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<td>Author(s)</td>
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<td>Citation</td>
<td>長崎大学総合環境研究 6(2), p.71-76; 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>2004-06-01</td>
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<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/5431">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/5431</a></td>
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Introducing Debate and Internet Research in English Communication Classes

William Pittman

Abstract

For the purpose of giving students practical linguistic, cultural, and intellectual experience with English, this paper presents a structure (in 3 or 4 lessons) for introducing debate and internet research to university level students. Teachers are introduced to the basics of debate, gathering information, sharing and countering opinions, and speaking in public. They also learn some specifics of debate, like how to create a Main Idea and how to find Support for the Main Idea. And they are introduced to techniques whereby students can efficiently gather and organize information from the internet to serve the purpose of their debate position. The first internet research lesson is presented in the classroom and is intended to prepare students for the enormous volume of information on the internet and to give them strategies to more readily identify what information is useful to them, and, more importantly, what is not useful to them. The second lesson is conducted in the computer lab and gives the students the chance to skim/surf the web, to find websites and articles that suit their research, that help them create a Main Idea and to find useful Supports for their Main Idea, and also help them save information so they can retrieve it easily. The third lesson occurs again in the classroom with the teacher assisting students in organizing their research, working out a Main Idea, identifying Supports from their research, and beginning to prepare their debate presentations. Finally it is stressed that internet research and debate are processes that must be repeated in order to solidify the students' understanding and confidence. Because it is necessary for Japanese university students to have competence beyond basic conversation, repeating the processes of internet research and debate is an important way to familiarize them with significant elements of English language cultures.

1. Introduction

The most important point to make at the beginning of this introduction to internet research in Japanese Universities English Communications classes is that the research presented here exists in connection with a larger process of individual students gathering information, informing their opinions, writing about those opinions and expressing them in a (formal or informal) debate. That is, internet research is part of a process whereby Japanese students can encounter and utilize English in its everyday uses in reading, writing and speaking. Both university administrations and university students in Japan are looking for ways that they (the students) can practically apply the base of knowledge that they (the students) have after several years of studying English. They are looking to use their second language communicatively and not simply as a vehicle to pass examinations and matriculate at university. They are looking for their university English classes to provoke them to think in and speak English in ways they have never been expected to before. The internet can be a powerful tool for students in Japanese universities to move to the next level of functionality in English. There are several reasons for the power that the internet contains, and they relate both to the multiplicity of linguistic applications (as mentioned above, for reading, writing and speaking) as well as to the extraordinary volume of information available to the individual who uses the internet. Perhaps most importantly, “Skills needed to use the Internet for language learning will be similar to those needed in other subjects in the curriculum, while Internet resources found in the language classroom will often
be relevant to other subjects” (TI, 6-7). The intention of this introduction is to illuminate the potential that exists on the internet for English language students and to suggest the means to activate that potential in relation to debate.

Preliminary to the writing of this article, I informally surveyed my classes about their previous research-oriented work on the Internet. The great majority, approximately 80%, had researched the Internet in Japanese, and a significant minority, approximately 20%, had researched the Internet in English. This highlighted to me that the students were familiar with the means of obtaining information from the internet, but also that they would need to focus mostly on content if they were to become confident in surfing the web in English. Here is one typical quotation from a student, "it's a little bit difficult to understand using Internet in English. So I often search in Japanese and then quickly make the sentence into English." Here is another quotation that teachers would do well to understand when introducing research in English, "Internet research gives information I don't need." To me this means that students need to learn techniques to sort through the enormous volume of information that the internet puts at their disposal. I also asked my classes if they found internet research in English valuable to them and if they would like to do more research in English. A large majority said yes to both but indicated to me that they would rather not pursue academic subjects, but simply American or popular culture issues. This interest is compatible with the process of debate, so I believe it is beneficial for the ESL instructor in a Japanese University to keep the topics and subject matter light, while allowing the students to assimilate the new processes of research and debate in English class.

