

Blending Computers and English using Student Power Point Presentations

Judy Yoneoka

Department of Foreign Languages, Kumamoto Gakuen University
judy@kumagaku.ac.jp

Abstract

This study reports on the curriculum design of a "Computers and English" course for third year university English majors, including three components based on Education, Communication and Research. The course design features a requirement for students to prepare and give presentations on a research topic of their using Powerpoint. Course results for the first year are discussed. In an attempt to breach the widening gap between Internet on computers and on other wireless devices, it is suggested that the course be renamed "Computers, Internet and English".

1. Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Education (*monbusho*) has recently urged the introduction of application of IT technology into all subjects of study at all levels, and it is possible that no educational field stands to profit more from IT than that of foreign languages. The marriage of IT and language not only makes it possible for students to communicate instantaneously with people around the world, but also makes available an array of educational materials and tools unheard of in the past. It has even brought about a new field of academic research--corpus linguistics.

This paper focuses on the curriculum and results of a newly-implemented 3rd year university course "Computers and English", designed to apply and integrate current computer technology into English studies. Course content was divided into three subfields: English education, global communication, and academic research. In addition, students researched topics of their choice within these fields and reported on them using PowerPoint.

2. The Computers and English course syllabus design

When three professors, myself included, were first asked to create a new "Computers and English" course

for third year university English students, the first question that arose was "Should this course be designed to teach English through computers, or to teach computers through English?" As the course was proposed within the context of an English major curriculum, the conclusion was that the focus had to be on English--and that computers should be used only as a means towards that end.

With this focus in mind, three fields in which computers are recognizably useful tools for language study were proposed: education, communication, and research; and the following areas were included as specific topics of study:

1. **EDUCATION.** Stand alone CD-ROM programs, dictionaries and resources; authoring programs and tools for creation of materials and tests; online English programs, courses and sites; English translation sites; online English resources.

2. **COMMUNICATION.** E-mail pen pals and classroom projects; ICQ, chat and game sites; online university and virtual meeting sites; schMOOze; 1-way media access (public radio, TV, news sites); 2-way media access (Fax and Telephony).

3. **RESEARCH.** CD-ROM and online research databases; offline and online corpora; data-driven grammar; corpus-based dictionaries, literature resources (online libraries, etc.); linguistics resources (mailing lists, conference information, etc.); online data collection and retrieval.

In creating the syllabus, basic computer literacy and word processing skills were not included, as it was assumed that the students would have already completed introductory computer courses. However, this did not turn out to be the case, and the first half of the year-long course was devoted to developing computer skills through English e-mails, participation in mailing lists and creation of home pages with html. The second half of the course, then, focused on introducing the current state of the art with respect to each of the three categories above.

The computers and education component of the course introduced CALL and reference materials available within the university. These included general English multimedia courses such as BBC and English

World, preparation materials for standardized tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL and the Japan-based English STEP test (Standard Test of English Proficiency, also known as “eiken”), and resources for specific language skills such as pronunciation or vocabulary. Reference materials introduced included CD-ROM databases such as the MLA International Bibliography and Social Sciences Index and electronic dictionaries and encyclopedias such as Encarta and OED. Most of these materials were available at the KGU university library or language lab center.

Online English education sources such as Dave’s ESL café (<http://www.eslcafe.com/>) were also introduced as part of the education component, as well as downloadable authoring software and tools such as Hot Potatoes, a language test freeware authoring tool provided by the University of Victoria (<http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked/>). Sources for downloadable English oriented software and tools (www.cnet-download.com) were also demonstrated.

The key activity for the computers and communication component was creation of E-mail pen pals through sites such as <http://www.keypals.com/>. Other web-based communication media were also introduced: classroom e-mail projects, private chat (using my own chat room site at www.kumagaku.ac.jp/teacher/~judy/chat/cgi/), public chat /game sites (<http://games.yahoo.com/>), online universities

(<http://distancelearn.about.com/education/distance>) and meeting sites, and schMOOze [5] (<http://members.tripod.co.jp/schmooze/>). Finally, traditional media communication sources that have migrated online were treated: both 1 way media such as public radio (<http://www.npr.org/>), TV (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>) and news sites (<http://www.cnn.com>), and 2 way media such as online fax services (<http://www.ourfax.com/>) and Telephony (<http://www.net2phone.com/>).

