

Using ALC NetAcademy as a textbook and its effect on the TOEIC Bridge IP Test

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1. Introduction

In April, 2005 for the first time, we installed the ALC NetAcademy at Asahikawa University after a lot of persuasion and preparation, when the administrative board finally agreed to lease this software for five years. But installing it on campus was not altogether easy. The main problem was to persuade other English teachers to try out this new teaching style because in the past they had taught English as they wanted, without clear guidelines from the University. Therefore, the part-time English teachers were twice given an explanation and preparation for using this software, in January and March, 2005, by a representative from ALC who was invited here to talk to them.

The program for using it started in April and ended in July, 2005, during the spring semester. Despite my efforts to teach or guide the part-time English teachers and one full-time Japanese English teacher, some did not show much interest. In the e-mail discussions among English teachers, not everyone responded or shared their good ideas.



This year ALC NetAcademy is being used for the second time. Therefore, as the coordinator of English, I have decided to describe how I used it or how I teach students using this software. I use it as a textbook, the “**Software textbook**”, not just a piece of software. No textbook in the world is perfect. Therefore, teachers should devise their own lesson plans with activities to enhance students’ language ability and motivate them. I hope this paper will give some tips to English teachers who are not familiar with this software in the classroom or who are not confident about using it.

In April and July, we also gave students the TOEIC Bridge IP Test to see how this test influences students' language ability.

2. Teaching plans with ideas

The class period lasted 90 minutes and students met twice a week in the computer rooms, taught by a Japanese English teacher and a native speaker of English. There were 19 freshmen and 6 repeaters majoring in economics, 2 female and 23 male students.

Lessons were divided into two parts, listening and reading, according to the software. In each class students studied two lessons from the listening and reading sections. These took 1 class period for the students who were unfamiliar with computers and the software. I did not follow the planned lessons in every detail, nor the steps for each lesson. The activities which I planned had to be related to the content of the lessons and I used activities which I got from the Internet or other resources.

Class 1: Listening: Lesson 2 初めての東京

Activity 1: Access to the Internet: <http://www.japan-guide.com>

The content concerns Narita International Airport, so I asked students to access this website. Therefore, all the students looked at the Narita International Airport website even if they had never visited the place. This website shows how to travel between Narita and Tokyo station and the means of access to/from Narita International Airport. After students had accessed this website, I asked some questions in English. For example, "Does the Tokyo monorail go to Narita?" "What is the cheapest way to get to Narita?" "How long does it take to go to Narita by JR Narita Express?"

At this time, students got some new and up-dated information from the website and the teacher could lead the students to Lesson 2. As I mentioned, because I did not follow the steps designed by the ALC, I instructed students to go to Step 3 first, so that they could understand the content at "Slow" speed and then at "Normal" speed. If they wanted to listen to it in a more challenging way, they could choose "Fast" or "Expert" speed. When students had finished this step, they clicked on 英文 and 日本語 texts and made a vocabulary list. Sometimes I gave them a quiz to see how much vocabulary they had learned. After this, they went to Step 1 to check the spoken sentences which were difficult to understand. Here, they could practice pronunciation individually if they asked the teacher for the correct pronunciation and the teacher could see how long it took each student to read the text after they had printed it out. Usually I gave them one and a half minutes. This gave students practice in speaking English. Thirdly, students answered a quiz using 英文ブランク. Finally, they answered a quiz supplied by NetAcademy. If they had taken this quiz according to the ALC procedure, they would have been greatly discouraged by realizing how low their listening ability was. But taking this quiz at the end motivated students to continue studying English with the ALC NetAcademy program.

Now, students go to the reading section in the ALC NetAcademy. Lesson 31 is on tea.

Activity 1: Firstly, teachers prepared different kinds of tea, such as green tea, black tea, powdered green tea, flavored black tea and Oolong tea, which the students tasted or smelled; they greatly enjoyed this activity.

Then, they accessed the website: www.specialteas.com/Black+Tea/cid=10/category.html which made them realize how many kinds of tea are in the world. This activity led them to read the text, but not to follow the steps in the program. This was their sequence of actions:

Go to Step 1: Students read the text once and clicked "Finish" so as to discover their reading speed.