2. The Basics of Debate

There are resources for those who would seek other means of introducing the internet to their students, and I will refer to some of those in this paper, but few are as comprehensive in their everyday linguistic applications as research for debate. In its most simplistic form, debate is expressing personal opinions and listening to, and countering, other opinions. Debate occurs at the level of Parliamentary speaking, or when two people discuss what television show they want to watch, or where they wish to go on vacation. It is worthwhile to present this expansive definition to Japanese students because there are two parts to this definition of debate that go against Japanese cultural norms. The first is expressing personal opinions. Japanese culture is a consensus culture and has little to do with individuals (let alone students) expressing their opinions. The other is rejecting or contradicting somebody who has spoken an opinion, because no Japanese person would want to cause shame in another, because this would then bring shame upon themselves. This is the first hurdle to teaching debate to Japanese students. However, there are ways to reduce the stresses involved in having people express and contradict opinions, and these ways play to the strengths of the internet.

The best step to reducing stress, when first presenting the process of debate to Japanese students, is to move slowly in preparation and to choose a topic that will encourage the students to research and express their opinions. I suggest that there be at least 3 or 4 classes devoted to definition of debate, preparing to research, and working on writing and presenting speeches. Also, as my research and experience indicate, young Japanese have a great curiosity about American popular culture. There is plenty of that on the internet, and choosing a topic that allows students to begin their internet research by examining and creating an opinion on something that is of little shameful consequence, and is also easy to research, read and comprehend, is a fine way to introduce debate with less stress. One such topic might be, 'Britney Spears is better than Christina Aguilera.' As insignificant as the topic is, it has all the elements of debate and it is exactly the level of interest and comprehension that most university students are at. (Other topics might be Mickey Mouse is more lovable than Ronald MacDonald, or Star Trek is more entertaining than Star Wars ) Another way to reduce stress is to prepare students for research in English on the internet. This generally occupies two class periods, one outside the computer lab, and one in
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Whenever, whatever the students are researching, I feel it is of fundamental importance, in the process of debate, to remind them repeatedly that the two most important things they should be getting from their research are a Main Idea, and Supports for the Main Idea. These definitions take up about 15 minutes of the first preparation period. These are basics that simply have to be understood the students need to agree on what they are debating (the Main Idea), and each debater must have reasons (Supports) for their opinion. As opposed to the Topic, which helps guide the students in their research, the Main Idea is what the student seeks to convince others of in his/her debate. This can be simply stated, for example, "I believe that Britney Spears is a better pop singer than Christina Aguilera." This is a perfectly acceptable Main Idea for such a debate topic and it leads to two consequences, the first is that the debate partner must also have a similar, contrary Main Idea, such as, "I believe that Christina Aguilera is a better pop singer than Britney Spears." If the debate partner is arguing, "I believe that Christina Aguilera is a better dresser than Britney Spears," then they are debating two different things, and this is not acceptable.

Also with such a Main Idea (better pop singer), the Supports that the students offer will have to be in the realm of pop singing, and not in commercial endorsements or fashion. With the first debate, Britney v. Christina, there is very little beyond one's personal music and fashion preferences to defend one's opinion, but, as mentioned above, there are statistics that can be identified in favor of one or another position. These statistics are the Supports that alter what would otherwise be the students' opinions into debate positions. Once the students are given weightier topics to debate, the students must be able to support their opinions with more than just their personal preferences. At that point, they must find information, statistics, facts, etc. from outside their own experiences that support their argument. Even as I introduce internet research, I mention to students that books, newspapers and magazines can be more directly effective for providing support information, if not as convenient.

3. In Classroom

3.1. 1st Lesson: Introducing Internet Research in Class

Once the topic has been decided on and we have talked about the Main Idea and Support, the next step is to prepare the students for the enormous volume of information they will encounter when they begin their research. First and foremost, students will have to understand that there are many ways to write their phrases when they begin searching. With a Main Idea like Britney is a better pop singer than Christina, the students will find that different wording will retrieve different information. I find it worthwhile to spend 20-30 minutes in class brainstorming ideas in relation to the topic. With brainstorming, the students call out a word or words that they think of in relation to the topic. All ideas are acceptable and are written down. Once the list is complete, the ideas can be organized under headings, such as awards, numbers of albums sold, and tours. With this clustered brainstorm list, the students can approach their research from a wider angle and find more pertinent websites for their Main Ideas and Supports.

Further, in terms of searching, Kirsten Lincoln has published a helpful article on Teaching Search Engines at the Internet TESL Journal website. Among her suggestions is one that I find useful, and that is for the teacher to prepare a search and photocopy the results (the hit list) to distribute in class before the students actually go to the computer lab. If students can be made familiar with skimming techniques to get a sense of the descriptions of each website as listed on the hit list, they will be more confident when they get to the computers themselves.

