

Filling Voids in Japanese EFL Programs With Bricolage, MAYA, and Intentional Space

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Abstract: Japanese universities and their EFL programs, when seen together, one may get a general sense that policy aims and actual effects show high-sounding slogans with results mainly in the opposite direction (Yoshida, 2019). A lack of a unified approach to EFL education can be explained at the program level when the following three terms are considered: 1) Bricolage, 2) the MAYA Principle, and 3) Intentional Space creation. Professors, often from eclectically different backgrounds, who are charged with curriculum design, hiring and training, and implementing their EFL program need to recognize their shared participation as something within an entire that will always be larger than the sum of what they can contribute. Hence the use of the term bricolage. Bricolage is a French loanword that means the process of improvisation in a human endeavor. The word is derived from the French verb *bricoler*, to tinker, with the English term DIY ("Do-it-yourself") being the closest equivalent. MAYA stands for: "Most Advanced, Yet Acceptable," a principle initially constructed by industrial designer Raymond Loewy. MAYA provides users, product consumers, teachers, students, coaches, and literally anyone with enough of what they already use and understand with enough new features that are easy to adopt ("Design - Raymond Loewy the first real Mad Man," 2017). MAYA is never applied nor experienced in a vacuum, always within a predetermined space. Within educational settings, MAYA needs to be applied not just in a classroom but to intentional spaces that include and go beyond the classroom. Creating an intentional space is about validating the students and making them feel valued and belong. It is also about building a dynamic, informed community applicable to learners' lives (Bauwens, 2008). So, what makes an EFL program good? Everyone working hard for the students? Is it teaching in an informed, smart manner? These questions and others were shared and discussed at a medium-sized university's EFL program in Japan. Survey results and discussion outcomes will be shared along with case study-like anecdotes and vignettes.

Keywords: Japan, EFL, administration, bricolage, Raymond Loewy, Intentional Space

1. Background

Many teachers believe they have all they need with the teacher's book. With a textbook in hand and handouts printed, teachers are ready. Always at hand is a chalkboard for quickly illustrating essential points. Such were the days of a now bygone era. We no longer live strictly in an analog world. Our students are increasingly digital natives. In light of that, they will compare and rank their technically savvy teachers to those who are not.

Moreover, some may have reached a point in their professional career and development that would lead them to say: "A gap fill is a gap fill is a gap fill!" By this comment, one can infer that the speaker must have sufficient knowledge and will do just fine in their medium of choice where they are proficient and comfortable. Suppose Computer-Assisted Language Learning, CALL, is not a part of that teacher's toolkit. In that case, the learners will never experience gap-fills on unimaginable levels, on their hand-held devices, and in unlikely places like buses, subways, and student lounges. With the possibility of frequent access, the learner's chances of recirculating already familiar linguistic information increase. No one is suggesting that such a teacher is not working hard, but one can ask how well that teacher's reach could extend with innovative aspects of available and tested technology.

There would be no need to write if this were an isolated problem. Nevertheless, Japanese universities and their EFL programs show that policy aims and actual effects are often divergent, high-sounding slogans with results in the opposite direction (Yoshida, 2019). Yoshida concludes that such a state can be squarely blamed on the Japanese Government, with its unreasonable policies and untenable expectations (Yoshida, 2019). Development in a positive direction at the program level can happen when whatever people of differing backgrounds see complies with what is most advanced yet acceptable for them and their program. Once that happens, creating intentional spaces for teaching and learning can occur.

2. Framework

A lack of a unified approach to EFL education can be explained at the program level when the following three terms are considered: 1) Bricolage, 2) the MAYA Principle, and 3) Intentional Space creation. Professors, who often come from different backgrounds, and are charged with curriculum design, hiring and training, and implementing their EFL program, need to recognize their shared participation as something within an entire that

