

Blending Methods for Blended Language Learning

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Abstract

Methodology is dead. Long live methodologies. As language teachers take an à la carte approach to classroom methodologies, we enjoy freedom—with a bewildering amount of alternatives—to improve the classroom experience and more seamlessly wed it to experience outside the classroom. We look at one combination of theories, methods, and tools to facilitate a university classroom of language majors with laptops and wireless Internet connections.

Borrowing bits from Massively Online Open Courses (MOOCs), Constructionism, Social Learning (Vygotsky), Problem Posing, Krashen, Tolstoy, Roger Schank, Task and Project Based Learning (TBL and PBL), Thornbury and Meddings' Dogme (Teaching Unplugged), Ubiquitous Learning, Gamification (i.e. OnePlusMe), and Peer Teaching, we set about creating a semester-long experience (including vacations) that transcends the classroom.

This style is similar to a workshop, is designed for intermediate language learners and above, starts with specifics and moves to general, is Flipped (content outside, activities inside), and focuses on developing autonomy. It uses Moodle, Google Docs, feedback mechanisms, along with many web-based materials. It balances cooperation and competition with peer evaluation and small group work.

Introduction

Twelve years ago I edited a collection of teaching ideas for Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) entitled *Recipes for Wired Teachers* (Ryan, 2000). Since then, a progression of articles in *Gakuen* (for example) has dealt with topics such as the Stylistics of digital media (2000), Blended language learning (2004), Tolstoy and the Hacker Ethic (2005), Input frequency and CALL software (2006), Web 2.0 and language learning (2007), Distance Learning (2008), Ubiquitous computing and Web 3.0 (2010), and Personal Learning Environments (2011) have all lead to the current article in one way or another.

During this time, I have come to realize that university students in general, and specifically in Japan, and even more specifically in women's universities in Japan, only develop autonomy in language learning to any significant degree when they go abroad. This is the main obstacle to any kind of true language learning.

During this same twelve-year period we have seen technology make its first tentative moves into the language classroom in Japan. Largely ignored in many educational settings,

computers have been “ghettoed” in laboratories. At the same time, we have seen students adapt and adopt new technology with a fervor that is heartening. The educational system, however, has been left behind with policies that seek to safeguard the status quo, while losing ground to countries like Korea and China that invest heavily in both technology and training.

Methodology is at the center of this debate. While Japan has moved language teaching methodology away from grammar translation toward Communicative Language Learning (CLL), it still finds itself behind the curve. Over the last 20 or 30 years language teaching has entered a post-methodology era. Hinkel noted this trend (quote here). Savignon, in an article with Brown, Ellis and other leaders in the field, discuss the last 40 years. The four post-millennium trends she notes begins with “1) a decline in claims for a universal best method reflecting an increased recognition of the diversity of teaching contexts and goals;” and ends with “4) the development of integrated and dynamic instructional models that promote meaningful communication as the means to developing learners’ communicative competence.” (Savignon, 2007)

She goes on to note:

Models of integrated teaching with a focus on meaning abound, continuing to blur the four skills distinctions with which language pedagogy had become comfortable. Current buzzwords to be found in a proliferation of new or revised teaching materials claiming a basis in ongoing research include *content or theme based*, *task based*, and *project based*. (Savignon, 2007)

This article is an attempt to assemble parts of many different methodologies, ideas, and influences into an approach that works with university students in Japan. It promotes autonomy and learning strategies, along with technology, to develop learners into self-motivated, social, problem-solving, task-based autonomous language acquirers. Others have attempted similar combinations for specific results in unique situations. Loucky comments about using the Internet to foster vocabulary and grammar learning among university students in Japan:

[Training learners] in the use of appropriate strategies, both metacognitive in general and specific vocabulary and grammar learning strategies, need to become part of course design and teaching approaches, both in class and online. As Skehan (2003, p. 408) has noted, ‘the web provides incredible potential for autonomy in language learning—what is also required is the opportunity to learn to use that autonomy productively’. (Loucky, 2010)

Twelve years ago, the Recipes for Wired Teachers book contained prescriptions and tools for classroom use of technology, all in a recipe format with ingredients and instructions for use

in specific situations. In this paper, we build on the idea of a recipe by looking at elements from a wide range of disciplines and schools of thought as ingredients. Then we assemble, mix, or blend those elements into an approach that this author has found works with some but not all students. An online version of this paper is available at kevinryan.com/research with links to sources available online that offer directions for exploration.

