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著者 Author(s)	Timbrell, Ivan; Takeda, Shingo
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Activities Integrating Second Language and Visual Art Learning Practices

TIMBRELL Ivan, TAKEDA Shingo

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English Instruction and the Formation of Future Self Image: Activities Integrating Second Language and Visual Art Learning Practices

TIMBRELL Ivan *, TAKEDA Shingo **

Key Words: English Education, Future Self-Images, Language Activity, Art Activity

I . Introduction

This study grew from the first author's observation that his first-year college English students do not spend much time on the task of language learning. Many of these students show little interest or motivation to apply themselves to language learning problems or activities. When asked questions like 'Why should you study English?' or 'How can you use what we are studying?', a few students gave answers about their future dreams, but most students gave cliché answers like, 'If I meet a foreigner on the street, I can give directions' or just said 'English is a compulsory subject.'

We do not think that this lack of motivation on the part of these students is completely unjustifiable. Language study is part of top down political and social projects. It is not something voluntarily taken up by for most of the students.

Indeed for residents of regional Japan like Tottori, there may be little exposure, or relevance to learning English. More than half the businesses in Tottori have little interest in international activity, and what international trade there is is mostly with non-English speaking countries. Common justifications for the study of English, such as becoming "global human resources" or joining the global English speaking community may not be very convincing. (鳥取県, 2016), (MEXT, 2010).

While there are many other pleasures and benefits enabled through language study, it seems that students have little idea of them, and what ideas they have are received and fairly generic. Few seem to have personally integrated ideas of foreign language into their ideas of their future lives.

The focus of and Motivation for language study for these students then lacks a personal connection. It is a shame to spend a lot of time doing something you don't want to, just because you were told to do it. It is better to spend one's life doing things that are useful or enjoyable. We want to understand how we could help students find uses and pleasures in their English studies.

The benefits of language study are a function of the time and focus put into it. Students can only make limited improvements in their language skills if they only study 90 minutes in class. Studying outside of class time and in the years following their graduation is where they can grow into their skills as language users. We wanted to help them have a positive experience, and to motivate them to continue studying at their own pace after the external motivations of school are gone.

* Master's Degree Course, Graduate School of Regional Sciences

** Lecturer, Art education, Department of Regional education

We asked the question - Why are these student lacking in personal motivation? Is it because Japanese society, and English classes in Japanese schools have not provided students with beliefs about the English language that are useful to language study. In the worst case, English classes in Japanese schools can demotivate students (Sakai and Kikuchi, 2009) by narrowly focusing on English for the purpose of school entrance tests. This test centered English education can build a growing sense of inadequacy, failure, and a 'can't do' attitude and diminish the perceived importance of communication and speaking skills among students. Classes often focus narrowly on grammar skills. Students who are not interested in grammar or do not easily understand it, soon lose interest in English class. The classes progress along a set sequence and time line. Students who are left are faced with a series of difficult tasks that seem to have no use, meaning, or pleasure.

English Education is subject to a "meta-curriculum". Ideas of ethnicity, language and culture are used on a personal and local level in identity creation, and also transmitted as part of political, economic, and state building projects.

Furthermore, Teaching and learning has a culture of its own. All these things influence the attitudes of institutions and participants of language education, as well as their goals (McVeigh, 2015). This meta-curriculum does not seem to help students develop positive images of themselves as confident, competent, cross-cultural communicators, or clear motivations and goals to become so. In the words of Jeffrey Sachs. Having goals is vital to a healthy society. If we don't have goals as a society, maybe we end up either with societies that are just confused, or are just striving for wealth and power, but without common purposes. (JICA Research Institute, 2017)

II. Developing Activities to Influence Student's Language Learning Beliefs

1. Teaching Belief

Alanen (2003) takes up the study of the development of language students beliefs about language. She uses a social cultural approach. She defines beliefs as psychological and cultural tools used by learners to mediate their learning. Examination of repeated interviews with child learners showed that their statements about language learning beliefs were influenced by discussions with the researchers one year prior. This suggests that beliefs about language learning can be created or influenced through pedagogical intervention.

In line with this thinking we wanted to make an activity that could help students to create beliefs about their future self that include imagining themselves as users of their second language (hereinafter called "L2-self") and therefore improve their motivation and achievement.

