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Creating Listening Activities for Moodle with Audacity

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Abstract

This paper describes a small scale CALL project that makes use of Moodle, the world famous open-source on-line CMS (course management system). In the context of a brief discussion of CALL and materials creation in general, I begin by describing the circumstances that motivated a decision to create online independent study materials as a component of an EFL course in British Studies in the Faculty of Humanities at Hokkai Gakuen University. I also outline my reasons for creating materials with a primary focus on vocabulary and listening skills development outside the classroom for learners of English. However, the main goal of this paper is a practical one, namely to explain how to: (i) record sound files with the open-source software Audacity, (ii) upload these files to your Moodle site, and (iii) make accompanying listening exercises and pre-listening vocabulary quizzes. In doing so, I will attempt to describe the numerous benefits this type of project can bring to both educators and learners.

Introduction

Reasons for creating online materials

Promotion of the use of e-learning is becoming an increasingly important goal for educators and educational institutions alike in all parts of the world. As noted by Fageeh (2011, p. 37), with respect to EFL education in Saudi Arabia, the promotion of various modes of e-learning is also national policy. This global trend is also observable in Japan in job advertisements for EFL instructors in tertiary education, where candidates with CALL knowledge and skills are often preferred. For classroom practitioners, this is a positive trend that can help establish clear goals for professional development. This said, a large amount of e-learning materials is already available both open source (or free) and commercially. For example, in the last few years, major ELT publishers such as Oxford have

created interactive websites accompanying some of their titles. They provide learners with access keys to take on-line quizzes and scores are available to instructors for evaluation purposes (grading). For an EFL teacher in the job market, this kind of CALL experience is unlikely to result in her resume surging to the top of the pile. In contrast, employers may be impressed by teachers with experience in creating original online courses. This probably leads to a situation where the wheel is reinvented through the creation of large numbers of foreign language e-learning activities that exist in near-duplicate form elsewhere on-line. Even so, it has to be remembered that creative CALL skills are hugely transferable and, for the ELT professional, the process of acquiring them through practice is therefore as important as the product.

Nonetheless, apart from these career-related or professional development issues, there are a number of other very good reasons for creating on-line materials. To begin with, habitual use of ready-made ELT materials can be damaging for both teacher and student. Gower et al. (1995) observe that exclusive reliance on textbooks “can stop you being creative in your search for texts and activities that will interest and motivate your students” (p. 78). The same holds true for on-line study materials. I shall provide further reasons in the next section in the context of a teaching/learning situation.

Reasons for creating online materials for a course in British Studies

In this section I shall describe the practical reasons influencing the decision to create on-line study materials for a particular course and further practical and theoretical considerations that shaped their design. To begin with practical reasons, this on-line project was motivated by the need to provide independent study assignments (for outside class contact hours) for two one-semester content-based elective EFL courses in British Studies in the Faculty of Humanities at Hokkai Gakuen University. They form part of a predominantly culturally-oriented suite of elective Intermediate and Advanced Topics EFL courses where the focus on gaining cultural knowledge serves an important purpose in motivating students. Their popularity reflects a sentiment commonly expressed by young adult Japanese learners of English in Japan. For example, in a 45-item Likert scale survey of the beliefs of nearly 1300 Japanese university-level learners of English, Sakui (1999) finds that the following item: “It is useful to know about English-speaking countries in order to speak English” (p. 482) registers a high rate of agreement. I hasten to add that teaching/learning about the cultures of non-English speaking countries through the medium of English could be equally effective,

even necessary, in fostering the development of “globalized” citizens.

The first of these elective courses is an Intermediate Topics course entitled English through British Studies. This course is available for second year students and above who possess a minimum TOEIC score of 480. The second course- Advanced Topics English through British Studies -is open for third and fourth year students with a minimum TOEIC score of 520. Note that despite the titles “Intermediate” and “Advanced” the English level of proficiency of the vast majority of students enrolled could never be described as advanced in terms comparable with global standards of English proficiency. The aim of these courses, as described in the syllabus guide, is as follows: “... students will practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing through the study of British culture. A variety of themes will be introduced using video documentary and texts from a very wide range of sources. Students will be encouraged to discuss the issues presented and to research aspects of British Culture which interest them”. Final grades are determined as follows: 25% class quizzes and attendance, 25% presentations, 25% final test, and 25% online quizzes (Moodle).

