Maintaining the student-teacher relationship, and adapting resources to online teaching

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Prior to the pandemic, I used minimal technology in my classroom, and I confess to having had an aversion to technology in language teaching. This was because students complained about online learning programs featuring traditional methodologies such as comprehension exercises, multiple choice exercises, and fill in the blanks. I eschewed such exercises because I was inspired by Bruner's (1996) notion that learning "is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" (p. 84). No wonder many of my students tended to dislike online learning programs; they tended not to conform to any of the conditions specified above by Bruner.

I was also influenced by Van Manen (2015), who highlighted the importance of the physical presence of the teacher through eye contact, voice, gestures, and presence. He explained that eye contact on a screen was qualitatively different from eye contact in person. He compared the toxic nature of plastic in baby bottles to that of technology in teaching: "the chemistry in the technology of media and teaching has become toxic for our students" (p. 110).

I was able to witness the benefits of in-person teaching in my classroom, and my observations seemed to confirm what Van Manen was arguing. I had my students regularly change partners as they engaged in pair work. The students would be paired into Partners A and B, and every time the conversational topic was changed, Partners B would move clockwise around the classroom to the next Partners A. I would observe the expressions on the students' faces as they engaged in conversation, and many of them were animated, engaged, and smiling. I considered that this was because their communication was "participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" as Bruner (1996, p. 84) specified.

My views changed during the pandemic when I was forced to abandon in-person teaching in favour of the Zoom online platform. Unaccustomed to using online resources, I had to quickly master this new medium. A JALT colleague in Kansai, Curtis Kelly, kindly sent me some videos on how to use Zoom, and my daughter sat at my side during the beginning of each lesson to help me as I started to use this new technology from home.

My desktop computer, books, and other resources were in my university office, but I could no longer gain entry to the campus from my distant locale. My only guide was the university's online syllabi which I accessed from my laptop at home. I had to find online teaching resources to match the syllabi. Thankfully, I managed to find free online resources that were even better than those in my office. The British Council provides a range of resources covering the four skills, grammar, vocabulary, business English, and IELTS. The video zone on their website Learn English (https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/general-english/video-zone) was particularly useful.

These videos are a few minutes in duration and are designed to cover upper intermediate (CEFR level B2) and advanced (CEFR level C1) levels. They begin with a warm-up exercise, and feature a video with a transcript. I send the students the video link a few days before the Zoom class. During the class, I play the video first without the transcript and then with it. Next, we complete the featured comprehension exercises. Of course, I am not a fan of comprehension exercises, but I concede that spending five minutes doing them probably helps students consolidate new vocabulary.

My other preferred online resource is Learning English (see previous link). This resource covers grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, news, and business, and has sections for teachers as well as children's stories with audio. I use the pronunciation section with a second-year

required class, for 15 minutes in every lesson: (https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/pronunciation).

The presenter provides important tips on pronunciation that learners in Japan are generally unaware of. The video clips feature the pronunciation of ordinary people in city parks and other public places, and some of them are slowed down so that learners can easily observe lip movement. The presenter is animated, and there is quirky humour at the end of every video clip. Each lesson concludes with a simple written explanation to summarize the featured pronunciation point.

For my trainee teachers' class, I use "Classroom teaching tips with The Teachers' Room" (https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/classroom_teaching). These videos cover topics such as word stress, error correction, vocabulary, how to give instructions, intonation, reading, dictation, collocations, grammar, songs, using realia, speaking, listening, writing and using social media. The presenters are lively, humorous, and engaging. I follow up each video with written assignments asking students to write 100 words summarizing the video and 100 words explaining how they would use these in their classrooms. In the latter, they have to integrate this with a lesson from one of the prescribed English language middle or high school textbooks from our university teaching library, so that they can adapt these videos to Japanese pedagogical requirements.

Finally, I will explain how I overcame my aversion to technology in language teaching. My concerns were whether I could establish and maintain rapport online. I was less concerned about teaching students on Zoom who I had previously taught in the traditional classroom. I *was* concerned about students whom I had never met in person. It has been over a year since I started teaching this latter group, and I can report that it is possible to establish rapport with them. I can see all of the students' faces at an equal distance. I can engage with them in paired discussions at regular intervals in breakout rooms. I hope I can meet these students one day in person, but teaching online has not prevented me from establishing rapport. Also, I concede that technology has given me speedy and convenient access to quality online resources.

References

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