

Electronic Dictionaries in the Classroom!? Bah, Humbug!

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The concept of high-tech is not just for rocket scientists anymore. It is trickling down to everyday usage, and serving a useful purpose for humanity. Our idea for teaching English in Japan is so simple that it takes only a few minutes to learn, even for the most techno-phobic. It's not price-prohibitive--the teacher does NOT have to invest in a computer, nor waste time and energy toting it all over creation. How many hours do students spend poring through their dictionaries, doing their homework? How much classtime is wasted on the flip-flip-flip of dictionary pages? This idea is a great time-saver for them, too. The psychological stress of not remembering 'The Word' that you need is lowered; the psychological boost of playing with a toy that not many other people possess enhances the attraction for this valuable teaching tool.

The electronic dictionary (a.k.a. hand-held translator, pocket translator, personal electronic dictionary) is an effective and interesting teaching tool that captures students' interest and does much more than just translate. Idioms, antonyms, synonyms, irregular verbs, kanji, katakana, and hiragana can be used interchangeably.

Students and Teachers of English

Low-ability students can be shown how to use the dictionary, with little technical direction. The dictionary can enable anyone to have an immediate, precise conversation, instead of general usage. Using the dictionary removes the responsibility of the student or the teacher not knowing a word; the inanimate third object knows the word. Beginners gain a feeling of control over their learning environment and learning process. Even the most negative students lose their hatred of "English police" by having a tool that simplifies and speeds up the learning process. The institutionalized dislike of English study is ameliorated through the use of this gadget, because of the novelty and convenience. It's fast and easy.

Adult students can communicate like adults, not children. Topics ranging from the concrete to the abstract can be facilitated using the electronic dictionary. For adults who do not have to use English everyday (and who forget critical or technical terms), during the intermittent visits of foreign English-speaking visitors, this pocket translator is a life-saver. It reduces the stress level of translation all around, either in review before the visitors come, or as a supplementary language source during the visit. Most electronic dictionaries have additional "cards" with technical vocabulary. Specialized students can purchase these for their technical needs.

High ability students can use the pocket translator to decrease "teacher talk," the artificially-constructed language used frequently in a language classroom. The teacher uses the appropriate English word, while punching the translation into the electronic dictionary. A student reads the Japanese word aloud to the class from the kanji on the screen, while the teacher writes the correctly-spelled English word (and related words) on the board. For example, "reciprocal" was used in class recently. While the students were understanding the Japanese equivalent, the teacher noted "reciprocal," "reciprocity," and "reciprocate" on the vocabulary paper on the table. This process took about 2 minutes in a small group of 4 students.

In a multi-level class, the hand-held translator helps the slower learners join the faster learners.

While lower-level ability students are working on basic English, higher-level students can be exploring idioms using a root word. For example, lower-level students may be working on a worksheet about parts of the body, and higher-level students can use the electronic dictionary to discover idioms using "head," "foot," and other words. Best of all, not everyone has to have their own machine. These can be shared.

Students of Japanese

For students of Japanese, the dictionary gives kanji stroke order and kanji combinations. It shows how to pronounce kanji in different forms, as well as the pronunciation of kanji combinations. The machine provides a very simple and easy way to review and revise Japanese language, both written and spoken.

One of the authors, who had been in Japan only a couple of weeks, was very confused and upset about how to get home to her new apartment from the subway station. She typed "LOST" into her machine, hit translate, and pointed to the dictionary word and herself. She was able to get help immediately from the stationmaster. She got home with little difficulty and smiles all around.

An older couple, both retired teachers, were visiting Japan from the U.S. While visiting a shrine in Kyoto, they were accosted by a group of somewhat confused high-school students on an outing with their English teacher. The students had an assignment to ask and receive answers in English about religion. This abstract topic was difficult, to say the least, for the students. With the use of the electronic dictionary, the students were able to communicate with the older couple. Everyone involved took away a unique memory of honest communication, a valuable learning experience and good will.

Deciding Which to Purchase

The next obvious concern is which electronic dictionary to purchase. There are many different ones on the market. The "credit card" size ones do not have a large enough memory to be useful. At least 20 megabytes are necessary. If there are too many buttons in a small space, the machine becomes tedious to use. The screen should be large enough so the user can easily read it. The price ranges from [[yen]]10,000 to [[yen]]50,000. Most electronic dictionaries also feature items such as a calendar/appointment book, a calculator, or an alarm watch. An honest evaluation of the user's needs should be considered. Many electronic dictionaries can be purchased with both an English and a Japanese manual.

Conclusion

This machine removes much of the distance between English and Japanese speakers. The fear of inadequacy in language usage is removed to an inanimate object and the panic of "being-on-the-spot" is ameliorated. The user gets an immediate feeling of control over his/her environment, and the other party/ies in the conversation have immediate comprehension; hence providing general harmony and well-being.

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