Since these are two-credit courses, as opposed to single credit courses such as first and second year EFL skills courses, the implication is that the workload for students enrolled should be greater. Although classroom learning activities for the course are regularly supplemented with self-designed materials, the backbones of these courses are provided by two video-based ELT course books -*Window on Britain* (1998) and *Window on Britain 2* (2001) -that explore the life and culture of Britain. However, these texts are rather short and there are no accompanying supplementary materials such as workbooks for independent study. Indeed, there are very few other ELT publications with exclusively British culture-oriented learning material that would be suitable for either in-class or out-of-class study in these two courses.

Out-of-class, independent study, or homework, for university EFL classes can take various forms, but reading and writing activities are the most common. For these courses, with the aim of providing students with additional cultural knowledge and listening practice, I recorded a series of short weekly lectures related to various aspects of British culture. These recordings have been made available online on Moodle to all students enrolled on the course through a process that shall be described later in this paper. To accompany these recordings, I designed a series of listening tasks with pre-listening vocabulary learning

quizzes. The decision to provide cultural knowledge input through listening texts rather than reading texts was mostly motivated by a desire to improve the students' listening skills which I felt deserved more attention than their reading skills. ELT publishers ABAX include the following comment on their promotional website: "Everyone knows that many Japanese say that 'listening' is their weak point with English". From personal experience as a teacher here, it would be hard to disagree with this self-assessment. In fact, many students begin their first year of English studies at university with practically non-existent listening skills. In my opinion, this shortcoming does not have anything to do with any genetically pre-determined weakness in the foreign language skills of Japanese people as a race, as some would suggest. It is simply a product of a system of English secondary education where there is a primary focus on "the learning of grammar rules which are presented and explained by the teacher in Japanese" (Sakui, 1995, p. 485). Despite the achievement of early advances in listening during their first year at university, obstacles to progress can surface quite suddenly. Davison (1996) sums up the situation as follows: "In reality, many Japanese learners of English will rapidly clear the early hurdles before coming to a grinding halt at certain key listening road-blocks" (p. 48). One solution to the road-block problem is to emphasize the development of listening skills through the learner's natural desire to learn about foreign culture. With this in mind, I formulated the following teaching/learning objective for the two English through British Culture courses: to have students develop their listening skills both inside and outside the classroom. According to White (1998, p. 35) encouraging listening outside class is an important goal for teachers, and, I would add, one which is often either undervalued or overlooked entirely.

A secondary objective of this project was to increase the English vocabulary of students enrolled on the course. Increasing L2 vocabulary size is a very important goal for our students and level of L2 ability is massively dependent on L2 vocabulary size, or number of words or word families known both productively and receptively by learners. This objective is addressed through pre-listening vocabulary tasks that focus on key words in the text which are unlikely to be known to most students taking the courses. Gower et al. (1995) state that, before having learners begin a listening task: "It may be helpful to teach a few key words-without which the listening would be very difficult to understand" (p. 90). In other words, the pre-listening vocabulary tasks assist learners not only with listening text comprehension but may help to increase their vocabulary size. I shall return to the issue of vocabulary task design in connection with a more detailed description of materials creation methods. It also