Part 1: Ingredients: Bits of Methods

Here we look at ideas, concepts, methods and approaches from Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Linguistics, Pedagogy, Human Computer Interface (HCI), Web design and other areas. Borrowing from these we adapt elements best suited for students at a university in Japan. Some of these elements are much more widely applicable, but others not so. It is left for the reader to create their own “Recipe” (syllabus and set of tools) for their teaching style and classroom situation. Please use this as a template to build upon.

MOOCs

Massively Online Open Courses are very large courses open to all, and delivered online. One of the earliest examples is the CCK 08, Connectivism and Connected Knowledge, facilitated by Stephen Downes and George Siemens, and hosted at the University of Manitoba, in 2008. This author joined more than 1,300 other educators from around the globe in an ongoing online discussion of topics related to education, learning, technology and pedagogy. Discussion focused around the LMS (Learning Management System) Moodle, with ancillary materials posted on the web. Twitter was a channel of communication to notify members of updated content developed on user blogs. The model was updated for PLENK 2010 (Personal Learning Environments and Networked Knowledge), and we saw a move away from a centralized information repository, even though archives were centrally aggregated on one server, again using Moodle. The latest iteration of the MOOC by Siemens and Downes (Change11 MOOC), dispensed with the LMS altogether, relying on RSS, twitter, blogs and groups in Google, LinkedIn, and Facebook, along with members reporting updates on places like Scoop.it. The organizational paradigm was made more modular with more than 30 notable facilitators, each taking a week to lead discussion and development of ideas related to learning online.

The term *Massive* refers to classes numbering in thousands, and sometimes even hundreds of thousands, of participants. In some, there are a core of students taking the course for credit (search for ds106 for a good example), while hundreds add their own content to projects because of simple interest in trying out new methods of teaching and learning online in groups. One non-credit course made news when two Stanford professors teamed up to teach programming in a MOOC. More than 100,000 students signed up. Stanford is

offering 12 other similar courses in 2012; I am signed up for Human Computer Interface, with an enrollment in the thousands. My daughter is maintaining her mental acuity between graduating high school at Showa and entering university in the US in September by taking the Stanford course in Anatomy. Sebastian Thrun, one of the professors at Stanford in the original experiment has left his tenured position to head up an online venture at udacity.com, where the first course teaches people to program a search engine in seven weeks. I am one of 65,000 (so far) signed up and ready to begin the course in February 2012.

Obviously, these massive enrolments are only possible because the course is delivered online. The final word left to explain in the acronym MOOC is Open, which means Open Source, or freely available. Tech circles like to note the two types of free by noting that Open is Free, as in Free Beer and Free as in Free Speech. Open courses are also a part of the OER (Open Educational Resources) movement most prevalent in the UK, but now globalizing.

I have now taken about six of these MOOCs. My initial experience of them was of being lost. The resources within the course are distributed around the Internet in many participant's blogs. The leader of the discussion will often have a page of links to start out with, but from there you have to develop a network of people and sites to customize the course to your needs. Building a Personal Learning Network or Environment (PLN or PLE) is an essential part of making your MOOC experience successful. This requires a lot of discipline and skill to develop.

Constructionism

That people need to construct knowledge instead of having it delivered to them is central to learning, and works especially well with online learning. Seymour Papert built upon Piaget's Constructivism. LEGO, the Danish toymaker, has sponsored Papert's research to develop Mindstorms, a learning environment for programming. Based on Papert's simple software to explore programming by making turtles move on a screen, whole programming languages like Logo and Smalltalk now allow anyone to learn the basic concepts of programming by building and making software.

