

One vision for an ideal tech-infused classroom

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Introduction

When I first started brainstorming an ideal tech-infused classroom, I took as my starting point my current teaching context and started thinking of what changes I would make to the physical environment to facilitate language learning and teaching. As I was brainstorming a list of things, I also drew a quick sketch and started thinking about what I would have on each of the four sides of the room, among my other ideas. Then I set that aside and went away for the weekend to the Japan Association for Language Teaching 2015 International Conference and a bit of serendipity happened. One of the presenters told us about a TED talk presented by an architect, *Takaharu Tezuka: The best kindergarten you've ever seen* (Tezuka, 2014). Tezuka describes a kindergarten which is circular, with a central courtyard and the roof as areas for play, exploration and so on. Suddenly, my whole concept of the physical space changed, I no longer wanted to limit my ideal space to a square box. Here, I first describe my current teaching context, and then my ideal space for language learners in that context, including how technology can enrich and extend that space.

Current context

I teach EFL in a private Japanese university with a long history of providing high quality foreign language education. My students come from a variety of majors, not all of them language. Their motivation for studying English ranges from simply needing to pass the English courses to earn required breadth credits on one end to having great interest in English to the extent of wanting to become teachers of English or to live and work in an English-speaking country on the other end. The

great majority of my learners are from 18 to 22 years old. I have only had one student younger than 18 at the university level that I know of, and there are occasionally one or two students in a class who are older than 22. Most students also live in their family homes and commute to school, with approximately an hour each way being quite common. Some may double that commute time, while a small number live near campus because their family home is too far away or for other reasons.

My courses include skills-oriented classes such as oral communication and reading, classes blending content-knowledge with skills such as presentation skills, and content-based courses taught in English. The maximum size of language courses is generally 40 students, though the English Education Center tries to keep class sizes in a range from 24 to 32 students. Students taking required English courses are streamed by major and level, the latter determined by placement test scores, though sometimes there is a mix of achievement levels in one class. There are common course objectives for the required courses of the same title, but instructors are allowed nearly complete freedom with respect to approach and methods. However, each course must have some sort of summative assessment that accounts for at least 25% of the course grade.

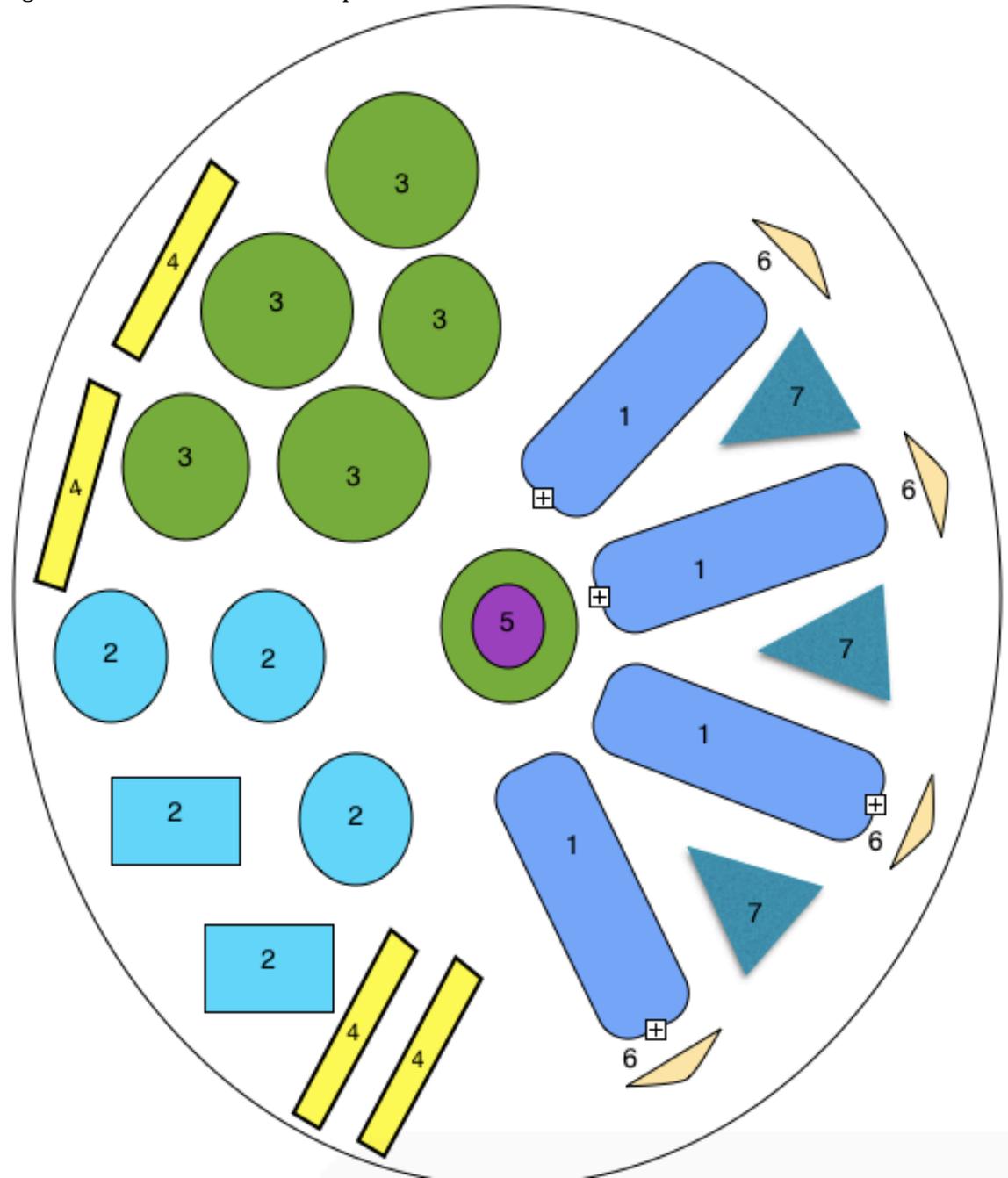
The existing physical spaces reflect the general expectation of administrators and students for teacher-centered instruction, and almost always include a teacher's desk and/or podium at the front of the room, with whiteboards and generally either a screen and projector or monitors for displaying visual images. These images can be from the instructor's own personal computer, from video cassette or DVD

