

Wiki wonderland: a tool for learning and advocacy

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Abstract

The Junior Primary sector (4–8 year olds) is under-represented in the LOTE literature. This age group has particular learning needs which are largely ignored in LOTE research. Yet creating the future starts here: this is the time when foundations can be laid for sound language learning skills, and above all, the time when a love of language learning can be instilled.

This paper will discuss the use of a wiki in a Junior Primary Japanese program. The wiki was originally designed as a communication tool for parents and the wider school community, to showcase Junior Primary language learning in an outer metropolitan school. This use of technology then became a tool of advocacy for language learning. Parents became advocates, sharing the wiki with friends and relatives all over Australia and indeed all over the world.

In addition to showcasing student learning and becoming a tool for advocacy, the wiki also became a learning tool in itself. Pages on the wiki could be re-used time and again to review targeted language, using the interactive whiteboard to pinpoint or extend the linguistic focus.

The paper will conclude with hands-on advice and tips for setting up a wiki.

Keywords

Junior Primary, wiki, technology, communication

ウィキ・ワンダーランド:学習とアドボカシーのためのツール

ウェンディ・ヴェニング、セント・フランシス・ド・サール・カレッジ

要旨

現在のLOTE教育は、小学校低学年(4~8歳)を十分に考慮して行われていない。この年齢の子どもたちに特有の学習ニーズは、LOTEの研究において大いに見過ごされてきた。しかし、未来の創造はここから始まると言ってよい。小学校低学年こそ、言語学習のしっかりした基盤を作る時期であり、何より言葉を学ぶことの楽しさを教えられる年齢でもある。

本稿は、小学校低学年の日本語プログラムにおけるウィキの活用について論じる。もともとこのウィキは、郊外の学校で小学校低学年の生徒がどのように外国語を学習しているかを示すために、生徒の親や地域社会とのコミュニケーションのツールとして開発されたのだが、このテクノロジーは、その後外国語学習そのものを推進するアドボカシーのためのツールとなった。生徒の親達が率先してオーストラリア国内、その他世界中の友達や親戚とこのウィキを共有し、広める役割を担ったのである。

このようにウィキは、生徒が日本語を学ぶ様子を紹介し、アドボカシーのツールとなったが、それだけでなくウィキは学習のツールにもなっている。ウィキに載せた記事は、学習目標とされている言葉を復習するのに繰り返し使うことが可能で、さらに学習のポイントを詳しくあるいは発展させて教えようと思えば、インタラクティブ・ホワイトボードを併用することもできよう。

本稿の締めくくりとして、実際にウィキを立ち上げるためのアドバイスやヒントも紹介する。

キーワード

小学校低学年、ウィキ、テクノロジー、コミュニケーション

Introduction

The Junior Primary sector (4–8 year olds) is under-represented in the LOTE literature. This age group has particular needs: students are often pre-literate; are still developing fine motor skills and social skills; have a high need for routine and repetition; have high teacher dependence; and have an interactive play-based learning style that thrives on hands-on activities (ACARA 2011, 7). These learning parameters are largely ignored in LOTE research. Yet creating the future starts here: this is the time when foundations can be laid for sound language learning skills, and above all, the time when a love of language learning can be instilled.

This paper will discuss the use of a wiki in a Junior Primary Japanese program. The wiki was originally designed as a communication tool for parents and the wider school community to showcase Junior Primary language learning in an outer metropolitan school. This use of technology then became a tool of advocacy for language learning. Parents who could clearly see how the above learning parameters translate to the Japanese classroom, and who could then clearly see the benefits of learning Japanese at Junior Primary level, then became advocates themselves, sharing the wiki with friends and relatives all over Australia and indeed all over the world.

In addition to showcasing student learning and becoming a tool for advocacy, the wiki also became a learning tool in itself. Pages on the wiki could be re-used time and again to review targeted language, using the interactive whiteboard to pinpoint or extend the linguistic focus. Furthermore, students became so keen to feature on the wiki that they put extra effort into producing high quality work that would be showcased.

Classroom technology

The explosion of classroom technology over the past few years has been tremendously exciting. One of the most exciting things is the way new classroom technology allows teachers to connect with parents. Language teachers often don't have much contact with parents, especially at primary school level, where the homeroom teacher is the parents' main contact. Technology that allows language teachers to become closer to parents is extremely useful. My experience of working with younger children is that parents are generally very keen for their children to learn a language.

They are also very keen to know what their children are learning, and very interested to know what is going on in the classroom. This parental involvement drops off as children reach high school, but at Junior Primary level, parental interest and involvement in schooling is

very high. Parents' own past language learning experiences may have been very teacher-oriented, may have been at secondary level, and perhaps focussed heavily on using writing to learn a language. Learning a language at Junior Primary level is very different.

