

# Autonomous language learning with technology

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*Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) wants English language education to be more communicative. Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) need to adapt their instructional practices to meet this goal; however, they may not feel confident enough to teach speaking themselves. Using technology, JTEs have the ability to interact with native speakers around the world when it’s convenient for them. Three of the available tools are discussed in this article with specifics on how to use them for autonomous language learning and finding partners to practice speaking English. Taking advantage of these tools will build JTEs’ confidence and English abilities, and will allow them to better instruct students communicatively.*

## Introduction

A change in the mandates for the improvement of English language education in Japan is placing more emphasis on students becoming communicative. The Japanese Ministry for Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology’s (MEXT) Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency’s report emphasizes that, “English and other foreign languages are an important means to greatly expand opportunities for our children who will live in the global society, and an important element in improving Japan’s international competitiveness” (2011b, p. 2). Further, MEXT’s Commission admits that “the level of English-language skill has a great impact on one’s future including employment and career advancement” (2011b, p. 2). To better prepare Japanese students for the future, MEXT has established new Courses of Study **329**

for the improvement of students' academic abilities which provide a variety of recommended changes to English language teaching methods, including the addition of English as a required subject in fifth and sixth grades in 2011 (MEXT, 2011b). One of their more specific goals is to center the teaching of English on listening and speaking at the elementary level to "foster a positive attitude toward communication" (MEXT, 2011a, p. 1). MEXT recognizes that in order to meet this goal, "classes must be shifted from lecture style toward student-centered language activities by employing such educational forms as speeches, presentations, debates and discussions" (MEXT, 2011b, p. 3) at age-appropriate levels, and even to have English classes conducted in English in high schools (2011c). These reforms, while encouraging for the future of English language education in Japan, place a great burden on teachers to be proficient in English to a degree necessary to teach it confidently.

Because of these revisions, one of the goals of MEXT in the coming years will be "promoting systematically designed training for teachers and the training will be completed by the end of fiscal year 2010" (2008). A 2010 Benesse Corporation-sponsored survey of over 2,300 elementary school teachers showed that 68% of those surveyed lacked confidence in their personal English level and their ability to teach English (as cited in Zifcak, 2011). MEXT realizes that "reinforcement of English skills and instructional abilities of English teachers is extremely important for the improvement of students' proficiency in English" (2011b, p. 9). Also, to prepare English teachers to meet the needs of the students and to make them comfortable in their own English communication abilities, "intensive training of English teachers is needed to improve their qualifications and performance" (MEXT, 2011b, p. 9). Unfortunately, Tahira (2012) argues that "MEXT's commitment to the new policies is in doubt as evidenced by a lack of meaningful support for teachers" (p. 3). Therefore this paper provides resources for teachers to improve their confidence in their English language abilities on their own using technology. While it is not an all-encompassing guide to self-improvement of one's English skills, the tools described below will help language learners take the first steps in autonomous language learning.

## Classrooms of the future

Thanks to the interconnectivity of the global community, opportunities to practice a foreign language have blossomed. Technology allows instant and free contact between people in countries around the globe. Japanese students of English used to have to rely on posters, books and videos to get a glimpse of what life was really like abroad; now an English teacher in Japan can connect their students with English-speaking students of Japanese via online collaborative activities to make their lessons more engaging. With some coordination between teachers, an English class in Japan can connect with a classroom in another country via *Skype* so that students can see life in that country firsthand and practice speaking with native speakers. Thanks to technology, foreign cultures and new international friends are now only a mouse-click away.

Now that the goals of English education in Japan are shifting, Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) find themselves having to rethink their approach to classroom instruction. However, the fact that many JTEs have not had opportunities to practice speaking English regularly has resulted in most of them having difficulty speaking English, much less teaching conversation in the classroom. Teachers have even "expressed concern about their ability to communicate with ALTs [Assistant Language Teachers]" (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011, p. 21). In order for teachers to improve their speaking skills, they need to find new ways to

brush up on their English conversation skills. Thankfully, there are several tools available to enable them to practice speaking English, such as *The Mixxer*, *Livemocha*, *Skype*, and virtual worlds. Practice is the key to fluency in any language, and technology allows people to practice speaking with native speakers of other languages more easily than ever before.

Because teachers are extremely busy and it takes time to meet a person, develop a relationship and practice speaking English, it is not practical for **JTEs** to try to find time in their busy schedules to seek out speaking partners in their local communities. They can, however, use technology to more expediently find people to practice English with whenever it is convenient for them. Considering teachers' busy schedules, making even a little time to practice English will be beneficial; Wu and Marek (2010) proved that "even a relatively small amount of authentic interaction in the target language made students more comfortable with information they had already learned, changed their perception of how well they were able to apply their skills, and inspired them to make global, cross-cultural connections" (p. 110). So regular, short periods of English practice by **JTEs** will boost their confidence in their English skills and their ability to use English in the classroom.