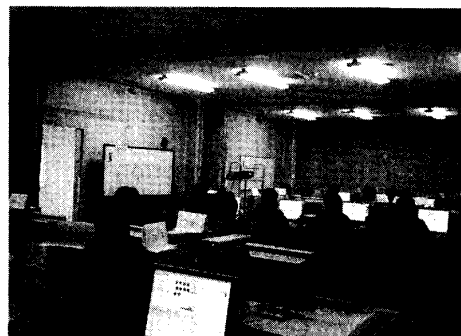
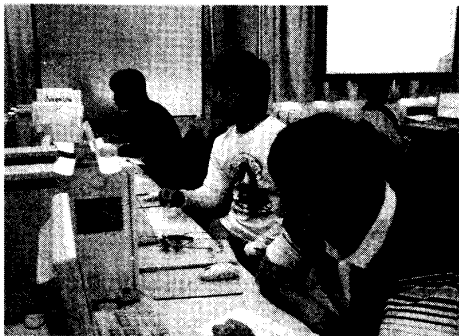
Go to Step 3: Students tried to understand the content and click a Japanese translation, then made a vocabulary list which they printed out.

Go to Step 2: Students answered a quiz, writing their scores on the feedback sheets.

Go to Step 4: "Phrasal 1": As soon as they understood the meaning of each phrase, they clicked "Next." "Keyword" and then "Paced": Students tried to see if they understood the meanings using these methods.

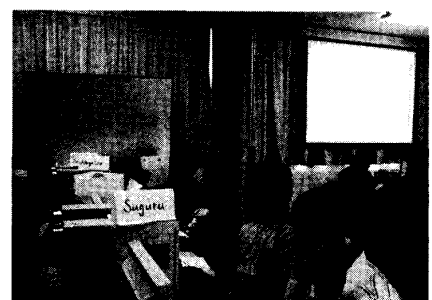
Go to Step 5: Students tried again to understand the content and printed their answers out.

Click "Exit" and press the "Yes" button to mark the lesson.



Class 2: Listening: Lesson 10 Sushi and Japanese life

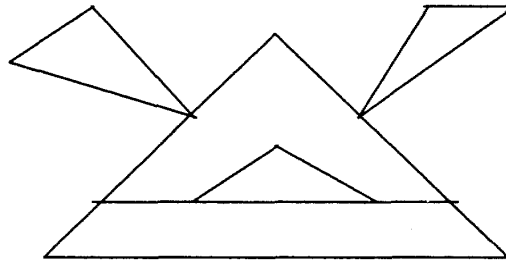
Activity 1: <http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2038.html> Students accessed this website to see many kinds of sushi.



Reading: Lesson 23: Origami

Activity 1: Making "Samurai Helmets"

Students accessed the website, <http://cp.c-ij.com/english/3D-papercraft/index.html>, using newspapers to make a samurai helmet. The website gives instructions for this in English.



The Samurai Helmet

Case 3: Listening: Lesson 11: Japanese popular sports

Activity 1: <http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2038.htm>:

It shows pictures on the screen of sportsmen and women, such as sumo wrestlers, soccer players, judo players, skiers and so on.

Reading: Lesson 21: Japanese traditions

Activity 1: Students accessed the website: <http://www.japan-guide>

<http://ymamtoku.jp/classic/>

They looked at Japanese castles, gardens, parks and kimonos on the Internet.

Case 4: Lesson 29: Telephone conversation 1

Activity 1: Listening to numbers

Students listened to a taped discussion of telephone numbers and filled in the blanks on their sheets. This tape was recorded with a variety of voices and accents, so that students heard different ways of speaking English.

Students studied this lesson according to the following sequence:

Go to Step 3: Discovery: they listened to the dialogue spoken slowly and then at normal speed. They learned the meaning of the dialogue and made a vocabulary list.

Go to Step 4: Students filled in the blanks on their sheets

Activity 2: Pronunciation practice

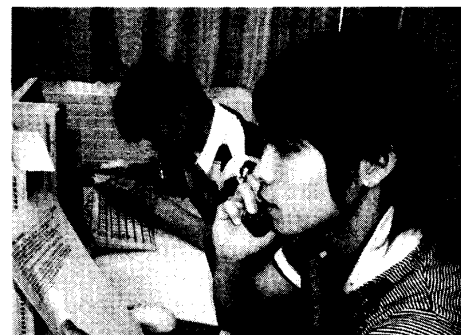
Go to Step 1: Students listen to the conversation without the text.

Go to Step 2: The students answered a quiz.

Activity 3: Using their mobile phones, students practiced this dialogue as a paired activity: Students practice this conversation with their partners and then printed out the text.

Exit: Students push the button.

Here, I asked students to talk with their partners on their mobile phones, though I do not normally allow them to use mobile phones in the classroom.