Spending time (the last 30 minutes of the preparation class) examining the form and content of the hit lists is a good way for students to gain confidence. For example, understanding URLs will help students to know what type of website they are looking at - .com means it is a commercial site, .org means it is a non-profit site, .edu means it is a school or university site, .gov means it is a governmental site. Knowing
what these mean, the students will have a clearer understanding of what information the websites contain. In these ways the students can have better informed expectations about what a search for a popular culture topic is going to produce, and how to find useful information.

3.2. 2nd Lesson: In the Computer Lab

Next, it is time for conducting the second lesson in the computer lab. The students should sign on and go to one of the English hosting sites. In Japan, the home pages are oriented toward Japanese language, for example, www.yahoo.com.ne.jp. This should be reduced to www.yahoo.com. It may seem odd to have to say it, but the students must do all research in English. As noted above, because students do not feel comfortable with English, they research in Japanese and then translate. While there may be times, as with more complex debate issues, when this is necessary, it is not a moving forward in the linguistic challenge to think in English, to encounter the language on its own terms and process the information directly, rather than indirectly through translation. Still, as noted above, the volume of information about American pop figures on the internet is overwhelming. For this reason, sorting and searching exercises are very helpful to get the students to learn how to discern between extraneous and worthwhile information. One such useful exercise is outlined in The Internet, from the Oxford Research Books for Teachers series, p.26-29. The students are given a list of questions which all begin "At which sites are you most likely to find:" and then there are a number of things to research and identify, pictures of, sound files of songs, price of CDs, upcoming concerts, etc., all of which can be used to research Britney or Christina. These questions are an excellent way for the students to recognize that they must organize their thinking, before they begin their research, to get the most out of the research that they do.

If the students are having a difficult time researching, it is ok to have them decide whether they prefer to take the 'pro' or 'con' position. Conceptualizing the 'pro' and 'con' positions is not easy for students who have little experience in formulating and expressing opinions at all. Other ways of defining 'pro' are 'yes,' 'agree,' and 'for the argument.' Other ways of defining 'con' are 'no,' 'disagree,' and 'against the argument.' Once they have decided which position to take then they can focus their research on either Britney or Christina. However, if the students are comfortable researching both, that should be encouraged because, when debating, it is worthwhile to have as much information as possible. There is really no such thing as having too much information in a debate.

When the students come across a website that contains pertinent information, they need to record that somehow. I have in the past suggested that they print out one page and keep the collected pages in a file. The page will always have the URL on it, so the student can go back if they need to. This method, however, has drawbacks. It is not always easy to simply print one page of a website. If many students in a class are printing, they will create a mass of paper to sort through and much time and paper will be wasted. And there are times when printing is simply not an option. For these reasons, I have found it wiser to guide the students in the use of bookmarking, or filing Favorites. This allows the students to maintain a personal listing of the websites they have visited and have found, or may find, useful. Students can also keep these bookmarks or favorites organized under a variety of headings rather than in one long list that will get harder to recognize the contents of the longer it gets. There is an exercise in The Internet (p. 32-33) which helps the students become familiar with this process of bookmarking. This should also be done in the class in the computer lab. I tell my students at the end of the class to print out all their material on their own time and bring it to the next class, for organization and writing.

Because class time in the computer lab is limited, saving and organizing good information and moving on in search of more information is the best way to maximize the time. I tell my students they can read for more comprehension later. In reading, this is called skimming. On the internet, this is classic 'surfing the web,' and it is a skill that students can use later when they are researching issues of greater
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consequence and importance. Now they are simply learning to recognize the difference between what is helpful to them in accumulating information and what is extraneous, of which there is much on the internet.

Because of the varying levels that the students are at, and because of the plethora of websites devoted to young, sexy, American pop singers, this first attempt at internet research will take up the entire class (average classes being 90 minutes). As the teacher, I constantly circle the room, asking what students have bookmarked, what they are looking at now, and any questions that they might have. The greatest problem the students have is fitting the information they gather into their argument. But with a topic like Britney v. Christina, this problem becomes smaller. And by dealing with this level of research, the students are preparing themselves for researching more difficult issues, such as topics which can be researched and debated later in the term – the Japanese way of life is better than the American way of life, Japanese gun control laws are more successful than American gun control laws, Japanese Self-Defense Forces should not be sent to fight American wars. The best thing that students can do is gather up 10–15 websites in their bookmarking, reading it on their own time and then bringing the printed information to the next class.