needs to be said that Hokkai Gakuen University students enrolled in the Department of English Language and Culture, according to my own research with a computerized yes/no test (Meara, 1992), begin their first year of studies with a mean receptive knowledge of 2790 English words (SD 104.7) or a total of 465 words for each of the six years of compulsory English secondary classes. After testing students in their 1st, 2nd, and 3rd years of study, it seems they might be acquiring receptive knowledge of L2 vocabulary at the rate of about 600 words per year of study on average. According to Nation and Beglar (2007), a receptive knowledge of at least 8,000 word families (not single words) is necessary to comprehend texts written by and for native speaker readers, such as academic papers, and these students are falling very far short of this capability. Indeed, the vast majority of them should not even be trying to read academic papers in English, even in their second and third year. The fact that learners of English begin their first year of university at Hokkai Gakuen University with such a small vocabulary size is surprising. One would think that the grammar translation method has the potential to provide learners with a larger “foundation” vocabulary in the initial stages of learning. Emphasis on grammar in secondary English education, and specifically grammatical rules, rather than vocabulary, probably contributes to this state of affairs. The annual mean gains made by Hokkai Gakuen University students in the EFL program are also disappointing. There are three possible contributing factors: (i) the emphasis on oral communication using language already known, (ii) the long vacations during which forgetting of new vocabulary almost certainly occurs, and (iii) the lack of an organized system of vocabulary learning.

In sum, at this stage, we have seen that there are many good reasons for creating language e-learning materials. These reasons include professional development goals, a desire to remain creative and motivate students, a need to meet specific course needs not covered by published ELT materials, and to target weaknesses or areas of specific need in learners.

What is Moodle and what are its benefits?

In the following sections I will describe how it is possible to meet the kinds of objectives described above with Moodle and highlight some of the benefits of the system. Moodle is a CMS (Course Management System) used by teachers in a variety of educational settings and institutions for delivering online courses. It is free and downloadable from the internet at <http://www.moodle.org>. Although it is free, getting started may involve an initial payment

to register a website and a further payment to an internet service provider or hosting service to host your Moodle site. Following installation, you will have to create a Moodle account through accessing the Moodle website, a simple operation described on page 10 of the user's manual (*Using Moodle*, Cole, 2005), and assign yourself the role of course administrator. This set-up stage is easier than it sounds. For example, the task of installing Moodle on to your website can be performed free of charge by your hosting service company. As for all other administrative and creative Moodle tasks, solutions to problems can be found from the user's manual, from experienced Moodle users in the JALT CALL community, for example, or from online support sites. Having created an account, the next step is to create a course. After creating the course and uploading the materials, students are able to create their own Moodle accounts and enroll on your courses. They can then access these courses and take the quizzes from their home computers. The following is an account of the seven steps to creating a Moodle course with sound files made with Audacity and accompanying pre-listening vocabulary quizzes and listening comprehension quizzes.

Step 1: Editing settings for your Moodle course (5-10 minutes)

After creating your Moodle course, the next step is to set the course settings by clicking on Administration. This leads you to a page where you begin by giving the course a name and writing a short course summary. The remaining tasks involve selecting preferences on a menu of about 14 items including course start and close dates and the opening and closing dates of each weekly task, if you choose the weekly option. These can be reset year after year in a very short time. Note that scores for each quiz (for each week if you select the weekly format) are automatically made available on Moodle. Note that one Moodle preference involves a decision of whether or not to display course scores or grades (for all members of the class) to the students. However, some students may not be happy with details of their performance being publicized in this manner and consider it a breach of privacy. In contrast, "naming and shaming" of class members who are not doing the work may have the positive effect of instilling a more positive attitude among those students who employ extensive task, or effort, avoidance strategies in their university studies. In addition, Robb et al. (2010) observed that some students can become motivated by a healthy desire to outperform their peers on Moodle quizzes if scores are displayed. In this way, the attraction of Moodle is not confined to the convenience of having weekly quiz scores made available (and having them automatically summed for end of course grading). It also lies in the way serious philosophical questions underlie decisions regarding what appear to be quite

simple course preference settings.

Step 2: Select and edit your listening text (5-60 minutes)