2. Second Language Self Image

Dörnyei and Chan (2013) have done recent research into future L2 self-images and imagery capacity. They state there are: "positive associations between desired language self-guides (particularly the ideal L2 self) and the learners' L2-related learning effort and achievement"(p.457). In other words, learners with an idea of themselves as a language user make more effort to study, and achieve more than learners without a vision, "self-guides were found to be associated with salient imagery/visualization components"(p.457). In addition, ideas of self are experienced as strong mental images. The state that "learners' sensory/imagery capacity has considerable pedagogical relevance because it is an important internal resource that can be

intentionally harnessed"(p.457). This research suggests that a learner’s ability to make and view mental images can be a useful tool in language study.

3. Visual Study

The first author of this article has been influenced by personal experience with memory techniques and visual note taking and planning. Where visual representations of an idea served to make it easier to remember and understand. The author has found that visual encoding of information can be a very powerful way to synthesize and store ideas. This led to the desire to create an activity that also used the power of visual memory. By asking students to draw a figure of their future L2 self using their imagery capacity it could be possible to address their lack of motivation.



Figure 1. Visual Notes Example

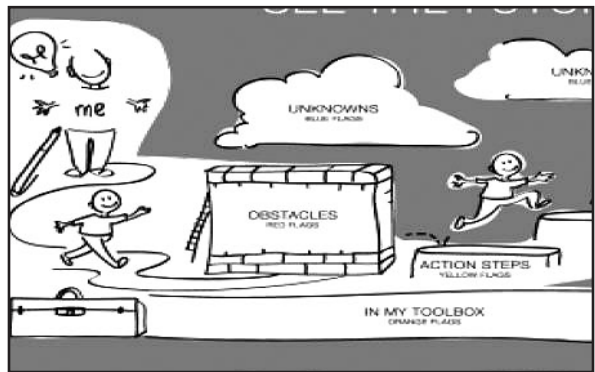


Figure 2. Visual Goal Setting Template. (Bradd, 2016)

4. Four Skills

Language learning is commonly conceived as divided into 'four skills'; reading, writing, listening, speaking. Hinkel(2006) describes this concept as follows:

Commonly accepted perspectives on language teaching and learning recognize that, in meaningful communication, people employ incremental language skills not in isolation but in tandem. For example, to engage in a conversation, one needs to be able speak and comprehend at the same time. To make language learning as realistic as possible, integrated instruction has to address a range of L2 skills simultaneously, all of which are requisite in communication. For instance, teaching reading can be easily tied to instruction on writing and vocabulary, and oral skills readily lend themselves to teaching pronunciation, listening, and cross-cultural pragmatics. (2006, p. 113)

Polyglot Lampariello (2014) refers to the four skills as four knights advancing on a castle. Drawing on this, the first author designed four knight characters to personify the four skills. The purpose of these characters was to help students visualize and remember the four skills.



Figure 3. Knights Characters

III. The L2ME Activity

Building on this image and the use of visual templates to study the First author created a worksheet divided into four boxes. One box for each of the four language skills. In the center is space for learners to draw a future 'super' self figure. This figure is to be the ideal self L2 (hereinafter called "L2ME"). In the boxes around the figure, learners are asked to draw visual representations of the skills and abilities they wanted their future self to have. They were asked to think of the kind of things their super self would be able to do. The purpose of this activity was to help the learner think of reasons they might want to study language, and to help them form a vision of their future self as a competent language user.

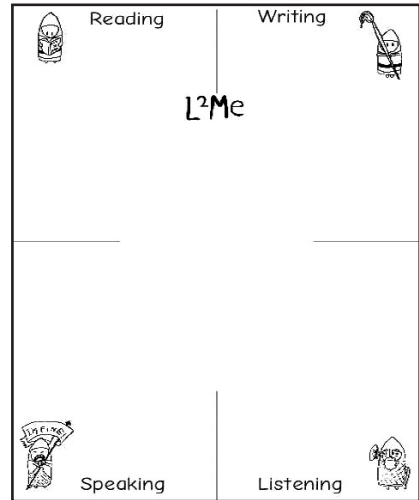


Figure 4. The Worksheet for L2ME

1. Supporting Examples

This activity also provides learners with example images. A common feature of visual arts teaching practice is the use of examples to help students who are stuck thinking of an idea. Visual arts skills may not be a major focus of every learner. There are a range of artistic abilities and some people have trouble drawing figures. For this reason an important consideration of this activity is offering some examples of figures on which to base drawings of future selves.

2. L2ME in Practice

The activity has been done with two groups of students. First, a group of adults who frequently use English and are involved in international activities. Second, a group of 18-20 year old college students who study English as a required subject.