About Junior Primary students

This age group has particular needs. Students:

- are often pre-literate (often do not even know how to hold a pencil, and cannot recognise any letters, let alone write any);
- are still developing fine motor skills (many cannot cut with scissors, many cannot fold a piece of paper in half);
- are still developing social skills (often call out, have little consideration for others' needs);
- have a high need for routine and repetition (the sense of stability Junior Primary children get from following routines is hugely important to learning);
- have high teacher dependence, constantly needing reassurance; and
- have an interactive play-based learning style that thrives on hands-on activities (ACARA 2011, 7).

You may think this is a perfect description of Year 9s, but in the case of Junior Primary students, these characteristics are typical of the normal social development of this age group. In addition, our younger learners are increasingly presenting with a variety of challenging behaviours. These often arise from a lack of social maturity, particularly in the areas of persistence and resilience. This is what we must expect of learners of this age group. We must find ways to engage these younger learners, ways of learning language that do not rely on literacy skills which may not yet be present. A successful lesson takes these learning needs into account.

Looking in on my Junior Primary classroom, you might think the students are not learning—they are just play-acting, just singing songs, just making craft. But in fact this is how 4–8 year olds learn (Bell and Lambart 1997; Makin and Wilmott 1998); the essential learning may just not be as explicit as it is in secondary classrooms.

For example, we may be learning the sentence patterns of:

Kore wa nan desu ka? __ desu

Kore wa __ desu ka? Hai, __ desu Iie, __ desu

We frame these in something age appropriate, like using the book *A visit to the zoo*, and use the zoo animals as a base for the sentence structures.

The wiki is a way of clearly showing parents the way we learn a language at Junior Primary level—not just the sentences we are learning, but also the activities we use to focus on those sentences—the toys, the craft, the puppets, and the learning through creative play.

The wiki

My wiki started out as a communication tool for parents and the wider school community, to showcase the work the students were doing in their Japanese lessons. I wanted the pages of the wiki to show that my Japanese teaching is clearly targeted to meet Junior Primary needs. I wanted parents to see the variety of activities in my Japanese lessons; the use of the school environment such as the schoolyard and playground; the ways students use classroom technology such as the SmartBoard and iPads; and most of all, the sense of fun.

I also wanted parents to see that while students thought they were learning about zoo animals, for example, in fact they were:

- learning about word order in Japanese sentences
- learning how to ask and answer questions in Japanese
- learning about the syllabic nature of Japanese writing, and so on.

I wanted them to see that what the child saw in the lesson—say, making a tiger, or a paper plate face—provided an opportunity for reflection on the language being learned.

What is a wiki?

A wiki is simply a publicly accessible website to which you can add, on an ongoing basis, as many pages as you like. The pages can simply feature information. For example, my wiki includes a broad outline of my teaching program and the Australian Curriculum Framework for Japanese. Previously, the official page contained an outline of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) for Japanese, and showed parents how my teaching program reflected the South Australian Languages policy. From the parents' point of view, this is probably the most boring part of the wiki—no photos of their children here. But it is valuable to have this information out there in the public domain, easily available to any interested parents. Transparency is a key idea for me. Then—on more interesting pages—we can add photos, glittery headlines and video clips of students.

In other words, my wiki is an electronic class newsletter, showing parents what their students are learning in Japanese on a regular basis. It's important to me not just to show the “star” pupils, but everyone having a go. Making mistakes is part of how we internalise our language learning, and the process is as important as the product. I can include links to other sites we use in the classroom, such as the folk stories on KidsWeb Japan. In this way, parents can click on the link and immediately read the story that the class has read on the SmartBoard. Or the student can click on the link and share the story with their parents.

I can also include links to other sites which may not be Japanese in nature, but can still be used in the Japanese lesson—for example, the animation made by primary school children in South Australia of the song “Caught in the Crowd” that I used in our lessons on feelings. This was an effective way of combining Japanese with broader educational goals, as the song, and the really moving video clip, looks at bullying at school. Many of my students were in tears watching this, and our conversations about how we were feeling came right from the heart. Again, it is valuable to be able to show parents how we teach language at Junior Primary level.

Students and parents can also use the wiki to follow up on Japanese learning at home. On each page, I write the language we have focussed on in each topic, to give parents a starting point so that they can become involved in conversations with their children about the Japanese the child is learning. Parents can see the songs we have learned, and use these to help their children review learning. When we make origami, I put the steps on a wiki page, so that students can do more origami at home if they wish.

