Providing web-based multilingual lexical learning materials with a regional culture oriented focus

Janet M.D. Higgins
Okinawa University,
Japan jmdth@yahoo.com

Abstract: This presentation introduces a CALL Multilingual Visual Dictionary (MLVD) CALL project which is being developed at Okinawa University, and is funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT). The project began in 2005 with a perceived need on the part of teachers and students at the university for language materials that reflect Okinawan and Japanese culture.

The project involves the compilation of a visual dictionary with entries in three languages: English Chinese and Japanese. Visuals include still photos and short videos. The dictionary is organised by themes. These allow us to explore various cultural artifacts and customs within authentic settings. The organisation of the units differs according to the main themes. The learning materials are a mixture of web-based and classroom based materials.

In this presentation I explain the organization of several units, show examples of the visuals and practice activities.

Key words: multilingual visual dictionary, culture-focused learning activities, CALL

1. Background

In 2005, languages teachers at Okinawa University began to express the need for learning materials that reflect Okinawan and Japanese culture. Students need to be able to explain features of their home environment, and the cultural values, local customs, and cultural artifacts of the communities in which they live or from which they come. Students who go abroad for short or long stay study often complain that they cannot answer questions about their home background when asked to do so by host families and students from other countries. A key requirement for being able to talk about one's cultural background is to have the appropriate lexical knowledge. Such materials would allow our students to talk about their life experiences to peoples of other cultures in English or Chinese. They would also provide foreign students with resources for learning about the regional culture in the three languages. The result was our Multilingual Visual Dictionary (MLVD) CALL project funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT).

The project involves the compilation of a multilingual visual dictionary with written and spoken entries in English, Chinese, and Japanese. Visuals include still photos and short videos. The dictionary is organised by themes. These allow us to explore various cultural artifacts and customs within authentic settings. In the following sections, I explain the rationale for using visuals and a thematic approach to the organization of entries, describe the organization of several units, show examples of the visuals, and give examples of the learning activities.

2. Rationale for the organization of the dictionary and the use of visuals.

The dictionary items are organised around themes. This form of organisation capitalises on what researchers know about the nature of memory and the network-like organisation of the mental lexicon、 and is a powerful learning tool. (For more details of research in this area, see Higgins, 2007).

In addition to being interesting and attention catching, visual images contribute significantly to the learning process. They provide an immediate representation of cultural artifacts with no linguistic mediation. We can immediately see from photos that the popular Okinawan *goya* is a long, thin, knobbly, green vegetable; in China it is white. Japanese apples are prototypically green, but European apples are both red and green (Suzuki, 1990). The value of using visuals is attested by research which demonstrates the positive value of imagery in vocabulary learning. Gairns and Redman suggest, for instance that 'our memory for visual images is extremely reliable and there is little doubt that objects and pictures can facilitate memory' (1986: 92).Moreover, research into learning styles has found that learners have preferred learning styles. By adopting a multi-sensory approach to vocabulary presentation, the project aims to cater for students with different learning styles.

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3. 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 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.

Figure 2

There are many issues to be resolved regarding the production of the entries. These include script, spelling, and grammar, as well as definitions. The most difficult problem is how to convey the full meaning of the entries. The first time an item is introduced it is accompanied by a visual. The visual provides the image. But the object alone in a visual is not sufficient information. If we take the example of the object '*toofu-yoo*' (fermented tofu), learners need to know not just what it looks like, but also how it is usually presented (small dish, with a small bamboo fork or toothpick) and when it is consumed (accompanied by *awamori,* Okinawan rice wine). Some items come in different forms, and the packaging is significant. Hence we are trying to make our photos as culturally rich as possible. The cultural notes are an important resource in this respect. For more detailed discussion see Higgins (2007) and Higgins et al (2007).

4. Selection and organization of the themes

We have organized the overall dictionary 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 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. In the topic on the Tsuboya pottery area, 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 topic on the main commercial shopping street in the capital, Naha, (International Street) 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.

From this outline it is clear that the organization of each thematic unit and the activities involved are different. In Departing from Naha airport, for instance, the theme lends itself to an organisation based on a chronological process. Departing passengers have to take a predetermined route through the airport from check in to boarding. During the stage between checking in and going through the departure gates, we take the learners on a souvenir hunting trail. This provides the opportunity to introduce typical Okinawan produce. We cover food items (for instance, *chinsukoo* biscuits, pineapple cake, black sugar, seaweed, fruits such as papaya, mango, dragon fruit and passion fruit), drinks (*awamori*, Okinawan beer), woven and printed cloth (*bashoo-fu*, *joofu*, bingata), clothing (*kariushi* wear), Ryuuyuu glassware, coral and shell products, and Tsuboya pottery, among others. The Departing from Naha Airport unit is accessed chronologically and by sub topic. The learning activities for the unit are process and product focused depending on the subtopic.