3. Results

(1) Adults

The adult students already had high intrinsic motivation to study language. They have many experiences using English. They could think of many very specific activities they would like their ideal second language self to be able to do. A lot could be learned about the individual learners goals and experiences from looking at their worksheets.

(2) College Students

The college students had a range of motivation and experience levels. Some students were able to easily visualize language activities they would like to be able to do. Most students only drew very basic and non-specific activities like 'write English'. The most important aspect is that most students did not draw a future 'super' self-figure in the center. This is in contrast to the adult students.

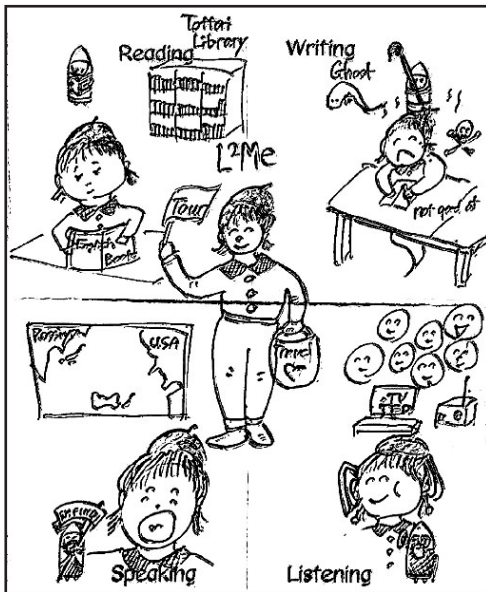


Figure 5. One of Worksheets of Adults

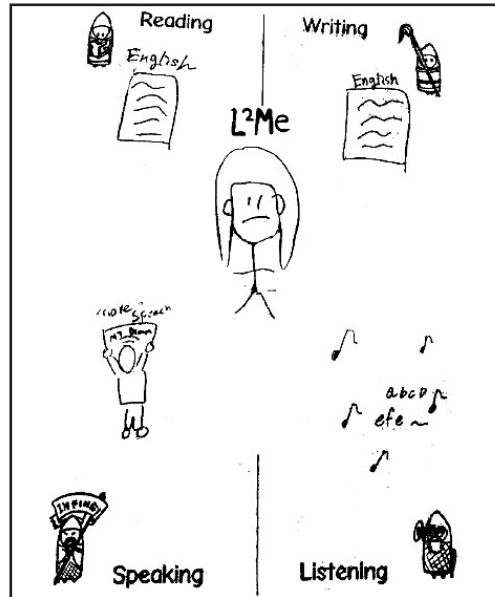


Figure 6. One of Worksheets of College Student

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The group of college students had difficulties imagining language activities that they wanted to do. In contrast, the adult students had used their life experience to imagine situations where they enjoyed using English and abilities that they wanted to improve. The college students did not have this experience to refer to. This raises a further question. How can a teacher support students to imagine language use situations, and then using these situations, think of things their ideal self L2 could be able to do.

A lot of insight can be gained from looking at the output of this kind of drawing activity. It suggests many avenues of possible future inquiry. Such as: How could such drawing be employed to gather data about visualization ability and language learning motivation and success? How could the pedagogical use of these drawings be explored in more detail? How can predicted impacts of this activity be measured?

IV. Follow Up Activity: The Modular Room Activity

The L2ME activity indicated that learners without experience using language, are limited in their ability to imagine and visualize an ideal future L2-self. The problem is then, how to simulate a multitude of personally interesting language use experiences and encourage learners to think about what meaningful connections these might have to their future. Furthermore, how can these situated experiences be varied across the four skills, and be generated in a way that enables visualization. This section describes the design and one time test of an activity seeking to meet the challenges described above.

1. Visual Thinking Strategies

The use of visual thinking strategies (VTS) in teaching has been championed by Philip Yenawine (2013). This approach uses open discussion and art works to support learners putting their thoughts into words.

Taking Paul Nation's (2007) four strands framework of language learning as a basis for exploring new activities, VTS can be understood in terms of providing opportunities for "meaningful input" by looking at and discussing artwork, and opportunities for "meaningful output" through sharing of ideas in a group. VTS seems well suited to foreign language teaching, and learning, and to the development of new ideas.

2. Picture Books

The acts of looking and thinking are central to VTS. These acts need a object of focus. Picture books are the focus of this activity. The images and narratives of picture books, and the situations they present are easily understood. They are also fertile ground for the extension and generation of new ideas. Their visual nature give freedom to readers to use their own words to describe their contents, and prompts the imagination to think beyond the page.