will always be larger than the sum of what they can contribute. Hence the use of the term *bricolage* to describe this situation. *Bricolage* is a French loanword that means the process of improvisation in a human endeavor. The word is derived from the French verb *bricoler*, tinker, with the English term DIY ("Do-it-yourself") being the closest equivalent. MAYA stands for: "Most Advanced, Yet Acceptable." It is a principle initially constructed by industrial designer Raymond Loewy. MAYA provides users, product consumers, teachers, students, coaches, literally anyone - with enough of what they already use and understand with enough new features that are easy to adopt ("Design - Raymond Loewy the first real Mad Man," 2017). MAYA is never applied nor experienced in a vacuum, always within a predetermined space. Within educational settings, MAYA needs to be applied not just in a classroom but to intentional spaces that include and go beyond the classroom. Creating an intentional space is about validating the students and making them feel valued and belong. It is also about building a dynamic, informed community applicable to learners' lives (Bauwens, 2008). So, questions emerge: What makes an EFL program good? Everyone working hard for the students? Is it teaching in an informed, smart manner? These questions and others were shared and discussed at a medium-sized university's ESL program in Japan. Survey results and discussion outcomes will be shared with case study-like anecdotes and vignettes.

2.1 Bricolage

The lack of a unified approach may be partly due to the eclectic cobbling of full-time teachers who design the curriculum. Someone with a background in applied linguistics or pragmatics may focus on computer-assisted language learning. This person is set together with someone with teacher certification and ten years of experience teaching high school English. However, not to forget another who has an advanced, if not a terminal degree, in English literature while another with no special training or certification in education is simply a native speaker. When seen as a whole, one can see a motley bunch. Consistency has to be a shared concern. When a team recognizes their shared responsibility, the members need to see themselves within an entire that will always be larger than the sum of what they can contribute. Such a contextual milieu needs to be recognized and named for what it is, a *bricolage* environment.

The *bricoleurs* construct theories by arranging and rearranging, negotiating, and renegotiating with a set of well-known materials (Turkle and Papert, 2016). *Bricolage* combines diverse theoretical traditions that lead to insights into sociological and educational phenomena (Lise, 2013). For this research, the "Point Of Entry Text" is the hiring practices of full-time and part-time instructors within Japanese universities.

Redfield 1990 describes standard hiring practices for Japanese and international instructors. Even today, this still holds in practice. Generally speaking, Japanese universities hire their faculty through a recommendation system known as the "Old Boys" or "OB" network (Redfield 1990). While there may be a system for recruiting, positions may be publicized, and formal qualifications are required. Depending on who comprises the search and nominating committee, these may be mostly for show.

A recommendation from the proper person is the key: for full-time positions, this proper person is usually Japanese. In practice, the candidate majors typically in English and, upon graduation, immediately enters a Ph.D. program. TEFL programs in Japanese universities may not be as pervasive as literature or linguistics at the departmental or program level. Therefore s/he will have specialized in either literature or linguistics.

Through the university's own or a broader "OB" network, if the graduate professor comes from a different school or is involved in one of the many learned societies that proliferate in Japan, information about jobs becomes available, and telephone calls are made; jobs are firmly secured. All this happens well before the job seeker makes a formal application.

Convinced of the desirability of an aspirant, the professor informs their colleagues; if there are no other applicants, the person is hired. If there are two or more aspirants, the one whose backing comes from the most seniority is selected. Realizing that an appointment for a full-time faculty position is a decades-long commitment, one can see how EFL programs in Japanese universities can be underachieving. The leaders hired have little knowledge, background, or interest in TESL/TEFL-related program development and implementation.

This process holds in the case of part-time positions - upon which the bulk of the classroom-level instruction depends.

At its best, bricolage is a way to learn and solve problems by trying, testing, and playing around. When seen in the context of hiring for language educator positions in Japanese universities, the hiring problem is solved. Trying and testing are done within limited circles. It can make one wonder about the extent of “playing around” more with self-image and ego rather than finding the most qualified candidate. With the selected candidate comes the reality that if the new person does not work out, it is the fault of the key person who recommended and pushed for that person, not the committee. The dabbling continues with a tamping down of expectations to maintain harmony and save face for all concerned. So, depending upon who sits on the search committees and who has the most seniority to recommend will determine the profile of an English language program for decades. Nothing is assured, but whoever comes will likely result from someone’s situational feelings. Another topic is whether or not such a new person can function in or manage a university English program.

2.2 MAYA Principle

With bricolage, another concern that may explain why a particular English program may be underperforming is the MAYA Principle. MAYA stands for “Most Advanced, Yet Acceptable.” It is a principle that provides users with enough of what they already use and understand with enough new features that are easy to adopt. To quote: “The adult public’s taste is not necessarily ready to accept the logical solutions to their requirements if the solution implies too vast a departure from what they have been conditioned into accepting as the norm.”- Raymond Loewy (Pringle and Field, 2009) (CMG Worldwide, 2020).

