

Improving assessment in Japanese through the use of digital tools

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Background

St Columba's College is a Catholic girls' secondary school in Melbourne. The College offers three languages: French, Italian and Japanese. Language learning is compulsory from Years 7 to 9, and an elective in the senior years, 10 to 12. Students choose one language prior to entering Year 7 and they study this language from Years 7 to 9 and beyond if they choose the elective option at Year 10. The trial reported here was conducted with the 2016 Year 10 Japanese class, which consisted of nine students. The effectiveness of digital tools to obtain feedback and to provide feedback to students formed the focus of this trial.

The importance of feedback has been highlighted by academics in the field of education including Black and Wiliam (1998), Hattie (2012), Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Masters (2013). Their research into what makes a difference in the classroom has been influential in changing teacher pedagogy. As teachers we need to ensure that the student is at the centre of all the work that we do, and that we empower our students to be active learners rather than passive recipients. Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 104) assert that 'when feedback is combined with effective instruction in classrooms, it can be very powerful in enhancing learning'. With that in mind, the focus for this intervention was to explore how digital tools can support and enhance feedback in the Japanese classroom through the evaluation of various feedback tools. Three questions were addressed in the trial:

1. How can I improve formative assessment through the use of digital tools?
2. What digital tools will help me find out what students are learning during class and at the end of the lesson?
3. Will the use of digital tools serve as motivation for students in their Japanese studies?

The changing nature of language teaching pedagogy

Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009, p. 28) argues that 'good teaching is the single most important controllable variable in successful language learning'. 'Good teaching' or effective language teaching pedagogy involves using a range of strategies to engage students and to make language learning relevant and accessible to all. This includes, among other strategies, using games, songs, mnemonics, authentic materials and contemporary topics. The use of digital technologies has the potential to also be a powerful way to engage students with their language learning (de Kretser and Spence-Brown 2010, p. 50). Not only can students play or create their own games to learn hiragana, katakana and kanji, or to master vocabulary and grammatical structures, they can use technology for the purposes of formative assessment to provide and receive feedback on their learning. The extent to which teachers use digital tools to support their teaching depends on teacher confidence and competence, as well as the availability of resources at their school.

Formative assessment through the use of digital tools

Masters (2014, p. 1) succinctly defines the fundamental purpose of assessment as ‘to establish and understand where learners are in an aspect of their learning at the time of assessment’. This information can then be used by teachers to inform and plan future directions in their teaching. Masters (2015) proposes that ‘the use of assessment information to guide future action might be described as the “formative” use of assessment’. In recent times a number of digital tools have been created for the purpose of identifying where students are at in their learning. Using digital tools is an effective way of checking for understanding during and at the end of the class. The advantage of using digital tools is that feedback from students can be received in real time. There are numerous formative assessment digital tools available for teachers, giving them both multiple options and the challenge of choosing among them. In response to this variety, teachers should consider what the learning intention for the lesson is, and which tool will work for the particular class and lead to achieving the learning intention. Teachers should experiment with a range of digital tools while recognising that some tools have similar functions and will provide the same outcome.

The power of student voice

Hattie (2015) highlights the importance of listening to the voices of our students in order to understand the impact teachers have in the way they teach. Student voice ‘can be a major resource for understanding and promoting high-impact teaching and learning’ (p. 16). In light of this, at the beginning of the trial in term 2 the students in the Year 10 class completed a survey. At this point in their learning the students had already completed one term of Japanese. The following questions were posed to ascertain from the students their attitudes towards feedback.

1. Are you informed of the learning intentions and success criteria in lessons at school?
2. What does feedback mean to you?
3. In what ways do your teachers provide feedback to you on the progress in your learning?
4. What do you do with the feedback provided by your teachers?
5. What opportunities are provided to you to demonstrate your understanding and to provide feedback to your teachers during class?
6. In what ways do your teachers check for understanding during a lesson?
7. In what ways do your teachers check for your understanding at the end of a lesson?
8. Do your teachers use digital tools to check for your understanding and to obtain feedback from you during a lesson or at the end of a lesson? If so, what are these tools?

The responses from the students highlighted the importance of clearly stating learning intentions and success criteria at the start of the lesson and of monitoring progress towards achieving these throughout the lesson. One student commented ‘Only in some classes I am informed of the learning intentions and success criteria. I believe this should be announced at the start of a lesson in order to know what you’re trying to achieve and ask relevant questions’.

