey questions using Likert scales and the qualitative data that related to the themes of engagement and empowerment and links to learning ‘enhancement’ are reported in this paper. The focus in this paper is on students’ perceptions of how the online exercises enhanced their learning in terms of their...
"engagement" with the learning material and their sense of "empowerment" in controlling their own learning pathways.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results pertaining to "Perceived level of engagement" indicate that students need to be guided on language learning strategies as only 39% of students responded that they usually use the audio facility for pronunciation practice. In the second case, regarding the level of interaction, only 39% agreed that the tool had a high level of interactivity. Considering the highly interactive virtual reality games available in the market, where students can play over the internet with other players, then this level of response is still quite positive. In looking at the responses regarding how the students were feeling in relation to empowerment, the quantitative results once again proved very illuminating. A sense of freedom and empowerment is evident in the highly positive (nearly 80%) reaction to the interactive in areas such as, flexibility in terms of pace, place and time. The fact that 100% of students used the tool "alone" (not dependant on others to use it) indicates a high level of flexibility and autonomy.

Students were feeling "confident" (over 70%), and over 60% were conscious of their own learning in using the tool. They were also positive about the feedback as over 65% found the feedback helpful and were using the tool in a variety of ways. In addition, the results indicated a strong preference (95%) for the interactive exercises and learning process, relative to "doing these exercises face-to-face in class". A further indicator of note was that only 30% of respondents were using the online exercises as a means to creating lists of "difficult vocabulary". Responses to all the other indicators of how students were engaging with the tool were very positive. The nature of the comments suggests that the students were engaging with the learning process, and were even aware of their own learning. The following are some of the comments from students:

Q1. On reflection, do you use the interactive lessons differently now than when you first started using them?
   • I now use the interactive program at home as a revision tool. (414)
   • Yes, at the start it was more of a game where it was like a new 'toy'. But, now you take it seriously to understand the passage and vocab. (421)
   • The more I practice on the interaction the more helpful I find it becomes, and more confident in using it. (430)
   • I found this is a very good system for study to learn the reading and writing passages. It makes me feeling more interested in it and encourages me to study more about the passage. It is attractive. If it is possible, more passages should be available in the interactive system (maybe all the passages should be available, not only the odd numbered one). I would be very appreciate if the system could keep going. (427)

Students' comments are indicative of the sense of empowerment and satisfaction that they have for the new learning tool. Some examples of their responses are as follows:

Q2. Explain things you like about the interactive
   • I like the blue 'hotwords' which really help with remembering Kanji. Those words probably stick in my head better than any vocab list. The ability to have the passage read out sentences at a time by a native speaker helped with pacing and proper placement of particles. (422)
   • It's much more convenient that we can use it anywhere provided with computer. It is more flexible. (426)

Those areas where students were not quite so positive, relate more to how students individually like to learn. For example "guessing" was not popular (30%) and students prefer to "check back in the passage rather than guess" (50%). It appears that the students preferred to work at building their comprehension
and reading skills rather than simply guessing. The comments also indicate that the students understood that it was up to them to take some responsibility if they wanted to get more out of the learning process.

When asked what they liked about the interactive, the sense of being "in control" of the learning came out strongly:

- The main thing I like about the interactive is the "hotwords". They are really helpful in keeping my reading flowing rather than continually having to look the words up. (422)
- I like the choice of English or Japanese for the questions, for I try the Japanese first, and if I can't get it the English translation is there. The hot words are good too. Also the Kanji questions help me to remember the Kanji. The feedback is good as it allows you to try again and understand what you are doing wrong. (547)

Overall, there is a sense that the learning process is in the hands of the learners [8]; [4] and that the positive responses are due to the feeling that the students are free to use the tool in the way that most provides for their needs at the time.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is important to consider these results in the context that the intention of the design of the exercises was to provide a student learning "tool" [4] rather than a program designed to "tutor". In this sense the results from the online survey have provided a number of important indicators that need to be incorporated in the development of this program. This process of "collaborative" effort between the teacher/learner in the continuous improvement of the learning material further supports this idea. The level of "engagement" and supporting comments indicating high levels of student motivation concur with suggestions by Gunn [9] and Kearsley and Shneiderman [10] that CALL as a tool offers great potential for effective language learning tasks that otherwise might be tedious and repetitious in nature. There was evidence of learner autonomy [5] and that students were working independently, controlling their learning pathways. We concur with Anstrom's [11] finding that the provision of learning strategies has a positive link to motivation and a sense of self-efficacy. There were indicators that the suggestions made by Vance [6] and later Wenden [3] that students need to be shown how to apply learning strategies are important in order to use such learning approaches to their full potential. Using the learning time with the online exercises for the development of lists of difficult vocabulary and phrases and using the exercises for the practice of pronunciation were two examples of applications that the students were under-utilising.

This study has reinforced that there is significant potential for the application of CALL programs as learning "tools" for student-centred learning which is both engaging and empowering for learners and therefore motivational. It has also supported the view that the development program is contingent on a collaborative approach with staff and students working together to build improvements and to maximise the potential. We also concur with recent views that student induction on learning strategies to apply in the process of working around the different levels and options provided by the material will further empower students to gain the benefits from quality of learning time. Staff training to provide greater insight from these evaluative studies and a further feedback loop to continuous improvement is also considered essential. Issues as basic as access to the technology cannot be assumed. The option to provide the material on CD rather than relying on Internet access and rapid downloading capability is now economically viable and will be considered as an option for students in relation to the development of the program.

A full list of references is available on request from the authors.