Using ideas developed for artificial languages of programming, it is not such a reach to apply these to natural languages and learning. "To Papert, projecting out our inner feelings and ideas is a key to learning." (Ackermann, 2001) Language production is much more closely linked to acquisition when there is an element of emotion involved, which uses the limbic system in the brain.

Vygotsky (Social)

Vygotsky's work on children and play preceded Papert. His concept of Zone of Proximal Development, where young children gradually increase their abilities, which allow them to learn more and at a faster rate, is central to many learning theories. Vygotsky's emphasis on language as the basic organizational tool of thought brings language learning to the forefront of all learning.

Vygotsky's concept of learning mirrors Papert's. Papert sees the learner as moving from self to explore the social world, creating, then attaching skills, ideas and concepts to a public social world. Vygotsky sees public, social communication move from the outside into the self, with small children only thinking out loud. Gradually the social dialog and language is internalized and individualized, creating what is like a personal language of thought and concepts within each person.

Problem Posing

The Brazilian social pedagogue Paulo Freire advocated posing problems as a model for the relationship between teacher and student. Instead of the teacher being the expert, disseminating knowledge to the students, the two worked together on a problem. The method has three stages. In the first, listening by the teacher allows the student to arrive at a definition of the problem to be solved. Discussion between the two in the second stage works on methods to solve the problem. The final stage is Action, where both student and teacher work together to follow the plan discussed and defined in earlier stages.

Krashen

Krashen's Comprehensible Input, exposure to language (in our case) that is understandable (without using a dictionary) in a low-key, non-threatening situation is key to language acquisition. Acquisition requires communication with speakers of the target language about meaningful events. Acquisition is unconscious, and does not follow a curriculum. Learning, on the other hand, is conscious, and involves a Monitor, where the learner thinks specifically about the material and monitors both input and output. When the material is slightly more difficult than the student is able to process ($i+1$, or input plus one) the learner is able to monitor the material so that learning can take place.

Again, the overall emphasis of the methods resulting from these theories is one of student control. Materials should be developed in the $i+1$ range for each student. Graded readers are a good example of this. Students need the opportunity to get a reader at the correct level. There is a significant amount of input by the teachers and materials developed by the teacher before the student is asked to produce any of the target language.

Tolstoy

Tolstoy opened his free school to the children of uneducated field workers in 1859 as a way to begin development of a literate public, whose tastes would eventually change literature.

After visiting schools at Kissingen, he jotted down in his diary: “It is terrible! Prayers for the king; blows; everything by rote; terrified, beaten children.” Another entry shortly after: “The idea of experimental pedagogy agitates me. I can scarcely contain myself....” And in still a third entry, after reading Montaigne, he wrote: “In education, once more, the chief things are equality and freedom.” (Simmons, 1968)

Tolstoy’s emphasis on freedom for children to learn what they wanted to learn was central to his methods. His teachers developed lessons in many different subjects, but “No consistent order was followed, however, and lessons were lengthened or omitted according to the degree of interest manifested by the students.” (Simmons, 1968) Tolstoy would often leave the classroom in the middle of a lesson, and students continued to study. Students were self-motivated because an environment of experimentation and play were introduced into the school house, and the curriculum followed student interests.

Roger Schank

Roger Schank left the study of Artificial Intelligence at Yale to focus on learning at Northwestern. An iconoclast, he saw classrooms as one of the worst places to learn. Rooms with bare walls (little input), and 30 or more students to one teacher were just the opposite of a real learning situation. He argued that the student/teacher ratio should be switched, and suggested having multiple experts advise each class. Of course, this could only be delivered through technology.

The motivational factor in Schank’s classes were simulations, and the closer to reality the better. The learner entered a simulation and encountered a problem. Resources were provided so that the student could develop materials to solve the problem. Some of the input was interviews with experts. They explained similar situations they had experienced, and how they failed to find a solution. Only then suggestions for techniques were provided.