The textbooks used in the two courses- *Window on Britain* (1998) and *Window on Britain 2* (2001)- cover the foundations, or basic knowledge, of British culture through topics such as food and festivals. Since motivating students with (hopefully) interesting material is a goal, I made a series of 5-minute recordings to complement these general topics with more specific ones. For example, I included listening passages on (the British obsession with) fish and chips and the origins and modes of celebration of Halloween. Other topics provide snapshots of some of the peculiarities of British culture that are not related to textbook topics such as the Loch Ness monster and the popularity of garden gnomes. Many of these topics have historical origins and the “lectures” or scripts are factual. Some are modeled on snapshots of British life described in one-off reports of British culture in various ELT textbooks (hence text selection and editing time can be quite short). The problem is that if the material is based on texts found on the internet, as it usually was, the level of difficulty for early intermediate level students will almost certainly be too high. As Underwood (1989) claims, in listening activities: “Students should be faced with language which they should be capable of understanding although it is slightly above their current level of use” (p. 102-103). In terms of the vocabulary burden placed on learners in listening, Nation (2001) refines current level of use in numbers: “Learners would need at least 95% coverage of the running words in the input in order to gain reasonable comprehension and to have reasonable success at guessing from context. A higher coverage of around 98% (one unknown word in every 50 words, or 2 to three unknown words per minute) would be better” (p. 114). No audio script is provided, since, according to Underwood (1989) “this is not a good idea” (p. 106), although some teachers would disagree.

The editing work therefore involves text simplification not only in terms of the vocabulary, but also in terms of sentence length. I also found myself removing a large number of proper nouns, such as names of people and places that British people would be familiar with but would be likely to cause listening problems for learners. The work also involves editing or removing “nice turns of phrase” and plays on word meanings that amuse native speakers, but may confuse learners. One potential problem is that simplifying text may not always have the desired effect. Anderson & Lynch (1988), citing Johnson (1982) point out the following in relation to text simplification. “In presenting learners with what are intended

to be grammatically ‘simplified’ versions of original texts, teachers and course writers may actually make the adapted texts more difficult to understand than the originals” (p. 83). Two other points are worth bearing in mind in editing and preparing the text, and certainly before going ahead and recording it. First, the text should contain sufficient information upon which to base ten good comprehension questions and ten new vocabulary items upon which to base the pre-listening vocabulary quiz. This is why Steps 3 and 4 should precede Step 6 (recording).

Step 3: Design your listening quiz questions (15 minutes)

After preparing the listening text, the next task is to prepare about 10 listening comprehension questions on a Word document. As with the listening texts and the vocabulary quiz questions to be described later in Step 5, these should be saved on your computer. This precaution is in case your quizzes, or whole Moodle course, disappear in cyberspace through an unforeseen event such as an unsuccessful switch of internet service provider or falling victim to a hacker. A number of quiz formats are available on Moodle but the format I have used is multiple choice (see Figure 1 below). With these items, there is a question (or statement to be completed) and the task is to select an answer from 2, 3 or 4 options.

Marks: 1

The first garden gnomes were made in

Choose one answer.

- a. Germany
- b. France

Figure 1. Example of a Moodle multiple choice listening comprehension quiz item.

Step 4: Edit settings for your quiz and upload questions (15 minutes)

Once you have prepared the quiz questions on Word, go to Activity in the course window for the weekly module, edit the options in Adding a new Quiz, then proceed to Questions in this quiz to add the questions and set the correct answers. As with editing the course options, there are a number of issues to consider when editing the options in Adding a new Quiz. For example, to prevent the sharing of correct answers between classmates while the quiz is still open, the results should not be made available to students until the quiz is closed. Feedback explaining why answers are right or wrong can also be displayed. Among the

benefits of this kind of on-line independent study assignment is that the teacher is not faced with situations where students complete and submit homework late. The quizzes can even be set to close at a precise time of day, 15 minutes before the class time for example. A further advantage is that students can complete the quizzes at their own pace. Although only one attempt at the questions is allowed, students can listen to the audio files as many times as they like, and pause and “rewind” at will, thus avoiding problems associated with within-class lockstep listening activities.

Step 5: Design your vocabulary quiz questions (30 minutes)

The next step is to prepare 10 vocabulary quiz questions. As mentioned earlier, pre-teaching, pre-presenting, lexical items that are: (i) unlikely to be known to most of the students and (ii) likely to assist in comprehension, is a very useful learning activity. Nation (2001) recommends some decontextualization of new lexical items with the following observation: “Learners need to focus on words not only as part of the message but as words themselves. This can be helped byproviding short definitions....” (p. 119). He adds that there has been no research on the effects of this approach with listening tasks. In order to achieve this focus, all you do is select and list about 10 potentially unknown words and try to make sure that some are helping learners to answer listening comprehension questions. To this end, I use the online Cambridge dictionary at <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>. I then copy and paste these definitions and examples, occasionally simplifying or improving them. I also use **** to delete the target words from the example sentences before insertion in the test as in the example below.

a trick that is intended to be amusing but not to cause harm or damage.
e.g. When I was at school we were always playing ****s on our teachers.