Raymond Loewy (November 5th, 1893 - July 14th, 1986), considered the inventor of industrial design, has had an unmistakable impact on the daily life of people, especially those who live in the United States. One of his most iconic designs is the livery for Air Force One, the paint scheme for every US President’s jet since Kennedy. However, perhaps his most familiar is his redesign of the Coke bottle (“Design - Raymond Loewy the first real Mad Man,” 2017).

An example of MAYA in action within a university’s English program can be seen when an instructor decides to implement the use of Moodle at the program level, not just at the incidental teacher-to-class level. One should not be surprised by outright rejection for various reasons, none of which fall beyond MAYA.

An argument for adopting Moodle is that teachers can extend their reach. Moodle has a proven track record for being flexible, time-saving, and efficient for monitoring student progress. By blending print and digital materials, students and instructors can benefit alike.

With the advent of handheld devices, user plans with unlimited data access, and wifi networks, the need for paper, arguably, has passed. Teachers no longer need to make corrections on submitted paper-based assignments. When assignments and quizzes have feedback set up to be visible after an attempt, the students receive their feedback. Students can practice their English more both in and outside of class by using smartphones, tablets, or laptops as long as they are connected at least to a wifi network (Goetz, 2012).

Sadly, this was not what happened and became a problem for those who initially rejected adopting Moodle skills well before the pandemic.

Goetz 2018 reports that when Readiness quizzes (RQ) are set up as gateway quizzes to raise awareness of class rules and expectations, the DWF rates drop, whereas DWF refers to *Dropout, Withdrawal, and Failure*. Concerning MAYA, those teachers who tracked student progress with RQ completion had lower DWF rates. This topic was introduced, discussed, and adopted during the annual teacher orientation meeting to benefit at-risk student populations and teachers who will not have to teach as many repeating students in subsequent years. The setup of the Readiness quiz for students included the caveat that it opened up access to the first two of six Preparation quizzes. The course had six units; therefore, all had Preparation quizzes and Review quizzes. Unit Tests were available if a teacher wished to use Moodle for course midterms. To access a Unit Test on the midterm day, the student must have completed the corresponding Review quiz. Moreover, they needed to have finished the Preparation quiz, which, in the case of the first two units, required having done the Readiness quiz.

Students who did the Readiness quiz tended to do their Preparation and Review quizzes on more of a weekly basis. Teachers who saw the value of the RQ could see the benefit for their students and themselves. Student benefit was that they were on time and focused on their studies and teacher benefit included knowing that all

or nearly all students would not only pass but receive earned and informative grades. MAYA applied well here. Beyond an in-class mention, those who did not use the RQ found this setup too advanced and unacceptable. Subsequently, their students were more likely to procrastinate in doing their other required Preparation and Review quizzes by the semester's end (Goetz, 2018).

2.3 Intentional Space

Within a bricolage environment and concerted effort to engage the MAYA Principle, creating an intentional space becomes the next focus point for filling the voids that define ineffective EFL programs in Japanese universities. The previous example of introducing Readiness quizzes worked but not for all. It failed most among the teachers for whom the idea of a Readiness Quiz was too advanced and unacceptable. To bring MAYA to all members, they need to be included by validating them, the students, and the teachers. Creating an intentional space makes them feel like they belong (Bauwens, 2008). It is building community. *Intentional spaces* are defined as a space created “with a specific intention for supporting and nurturing one another, expanding awareness, and empowering transformative action” (Seale, 2017). It is a space created within an informed, applicable, dynamic and where their ideas matter. Furthermore, an intentional space can be made within a classroom and a curriculum.

Before an annual teachers' meeting in 2020 at a small private liberal arts university in Japan during the early days of the COVID Pandemic, a survey was given asking teachers to respond to various working hard and working smart statements. In short, the statements were collected from Terry Heick's list of ways to teach smarter (Heick, 2017).

The discussion results that ensued over Zoom and other meetings suggest that a more informed and deliberate approach to foreign language instruction within a university context is needed. The highlights include the following.

Share Ideas: With shared knowledge, achieving more becomes a more precise focus. When such sharing happens within the same program, students in different classes figure out there are new expectations before them.

Create Intentional Space: When students see the meaning and value of English, they will follow up by creating their own intentional spaces for English learning and acquisition.