The Japanese picture book "WATASHI NO JITENSYA" was chosen for the activity described here. The book is about a girl connecting her dream rooms to her bicycle before a big trip. The theme of this book is well suited to a VST activity and the development of L2ME for a number of reasons.

- It has a message of friendship and sharing fun.
- The story and the illustrations are clearly divided into sections. This would make it easy to separate when creating individual student tasks.
- It contains everyday situations and social interactions that can become the base for discussion and the activation of ideas.
- Its' imaginative and fantastical nature encourages the reader to think freely about what may be possible.



Figure 7. The Japanese Picture Book "WATASHI NO JITENSYA"

3. Why not an English book? Aren't you trying to teach English?

The question could be asked - Why use a Japanese book? Wouldn't an English book be more appropriate? The activity presented here focuses on stimulating ideas and practicing visual thinking. To this end there is not any particular advantage to using an English text.

This activity was tested by the first author with students from Tottori universities affiliated elementary school. In this case, just working with an English speaking adult was enough to make the students excited to demonstrate their English skills in any case.

4. Activity Design

The hypothesis is that actively creating images of 'L2 activities', could help learners create an image of their ideal self L2. Giving purpose to language study the image of an ideal L2 self could help stimulate positive beliefs about language learning and therefore motivation and achievement. Simply showing learners a book and telling them about when they could use English would be a passive activity. We wanted to create an activity where teachers and students can actively co-create ideas and beliefs and the visual representations of those.

The basic idea for an activity was to have students work together to create a version of the fantastic bicycle from the book. This shared artwork would then be used as the base for a VTS style discussion, guided towards the learning goal.

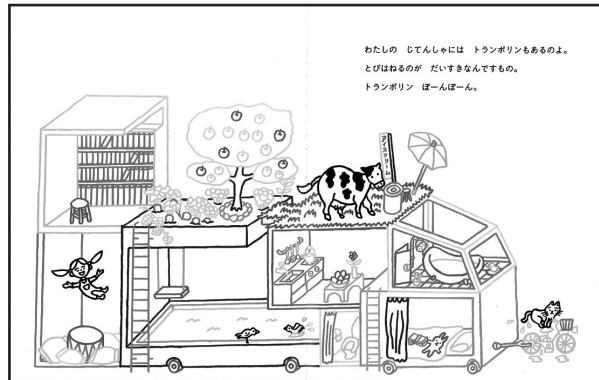


Figure 8. One of Pictures

5. Drawing Template

The rooms drawn in the book are like modular cubes. This shape seems to create a space with potential to be filled with ideas. The modular shape is also very satisfying to connect with other cubes and rearrange to see a bigger space emerge.

The use of a template is also a way to offer scaffolding support for the students drawing. If every student used the same shaped template this would enable the drawing to connect together easily. In the practical test of this activity the students rotated the templates differently and had to negotiate how they would connect their drawings. The drawing template was printed on paper and cut into room shapes that shows the walls and floor. The lines were arranged in an isometric, 3d projection.

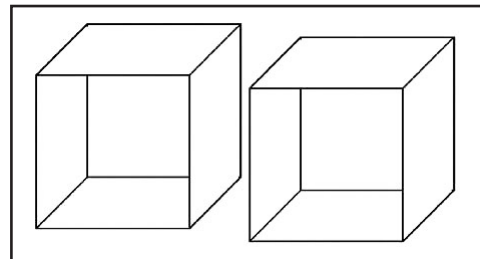


Figure 9. The Modular Cube Room Template

V. Activity Flow

As stated above, we tested this activity with a small group of four, fifth year elementary school students to find what was good, and what could be improved. The activity was carried out in two 50 minute sessions.

1. Start: Reading

The Practitioner read the book together with the students. To start with the practitioner read the book in Japanese himself, but then had the students take turns reading the book page by page. Students were prompted often to guess what kind of room would be on the next page in hope of activating their thinking

about interesting rooms.

After reading the book, the practitioner gave the book over to the students to look at the illustrations of the many different rooms and the people playing in them.

The students talked to each other for a few minutes about the book. This seemed like a kind of natural VTS activity. They also took this opportunity to try and figure out the names of some rooms in English.



Figure 10. Reading

2. Middle: Drawing

After this discussion, the practitioner gave students the drawing templates. The students were asked to draw a room that they liked. This activity followed teaching methods from visual arts lessons. For example, the practitioner showed interest in the student's work, but didn't judge value, or try to influence it.