The final component of the course was computers and research. This component included introduction of online English-English (<http://www.dictionary.com/>) and Japanese-English dictionaries (<http://dictionary.goo.ne.jp/>), encyclopedias (<http://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia.html>), thesauri (<http://www.thesaurus.com/>) and other reference sources, as well as online research retrieval sources such as the Eric database (<http://ericir.syr.edu/>). It also covered effective use of search engines, and the question of resource quality. Online journals that treat language issues such as TESL-EJ (http://www.zait.uni-bremen.de/wwwgast/tesl_ej/) and the Jalt Language Teacher Online (<http://langue.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/jalt/pub/tlt/index.html>) were also introduced.

The final class in computers and research was a special session in a Macintosh room devoted to corpus linguistics, a field which may safely be called the crowning achievement of the marriage of computers and language research. The availability of large volumes of data from

myriad sources and tools to analyze them from various points of view has revolutionized almost every facet of the language industry from linguistics and teaching to lexicography and textbook making. Indeed it is possible nowadays for any student to become a corpus linguist themselves, simply by using a standard search engine as a sort of corpus tool.

This session introduced the use of the Mac based software CONC (<http://www.sil.org/computing/conc/>) and Bbedit (<http://www.barebones.com/>) as well as applications of corpus research in linguistics [1], literature [2] and ESL [3].

3. The presentations

To solidify the course content and to provide students with a chance to make practical applications within a subfield of their choice, they were required to prepare a final research presentation using PowerPoint. PowerPoint was employed in this course as it is extremely easy to learn, use and manipulate. PowerPoint was “taught” in a space of 15 minutes only, leaving students more time to work on the English and research components of their projects as well as to explore the possibilities of PP for themselves. It is also an ideal tool for presentations that involve extensive links to other items, be they websites, word files or multimedia files. In addition, students tend to feel comfortable in making oral presentations using powerpoint. Their work looks professional; it therefore gives them the illusion that it IS professional. Finally, it is the only opportunity for students to learn and use PowerPoint within the English department curriculum

Altogether, 30 students participated in the course in its first year, and their presentation topics ranged from general themes such as world internet diffusion, internet addiction and distance education in Japan to specialized items such as TOEFL e-mail services, use of electric pocket dictionaries in Japanese high schools, and even Mother Goose on the Web.

The table below shows the distribution of the 30 presentation topic choices with respect to group:

- 5 students (16.6%) communication**
- 3 students (10.0%) online education**
- 2 students (6.6%) educational resources**
- 5 students (16.6%) Internets research**
- 5 students (16.6%) web resources**
- 10 students (33.3%) corpora**

It can be seen that the majority of students worked on corpus related topics, but as will be discussed in 3.3, this was more because of a lack of other ideas than because of an inherent interest in corpora.

3.1 Education

For students wishing to work in computers and education, the following suggestions were given as topic ideas:

- compare and review several stand-alone multimedia programs
- list and review online English education sites
- write an online test and pilot it with other students
- write your own program (in visual basic or other language) and test and review it
- download some English freeware or shareware (being careful of copyright issues) and review it

As can be seen, these suggestions are relatively technical and experimental, and perhaps because of this only one student opted to do a project based directly on one of the suggestions (*Types of CD-ROMs for TOEIC*). Other students tended to gravitate towards researching education with computers in a more generalized manner; i.e., research was more oriented towards survey type work of computers in regular and distance education than towards specific educational applications. Student topics in education were subcategorized accordingly into (1) distance and computer education, and (2) educational software and resources.