## Tools for self-improvement

Technology allows language learners to move beyond their textbooks to use their L2 in a real setting with native or fluent speakers of that language. Wu and Marek (2010) showed that "positive interaction with native speakers [using technology] builds student confidence, leading to the end result of improved ability" (p. 110); so the below tools offer a means of boosting the confidence of teachers which Fennelly and Luxton (2011) state is lacking. There are several ways to leverage technology to help language learners engage with native speakers, and a number of websites which are designed to assist learners in improving their communications skills. Sites like *The Mixxer* (<[www.language-exchanges.org](http://www.language-exchanges.org)>) and *Livemocha.com* provide users an opportunity to write a blog post in their foreign language and to have more proficient speakers correct or comment on the text with suggestions for improvement. These exchanges of language mentoring allow users to make friends with other language learners and these friendships can lead from asynchronous text-based exchanges to synchronous audio or video-based interactions. In order to more easily explain the program descriptions and functions of the tools below, the perspective of a Japanese-speaking English language learner (**ELL**) will be used.

### *The Mixxer*

One of the better websites which fosters online interaction is *The Mixxer*. This site is "a free educational site for language learners hosted by Dickinson College. *The Mixxer* is designed to connect language learners around the world so that everyone is both student and teacher" (The Mixxer, n.d., n.p.). *The Mixxer* website offers a Japanese version as well as English to make it easier for those who are less confident in using the Internet in English. When creating an account, the user selects which language(s) they speak fluently and which languages they desire to learn or practice. Once the account has been created and the user logs in, they will be taken to the user's Homepage (see Figure 1). The Home page allows users to begin writing a blog post by clicking on the Post a Blog tab. Then other proficient speakers can give feedback on the user's blog post: for example, the **JTE** can write a short text in English and an English speaker can read, correct, and comment on the text. The blog

posting interface is similar to common word processing programs, so it is easy to use. It is through this exchange of comments and suggestions for improvement that a relationship begins between *Mixer* users.

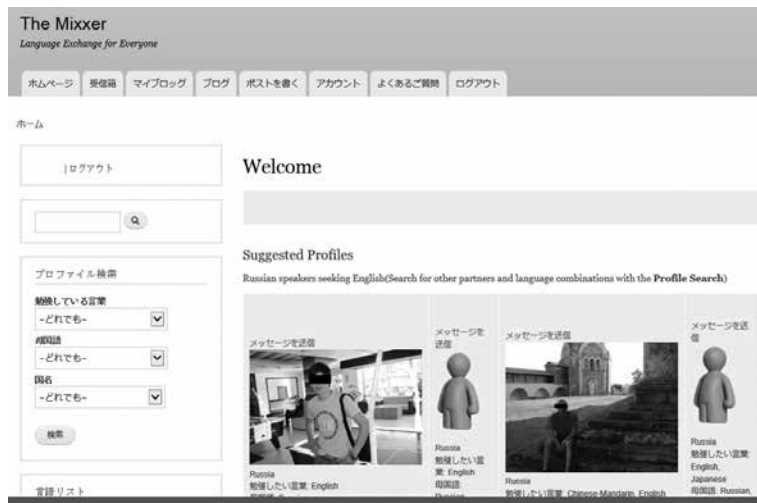


Figure 1. *The Mixer* User's homepage.

*The Mixer's* user Homepage also suggests other *The Mixer* users who are potential language learning partners due to a shared interest in the same languages (usually the recommended partners are native speakers of the language the user stated that they were learning in the account creation process). These suggestions make it easy for an **ELL** to make contact with English speakers who desire to learn or practice Japanese, thus giving them a common interest upon which to build a relationship. For **ELLs** who are not comfortable making direct contact with other language learners they do not know, they can wait for other users to initiate contact with them or simply post a blog entry in English and wait for someone to read and comment on it. Once comments are received to the blog post (this can often take a few days to a week), the **ELL** can correspond with the commenter and begin to form a friendship. Comments are exchanged in a format similar to **SMS** message systems, so there is no need to try to learn a new system for communicating. A final way to use *The Mixer* to meet language practice partners is to read other learners' posts and make comments on them. A **JTE** can search for posts in Japanese and comment on the user's post or make suggestions for improvement. The other user will appreciate the feedback and may continue the conversation and eventually become an online friend.

Figure 2. *The Mixer* Blog Post Page

As the **ELL** makes contacts, exchanges messages and comments, and feels comfortable in their interaction with *Mixer* friends, they have the ability to easily move to audio or video conversations using *Skype*. The user profiles in *The Mixer* provide links to *Skype* accounts so that users can quickly connect via *Skype* and continue their interactions there. Before taking this step, learners should take some time to get to know the other person so that they feel comfortable interacting face to face.

## *Skype*

For those not familiar with *Skype*, it is a fantastic and free tool that allows people to communicate using text, audio, or video via the Internet. It allows **ELLs** to not only practicing speaking, but also to experience and learn the nonverbal communication cues of foreign language speakers as well. It is an amazing resource which, with some planning and coordination, allows learners from around the world to connect with others, anywhere and at any time.

