“NATURALLY WIRED TO LEARN”

Beliefs about SLA in an online community

Master’s Thesis
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English
November 2013


Asiasanat – beliefs about language learning, online community, sociocultural theory
Säilytyspaikka – Depository Kielten laitos
Muita tietoja – Additional information
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1 Introduction

This study focuses on beliefs about second language learning that come across in articles, personal stories, and responses to these articles, published in a language learning and culture website, tofugu.com. I am especially interested in the possibilities for social interaction and the online communication of this site from a pedagogical perspective. In this study I examine the narratives by the authors of the webpage and try to find out how these narratives perform social actions through helping the learners to form new learning beliefs and accomplish their language learning goals. The multitude of conversational responses between the authors and the audience, and the informality of the group of people with similar learning goals, encouraged me to approach the site as a language-learning community. While online communities have been the subjects of some previous research, the functions of online communities as places of learning have not been under much examination.

The aims of the site are to offer learners different sources, methods and tools to study Japanese as a foreign language in addition to offering cultural knowledge and information about Japan. Due to the intercultural audience the website English is used as a lingua franca in the articles and in the conversations. The publishers engage the audience by asking questions and encourage them to share their learning experiences. In the comment sections the members of the audience share learning experiences and ideas with each other as well as ask questions and help from the publishers. This study is focused in finding answers to the following questions: What beliefs come across these texts? How are they narrated to the audience? How is the learning community responding to these beliefs? Does the discourse contribute to formation of new beliefs?
One of the main interests of this research is to look at online learning from a social perspective. As the social media has evolved to become a more and more powerful tool for communication, interaction and even political influence, it is increasingly important to take its possibilities into account when researching language learning and teaching. Informal platforms and online communities have become increasingly popular places for individual language learning. Autonomous, voluntary language learning through gaming and interest groups has had great impact on increasing students’ language proficiency.

As the information given in the webpages is public and the comments of the users are allowed and even asked for in the articles, I would suggest that the audience regulates a lot of the content. In addition, I find that his kind of research and question asking can be beneficial in the development of normative school surroundings. Language learning is a process, most of which happens outside the classroom environment. Even in the most traditional surroundings the learner has the last say in controlling and regulating their own learning process.

The interest for this case study arose from the increasing popularity of the World Wide Web as means for exchanging learning experiences. These experiences, which can also be characterized as stories, teaching and learning histories or narratives, help learners to overcome problems with a specific language or in language learning in general. They are used to strengthen learners’ motivation as tools for overcoming obstacles. Simultaneously, by sharing these stories, the learners share and develop their learning beliefs. There is an increasing interest in the field of applied linguistics towards beliefs and their affect in language learning.
Beliefs are commonly counted as one of individual learner differences, which affect the learning process and its outcomes. Although the terminology varies, Kalaja & Barcelos (2003:1) clarify the term Beliefs in Second Language Learning/Acquisition (SLA) with a broad definition stating that beliefs are: “opinions and ideas that learners (and teachers) have about the task of learning a second/ foreign language”. Kalaja and Barcelos (2003:1) point out that the role of beliefs is quite essential in teacher student relations, the use of students’ learning strategies, in cases of learning anxiety as well as in autonomous learning. In tofugu.com the beliefs come across in discussions about different learning techniques and personal experiences. As online language learning is usually quite autonomous, beliefs may have a significant role in the learning outcomes. I am especially interested in the topics the online learners discuss and the kinds of experiences they present when discussing their individual learning. In addition, this study pays attention to the kind of opportunities for discussion the creators of this website offer for their audience.

This research approaches language learning from the perspectives of sociocultural theory. According to Lantolf (2000:1) the principle idea of sociocultural theory is that “the human mind is mediated”. This can be interpreted so that our thoughts and ideas are in constant interaction with the people and phenomena surrounding us. The connection between learning and human interaction is one of the principal concepts of this research. Whether we use symbols, tools, signs, or utterances our society is inevitably developing through communication. Lantolf (2000:1) describes physical and symbolic tools that are passed on from generation to generation. Symbolic tools entail, among other things: numbers, music, art and language. The younger generations modify these tools according to the
changes and developing needs of the individuals and the society. Lantolf (2000:2) uses computerization as an example of these developments. In addition the development and changes that have taken place in language use, grammar and vocabulary have occurred due to similar mediation.