TBL: Task Based Learning

Task-based language learning uses specific tasks as a goal and the result of learning the language to a degree that allows the completion of the task. While language is focused on in the preparatory stages, it is de-emphasized during the task itself. Teresa Pica and Michael Long have done extensive research in this area.

PBL: Project Based Learning

Setting a series of projects that require language for completion is one methodology that takes a similar approach to TBL, but on a larger scale and over longer times, typically more than one class, and possibly as long as a semester. Another step up in complexity is Problem Based Learning, which would require a high intermediate or advanced level of English to complete.

Dogme: Teaching Unplugged

Scott Thornbury and Luke Meddings wrote *Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching* in 2009. A simple guide to a method that developed out of a school of film direction. Classes are minimalist, with very few materials (some eschew textbooks), and very student-centered. Another antecedent is Curran's Community Language Learning where the instructor acts as a counselor.

A strict Dogme Approach would see the introduction of technology as a distraction to the main focus of the classes, where students develop questions about language based on examples, then answer those questions with language samples provided by the teacher in the moment. This author would argue that both examples and samples could be effectively provided through the Internet in a learner's quest for answers, and thus provide a richer experience.

Ubiquitous Learning

Technology is giving us opportunities to learn anywhere and any time. Putting materials and activities online allows for a more seamless integration of work inside and outside the classroom. Eventually we may see this line between homework and classwork disappear.

Gamification

Jane McGonigal, in her book *Reality is Broken*, points out that people play about 3 billion hours of games each week. She is reworking the motivational elements of gaming to apply to real-world problem solving such as hunger or climate warming. She states, "When you strip away the genre differences and the technological complexities, all games share four defining traits: a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation." (McGonigal, location 447)

OnePlusMe is a simple website where you can send a quick vote of confidence to anyone on the Internet. This kind of interaction is a very good way to build teams, and collaborate on a common goal. It even works well in competitive environments.

Peer Teaching and Flipped Classes

Brian Lukoff, Professor of Education and Eric Mazur, Physics Professor, both at Harvard, worked together to develop a method when Mazur found one day that if he let the students who understood his lecture explain it to the students who didn't, comprehension skyrocketed for everyone. Now Mazur requires reading before class, and the students prepare because they know that Mazur will only ask them questions, and they will only come to an understanding of it through discussion with their classmates.

Flipped classes take the lecture out of the classroom and put it online, possibly with some comprehension activities. Two chemistry teachers in a Colorado high school found they could use their time better by putting their lectures online. The students would then spend time in the classroom either discussing the lecture or running experiments to test the theories presented outside class.

Part 2: The Blending

Please note that this style has been developed over the last 2 years, with input from other teachers, but focuses mainly on university students in Tokyo, Japan. This approach has been used at 2 different universities, one top-tier, and the other mid-tier. Students were willing to invest time and energy into this method because of the variety of activities and the freedom to choose. What still needs to be determined is whether this leads to improvement in language production. As an overall impression, though, students spent more time on activities both in class and outside class on task (producing the target language in an authentic situation), than regular classes.

The Technology

To leverage non-class time we use a virtual classroom online. Moodle is the most popular Learning Management System (LMS). It consolidates the administration of a class online. Teachers can either install it on a web server themselves, or pay a small fee to have it maintained on a web server for them. Students each have an account in this open-source database-driven software. Recently, more and more educational administrations (universities, departments of education) are employing in-house technicians to customize and maintain this software.

Moodle contains many different kinds of activity templates such as discussion groups, quizzes, assignments, forums, journals, surveys and wikis. In addition a base of thousands of users develops modules of additional activities of every imaginable sort, such as photo galleries with comments, rubric input, and questionnaires. One can build a web page inside the course, or link outside. Activities can be connected with stipulations as to performance on one before another can be started. The newest version has completely new code, allowing

for many Web 2.0 related activities that promote social interaction within the class. The most outstanding feature is that Moodle is multilingual, with over 100 languages in its interface.