The former category contained three presentations: *Computer Education in US vs. Japan*, *Distance Education in Japan* and *Distance Education at Japanese Universities*

The latter category included only two papers which explored on and offline resources, respectively, for standardized tests: *How to study TOIEC and TOEFL by E-MAIL*, and the abovementioned *Types of CD-ROMs for TOEIC*. It is noteworthy that the former paper included a link for TOEIC study by I-mode (cellular phone). This indicates the growing popularity of that internet medium over computers in general, a point will be taken up further in the conclusion of this paper.

3.2 Communication

For possible presentations based on communication, the suggestions were

- make ESL pen pals from all over the world and find out how they use computers to study English
- make a list of English radio/TV stations available online and compare what they offer
- configure your computer to telephone around the world and compare different programs, rates, etc.
- participate in an online MOO several times a week and report how it affected your English

Again, the topics actually chosen were more generalized and survey-oriented than those given in the

suggestions. Five of the student presentations were in this field; two concentrated on E-mail (*Useful Expressions in E-mail, Spam Mail*); two on chat services (*ICQ, ICQ vs. Yahoo Messenger*); and one on internet telephony (*Internet Phone*). The defining characteristic of these presentations was that fact that they tended to introduce resources rather than actually use them.

3.3 Research

Suggestions for research based presentations included:

- make a list of online journals available in your field and what they offer
- list up sites with literature available online
- compare and contrast some of the major research search engines
- do a corpus based study of Japanese English based on complist
- do a corpus based study of some literary author

The bulk of the projects (66.5%) were in research, and were divisible into three subcategories: Internet research (16.6%--5 students), Web resources (16.6%--5 students) and corpus linguistics. The final category was again subdivided into three sections depending on what corpus material was used: (1) movie corpus (6 students), (2) Complist corpus (2 students), and (3) both or own (2 students).

Several students, again, wanted to research relatively generalized computer-oriented themes either about Internet itself or about resources available through the Net. In keeping with the course focus on computers as English learning tools, such topics were accepted only if they concentrated on English sites

The five research projects which dealt with the Internet in a general manner were *The Internet diffusion rate in the world*, *The Internet diffusion rate in the China*, *The IT industry in India*, *Internet addiction*, and *Electric Money (e-money)*.

The topics that concentrated on web resources were *English Newspapers on the Web*, *Mother Goose on the Web*, *Western Art on the Web*, *English E-books on the Web* and *Electronic Pocket Dictionaries*. The first four topics each deal with a certain English-oriented theme, and web sources were searched and rated by these students. The fifth topic treated the problem of use of electronic pocket dictionaries in high schools, and was noteworthy as being one of two to handle offline rather than online sources (the other being *Types of CD-ROMs for TOEIC* in the education category).

The other major resource-oriented themes (33.3%, 10 students) were all related to the subfield of corpus linguistics. The relatively large percentage of students working in this area was essentially the result of "the lack of a better idea", as anyone who had not chosen a topic by

the fourth week of the course was assigned automatically to the corpus group. In fact, only three of the 10 students can be said to have chosen this topic of their own free will.

The corpus group was divided off from the regular class in the second half of the term and set to work in one of the Macintosh rooms. There, they were introduced to Conc, a highly useful macintosh-based software program for creating word frequency and KWIC (key word in context) lists. Short examples of each are below:

Word frequency list

6.18% the
4.23% is, was, be, are, 's (= is), were, been, being, 're, 'm, am
2.94% of
2.68% and
2.46% a, an
1.80% in, inside (preposition)
1.62% to (infinitive verb marker)
(from: the BNC word frequency list,
<http://www.invisiblelighthouse.com/langlab/bncfreq.html>)

Key word in context (Ay)

241 a good throw. Hamish: Ay. Ay, it was. William: I was
251 You could? Hamish: Ay. William: Well then do it.
255 like a worm? Crowd: Ay! William: Then do it. Hamish
273 the rocks. William: Ay, you should have. Get up you
big
276 you again. Hamish: Ay, welcome home. Girl: William
(from: *Research for Scottish English with Concordance*, student pp
presentation)

Students were given a choice of two homemade corpora to work with. One of these was a minicorpus of over 126,000 words compiled from unedited messages posted by students to an intrauniversity mailing list entitled "Complisr". This minicorpus enabled the students to analyze the Japanese English of their peers for grammar and stylistic features. Two presentations were made using this corpus: *Japanese English Research in Corpora* and *Uses of A in Japanese English*.