Social forums, blogs and media have become increasingly popular as places for interaction. Many individuals belong to a specific online community of likeminded people sharing their experiences or having similar goals. A rising number of teachers are willing to use the web as a source of inspiration or as a place for activities in the school environment. In addition there is an increasing number of educators that are producing teaching materials and sharing their knowledge through the Internet. Despite the fact that great amounts of material are made for learners using the Internet, there are not many pedagogically designed platforms for learners to share their experiences globally with the possibilities of having authentic discussions about their learning. A growing number of learners are encouraged to make their learning interactive using the possibilities of social media, which serves as an autonomous platform outside the restricted classroom environment.

Web-based learning increases the students’ possibilities to interact with people regardless of their location or nationality. Webpages offer opportunities of authentic international exchange of ideas and common methods used in the educational fields in different cultures. The possibility to learn outside the classroom can be considered as one of the greatest strengths of online learning. In these settings at best the learners can be freed from the hierarchical stand points of learning. Freedoms, as well as responsibilities are thus given to the learner. The Internet has developed during the years, enabling everyday users to be publishers of information and the learners to become peer-teachers who help each other’s progress.
In the following chapter (2) I will first look at some previous research, more specifically research done in the field of education, from the point of view of sociocultural theory, beliefs about language learning and the technical developments for learning and interaction, which have become available in the last decades. Secondly, in chapters 3, 4 and 5 I will introduce the webpage and examine the contents of 5 articles on tofugu.com and the conversations between the author of these articles and his audience. Thirdly, chapter 6 discusses the beliefs presented the articles and beliefs that come through the conversations and responses from the learners using the page.
2 Theoretical Background

The following chapters discuss key concepts and theories underlying this study. First I take a look at some previous research. Secondly, sociocultural theory is discussed from the perspective of language learning. Cognition, self-regulation and metacognitive skill are relevant areas of study when we are observing our own individual language learning processes and try to find common roots to the beliefs we share. After discussing the social aspects of language learning, the chapter focuses more deeply on theories of beliefs about SLA. Other relevant issues are the social and technical developments that have taken place in the history of learning. Important topics for discussion are also the virtual tools, their use and development towards modern language learning.

2.1 Previous Research

2.1.1 Research on Beliefs about SLA
Beliefs about SLA (second language acquisition) have been under examination since the 1980’s. The definitions of beliefs and methods of research have gone through changes in the course of time. There are various fields of study, which are interested in how cognition and talk in interaction/discourse are intertwined. Discursive psychology, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology share similar basic approaches to language’s affects on behavior (Potter & Te Molder, 2005:3). All of the fields of study mentioned above consider talk as a medium of action, they also share an understanding that talk is locally situated and organized. These views also emphasize the important role of language as a tool of interaction, negotiating meanings, sharing experiences and beliefs.
The effect and value of learner and teacher beliefs has been under discussion. Barcelos (2003:7-8) states that even though learner beliefs are acknowledged, the 'self-made' theories of learners can be considered to be less worthy than the scientific theories. She points out, however that, these 'layman' theories should not be treated as false but as subjective points of view resulting from individual experience. This idea is especially valuable in the research done about beliefs.

Kalaja and Barcelos (2003:1) point out that most research done on beliefs has been done with quantitative methods such as questionnaires and interviews. Dufva, Kalaja and Alanen (2007:130) shed light on an important issue when stating that a critical eye may notice that by using questionnaires and survey methods, the beliefs can be described from the perspective of the researcher, not the interviewee. When forming interview and questionnaire questions the researcher often brings forth their own assumptions and expectations. Quantitative methods rarely bring out certain nuances that may be visible when the research subject uses their own words.

Kalaja (2003:87) states that discursive methods have clear advantages in research on beliefs about SLA. She (2003:94) mentions that the discursive approach offers an “insider perspective” due to the fact that the data is given in the words of the students or teachers. A good example of researching beliefs through narratives can be found in Kalaja’s (2003:94-95) study of Finnish students preparing for their English matriculation exam. The data in question was collected from a dozen students who were asked to keep a diary like journal of their thoughts and feelings, specifically their “expectations of success” during a semester of preparation for the exam. This diary consisted of a minimum of six audio recorded entries. In addition the participants took part in a pair/ group discussion a few months after the exam was over. In turn, Sakui and Gaies (2003:158-159) relied on a journal like self-study method to discover teacher beliefs. The data of Sakui and
Gaies also involved some discourse due to the fact that Sakui, who was the teacher writing the journal, would write to Gaies who was the audience of this journal. Thus the data included some exchange of ideas and teaching experiences.