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 3 is an example of a Tsuboya Gallery. By clicking the visual, learners access the basic screen for that entry. By clicking the example box, they can see and hear an example of the entry in a conversational context.
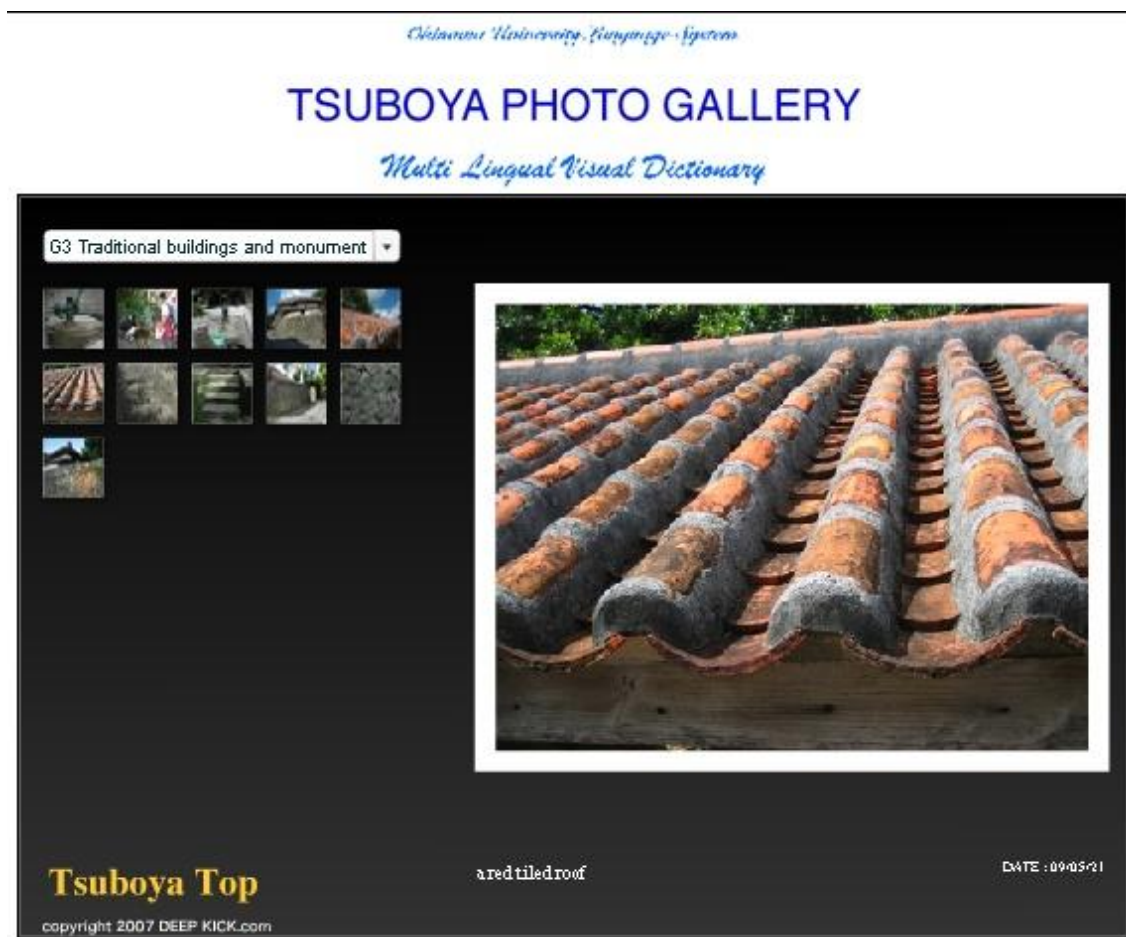

Figure 3

5. Practice Activities

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. One type is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

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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 (see Figure 5).

Figure 5   Examples of open-ended speaking tasks

Open–ended speaking tasks

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.
b) You visit the duty free section of the airport to buy souvenirs for your family. Tell us what you buy for your relatives.
c) Choose three interesting places or objects on Yachimun Dori (Pottery Street) and guide a visitor to see them.

6. Summary

We aim in this project to provide learners with a set of resources that will help them share their life experiences with people from different cultures. By using authentic photos and short videos, we hope we can provide them with engaging and stimulating learning materials. While visuals deal well with objects, abstract concepts are more difficult. We use video to capture actions and processes, but we acknowledge that not all concepts are easily amenable to visual representation. We have tried through the incorporation of extensive texts (cultural notes, conversations, interviews) to place the lexical items in authentic settings and show how they are used in their appropriate grammatical and social contexts.

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 not only by the authors, but by the users themselves, as they suggest themes and incorporate the lexical items that interest them and that they need.

7. References

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