

The introduction of iPads at a Japanese university EFL program

Joachim Castellano

Abstract

There has been increasing interest in using tablet computers, particularly the Apple iPad, as a language learning tool. This paper describes a case study on the introduction of iPads into a Japanese university EFL environment from the perspective of university lecturers. Potential opportunities offered by tablets across the learning environment, which includes a self-access center, is discussed. It will describe support iPads required and then report on how teachers and learning advisors used an iPad in their practice. In addition, its impact on the institution's existing technology infrastructure will be examined.

INTRODUCTION

This poster presents a case study in which tablet technology was being considered for widespread use in the English Language Institute (ELI) of Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). The university's Research Institute of Language Studies (RILS) funded two Apple iPads (2nd generation), and a study commenced in order to evaluate their potential. During one semester the iPads were distributed to ELI lecturers, who work as teachers or learning advisors at the ELI's self-access center. The purpose of the study was to determine how useful an iPad might be to these lecturers' educational practice. Results presented by the poster were used by the administration to fund the additional purchase of 15 iPads. It also started and informed additional studies on iPads at the university. KUIS is

currently considering the widespread adoption of tablet computers across its classrooms.

Background

While tablet technology is quite new to language learning, it is just the latest in a series of tools to offer potential benefits to CALL. Beatty (2010) described a history of technologies from VCRs, desktop computers, to CD-ROMs that have risen and fallen out of favor. However, tablets have taken the education market by storm, especially the Apple iPad. In fact, at the end of the June 2012 quarter the iPad alone outsold all PCs sales in American K-12 schools (Hughes, 2012). Before jumping on the bandwagon and purchasing hundreds of iPads at KUIS, it was thought prudent to launch studies about its appropriateness here. This was the first study of tablet computing in the ELI at KUIS.

The iPad was released in Japan on May 28, 2010. Although Apple did not invent the tablet computer, the iPad was the first to be commercially successful, as evidenced by one million units sold in less than one month (Apple, 2010). It also received critical acclaim for respected technology journalist Walt Mossberg, “I believe this beautiful new touch-screen device from Apple has the potential to change portable computing profoundly, and to challenge the primacy of the laptop” (2010).

In order to gauge the interest of iPads in higher education in Japan, it might be useful to track the number of presentations and workshops concerning the tablet. The JALT CALL Conference, an annual gathering of foreign university lecturers in Japan who have a special interest in language learning with technology, reflects the budding interest in the iPad. According to the JALT CALL presentation

abstracts, there were four iPad-specific sessions last year (2011) and seven this year (2012). There was no mention of competing tablets such as the Samsung Galaxy. This tally also excludes dedicated e-readers such as the Amazon Kindle.

Published research on language learning with tablets was few at the time of the study. Kelly & Shrape (2010) interested the author because it served as a replicable study. After acquiring iPads they quickly tested it in their learning environment from a variety of perspectives. Here, six staff members of Curtin University in Australia used an iPad over 100 days and recorded their experiences. Noteworthy was the iPad's speed compared with a laptop. They also noticed some problems including inconsistent input gestures, and some incompatibility with the Blackboard LMS. However, data were gathered mostly from IT staff members in a non-classroom context.

There are even fewer studies looking at tablets in Japanese higher education. Angel (2011) reported anecdotally on using one iPad as a teaching tool while working at four universities in Kobe. Sekiguchi (2011) looked at how iPads affect student learning outcomes and attitudes. Lavin (2011) reported on iPad use in small group settings and the added flexibility it provided to class activities. It was thought that the present study could glean more information from the front lines of teaching and advising practice and guide researchers to future areas of study.

Context

The case study took place at the EFL program managed by the ELI at KUIS in Chiba, Japan. The learning environment includes traditional classes taught by native speakers of English as well as a robust self-access center called the SALC. Teachers and learning advisors, who aim to develop learners' autonomy,

participated in the project.

METHODOLOGY

In order to determine the appropriateness of the iPad at KUIS, an online survey was administered to all participants. Data were coded and sought to answer the following three questions:

1. What types of language learning activities was the iPad used for?
2. Were there any benefits or drawbacks while using the iPad at KUIS?
3. What future uses, if any, of iPads do you see in language learning?

Participants

15 KUIS lecturers, 12 teachers and three learning advisors, participated in the study. The total number of participants represented about 25% of the total EFL lecturers at the university. A majority of the participants described themselves as average users of technology, as opposed to early adopters.

Research procedure

The participants were loaned an iPad for a two-week period over one 15-week semester. During that time they were free to use the iPad as they wished in their teaching and advising practice. Also, the participants could ask the researcher for technical support as needed. An online survey was administered that asked participants to report and evaluate the iPad after the two week trial. Data were coded and grouped into appropriate categories and then analyzed for patterns.

RESULTS

Research question 1: What types of language learning activities was the iPad used for?

The iPad was used mainly for passive activities. The dominant category of use was media consumption. This included activities such as browsing the Internet; viewing documents, maps, videos, e-books, photos; and listening to podcasts. Some productive instances occurred including creating presentations, movies and music. Other uses included Skype, classroom management, and testing specific language learning apps.

It is important to note that a little over half of the participants (8) reported that they did not use the iPad in actual practice with students. These participants used the iPads minimally during their office hours or at home. Some participants explained that they did not use iPads because of a lack of time (2) or Wi-Fi access at KUIS (3).

Research question 2: Were there any benefits or drawbacks while using the iPad at KUIS?

Several benefits to the iPads were mentioned. The iPad's size was cited as a plus, as it is conducive for sharing content and group work (4). Others mentioned that it was a rich media source (3). Two participants mentioned that it was easy to use. Mobile lesson planning, professional development, autonomous learning potential, and student excitement were each cited as positives. Three participants found no benefits at all.

Two common drawbacks were found: lack of Wi-Fi connection and unfamiliarity with the iPad's hardware and software. Since KUIS lacks a widespread Wi-Fi

network, some teachers taught in classrooms without Wi-Fi. These teachers found the iPad's functionality severely limited without Wi-Fi (8). Seven participants mentioned that since the iPads were brand new, they had difficulty with basic hardware issues such as charging and typing. Most found navigating new, unfamiliar apps as the primary issue. Other drawbacks (mentioned once each) included: useful apps were hard to find, iPhone was more useful, and it proved to be a distraction in class.

Research question 3: What future uses, if any, of iPads do you see in language learning?

13 out of 15 participants could envision a future use of the iPad at KUIS. Most participants (9) thought that the iPad would be useful as a media hub. The second most popular category included uses for classroom tasks such as research, writing, and creating presentations. Others mentioned teacher-centric uses such as lesson planning and reading research articles. Less popular uses included media production, such as video and audio editing, and using specific language learning apps.

DISCUSSION

Since the iPads were given to participants without much guidance, it is not surprising that only half of the lecturers could actually use it in their practice. However, for those that could use it, they felt that the iPad was useful in small group activities such as media viewing or creating presentations. This benefit might be suitable for the ELI curriculum that sets up many small group tasks. However, lack of Wi-Fi access severely limited the functionality of the iPad, which indicates that KUIS's technological infrastructure is not currently equipped for mobile

technology. Also, the newness of the tablet and its software was seen as a drawback, which is a natural consequence of any new technology.

In conclusion, in order for tablet computers to be well understood and its benefits realized, educators require examples of best practices and technical support, as called for in Ostashewski & Reid (2010). Next steps in tablet studies at KUIS require adequate Wi-Fi access and enough units to be given to a class of students for evaluation. Future studies should focus on student feedback and the impact of tablets on learning opportunities and outcomes.

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