These previous studies show that ‘self-made’ or subjective theories, conversations and stories are in fact valuable data when researching beliefs. Without leading questions or forced assumptions of the researcher, the message coming across the data can be considered more authentic. With the help of authentic, emic data it is possible to design better teaching methods and produce material, which serves the learner as means for achieving their goals. The current approach for examining beliefs, to view beliefs “as reflections of the varying experiences of learners in different social contexts” (Dufva, Kalaja and Alanen 2007:130), stresses the need to examine them using methods that allow the voice of the learner to come across through the data. The authors list diaries, life stories, interviews and different types of tasks as good sources for finding better descriptions of the learners' experiences. The web-articles I am researching contain these kinds of personal narratives and stories as well as shared experiences through dialogue. The learners express their opinions as responses independently to each post. The data in this research can therefore be seen as valid.

2.1.2 Research on online communities

The increasing interest in examining online communities and their interaction can be seen in a couple of quite recent studies. Valkonen (2013) set out to examine discussions in female football fans’ fan-page. This study focused on gendered discourse topics in the online community. Hagman (2012) conducted a study on the conflict behavior in two online communities. Hagman (2012) set out to find what structures of conflict talk was used in
these communities, what kind of differences were there between these communities and what kind of things could affect the choices in these conflict talk methods.

Online communities have become places of active interaction for people of various interest groups. It is not uncommon for people to share their ideas and feelings online. Online communities are also used as a platform for discussion and forming new ideas and shared beliefs. This study focuses in finding out what kinds of beliefs are formed in an online language learning community and how they are presented and shared by the members of this community.

2.2 Approach to Language Learning

The conceptions of our identity and cultural background arise from our environment and our social surroundings. Language is a tool that we use to bring forth different aspects of our identity to other members of different social groups we want to connect to. In our culture language is the most used medium for communicating with others. Vygotski (1982) discusses the relationship between cognition and language.

Research has shown that though thought can exists without language, language does not exist without the mental processes, which enable it. Vygotski (1982:92) points out the first implications of the hybridization of language and cognition, which can be seen when an infant starts to name objects at approximately two years of age. From this we can deduce that the trigger for our language use comes from our surroundings. Vygotski (1982:92) describes two different types of behavior as characteristic of this turning point where cognition and linguistic capabilities intertwine. The first characteristic is that a child starts to ask what a certain object is called. The
second phenomenon is the sudden and surprisingly fast growth of the infant’s vocabulary. These changes turn sounds into speech making them act as a tool for cognition. This will inevitably lead to negotiation and forming meanings as a result of discourse and conversation. It is a universal social phenomenon that new terms come up as a person grows and as the society develops. The meanings of words and phrases go through changes in the process.

Whatever form language takes, whether it is written, spoken, signs or images, it is an instrument for understanding each other. This is why language learning always has a socially connected purpose. Alanen (2003:58) describes the language and its uses in the individual and social spheres. As individuals we belong to many different groups in our lifetime. Education, work, hobbies and family all have an effect on our social life and inevitably our language. Language is used to intensify our belonging to a group and is also affected by each group we socially feel belonging to. According to Bakhtin’s appropriation theory (1981) we use same words that others have used to appropriate our language. Most of the words and phrases people use are not original but appropriated from others. This, in fact, could be considered a backbone of language development through the course of history.


[...]language is both external and internal: it belongs at the same time both to the speech community and the individual member of that community. The means that individual members use to mediate their actions, whether internal or external, have a social origin and are influenced by the social, cultural and historical context. Language is not only a psychological tool, it is a cultural tool as well.” (Alanen, 2003:58)
This idea of language as a cultural tool is also supported by Dufva (2003:135): “...Since cognitive operations develop and occur in a certain physical and social environment they also bear the mark of that environment” Similarly, in online conversations, the language used bears the mark, in this case, the specific jargon, topics and speech acts, appropriated by the group belonging in a specific online community.