Some students knew exactly what they wanted to draw from the first instant. One student spent a long time thinking about what to draw. The practitioner asked the other students if they could give him advice.

The students drew one or two rooms each. Many of the student's rooms were related to each other in concept or design. Working in a small social group seemed to help students to generate ideas. This kind of drawing activity can benefit from being done at a shared table.



Figure 11. Drawing

3. End: Co-creating a Space

At this point the first session ran out of time. At the end of the sessions the students placed their drawings together on a whiteboard to see how the rooms would fit together.

4. Second Session: More Drawing

At the start of the next session the students were asked to draw some more rooms. Then we positioned all the rooms on the whiteboard again. As mentioned above some of the students had used the room template at different rotations. This caused the rooms to not line up together. There was some interesting troubleshooting by the students of this issue.



Figure 12. The Scene of the Second Session

5. More Co-creating a Space

In the end they created two separate spaces using rooms of each rotation. Later the students drew a bridge between the spaces on the white-board. This seems to show that the combined rooms had taken on the form of a building in the imagination of the students. They called it a mall.

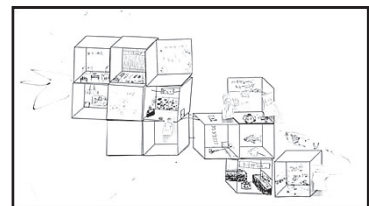


Figure 13. Pictures on the Whiteboard. The "Mall"

6. Discussion of Language Use Situations

The next stage of this activity is to generate ideas about language use activities. Once this co-created imaginary space had been created, the students were prompted to imagine themselves in situations within the space. For this purpose, cartoon avatars of the students were drawn on post-it notes. The students were asked to stick their avatar figure to the "Mall" in a room that they would like to go.

Next we discussed the kinds of language they might need or like to use when they were in that room. In the "Bay Blade Battle room", one student called out a battle cry, another student talked about shopping conversations in their toy shop. The practitioner asked the students to imagine this mall was in another country, and then talked about what English phrases they could use in these rooms. For example, if a student wanted to buy a red fish in the aquarium, he could say "I want the red one".

Unfortunately the test run of the second session activity needed more time to fully develop. The questions that was used to guide this discussion also need to be improved in order to prompt the students to create more strong imagery of themselves using L2.

7. Finishing

Finally the purpose of the activity was explained, that it was to help imagine situations where English could be used. The students seemed to have understood.

VI. Discussion

In the drawing activity some students could imagine and draw a room right away. Some students had a great deal of trouble thinking of an idea. Also some students could draw a lot of details into a room, while some students didn't add many details. There could be many reasons for these differences between students. There is a possibility that there is a correlation between the speed at which a student can imagine a room its details and the students abilities to form clear visions of their ideal future self L2.

The activity above is a first step into investigating how practicing creative artistic image forming activities can help students become engaged and motivated learners in all subjects.

There are still many practical and theoretical questions unanswered about these kind of activities, especially in the Japanese context. Further practical investigation and follow up with the students is needed to verify the theorized educational effects.

This investigation generated some questions for us with regards to our goals. We tried to help students imagine situations where they could use English in their future, but many of the rooms they drew were fantastical. These fantasy rooms may not be connected to students' ideas of their future. Even if a student can imagine language use activities in a fantasy situation such as a Bay Blades training room, students might not see this as an activity they will ever do. So they might not link the image to their own ideal self L2.

With regards to the different speeds at which the students created rooms. We are curious as to effect of learners general visualization ability on the success of this kind of activity, and

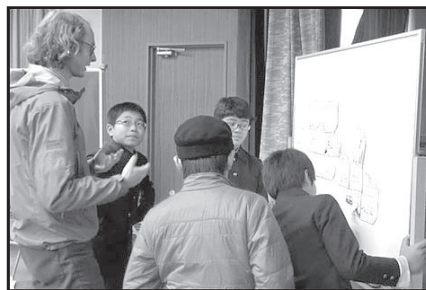


Figure 14. The Scene of Discussion

further more on their ability to generate and use images of their future self as a tool to motivate their learning.

A further progression of this activity could be the addition of another stage at the end. One where learners navigate the co-created space with the figures of self, in a more structured way similar to a table top role playing game. This addition of narrative persona and goals seems to have the potential to stimulate learners to imagine richer more memorable language use situations?

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