The reflections also revealed that a consistent approach to acquiring feedback from the students during and at the end of the lesson, or at the start of the following lesson, will further support learning. One interesting comment from a student about the feedback she generally received was ‘Teachers either write comments, fill out rubrics or talk to me personally as ways of feedback. It’s generally written as comments on assessments, tests or reports.’ This comment highlighted that feedback strategies were perhaps not being used on a regular basis in class to ascertain where students are at in their learning. The students also identified that they are confident and competent users of digital technologies, as revealed in a comment by a student, ‘I feel pretty comfortable in using technology and I like to trial new things.’ Thus the use of appropriate digital tools should be embedded in the curriculum and be a part of their learning.

Trialling digital tools

A number of digital tools were trialled by the students each lesson over a five-week period to check their understanding during the lesson. These included: Vizia, Kahoot, Quizizz, Go Formative, Google Forms (quiz option), Quizlet, Hot Potatoes and the Languages Online gamemaker templates. To check for understanding at the end of the lesson the students completed ‘exit tickets’ using Twitter, Google Forms and Speakpipe. ‘Exit tickets’ enable students to reflect on what they have learnt during the lesson. They are completed at the end of the lesson and the responses are reviewed by the teacher to inform the focus of the work in the next lesson. Alternatively, ‘entry tickets’ can be used, where students reflect on what they learnt during the previous lesson at the start of the next lesson.

Previously I had made my students complete ‘exit tickets’ on paper and then I collected and analysed the responses. Having the students complete these digitally means I am able to receive the feedback immediately and the responses can be stored in one place rather than on individual pieces of paper. ‘Exit tickets’ can also be thought of as ‘thinking diaries’ where students reflect on what they did during the lesson, what they found easy and difficult, what skills they used and developed, and how they can apply these skills to other areas.

The students completed a post survey to ascertain their attitudes towards the digital tools that were trialled. The students reflected on the questions and their responses were insightful. The following comments are a sample of the student responses and do not reflect the opinions of the whole class.

1. Which digital tools did you find useful for providing feedback on your learning during class and why?

I liked Google Forms, Kahoot and Quizlet. They are very useful for not only Japanese but other subjects. They are well known and easily accessible.

Google Forms works really well to provide feedback on your learning.

Google, Kahoot and Quizizz were probably some of the best digital tools used. Especially Quizizz as it tested our knowledge with a time limit and with the questions we got wrong it gave us feedback by telling us the correct answer.

2. Which digital tools did you find least useful for providing feedback on your learning during class and why?

With Twitter most people our age don't have it, so it is not very useful.

Go Formative, as it never really told or gave feedback on what we did wrong.

3. How useful do you find using digital tools to reflect on your learning at the end of a lesson (for example Exit Tickets)?

I found it very useful as it tests my knowledge in a fun and exciting way.

I think that Speakpipe was a better way of reflecting as it could be done in your own time at home.

I really find Google Forms and Speakpipe helpful because it is easy to use and allows us to reflect on what we learnt and know.

4. Do digital tools motivate you in your learning?

Games such as Kahoot and Quizizz are fun but also educational.

Kahoot is always fun and engaging.

Observations and Conclusion

The trial gave students the opportunity to explore how digital tools can support their learning. This was achieved through evaluating the feedback tools that were presented to the class. It is important to note that no tool was being endorsed throughout the trial. The feedback from the students was useful in determining which feedback tools to embed across all my classes. A consistent thread in student feedback was that they enjoyed the competitive element of digital tools such as Kahoot and Quizizz. The rapid pace of these tools, providing instant feedback to students, ensures that they are being engaged in their learning, and at the same time provides feedback to their teacher to inform what happens next in the classroom and what adjustments need to be made to their instruction. As observed by Team ISTE (2015), 'digital tools engage students and provide teachers with quick feedback they can use to personalize learning experiences for their students'. Interestingly, as reported, the students did not find Twitter a useful tool for providing feedback on their learning as high school students are not using Twitter.

In using digital tools in the Japanese classroom, I believe it is important to consider these questions: What is it that I am trying to achieve? Will the digital tools and technology be used in a meaningful way, given the large number of options that are available? What will suit my intended purpose and desired outcome the best? It is important to remember that the learning should be driving the use of the technology. Timing is also important in receiving feedback from students in order to maximize the individual potential of each student. The digital tools trialled provided students with opportunities to receive personal feedback as well as whole-class feedback. Feedback needs to be ongoing, with opportunities built in to each lesson to check for understanding during and at the end of the lesson. It is also important to consider that the tools used to gain feedback should be varied to ensure students are engaged, and that they do not become disengaged by using the same method of feedback all the time. From an organisational perspective, using digital tools is a more effective way to maintain records of student feedback and to access data when required.

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