The task is to match each of the ten definitions by clicking on a drop down matching quiz menu with all ten items and selecting the correct answer. The answer to the above is *prank*. To upload the quiz onto Moodle, click on Add activity and select Matching (target word to definition). It is worth remembering that students may learn new words other than the target ones in the listening activity, or strengthen links between words already known. As Rost (1990) points out, listening may help to improve inferential skills and discourse interpretation ability since it involves “the ability to infer meaning by supplying links between lexical items” (p. 83). It is also worth repeating that it is vital that the text is generally comprehen-

sible to support incidental learning. As Gower et al. (1995) comment: “If a text is..... generally comprehensible, the students can often grasp the meaning of new words in context. The more often a vocabulary item is encountered, the more likely it is that the full meaning will be understood and remembered” (p. 142).

Step 6: Record and edit your listening text (5-15 minutes)

The penultimate step is to record the listening text. Underwood (1989) warns that: “Most teachers do not have the time, or the opportunity, or perhaps even the interest, to record their own listening material for their classes” (p. 102). While this is true to some extent, if you do have the time and the interest, the same audio files can be re-used, and hopefully enjoyed, by hundreds of students over the years, as they have been here since 2007. This is a good return on the initial time investment. To begin, I recommend downloading Audacity, the open source sound recording software program from <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>. The rest simply involves attaching a 700 yen microphone to your computer, if it does not have an in-built microphone, opening Audacity and clicking the red record button to start recording. If you are not happy with any part of the recording, the part can easily be deleted with the editing menu. Following this, the sound file can be exported as an MP3 file, with the iTunes format being the recommended option. This requires typing .mp3 after the file when saving. A five minute listening file is usually 2-3MB, but longer or larger files can be uploaded by adjusting your Moodle course settings (Administration) to set the maximum file upload size as high as you can (55MB). Finally, to upload the file onto your Moodle site, go to your course window and click on Add a resource.

Step 7: Decorate your course window (5 minutes)

The final step is to decorate your course window. Gower et al (1995) comment that: “Visual material can be helpful to students, especially if the topic is not related to something from their everyday lives” (p. 104). In other words, a good picture can reduce problems caused by lack of topic familiarity and increase motivation for listening. An example picture from one weekly module appears in Figure 2 below. It shows a picture of a garden gnome that was kidnapped from his garden (as a prank) and taken to London on holiday, an example of a nationwide phenomenon of “gnome-napping”. The owners of the gnome received a postcard with this picture of their gnome posing in front of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, along with a short message describing the delights of the trip.

4 November - 10 November



- Garden Gnomes sound file
- Garden Gnomes. Vocabulary quiz
- Garden Gnomes. Listening quiz

Figure 2. Frame from a Moodle course window including a picture of a garden gnome on holiday in London

To upload your picture, select administrator role, turn editing on, click on the edit symbol, click on UPLOAD PICTURE icon, click on BROWSE, click on UPLOAD, click on the file, enter ALTERNATE text, then click OK. Your picture will be included in the course window.

Outcomes and conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss the reasons for -and the benefits to be reaped from -creating an on-line listening course with Moodle for independent study. Although I have not yet sought feedback from the students concerning their feelings about the course, the participation rate has been high and the scores achieved by individual students have matched expectations raised by in-class performance. This has been my first experience of creating course materials with Moodle and I hope I have succeeded in showing how easy it is in the hope of encouraging other classroom practitioners, even confirmed technophobes, to follow suit. If it doesn't seem simple, this is probably because the required operations are more easily demonstrated in a practical workshop situation, or in a one-on-one tutorial session. If any teacher is interested in creating a similar course, I would be very happy to provide assistance if necessary.

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