players, and from desktop video projection systems. In large lecture halls and some computer classrooms there are controls and connectors all at the teacher's desk area, but the typical small classroom includes an audio-visual cabinet off to the side, and usually this has the only Internet connection in the classroom, via ethernet. The classrooms are most commonly set up for about 40 students, and will have small moveable student desks and chairs. There is one language lab on campus, but it is simply a listening lab. There are two relatively newer rooms which combine computers for 64 students with listening lab functionality via the computers. These, and most other computer rooms, have rows of desks with Internet-connected computers on them and a small partition rising up behind the desktop screen. These all face the front where the instructor console or desk is, with a computer. Often this means the majority of students are invisible to the instructor at any given time and group work is also inhibited by the physical barriers.

Ideal space

In considering my ideal language teaching and learning space, once physical safety and basic comfort are ensured, it is most important to have an environment that is flexible and easily adaptable to a variety of activities. It should be inviting and inherently interesting for students and also enhance classroom management. It should have information and communication technology (ICT) integrated in this multipurpose space. Below, I describe one concept for such a space, beginning with a simple visual (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Ideal classroom map



Key to Figure 1

1. Desks where up to 8 students can sit facing each other, and which has a computer for each student which can be stowed away easily.
2. Tables with chairs at which students can sit.
3. Areas with carpets, beanbag chairs, sofas, etc.
4. Shelves for books and classroom materials.
5. Teacher table and presentation console, with chairs and carpet.
6. Presentation screens and whiteboards that can be controlled either from the central teacher's area or from the student areas.
7. Mini-lockers for student belongings, storage for small devices.

My plan, as seen in figure 1, involves a round or oval space, with the teacher at the center. This is not, as might be assumed, because of a personal desire to encourage traditional teacher-centered learning. Rather, the reality of classroom instruction is that the teacher often leads, describes, models, and monitors, activities and tasks, acts as an available resource, and sometimes needs to prod learners to stay engaged. Hawkes (2009) argues for a certain centrality of the teacher, noting that “the teacher’s role is central” in a target-language-rich dialog promoting knowledge co-construction with the learners (p. 82). Evans (2009) notes that teacher roles are changing in response to the wide access to information available to learners and greater interactivity in learner-instructor communication. Also, Raith and Hegelheimer (2010) note that teacher support and guidance while learners engage with tasks is critical and that teachers need to respond to unforeseen circumstances. This central physical position of the instructor in my plan, rather than reinforcing a teacher-centered, lecture style of education, allows the teacher to be ready to take on a multitude of roles within the learning community. Being in the center of the space also reduces average distance from learners and makes all these varied elements of teacher practice easier to engage in.

About two-fifths of the room is given over to long tables that radiate out from the teacher station, with seats for four students on each side of the tables. The tables are equipped with Internet-connected student computers that have attached headphones and microphones. However, rather than the equipment simply being permanently on top of the tables, it can all recess into the tables, clearing the space on top. Students can work collaboratively in pairs or groups at these tables with or

without the computers and an individual student is no further than four seats from the instructor station. Also, at the ends of these tables that are furthest from the center are screens and presentation stations. These can be utilized either by the instructor or by students, and controlled either from the stations themselves or the instructor station.

This space and equipment can be used for students working on any of the “five Cs of foreign language education” as described by Evans (2009, p. 8). The combination of access to the instructor and other learners along with information and people outside the classroom via the Internet allows for activities developing all of the communications, cultures, connections, and comparisons standards, and to some extent the first of the communities standards. It also allows for the kinds of “three-way dialogic interaction involving pupil, teacher and ICT” mentioned by Hawkes (2009, p. 89).

Between the radiating tables are mini-lockers and shelves for students to stow their belongings during class. This makes shuffling pairings and groupings of students easier since they don’t have to pack up and/or move belongings each time they move. It also reduces distractions by having non-essential items stowed away during class time.

About one quarter of the room is used for a lounge-type area with several rugs with groupings of comfortable chairs, cushions, etc. while another quarter has a few tables and chairs. Both of these areas have shelving at the edges which can be used for books, props, and other materials. Some of this will also be set aside for secure storage of some small electronic devices such as portable recorders of digital

audio and video and tablet devices. These spaces can be used for a variety of activities, including simple stretching or other physical activities to help refresh students during the 90-minute long lessons, quiet reading time, discussions, and so on. These varieties of activities, in addition to supporting the language standards noted above, can promote visual, auditory and kinesthetic memory and provide a number of benefits to our learners (Hawkes, 2009; Jugovic, 2015).

To aid in general physical comfort as well as limit isolation from the environment, the walls consist of sliding doors with triple-paned glass that can be opened up for air flow or closed depending on the outside conditions. The amount of direct and indirect sunshine into the rooms can also be controlled with a combination of shades and lighting tubes so that natural lighting can be used extensively but without adding heat at warmer times of the year. Sound baffles on the edges of the space also help to reduce excessive outside noise when needed.

Conclusion

For a face-to-face language teaching and learning environment, the attributes of the physical space can be important for facilitating learning. Access to easy to use information and communication technology is an increasingly important element of the space, and should be integrated into language classrooms at the design stage and not be limited to traditional listening or computer laboratories.

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