Reading: Lesson 19: Japanese movies

Students accessed the website <http://www.movies.com> and explored some popular movies, for example "The Last Samurai", "The Dream Begins in Fact", "Star Wars: Episode III." Students worked according to these procedures for 30 minutes.

Go to Step 3: Students made a word list and printed it out.

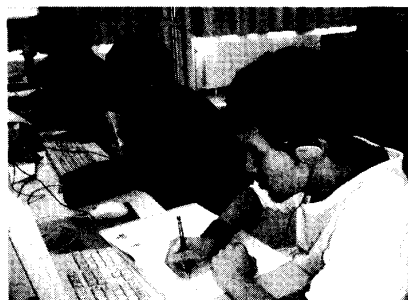
Activity 1: Quiz: this was a vocabulary quiz after they had studied the meanings of the words. I chose 10 words and asked students to give their meanings.

Go to Step 1: Reading speed: this tells students how fast they read.

Go to Step 4: Phrase reading 1 or Keyword reading

Go to Step 2: Quiz: this is implemented in the software.

Feedback sheet: Students filled this in after they had finished the other tasks.

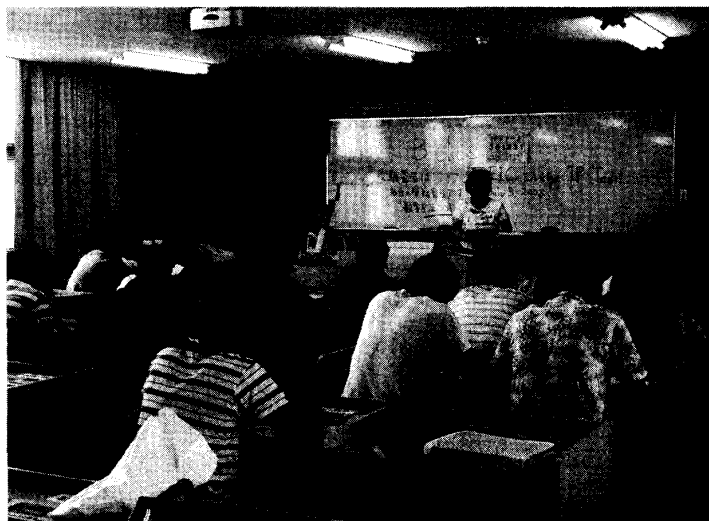


3. The problems in 2005 and 2006

The problems which I found in the spring semester in 2005 are as follows: 1. Students explored other websites which were not related to the lessons. 2. Latecomers disturbed other students and the teacher. 3. Students used mobile phones during class. 4. Students were not familiar with self-study. They have been spoonfed for many years and some of them, instead of being taught through speech, wanted the teachers to use the blackboard. Students needed much encouragement, especially those who are low-level. 5. The program does not provide enough easy lessons for the students. 6. Some teachers found it difficult to use this software because they were not good at using computers. 7. Some teachers were unwilling to use this software. 8. Due to the students' poor ability in listening, they had to be taught bilingually. 9. It took too much time to email information in two languages to teachers and office workers.