3.3. 3rd Lesson: Organizing Research

After the lesson in the computer lab, students should have enough information to create their own Main Idea. Assisting in this is the object of the first part of the third lesson. Back in the classroom, after one lesson of pre-lab preparation and one lesson of computer research, I have the students working together with their debate partners (groups of two, four, or eight, depending on the topic). I ask them to bring out all their research information, and to go through it, attempting to formulate a Main Idea. (Please note again that the Topic and the Main Idea are different. The topic is Britney Spears is better than Christian Aguilera. The Main Idea that the students will argue is Britney Spears is a better pop singer than Christina Aguilera. The Topic focuses the students’ research, the Main Idea is the focus of the students’ argument.) This has proven to be a challenge because students often cannot comprehend what they are reading. The pop culture topics are helpful in that they do not tend to be too philosophically demanding. When the content of their research is not intimidating, students should be able to produce Main Idea statements that are easy to understand and Support. And hopefully this practice will make more complicated topics easier to research.

Finding Supports for the Main Idea is the second part of the second lesson. Once the Main Idea is stated, the students go through their research again, looking for statistics, quotations, and facts that help to prove their positions. Here again, differentiating between the ideas of ‘Pro’ and ‘Con’ can be helpful. I ask the students to recognize whether they are Pro or Con, and then assist them in going through their research and finding ideas, facts, and figures that are either Pro or Con in relation to the Topic. It is the students’ responsibility to weave such Pro or Con information into Supports for their Main Idea. But the single most important thing about Supports is that they must be attributed to a source outside of the students’ opinion. The easiest way to do this is to identify the website name, for example, "According to the Britney Spears Fan Club website, Britney has won four Grammy's for pop singing, two for her second album, and two for her third album." The two important elements of this Support are, where it came from, and what the facts are in relation to Britney’s pop singing. All supports should be organized in such a way as to inform the audience that these are not personal opinions, but verifiable facts. Again, this runs counter to what Japanese students are used to; they are used to being told what the facts are and then remembering them for future tests. Gathering information to be used to express an opinion is unfamiliar to them. That is why starting with pop culture topics is helpful.

Once the Main Idea is stated and several supports are found to advance the argument, the student needs some guidance as to the organization of writing a speech, and the performance required to make a speech. This depends on the time available to the teacher; the less time available, the less confident the students will be in writing and presenting.
However this article is not intended to inform teachers how to get students to write and make speeches. I am noting this issue because, when it comes to debate, all steps of the process require attention to help the students organize and express their opinions. Japanese university students, in general, are so lacking in confidence with English and so unaccustomed to standing in front of their peers, expressing and contradicting opinions, that it can be almost painful to watch them go through it. However, there is hope in the recollection that debate is a process that can, and should, be repeated. Once the first round of research, organization, writing, and presentation has occurred, I always go through it again. And, depending on the level of the class, I make the topics slightly more challenging each time.

4. Conclusion

To conclude this Introduction to Internet Research, I would like to reiterate that the need for Japanese students to become increasingly functional, communicative, with their English is apparent to everybody in Japan. Japanese society is a leader in technological, financial, environmental, and diplomatic institutions around the world. In order to solidify the authority that Japanese society has these days, the Japanese university graduates of the near future must be literate not only in English for test-taking, but in many of the cultural aspects of Western society that are imbued in the study of the language, for example, gathering and organizing personal opinions based on external information, learning to express informed opinions and to attribute where they came from, hearing others express counter opinions, and being engaged in discussions that respectfully, constructively, move all involved in the discussion forward in knowledge. The study and practice of debate offers these cultural norms to Japanese students, but no aspect of English study can have as forceful an impact as the internet, which can in a matter of hours transform a novice on a topic into a well-informed, conversationally capable individual. Presenting a process of research with the intention of debating, and repeating the process throughout the term allows the ESL instructor in a Japanese university to teach the students where to get information, how to gather and organize it, how to present it to others confidently, and, most importantly, how to continue to do so once the class is over.

5. Works Cited
