Using VoiceThread in Japanese Language Education before, during, and after the
Pandemic
日本語教育における VoiceThread の使用--コロナ禍、それ以前の経験とさらに今
後に向けて

Chie Furukawa, Simon Fraser University
古川千絵，サイモンフレイザー大学

1. Introduction

This presentation demonstrates the strengths and possibilities of using VoiceThread for Japanese language education by reflecting the in-class practices using VoiceThread in the past two years in Japanese language classrooms, based on the experiences of the author and the feedback from the students.

VoiceThread is a highly intuitive online platform where instructors can share pre-recorded lectures and practices with slides while students can interact with the instructor and classmates by sharing their feedbacks/comments through inserting:
1) text, 2) video recorded on webcam, 3) audio recorded via microphone, 4) audio recorded by calling with a phone, and 5) audio file (the list is from Howland (2014).).
It also has a doodle tool to annotate the slide.

1.1 Benefits of using VoiceThread

Previous studies have pointed out the main benefit of using VoiceThread is its capacity to enable more interactions and connections among the instructors and the learners. According do Delmas (2017), VoiceThread helps create communities especially for online learners by increasing a feeling of connectedness between the students and instructor. Also, as Erickson, D. C. (2020) well summarizes, VoiceThread can help combine the lecture and discussion in one platform, where students can pause the lecture video and post their questions/comments right there just by one-click and instructors can respond whenever possible.

Scholars also have identified benefits of VoiceThread for language education particularly. Based on the discussions of Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna (2017) and Mango (2017), they are: 1) learners can listen to the pre-recorded lectures, listening practice materials, and classmates' presentations anytime repeatedly, 2) learners can spend enough time on their speaking practice and review their own speech performance with the feedback from the instructors, and 3) learners can practice their listening/speaking in a safe, low anxiety environment.

While VoiceThread does not seem to have used in Japanese language education as widely as in other languages education, these features of VoiceThread have become even more important as the recent pandemic and the shift to the remote instructions have forced all the educators to reconsider and explore various options of asynchronous learning that largely depend on ICT. As one example, the authors' Japanese languages courses (flipped classroom-style) this year (2021) and last year (2020) have applied the following applications:

- Classes (mostly for speaking practices) → Zoom
- Mini-lecture videos → VoiceThread
- Oral assignments and exams → VoiceThread
- Online quizzes/ writing assignments → Canvas

The students in the author's courses were already familiar with VoiceThread before the pandemic because the author partially and experimentally used it in class. Those who were completely new to VoiceThread, however, also seemed to have quickly adapted to the new class style, where Zoom and VoiceThread were combined and VoiceThread started to be used in an extensive way. But how it worked (and did not work for some cases) for the students should be tracked and revealed through detailed investigation.

The author conducted student feedback surveys before and during the pandemic to understand experiences of students using VoiceThread in Japanese language courses and its benefits/drawbacks.

1.2 Method of student feedback survey

The student feedback surveys were conducted in two different periods: before and during the pandemic. The following is the design of the surveys:

Survey A: Online survey (2020-2021, during the pandemic)
- Students of 1st year and 2nd year level courses of Japanese language
- 15-28 students for each class
- 469 students in 23 classes in total (5 classes (101 students in total) were switched to remote instruction in the middle of the semester)
- Number of Valid responses: 89 (response rate: 19.0%)
- Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous.

Survey B: In-class survey (providing a paper survey to fill in, 2019 Spring)
- Students of 1st year, 2nd year, and 3rd year level courses of Japanese language
- 15-30 students for each class
- 135 students in 5 classes in total
- Number of valid responses: 97 (response rate: 71.8%)
- Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous.

Questions (in both survey A and B)).
- If you used Voicethread for the assignment, did you find Voicethread useful? And why? Any suggestions to improve?
- And if you did not use Voicethread, what were the reasons?

Other questions not directly related to Voicethread were included in the survey and they are excluded in this presentation.

During the semesters when the surveys were conducted, VoiceThread was used in the courses in these areas:
1) Pre-recorded lectures (for Survey A only)
2) Oral/ listening assignment and assessment (for Survey A and B)
(For the oral exams, there were time limits and students were monitored through Zoom)
3) Students' oral presentations with their slides, where comments and Q&A are also exchanged (for Survey B only, in the 2nd year and the 3rd year level only)

2. Discussion
2.1 Summary of the results of the surveys

Survey A (n=89, during the pandemic, online survey):
- Feedbacks are mostly very positive: clearly positive: 75 %
- Those who said they did not use Voicethread: 20 %
  - Simply preferred their own devices for recording: 18 %
  - Found technical difficulties: 2 %
- No comments (for the question for Voicethread): 5 %

Survey B (n=97, before pandemic, paper-based survey):
- Feedbacks are mostly very positive: clearly positive: 87 %
- Those who said they liked in-person oral assignments: 13 %

2.2 Student's comments
Summary:
- Flexibility of VoiceThread was highly evaluated particularly-- it allows the students to work at their own pace and focus more on their own voices.
- Many mentioned that VoiceThread significantly lowered the psychological burden of the oral assessment, where students often feel the assessments do not reflect their proficiency accurately because of the anxiety they tend to have during the in-person oral assessments.

Positive comments (comments are kept as the originals):
"I was hesitant to use VoiceThread at first because it's an application I never heard of before. After using it the first time I was also uncertain whether my recording was properly uploaded or not. But after getting used to it, I do find it useful and maybe even the best way to do recordings because I can easily hear feedback from the teacher. I also like how I don't need to upload any files from my phone."

"I found VoiceThread very useful. I enjoyed being able to slow down the speed of the recording to get a better understanding of not only tone and inflection but the nuances I wouldn't have picked up on if I wasn't able to utilize it. "

"Yes, VoiceThread is a pretty good tool. Once we set up an account, the recording can be saved directly before going through the trouble of uploading the files."