The second corpus that was suggested to the students was made up of movie scripts downloaded from <http://www.script-o-rama.com/>. This proved to be the more popular of the two corpora, and indeed seemed to spark the students' creativity in a way that none of the other projects were able to do. Some students opted to compare and contrast several of the movies in the database, whereas others used only one or two. Topics included the following: *Use of "OK" in Recent Movies*, *Use of "fucking" in Trainspotting*, *Research for Scottish English with Concordance* (see above), *Use of "Japan" in Recent Movies*, *The frequency of "guy or guys" used in the movie scripts*.

Another student creatively made use of both sources in the inappropriately titled *Movie Script with CONC*—this presentation compares and contrasts the frequency of 'which' used by Japanese students (written) and English movies (oral). Another student embarked on a highly ambitious project entitled *Comparative study of American,*

British and Australian English in Newspaper, in which she created her own minicorpus based on web-based newspaper sites.

4. PowerPoint: a "happy medium" between Computers and English

The advantages of using PowerPoint in computer literacy courses have already been noted by several researchers. What, however, are the advantages of using PowerPoint in a course where the main thrust is on a liberal arts subject such as English?

First of all, as an English learning tool, PowerPoint provides the usual grammar and spelling checks which act as natural language feedback. (On the other hand, this was sometimes a detriment, as can be seen in the case of the student who misspelled "important" and the computer kindly corrected the sentence to read "It is impotent to use Internet without suffering from Internet addiction.")

Another English bonus is that effective PowerPoint presentations "want" outline and organizational skills that are often neglected in Japanese higher education. There is a Title Page, there should be an short introduction and short conclusion, it is only possible to fit a certain amount of body onto one slide; therefore, the body must be broken into logical chunks as well.

Also, PowerPoint can be said to bring out creativity and motivation. The availability of a variety of resources—word, excel and web files, and even sound and video clips (although none of the latter were actually used) that can be arranged in a "beautiful" manner tended to encourage even less motivated students to do their best. This can be evidenced especially in the relative quality of the corpus based presentations, many of which were done by students with relatively low English and computer skills..

In addition, English presentation skills were boosted with the addition of the presentation "props". Most students seemed highly relaxed and calm during their presentations, and were able to speak more smoothly than they would have if they hadn't been using PowerPoint. In a culture in which public speaking skills are sadly ignored, the use of PowerPoint serves to give students a taste of public speaking in English without throwing them into sheer panic.

The presentations were not only delivered smoothly, they were also a pleasure to listen to and to watch. "Sleepers" during the presentations were nonexistent, even though this is generally a problem in Japan, requiring artificial incentives to stay awake such as peer evaluations. Many students indicated on a post-course questionnaire that they felt the presentations were interesting and easy to follow through the use of PowerPoint and that they could use PowerPoint in the future.

It must be admitted, however, that there were disadvantages to PowerPoint as well. Many of the presentations involved students simply reading the cards rather than using them simply as presentation props. In addition, several students concentrated on the “beauty” and esthetic appeal of their presentations to the detriment of their content, which was often either plagiarized from the web directly or lacking in cohesion and depth.

One point which should be stressed in future courses is the integration of PowerPoint with more traditional oratorical skills. This will be best overcome by the introduction of material such as can be found on the PowerPoint student Help Page [6]. Here, four factors are mentioned for effective presentations: Content, Design, Delivery, and Creativity. While the student presentations can be said to effectively incorporate the second and fourth factors, the first and third still leave much to be desired.

Finally, it should be stressed that academic writing skills, especially with respect to plagiarism and quoting sources, are equally applicable to PowerPoint presentations as they are to research papers.