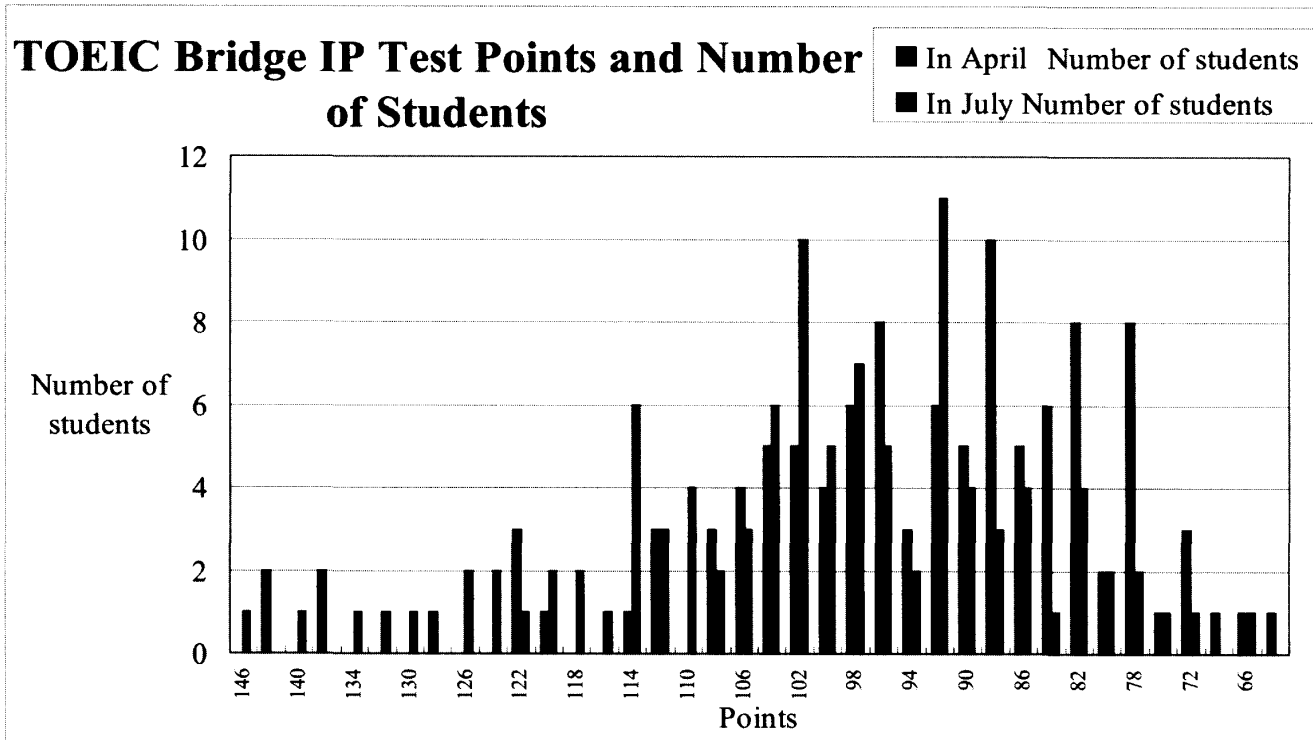
4. TOEIC Bridge IP Test result

The students took the TOEIC Bridge IP Test in April (Pre-test) and in July (Post-test) to see how the ALC NetAcademy had affected their learning of English.