## *Livemocha*

A website which is similar to *The Mixer* is *Livemocha.com*. *Livemocha* also provides an opportunity for learners to receive and give feedback on written posts, and it also offers a Japanese version of the website. *Livemocha* does not provide the direct link to *Skype* that *The Mixer* does, but there is nothing to prohibit *Livemocha* users from connecting via *Skype* on their own once a friendship has developed.

For **ELLs** who are more comfortable with structured language lessons to study English instead of free-flow writing, *Livemocha* offers a series of lessons from basic through intermediate levels. *Livemocha* describes itself as follows:

Membership is completely free. Your membership includes lots of free features: chat, flashcards, messaging, making friends, and more. If you learn best with a structured

language course, we offer both free basic and paid premium options. You can practice over 35 languages for free with our *Basic vocabulary builders* 101, 102, 201 and 202. These courses include Learn, Review, Write, and Speak exercises. (Livemocha, 2013, Help page)

*Livemocha* offers many activities to practice each language skill to help learners develop into fluent speakers of a foreign language, and also suggests language partners on the user's homepage to make it easier to find friends with common interests. The lessons cover various topics and are short enough to be completed in one sitting. As the users progress through the lessons, they can purchase higher-level lessons with points accrued by providing feedback to other users. Figure 3 below shows some of the English courses available to *Livemocha* users. Learners can also return to previous lessons, give comments or feedback to others, and find language study partners from the area on the left side of the screen; personal account actions are available on the right. *Livemocha* provides an excellent language resource for **ELLs** to develop through interaction with structured lessons as well as through feedback from native speakers.



Figure 3. *Livemocha* user Homepage

### Other Language Learning Websites

There are other language-learning websites which profess to provide similar services to *The Mixxer* and *Livemocha*, such as *MyLanguageExchange.com* and *xLingo* (<www.languageexchange.org>). These sites offer very basic options for free but require payment for any real interactivity or functionality. The best advice for exploring sites other than those explained in detail above is to sign up for the free subscription to see what is available and to determine whether or not the site's premium resources are worth the cost.

## Second Life

For **ELLs** who want a more realistic online language practice experience, virtual worlds provide a place to interact with native speakers using an avatar. *Second Life*, one of the most popular virtual worlds, offers great opportunities for foreign language practice. This online community allows users to create an avatar and explore a virtual world, parts of which are similar to the real world. Participating in *Second Life* is free and anyone can create an avatar and explore the site, interacting with other users as desired. A Japanese interface for *Second Life* is available to make it easy to use. Additionally, the *Second Life* website offers many tutorials on a wide variety of topics to help users more easily explore its virtual world.

To begin, visit <secondlife.com> and create an account for free. Some time is required at first to create the account, create the avatar, and learn how to explore the *Second Life* virtual world. New users are automatically directed to a practice area where users learn how to control their avatars to accomplish tasks. However, once the initial steps are complete, exploring *Second Life* and interacting with other avatars is quick and easy. Interesting locations within *Second Life* include Moscow's Red Square, Washington, DC, the Forbidden City in Beijing, and many more. These virtual locations are detailed replicas of the real places and visiting them can be just as fascinating as a real-life tour. Additionally, within *Second Life*, there are areas created for congregation and interacting with other users and those spots are listed as *Chat Hot Spots* under the search function's *Destinations* heading. *Second Life's* multicultural users and virtual locations make it a wonderful opportunity for foreign language learners to meet fluent speakers of their target language.



Figure 4. Avatars chatting in *Second Life*

Many places on *Second Life* are identified as common meeting locations for certain nationalities and users can search through the list of virtual locations to find places to meet other English speakers. Once arriving at such a place, users can find another avatar and begin chatting with them using text or voice chat as seen in Figure 4. Virtual worlds offer a great opportunity for language learners to find partners for conversation practice with

anonymity so there is no fear of losing face or being ashamed of low confidence in speaking English. In *Second Life*, avatars can use both voice and text chat options to practice all four language skills while learning about other cultures.

### Other options

In addition to the aforementioned tools for language practice, ELLs can also take advantage of the thousands of activities, *YouTube* videos, streaming television shows, podcasts, and chat options on the Internet today. Anyone who desires to learn a foreign language has an amazing amount of resources available to them. This article has provided a few of the more interactive options for learners to improve their English conversation skills and bolster their confidence conveniently with the use of technology. While these tools are not a golden ticket to instant fluency, they do provide a means to practice the language at a convenient time and location so that the learner's skills will not atrophy due to a lack of practice.

### Conclusion

MEXT's desire to provide more communicative English language instruction will require JTEs to be prepared to meet this new demand. To do so, they need to feel comfortable with their own English communication ability. Fennelly and Luxton (2011) remind us that students' attitudes toward English suffer when their teachers are not adequately trained (p. 23). While many, if not most JTEs desire to improve their English ability, the demands of their job leave little time for language practice. Technology provides JTEs opportunities for language practice at a convenient time with native speakers around the world through peer mentorship websites such as *The Mixer*, *Livemocha*, and virtual worlds such as *Second Life*. JTEs and language learners alike need to take advantage of these resources and focus on becoming not only comfortably conversant in English, but also fluent so that they have better opportunities to succeed in the interconnected global community of the 21st Century.

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