That students develop a love for English is ideal. However, seeing as how all students are non-English majors, with a must-pass grade of 60%. If they love it, all the better.

Reflection is more important than following a plan. Plans always need adjusting to meet learner needs as the teacher reacts to the learners' development. An awareness of a bricolage approach to the eclectic nature of learning applies.

Learn more from different models. Embracing the bricolage continues with the mixing up of learning models. Keeping the students engaged requires more than one teaching method.

In short, teachers need to share ideas to create intentional spaces for students to learn. With an informed hope that they may love English, the classroom space and overall curriculum design need to foster the creation of intentional spaces. Reflecting on what worked is just as important as making plans. And the more informed teachers are, the better, as this applies to practical models for teaching. It is here where teachers are “teaching smart.” These five topics ranked highest in the Heick survey on how to teach smarter. These top five formed the Most Advanced Yet Acceptable or “MAYA” Items from this survey.

Within the balance of Working Hard and Teaching Smart, all of these categories can assist teachers in extending their teaching reach and knowing when they have done enough. The teacher must understand that it is finally up to the learners to appropriate what is before them. Knowing when to say when will help teachers maintain a clear head, stay focused on the present tasks before them, and reinforce their initial sense of calling that led them to the teaching profession in the first place.

As for the other items, the teachers did not rank highly. Most were perceived as common sense, skills already acquired, or ideas that could not be readopted or changed due to school policy. Sampling follows in descending order of importance: prioritize work, take work home, use Moodle and Zoom, grade everything, less is more, say no, embrace mistakes, collaborate with others, emotion, and use social media.

Teaching smart came to mean: developing the necessary skills for online teaching, listening to teacher needs, and listening to student needs.

Later, after the first semester, full-time teachers who benefited from at least six years of experience working with the learning management system Moodle showed unique approaches to teaching online during the pandemic. Given the diversity of the entire staff, age, familiarity with technology, and teaching style, it was decided to offer a variety of ways for teachers to conduct classes remotely. Two categories were conduction classes: 1) via Zoom and 2) on demand.

3. Application - the flipped classroom

With the advent of the COVID Pandemic and the start of a new academic year, entirely online, full-time, and part-time teachers needed to consider the flipped classroom (Koblin, 2021). Even before the first semester began, there was pushback. One full-time professor, someone with a literature background and little or no computer skills, insisted on teaching on-demand without using Zoom. The argument was that if students receive assignments through the post office, and return their work in a set manner for grading and feedback, shouldn't that be acceptable. Realizing that the said instructor honestly could not do much more with Moodle than work with it as a convenient post office, permission was granted to create an intentional space within such parameters.

The members of the teaching team were not teaching in isolation. Each teacher had a partner teacher with a clear division of the teaching load. Preparation and Review quizzes were provided in Quiz Centers, also known as Metacourses in Moodle. Teachers were given links to publisher-provided worksheets in pdf form and "Moodleized" versions in quiz format in each locally assigned Moodle class. In theory and practice, no one teacher needed to create content to teach. There was plenty of content already provided. All they had to do was to conduct classes online or set up on-demand teaching plans.

3.1 The problem of inadequate space

Sadly, online teaching was quickly redefined to accommodate students' insistence that they have a right not to use their cameras and control their microphones. Mostly, they were in their bedrooms, where they did not want to show their private space or family living rooms.

This request was honoured but did not change the course purpose and overview: to build foundational English communication skills useful in the real world. Although the main focus is on oral communication, importance is also placed on vocabulary building, grammar, reading, and listening comprehension. The course design included the following learning cycle: Individual preparation (including e-learning), In-class practice, and Individual review (including e-learning). The aim is to establish communication skills in English and see students shift from passive learners to active participants ("2020 CEP Teachers' Handbook," 2020). Additionally, evaluation is based on Preparation and Review quizzes, in-class performance, mini-quizzes, assignments, midterms, and final exams. Only the Preparation and Review quizzes are preset. All other adjuncts can be accessed from the available stock in either the teacher's assigned Local Class or the relevant Quiz Centers.