"I found VoiceThread for the assignment useful because the sample recordings were easily accessible as well. You could record right away after listening to the sample recordings and it uploads right after. At first I was not familiar with VoiceThread so maybe putting some basic instructions on how to use it would be helpful."

"VoiceThread was really great, especially for the oral exams. I like that you record the answer to each question separately, can redo it if you need to, and don't feel as nervous because no one is watching you. It was also very useful to have the grammar and vocab videos on VoiceThread to reinforce what you learned and clarify certain points. It is also super helpful that you can speed it up or slow it down as needed, as this helped to save time when watching the videos."

Negative comments (comments are kept as the originals):
"I did not use VoiceThread for recording assignments or exams simply because I found that using my phone was more convenient for me (it was within physical reach)."
"I opted to not use VoiceThread because I tried it a few times and the interface was confusing to me. In the future, an orientation for using the app may be helpful. However, I can see how it is a helpful app especially for evaluating a student's performance in reading/speaking comprehension."

"It was okay since sometimes the uploading time took longer to submit, which needed to compete with the time."

"VoiceThread did its job, to be blunt. However, I do not think it is it was the most easy-to-use platform, as this had been my first time using it."

"I only used VoiceThread for playback, I'm always more confident in submitted and uploading a file than using the cloud."

"I only used VoiceThread when I needed to see other's projects on VoiceThread. For me, I prefer other programs or live sessions."

"Personally, I find VoiceThread to be a pretty cluttered application/website and I'm not very comfortable using it, if possible, it would've been better to use other applications or websites with better interfaces."

2.3 Some issues/drawbacks of VoiceThread identified from both students feedbacks and the author's experiences
- It is hard to provide spontaneous conversation settings (it is possible if two more people access the same VoiceThread file at the same time but there is still a time lag.).
- It takes some time to understand how VoiceThread works and get used to it.
- Some students still prefer using their cellphones to record and think they are easier to use.
- There are occasional technical issues, especially when many students access the same page at the same time for oral exams.
- Students need to install the application when they want to use it with mobile devices such as cellphones and tablets.
- The available functions for the users with free account are limited and there are fees for the pro accounts.

2.4 Solutions
- Providing clearer instructions on how to use VoiceThread (an original short tutorial video worked very well).
- Combining the assignments/activities using VoiceThread with other in-person assignments/activities
- Using VoiceThread for multiple assignments/activities so that the learners will be able to get used to it faster and to find the benefits of using VoiceThread

- Demonstrating the benefits of using VoiceThread to each instructor's institution and requesting them to buy the licence

3. Conclusion

The survey results demonstrate that most of the students in the author's Japanese language courses have had very positive experiences with VoiceThread. They also confirm that students have found the benefits of using VoiceThread in its capability enabling flexible learning style with lower-level anxiety that students tend to have while using foreign languages. This finding is consistent with the previous studies discussing the use of VoiceThread in language education. While some students evaluated VoiceThread negatively and some technical/administrative issues indeed exist, there are practical solutions to cover those drawbacks.

A figure below shows how the author's use of VoiceThread has been shifted through before and during the pandemic. It also includes plans after the pandemic or after the author's institution shifts to in-person instruction. The newly added short lecture videos and recording assignment using VoiceThread is planned to continue to be used because both the students and the author have found them very beneficial because students can spend their time flexibly to learn with the videos and to practice listening/speaking outside of the class while they can focus on conversation practices during the class time. In oral assignments/exams, both the ones using VoiceThread and in-person style may be used to cover the drawbacks of VoiceThread (difficulties to experience truly natural and spontaneous conversations). They are still plans and may change and/or shift after more trial and error in the future.

Figure 1: VoiceThread before, during, and after the pandemic

Before	During	After (future plans)
- In-person instruction - Experimental/partial use of VT for oral assignments/exams and projects presentations	- Remote instruction - Extensive use of VT: newly added 1) short lecture videos to explain grammar points and vocabulary use and 2) recording assignment - Quizzes/some part of written exams shifted to online (Canvas)	- In-person instruction (with some future possibility of blended courses) - Short lecture videos and recording assignment using VT will remain - Oral exams: mixing VT and in-person? - Quizzes: probably will stay online while written exams may go back to in-person

The inevitable shift to remote instruction due to the pandemic has unexpectedly provided educators with opportunities to explore various possibilities of using ICT, which includes VoiceThread. Although the author had started use VoiceThread partially in class before the pandemic, much more extensive ways of using VoiceThread in remote instruction during the pandemic have made both the instructors and the students realize the benefits of using VoiceThread deeply.

This presentation has clear limitations as it is based only on the students in the author's courses. Future research using larger samples from other educational institutions and comparisons with other similar applications need to be conducted. Also, how to use VoiceThread for reading/writing practices effectively in Japanese language education should be explored.

References

Delmas, P. M. (2017). Using VoiceThread to create community in online learning. *TechTrends*, 61(6), 595-602.

Dugartsyrenova, V. A., & Sardegna, V. G. (2017). Developing oral proficiency with VoiceThread: Learners' strategic uses and views. *ReCALL*, 29(1), 59-79.

Erickson, D. C. (2020). VoiceThread. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 23(4), 299-301.

Howland, J. (2014). Let's Talk VoiceThread! Supporting Communication in Online Courses. In T. Bastiaens (Ed.), *Proceedings of World Conference on E-Learning* (pp. 856-861). New Orleans, LA, USA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).

Mango, O. (2017). The effects of using VoiceThread on students' listening comprehension and attitudes toward using VoiceThread. *The Journal of the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages*, 21(1), 37-57.