It's fair to say that, notwithstanding the learning that takes place, Junior Primary students often focus on something interesting to them, for example: "Mum, we ate marshmallows in Japanese today!" The wiki page allows a conversation to develop from that: "Why did you eat marshmallows in Japanese?", and most importantly, "What words did you learn?"

The wiki allows parents to easily see that the marshmallows were in fact pretend *dango*, and the chocolate sauce was pretend soy sauce. Parents can see that the language and intercultural focus was on saying grace: *itadakimasu* and *gochisosama*.

It is not realistic to expect Junior Primary students to articulate to their parents a lot of what happens in a lesson. The wiki provides a tool to frame conversations about language learning, making it easy for parents to ask appropriate questions in talking to their child. I find this transparency most beneficial to parent-teacher communication, as parents can clearly see what their children are learning, and how they are learning it at the Junior Primary level.

At its simplest level, my wiki invites parents in to my classroom so they can see what we are doing in Japanese lessons—thus fostering transparency in my teaching program.

Advocacy

As time went on, I found that the wiki had taken on another role—as a tool for advocacy. As parents saw that it really is worthwhile learning a language in Junior Primary, saw how much Japanese the students were speaking and writing, and how the student's understanding of Japanese culture was growing, they began forwarding the site address to grandparents, relatives and friends: of course to show off their child's achievements, but indirectly celebrating the achievements of the Japanese program. It is wonderful to see parents and the wider community sharing the excitement of our Japanese program—in just a year, parents had shared the wiki with friends and relatives all over Australia, and indeed all over the world. This is fantastic advocacy for the teaching and learning of Japanese.

A learning tool

In addition, the wiki has also become a learning tool in itself. My students are excited to feature on the wiki, and this has become a motivating factor driving their learning. They want to produce great work that will feature in a photograph. They want to be recorded speaking Japanese so that the clip will appear on the wiki. When the photos

and videos appear, the students want to see and hear them again and again—so the wiki then becomes a teaching tool. Using the interactive whiteboard, I can pinpoint particular linguistic items for the class to review. I can press pause and ask students to supply the next word—or think of an alternative, or to sing the next line of a song. Because the video features themselves, their brothers and sisters, and their friends, it is so much more fun.

I have also deliberately used the wiki to further the connection between home and school in a Show and Tell page, in which students show others the Japanese things they have at home. When shown my wiki, the South Australian Minister for Education commented in particular on this page because of the language learning links made between home and school.

The wiki has also been used in ways I didn't envisage—a teacher at another school (where Japanese is not taught) used my page on making origami to demonstrate procedure writing to a class.

Setting up a wiki

Wikispaces, a site where teachers can create their own wiki, is free for schools. Teachers simply need to create a name for the wiki and log on to www.wikispaces.com to establish their own page. I think it is good to choose a name that shows clearly what the wiki is about. Of course you can use any other website template to serve the same purpose. Wikis can be used as information sharing sites in which anyone can contribute or add parts, but my wiki is read only because of its primary function as a newsletter.

Photos and videos are imported as files. Video clips need to be kept short in this format. Wikis operate differently to Word documents, and I've found the best way to display photos and videos is to first create a table. Of course you need permission from parents to show students' photos on a website. Many schools now have a standard consent form for this. Some parents do not consent, and there are valid reasons such as custody disputes that may come in to play, and these rights must be respected. I know of some teachers who black out the faces of children who do not have consent, but I take a great deal of photos and prefer just to not use those that include non-consenting children. One does have to be careful not to have children in the background too, as with computer technology a tiny dot in the background can be enlarged so the face is recognisable. It is always better to crop or remove the photo.

Headlines, emoticons, and long video clips are imported as widgets using embed codes. I like Glitterfy.com for headlines, but Sparklee.com and CoolText are also popular. Colour backgrounds for pages are also imported as widgets. I have found that writing is best done first in a Word document if you want to use Japanese script, then cut and pasted in to the wiki. On an iPad, it is easier to write directly in Japanese script.

Conclusion

My wiki functions primarily as a communication tool—an electronic audiovisual newsletter for parents and the wider school community to showcase the Junior Primary language learning in our school. From this beginning, the wiki has grown into a tool of advocacy for language learning as parents have shared the wiki with friends and relatives across Australia and around the world.

In addition to showcasing student learning and becoming a tool for advocacy, the wiki has also become a favourite classroom learning tool. Students enjoy revisiting pages on the wiki to review targeted language, and have become so keen to feature on the wiki that they put extra effort into producing high quality work in the hope of being showcased.

I am passionate about language teaching: my wiki is an opportunity to share that passion with others, inviting them to join me on a walk through my Wiki Wonderland.

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