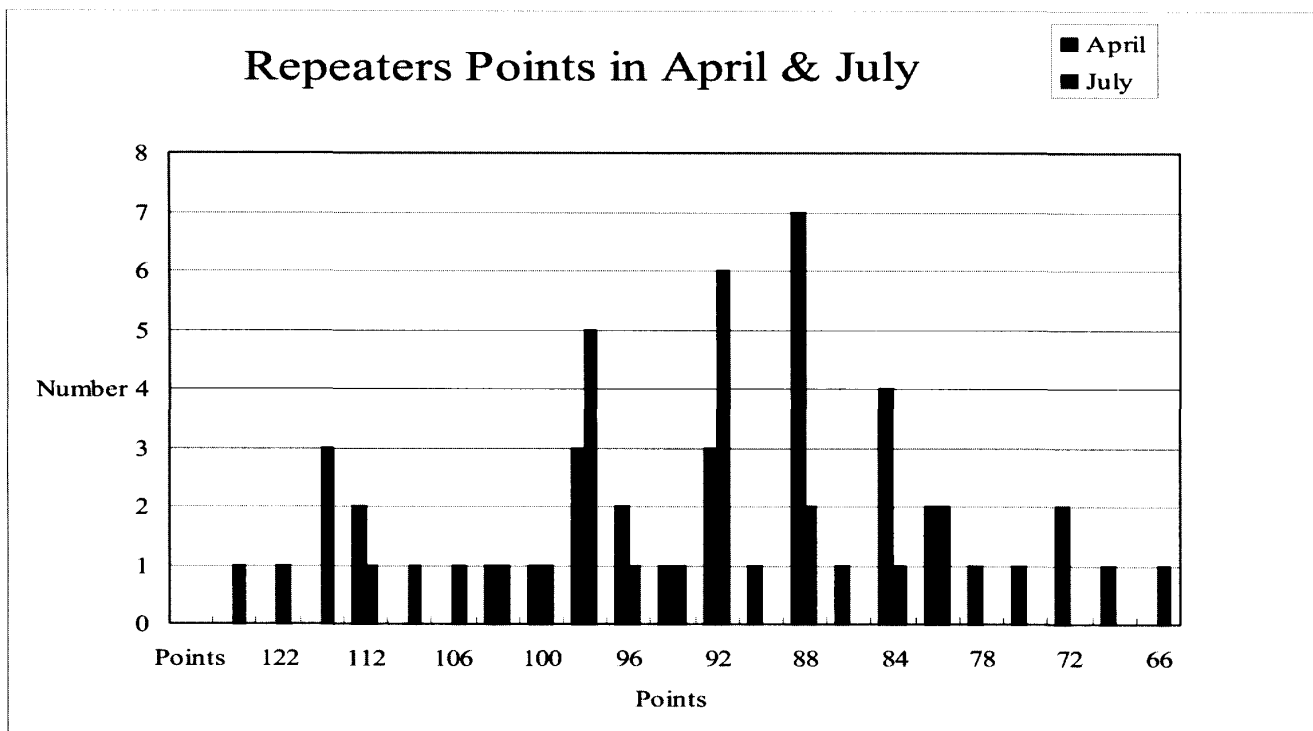


From April to July, we did not prepare the students for the TOEIC test in classes, but as a whole their English did improve. In April, 107 students and in July 101 students (including repeaters) took this test. The average score in the test in April was 94.42 points and in July the average increased to 102.17 points. Figure 1 shows how students (including repeaters) improved their English abilities in the spring semester. The figure shows the numbers of students according to the points gained.

Figure 1 TOEIC Bridge IP Test Result in April and July



Now, I want to show how the English language ability of the repeaters improved (see Figure 2).



In April, 33 repeaters took the test and gained an average of 89.39 points. In July, 28 students took the test and scored an average of 97.92 points. The repeaters also improved their English language ability. ALC NetAcademy also had a good influence on the repeat students and encouraged them to learn English.

All our classes have a Japanese English teacher and a teacher who is a native speaker of English teacher

and all the students evaluated each of the English teachers. In the classroom, the students tried to solve their problems in different ways, some by asking teachers (21 students), looking up words in a dictionary (34 students) and asking their classmates (48 students) the largest group. 31 students combined these three strategies to solve their problems. In a normal classroom, this does not seem to happen often, but in computer associated classrooms, students can interact more with the teacher and their classmates. Using computer associated classrooms benefits students by allowing more interaction between teachers and students and between students.

5. Conclusion

Last year, I found 9 major problems in teaching, but those problems have not seen so serious, as it has become possible to tackle them with the program, in particular the problem of students' using mobile phones in class. In my class, I rarely noticed that students used mobile phones in lessons. If this program is used with disaffected students, they are much more likely to follow the course and will not lose interest as easily as they would with only a textbook.

The company (ALC) improved their programs after I advised them. They said that other English teachers had also made similar suggestions. Moreover, as this is the second year of use in class, our teachers were familiar with this software. As coordinator of English, I did not have to instruct the other members of the teaching team nor send emails advising English teachers as I had done the year before, so that I was able to use time to prepare my lessons. As for latecomers, they did not make me angry so often, but I appreciated in the end the presence of everybody who attended. For teachers, speaking two languages is not problematic at all.

The TOEIC Bridge IP test seems to show how students can improve their English ability by using ALC NetAcademy. Therefore, English teachers in the classroom should use the software according to the "Software textbook", not merely as an autonomous learning device, because after 6 years of learning English students or if their English ability is not high, they are not motivated to learn English. In addition, accessing the Internet and talking in English over mobile phones has motivated them to learn English.

There are many textbooks and software programs for teaching English, but there are no perfect textbooks to accommodate students of all levels. Good teaching or good learning depends on how teachers teach the target language, English. Teachers must develop their teaching plans and recognize the roles of the teacher as a leader, parent, facilitator, and healer.

The learning experience of every student and the effectiveness of every teacher are influenced by what goes on among and between the people who populate the classroom (Ehrman and Dornyei, 1998, p. 5).

Tudor also emphasizes that students have different experiences and perceptibility so that teachers need to know how to solve problems while they teach. Students are complex human beings not 'simply' language learners. They interact differently influenced by a variety of attitudinal and experiential factors.

They are human beings who interact with teaching procedures in an individual manner as part of the broader goal of creating a personal understanding of language and of language learning in the here-and-now of their lives. The goal of language teaching is not to iron out differences among learners but to work with them in a constructive and educationally informed manner (Tudor, 2001, p. 15).

Teachers should be empathic listeners. A good teacher has three main characteristics: empathic ability, acceptance of the students and aims which are congruent with theirs (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997, p. 76).

The sense of what it is like to be another person—and to convey that understanding to the other—is at the heart of most psychotherapeutic modalities. It also is a key to effective teaching, especially teaching influenced by humanistic models (Ehrman, 1998, p. 219).

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the students in Class B who agreed to having their photographs shown in this paper.

References

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- Ehrman, M. E. and Z. Dornyei. 1998. *Interpersonal Dynamics in Second Language Education*. Thousand Oaks:Sage
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