Moodle is used here to serve as a repository of information for students outside of class and an administrative tool to track student use of that material. Each week the students access Moodle between classes to either read a short text, watch a video or listen to some audio (see Flipped Class above). Often there are aids for comprehension, and students can build a common glossary among their class members to help each other out with vocabulary.

All students have access to the Internet on a computer, either desktop or laptop with wireless. Many have access through smaller devices such as iPod Touch or smart phones. As students enter the classroom a final short quiz is open for the first five minutes of class time. This insures that students are on time and have their laptops on and ready to study, as well as taking a form of attendance. The teacher can fill students in on anything that is not clear in the assigned work.

The Classroom

As student enter the classroom they are asked to sit in different configurations depending on the day's activities. One common configuration is to sit in groups of three to five (cafeteria, or *kyushoku* style), desks facing each other and allowing for room around so the teacher can circulate. Another configuration is designed for a larger group discussion called Socratic Circles, with four students facing each other, each flanked by 2 other students to comment upon their comments.

In this approach, there are always three common activities to begin each class. After the quiz, the teacher tells a story about a personal experience. This is not a lecture, but serves as a way for students to get to know the teacher better and as a way to focus the activities that follow. Often this will include slides of pictures, graphs or even a short video clip for variety. While the teacher "lectures" students answer feedback questions with their iPod Touches, using a website called QuestionPress (or alternatively, MOARS). These websites allow the teacher to formulate comprehension questions in the moment and students to either give their opinions or choose a direction for the story to go. This type of Classroom Response System (CRS) often uses "clickers". These stories are very fast paced and short usually lasting less than 5 minutes.

The third common activity is one of question formation. Once the topic or direction of the class has been set by the story, students are asked to formulate questions. This gives students time to think about the topic and relate it to their outside work. Each student is asked to submit three questions, which are displayed on the projector anonymously. The

teacher chooses to answer some of the better questions, and points out where other questions can be improved.

This third focus is the jumping off point for other activities. Question formation is at the heart of autonomous learning, and is the first step in exploration of new topics that are of interest and value to the students (see Tolstoy, Task-based and Dogme above).

Autonomous Activities

Each week students access a menu of about a dozen activities. They allow for easy linking to materials for the first three activities in class, and for the materials presented outside class. Of these dozen activities, more than half are optional. They usually include access to materials that should spark discussion.

In almost every menu there are links to short video clips on the topic of the day, and if possible, from different viewpoints. Pairs of students could watch clips from opposite sides, and use it first as a kind of information gap activity, then as a basis for discussion. Another set of links goes to infographics, or visualizations. Using numbers and statistics is a kind of literacy that is becoming more and more important in our data-driven society.

Beyond these, there are links to other kinds of materials. Three sets of links are the **Make**, **Do**, and **Teach** links, where students can assimilate small bits of information, and turn it into knowledge and then either make something with it, or use the information to do something, or teach this information to other members of the small group. These three sets of links promote autonomy on a scale much wider than the initial three sets, or the links to promote discussion.

The small group dynamic is important in this class. Of course, everyone has agreed to interact in English unless absolutely necessary (see ClassDojo below). Beyond this, students learn to cooperate with each other to complete the activities outlined. Some days groups form freely and of different sizes. Other days groups are assigned on a basis of complementary qualities of personality (introversion/extroversion), linguistic ability, or personal experience.

One common activity that students find valuable is Socratic Circles. After studying a topic outside of class, four students are set to discuss it. There are three stages of discussion, 1) Summarize, 2) Issues, 3) Relevance. The four discuss what was in the assigned material, then the issues involved, and finally how much it affects their lives. At the same time each speaker has two people behind her tweeting comment through Twitter with other opinions, agreements, or new ideas for their particular speaker. These tweets are displayed on the projector (or can be viewed by each student individually by filtering using a hashtag) in real

time. After approximately 10 minutes, the people in the center fall silent and tweet, while the others put down their devices and discuss the three stages of the topic.

Evaluation

Tests are good for education, but not for learning. Using the software New Dynamic English by DynEd, this author learned the value of constant, immediate evaluation. Feedback at every possible moment increased student participation, awareness of the language, use (as opposed to usage) of the language, and retention of target language. This method tries to replicate constant, immediate feedback in the classroom, and builds it into the evaluation mechanism.

