Languages, Cultures and Virtual Communities
Les Langues, les Cultures et les Communautés Virtuelles

Activating learning using multilingual CALL lexical resources: A regional culture-oriented multilingual visual dictionary project

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Abstract

This presentation reports on-going work on a Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) funded Multilingual Visual Dictionary (MLVD) CALL Project. The project involves the compilation of a visual dictionary with entries presented in three languages: Japanese, English, and Chinese (mainland and Taiwanese). All the materials are recorded in the three languages. Visuals include still photographs, maps, and short videos. The dictionary is organized by themes, and the content focuses on Japanese and Okinawan cultural items. This report briefly explains the rational for the project, its technical development, the design of the dictionary, the presentation and organization of entries, and examples of practice activities.

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1. Introduction

This presentation reports on-going work on a Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) funded Multilingual Visual Dictionary (MLVD) CALL Project. The project involves the compilation of an audio visual dictionary with entries in three languages: Japanese, English, and Chinese (mainland and Taiwanese). Visuals include still photographs and short videos. All the materials are recorded in three languages: Japanese, English, and Chinese (mainland and Taiwanese). Visuals include still photographs and short videos. All the materials are
recorded in the three languages. The project began in 2005 and is now in its third stage.

The project began with a perceived need on the part of teachers and students in the university for language materials which reflect Okinawan and Japanese culture. Such materials would enable Japanese students to talk about their life experiences to people from other cultures, in English or Chinese. They would also provide foreign students at the university with resources for learning and talking about the regional culture in the three languages.

2. Technical development

The project began in 2005 and is now in its third stage. Our 3-person team was initially funded by a one-year grant from the University’s Institute for Regional Studies. We then obtained a Ministry (MEXT) grant for 2006-8, and a further one for 2009-11. During this period we have moved from using Panasonic L3 Stage multimedia system software available in our CALL lab, to a web based platform. This has enabled us to deal more effectively with the requirements of the Chinese writing system, to use more effective graphics, and to use more flexible practice activities. Early developments are described in detail in Higgins (2007) and Higgins et. al. (2007).

Figure 1 shows an early web-based student screen. Learners click for text and sound in the three languages, and can activate the videos. Learners can read and listen to the entries, and then select the example sentences or short conversations. By clicking on the book icon, cultural notes can be read and listened to. The map on the left shows the current stage in the unit being studied.

We have produced easy navigation from the main menu through to the units and the subtopics in each unit.

3. Dictionary design

Our dictionary like other picture dictionaries is arranged around themes or topics. This form of organisation, in which items are interlinked, is a powerful learning tool since it capitalises on how
researchers understand how memory works.

The overall dictionary is envisaged as a visit to Okinawa. Each unit covers a thematic area, and we have chosen themes that will allow us to introduce a range of Okinawan and Japanese cultural items, as well as provide insights into the cultural history and traditions of Okinawa. The following are units we are working on:

- the first and last units are Arriving at Naha Airport and Departing from Naha Airport. We focus on travelling procedures as well as souvenirs and airport facilities.
- the main commercial shopping street in the capital, Naha, (International Street). This allows us to briefly cover the history of the commercial centre of the city, as well as Okinawan specialties and crafts, street life, and annual events.
- the historic pottery area of Tsuboya. We examine the pottery making process, see a potter at work, and take a walk along the main street with its pottery workshops, kilns and shops.
- the main food and clothing market areas of Naha. We include Okinawan produce and dishes, ethnic restaurants, and souvenirs.

4. Dictionary Entries

Each entry is introduced in its written and spoken form and is accompanied by a visual. In addition we provide an example sentence or short conversation in which the entry is used in a typical way in the context of the topic. Furthermore, we have a cultural note for many items. These notes vary between the three languages, depending on the cross cultural knowledge we assume speakers of those languages have. Learners can opt to see the visual and listen only, or see the written text as well. Figure 2 is the current design of a screen from the Departures unit, showing the entries in the three languages, and the map of the unit on the left. On the right, learners click for the written text or the spoken text in whichever language they are working with.

Where there are a lot of entries, they are subdivided into thematic groups. These are shown on the unit menu as Galleries. Figure 4 below is an example from the Tsuboya unit. Within the galleries, the visuals are in no particular order. This makes adding further entries and visuals to the database simple.
In producing each entry and example sentence, we have paid attention to the distinctive features of words and their syntactic context in the three languages. This means in English for example, countable nouns are usually introduced in the indefinite form using the indefinite article. Uncountables have zero article. In the example sentences we include plural and definite forms. In Japanese we are careful to maintain the argument structure by indicating the particles with the verbs (A ga B to verb).

5. Unit design

The dictionary entries in the units of the MLVD are organized in a way that reflects the context in which we use the words in real life. In “Departing from Naha Airport”, for example, subsets of entries are organized according to the chronological processes of checking in and boarding, while others focus on buying typical Okinawan souvenirs (divided into different categories: food, drink, glassware, pottery, shell work, etc.) before boarding. Figure 3 shows the sequence of scenes in the departure process.

Figure 3. Sequence of scenes in the departure process (MLVD: Departing from Naha airport)

In the “Tsuboya Pottery District” unit, the sub themes include the history of the area, the pottery making process, interviews with potters and architects, and virtual tours as a tour guide. Each of these has a different format, and the entries are used in typical contexts. Several of the sub themes depart from the basic format of providing entries and sample sentence contexts. Instead they use entries embedded within short texts (history sections) or conversations (interviews).

In this unit we subdivide the entries into thematic groups or Galleries. Figure 4 is an example of a Tsuboya Gallery. By clicking the visual, learners access the basic screen for that entry, as shown in Figure 5. By clicking the example box, they can see and hear an example of the entry in a conversational context.
6. Practice activities

Funding has limited the variety of the on-line practice activities. However, as we have always envisioned the dictionary as a classroom resource as well as a means of independent learning, and as a set of lexical resources to be used in integrated language practice, we have supplemented basic on-line word and phrase-based practice with individual, group and pair work production activities for the classroom.

Basic practice involves repetition and memorization of the entries. The next stage is recalling and recognizing them among groups of words, groups of visuals, or from spoken forms only. We then place
the entries in their sentence contexts with short dictation exercises.

The entries are then placed in a communication context. For instance, learners are asked to use them in short conversations, act as a tour guide, listen to and create short interviews, and make short speeches. We expect teachers to be able to use the materials flexibly in the context of their own class work and to design their own practice activities. The author, for example, runs a course which includes describing and explaining Okinawan culture using the medium of the guided tour. One of our fieldwork projects is to visit Tsuboya, collect photos and information, and act as tour guides. The MLVD materials can act as a resource for fieldwork preparation, and as post-fieldwork prompts. We also plan to integrate students’ ideas, photos and descriptions into the project data base. Figure 6 presents examples of open-ended speaking tasks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open-ended speaking tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) You are flying to Osaka. You arrive at the airport. Explain the procedures you need to take before you can get to the departure lounge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) You visit the duty free section of the airport to buy souvenirs for your family. Tell us what you buy for your relatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Choose three interesting places or objects on Yachimun Dori (Pottery Street) and guide a visitor to see them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Examples of open-ended speaking tasks

7. Summary

We believe that our multi-lingual multi-media approach to vocabulary acquisition is motivating and appropriate for a variety of language learners with varied goals. We foresee this project being extended by not only the authors, but by the users themselves, as they suggest themes and incorporate the lexical items that interest them and that they need for talking about their culture or “adopted” culture.

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References