3.2 Creative ways to adapt

While keeping the course goals in mind and honoring student requests for a no-camera environment, teachers needed to adapt or find ways to teach and follow the course syllabus. Given the diversity of teacher backgrounds, familiarity, and lack thereof with online teaching and management of Moodle, teachers branched out to fill in where they perceived voids, both old and new. An old void could be a class full of passive learners, while a new void would be fostering a communicative classroom but online. Visible is the bricolage environment as seen by four different teachers. The following examples show how a teacher(s) increased the number of quizzes to include material directly from the textbooks to benefit those few who could not participate in a live Zoom class. In contrast, other teachers assumed that if a few could not join in Zoom, then structure the class to give

assignments via PDF uploads. Quizzes were not used beyond the ones already provided. How each teacher applied themselves in light of the new challenges illustrates how the MAYA principle was evident. Teachers selected what was best, or rather, most advanced and acceptable to use. The following charts show how four teachers negotiated to teach online or on-demand during the first semester of the COVID Pandemic. The four teachers reflect the “bricolage-like” diversity: a Japanese national with a literature background; a native speaker with no teacher training or certification; a Japanese national with a Master's in Education and ten years of teaching high school English; and a native speaker with a Masters in English Education and extensive background in computer-assisted language learning. All teachers had sufficient computer skills to accomplish what they desired for student benefit within the online Zoom / Moodle environment and could determine how much or how little they would do.

3.2.1 PDFs

Moodle offers the use of PDFs to distribute information, instructions, and tasks. PDFs on Moodle are not interactive and are regarded as resources. For the teacher, they are fast and easy to upload. How students respond is determined by the teacher.

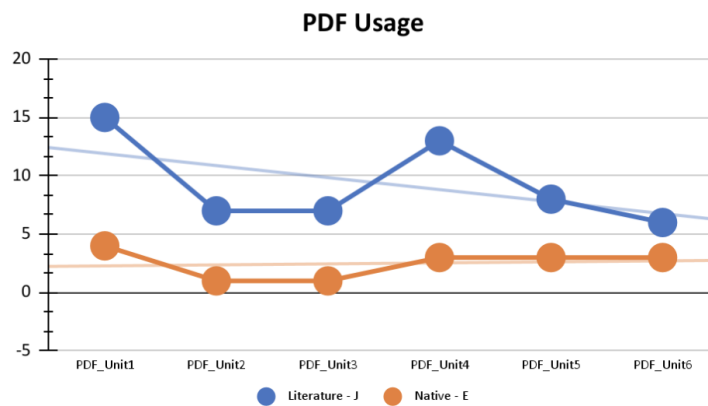


Figure 1: Usage of PDFs within Moodle local class as a teaching resource

Of the four teachers, two used the PDFs over the semester. One teacher had a literature background, while the other was a native speaker of English with no particular training in TEFL.

3.2.2 Assignment activity

Moodle offers the use of the Assignment to collect and evaluate student work. Managing student work using an Assignment activity provides a convenient database of student submissions that can be managed online (“An Overview of Assignments in Moodle,” 2022). For the teacher, they are fast and easy to upload. Students respond by a deadline set by the teacher. One drawback is that assessing each submission can be a labor-intensive task.

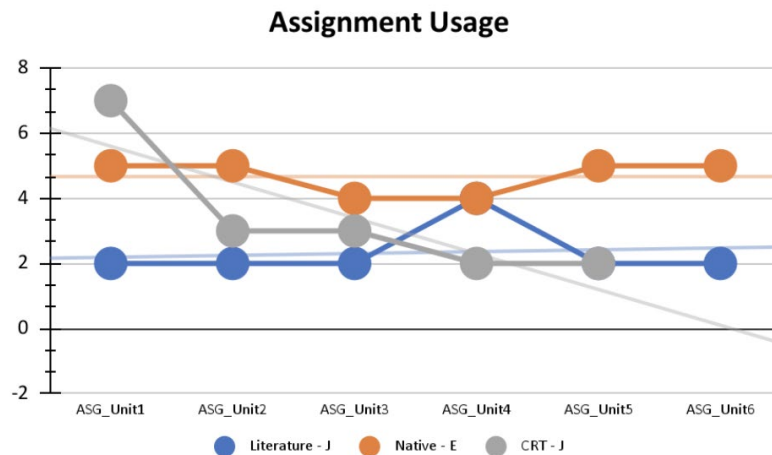


Figure 2: Usage of assignments within Moodle local class as a teaching activity

Use of the Assignment was used by three teachers: the literature, native speaker of English, and licensed teacher. The trend lines indicate that only teachers with a teaching license (CRT - J) decreased its use over time. Only the CRT - J graded all submissions. The others did not use the Assignment for reasons that remain unclear.