Students are given points for comprehension of the material assigned outside of class in two ways, accuracy and speed. Answering questions correctly is good, answering them correctly in a short time is even better. The lackadaisical pace of most Japanese classrooms is something akin to an assembly line. Quick bursts of intensive learning activities (20 minutes seems about the optimum), followed by short periods of rest and consolidation (chatting...in English) are more natural. Students are rewarded for creating questions during class time in the third activity. After the initial three common activities, during the autonomous discussion time, students are monitored by the teacher.

ClassDojo is a simple website that is designed for elementary school classes, but works marvelously to keep students on task without too much direction. Each student has an avatar on screen during discussion time. The teacher walks around class and pushes buttons on a tablet to select student, and give quick positive (or sometimes negative) feedback, such as asking a question, changing the topic, adding information from outside assignments. The points are displayed next to the student name onscreen for all to see, and a quick beep notifies that points were given. Students quickly see that if they are involved, ask question and simply speak in English, they will be rewarded. Monitoring the class by walking around the groups allows the teacher to also give support to discussion when asked or needed.

At the end of each class, students are asked to give points to each other, based on how much they learned from that student. This is an idea called OnePlusMe (see McGonigal, above). By being a part of the evaluation process, students feel more invested in the outcome of their discussion. Lower motivation classes try to game the system by giving each other equal points in a round robin, but that does not continue for long as students do not see the actual points in any week, but a ranking.

By calculating points gained outside of class, online in Moodle, and adding those to points from comprehension and question activities in class, as well as participation points in class, a raw score is added to the week's total for each student. It is then added to any previous

week total, for a running Rank, which is available at all times. Student identities are preserved using a code that only the students know. At any time, the student can see how she ranked each week, and how her participation has changed over the week. This fosters both cooperation and competition. While the competition is obvious, cooperation is built into group work and special projects. Group work in class always garners more participation points because it involves more communication.

Special Projects are the final element in the course evaluation, and the most autonomous. Each week at the end of the Activity Menu are suggestions for additional work on the topic. This follows the Make, Do, Teach format of the activities, but is done outside of class, or prepared outside class and delivered (or presented) in class. These can be individual reports, small group information collection, creating a web page, audio, video, or powerpoint presentation. Students can select a suggested project, or get double points if they invent one of their own. These projects are entirely voluntary, but can bolster participation for those that find discussion in class daunting.

Augmentations

Next year plans to add features of the MOOC are underway. We are currently looking at changing our online presence away from the “walled garden” or “siloes” (segregated) information of Moodle to a framework that allows more open collaboration, such as Pearson/Google’s new OpenCourse setup. People outside the class will be invited to participate in online discussions, and in-class presentations by both teacher and student will be available through video online. This collaboration with what I expect will be mostly native English speakers should increase authentic communication exponentially.

An experimental feedback mechanism common to games and social websites today will be added. An open platform for awarding Badges is being developed at Mozilla (known for the Firefox browser) and should be ready for the new academic year. Badges are a kind of online certificate to show mastery in a micro-skill. Badges are portable to other systems, open to the public and available for free to anyone. Any institution can award badges, and their worth is graded based on reputation garnered through feedback from institutions employing people awarded with these badges. Major universities like Harvard and Stanford are looking into their own system, with MIT offering a free software package to set up your own evaluation system based on their Open Course offerings.

Conclusion

The language classroom environment and curriculum can and should change today as a result of technology and changes in literacy. To build a set of tools that is flexible and robust enough to develop learner capabilities should be based on research not only in

linguistics and second language acquisition, but on learning theories from other areas. Students need to be active in their learning. Only the best lecture-based courses will become popular online, and subsume the rest. The classroom needs to become a place where students can interact, try out their newly formed language in an environment that allows support and encouragement, but also constant feedback and tools to improve. Bringing the world into the classroom is essential to a successful class.

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