5. Conclusions and future directions

In theory, computers may act as English tools both in on- and offline modes. In practice, however, 90% of the non-corpus student presentations concentrated on online applications. Even the corpus research made use of online materials (newspapers and movie scripts) as well as downloaded software. There were only two exceptions: (1) *Electronic Pocket dictionaries* and (2) *TOEIC CD-ROMS*. In the first presentation, the student had prior knowledge of research on the subject; and in the second, the topic was specifically recommended by the instructor. However, it must be admitted that most of the suggestions presented at the beginning of the semester too dealt with online topics. In future years, it may be advisable to include more suggestions for offline applications, such as work with English spelling and grammar checkers.

In conjunction with the online-offline dichotomy, a more fundamental problem is quickly emerging that will become extremely important to CALL educators in the near future. Up until now, it has been assumed that the term “computers” includes both off- and online applications, but it is fast becoming the case that online applications do not necessarily relate to computers. That is to say, the immense popularity and ubiquity of web-based cell phone in Japan means that both e-mail and web applications will soon become more available to students than those on computers.

Indeed, they already are. A recent survey by the author (May 2001) of 129 first year students (83% female, 95% between the ages of 18-19) revealed some striking

statistics about Japanese students’ use of cellular phones today. Over 98% reported having a cell phone, and 95% of these had Internet and mail capabilities. Moreover, 75% of all students reported using M-mail (mobile mail) at least once a day, and many students wrote in the margins (with some pride?) that they sent and received over 30-60 M-mails a day. Cell-phone based Internet was accessed less frequently, with only 34% of the students responding that they surfed the cell web at least once a day.

Comparing this data with that for access to internet and mail via computers, we find that only 41% of the students reported having access to E-mail via computers (although 95% are enrolled in a required computer literacy course of which e-mail was supposed to be an initial component). In addition, when asked to contrast computer-based E-mail with M-mail, only 9% reported using E-mail more than M-mail, and almost 87% indicated that they preferred M-mail to E-mail. Reasons given therefore were convenience and portability as well as that fact that M-mails did not have to be overly long.

Are there English applications for mobile mail and cell-phone based Internet? Indeed there are, and they will only increase in the future with G3 technology looming on the horizon. One of the student presentations has already been introduced as providing one such example: an I-mode based TOEIC study site. Like this, more and more cell phone sites are featuring one-point English lessons (e.g. <http://ikaiwa.com>) and access to world news and wap sites (for CDMA users) (e.g. <http://000.com>). Reports are emerging on experiments using M-mail to enhance students’ vocabulary learning [4], increase teacher-student communication and provide writing applications.

Clearly, some educators have awakened to the fact that the cell phone revolution in Japan may be exploited to the advantage of the English language industry, and that we may indeed be facing at least a partial shift from CALL applications to TALL (Thumb-assisted language learning) applications. This revolution questions the appropriateness of the very title of the course “Computers and English” and suggests that a neutral term such “Internet” might be a welcome addition to the name.

5. References

- [1] Yoneoka, J., 1998, “[“But they do it”: Using Corpora to Research Sentence-Initial *And*s and *But*s \(SIABs\) in Academic Writing](#)”, *English Corpus Studies* No. 5 (1998), p. 15-26.
- [2] Hori, M., 1999, “[“Collocational Patterns of Intensive Adverbs in Dickens: A Tentative Approach”](#)”, *English Corpus Studies* No. 6 (1999), p. 51-66.

[3] Johns, T., 1990, "From Printout to Handout: Grammar and Vocabulary Teaching in the Context of Data-driven Learning", *CALL Austria* 10, pp. 14-34.

[4] Thornton, P. and Houser, C. (2001), "Learning on the Move", presentation at *JaltCall 2001*, May 26.

[5] Awaji, Y. Falsetti, J., Schweitzer, E., Turbee, L. and Younger, G. "SchMOOze University: Real Language Learning in a Virtual Community" TESOL '98 Seattle, Washington, March 17, 1998 hand out available <http://spot.colorado.edu/~youngerg/moopci.html>

[5] Snell, W. "Welcome to the Student PowerPoint Help Page", available http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/snell/PowerPoint_Help.htm, as of July 2001.