3.2.3 Quiz module

Moodle offers the use of quizzes to evaluate students' understanding. Moodle quizzes consist of a Quiz activity that contains one or more questions from a Question Bank. The Quiz activity allows the teacher to administer a wide range of questions within a specific layout and order, provide different kinds of feedback based on how a student performs on the quiz, and control the ways students can access the quiz ("An Overview of Quizzes in Moodle," 2022).

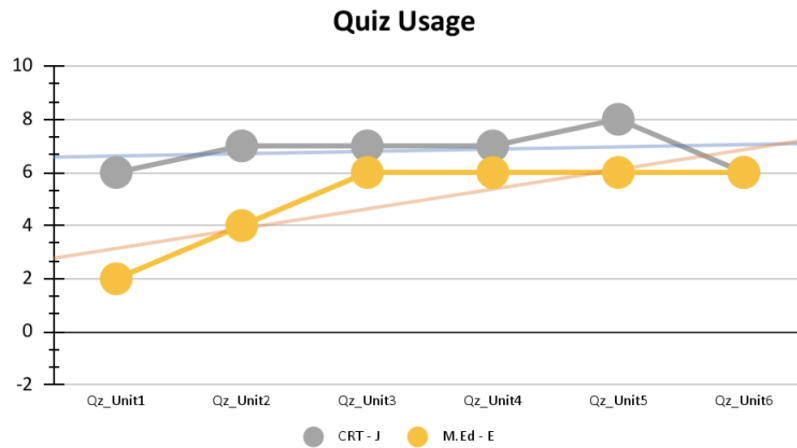


Figure 3: Usage of quizzes within Moodle local class as a teaching activity

The instructors with either teacher certification or a Masters in Education made increasing and consistent use of the Moodle Quiz activity. The others preferred to distribute PDFs or give Assignments. Grading assignments online did not happen.

4. Discussion

Given that the course syllabus clearly defined goals, gaps occurred when implementing online teaching and Moodle. Seeing the aggregate use of Moodle resources and activities, gaps are conspicuous.

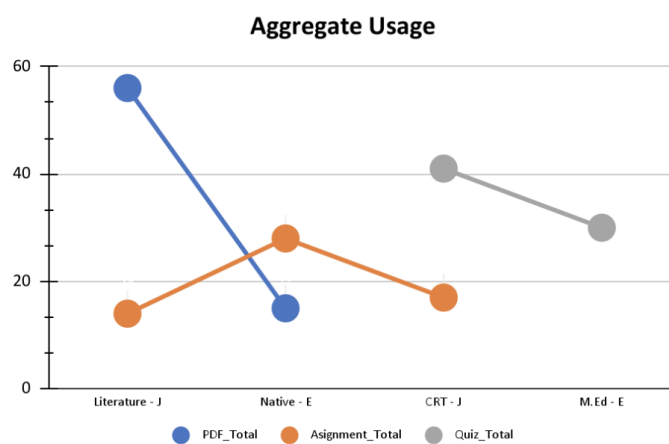


Figure 4: Aggregate Look at preferred use of resources and activities.

Moodle is a connector. As Penny Ur has said: a gap fill is a gap fill (Nováková, 2013). This comment could infer that she had little use for computer-assisted language learning. However, that would be too simplistic. For example, an online gap fill can provide metadata that would otherwise be inaccessible if one were operating strictly within an analog environment. Moreover, gap-fills, assignments, quizzes, and other ancillary tasks build confidence for communication when the learners have not received instruction.

Relying only on resources diminishes the learning experience and widens the gaps, exacerbating the bricolage environment, only demonstrating that some tools within Moodle were too advanced to be acceptable. The creation of intentional space collapses at the program level.

5. Conclusion

If intentional space at the EFL program level is to be created, gaps and voids filled with more teachers in compliance with MAYA for branching out of their bricolage diversity and teaching tools, such as Moodle. Simply putting teachers in front of a computer, and showing them what can be done, is not enough. Teachers need to be led with mini-tasks to create that “WOW!” moment, as Ur referred to at JALT2013 (Darren Elliott, 2017). If such never happens, EFL programs will likely continue to fall short of their high-sounding goals, with teachers being in violation of MAYA and the creation of intentional space limited.

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