Vygotski (1982:214) describes the relation between thought/ cognition and word/ speech/ language as an ongoing process, which is a motion to and fro between the two. He continues by stating that the thought does not only come across to the recipient in words, but it actually comes true in words. Alanen (2003:58) adds to this idea by stating that the learner is shaping her ideas through communication and that ideas do not just appear in peoples’ minds without input from their social surroundings.

Dufva (2003) sees the individual beliefs as results of a socialized process of belief formation. This would imply, that the beliefs we share in a language learning community are also shaped by other members of that community and their beliefs shared, in the social group. Dufva (2003:135) describes individual beliefs as: “consequences of the series of interactions they have been involved in and discourses they have been exposed to”. This suggests that the nature of beliefs can be interpreted as ever changing, controlled by our social and cultural environment.

2.3 Beliefs about Language Learning - Metacognitive knowledge
Dufva, Kalaja and Alanen (2007:130) describe beliefs as “a part of learners’ metacognitive knowledge”. Kalaja and Barcelos (2003:1) list different ways in which individual learner and teacher beliefs are significant in the field of language education. As stated earlier, beliefs about SLA can affect classroom agendas between teachers and learners, the selection of a certain language strategy, anxiety levels during learning and learner autonomy. This would strongly highlight the importance of the role of beliefs in our everyday classroom interaction.

Woods (2003:204) discusses the term belief and points out that the definition is less important than actually finding out how the term fits to describe learner and teacher experiences. He (2003:204-205) examines the distinctions between beliefs and knowledge. “[…]knowledge is a subset of beliefs, those beliefs for which there is the greatest consensus, the greatest demonstrability and the least personal identification.” This can be stated in other words, saying that knowledge equals the beliefs that we can most objectively prove to others.

Alanen (2003:55) focuses especially in the relationship between metacognition and self-regulation in learner beliefs. Self-regulation means taking the gained metacognitive knowledge to a practical use. “[S]elf-regulation plays an important part in connecting metacognitive knowledge and learning” (Alanen, 2003:56) A learner with self-regulation skills is aware and in control of her knowledge and tools for learning, and is also able to use the knowledge and her specific skills to gain more knowledge and enhance her learning outcomes. Alanen (2003:62) also emphasizes the difference between beliefs as metacognitive knowledge and beliefs that are used as tools of learning. There are beliefs that do not directly affect our self-regulatory actions and are therefore considered metacognitive knowledge. In
other words, they are beliefs that we are not strongly aware of or they don’t lead to conscious actions.

Alanen’s (2003:60) outlook on beliefs is that they can affect language learning when used as tools of mediation. According to Alanen (2003:60), learning a foreign language is in itself mediated action towards certain individual goal. Beliefs in this context serve as grounds of learning that can be tested while learning and which can be reformed as learning proceeds. Alanen (2003:63) adds, however, that learners may need help in establishing which beliefs or strategies are most functional and useful. This is where a teacher or a mentor can be most beneficial. This study has a clear setting where the publishers of the webpage act as teachers and mentors to the learners who view the webpage. They also encourage peer teaching and participation in courses or tutoring outside the online environment.

2.4 Narratives conveying beliefs

Dufva (2003:132) focuses on the dialogical approach towards beliefs. In her view the research done through interviews, group discussions or written narratives bring out the voice of the interviewee. In this approach beliefs are viewed “as subjective experience” (Dufva, 2003:132) and the data is gathered from individual narratives presented in various forms through negotiative methods. She describes this method of data gathering situation as resembling a “conversation rather than interrogation” (Dufva, 2003:132). Dufva (2003:133) also emphasizes the voice of the subject and the importance to focus not only on what is being said but also how it is said. The voice carries a personal approach with different meanings, opinions and attitudes.

The role of narratives or personal stories is also an important part of our everyday discourse. Edwards (1997:263) sees narratives as part of day-to-day
discourse. Daily conversations are often constructed of descriptions of past events and experiences. Interestingly this aspect of discourse also makes it difficult to draw a clear line between narratives that are based on fiction and those that are based on facts. Fiction and facts, as far as stories and narratives go, are both often directed towards an audience who regard the story as either plausible or questionable. Both types of narratives are told or written from a certain point of view and their aim is to have an effect on their audience. Edwards (1997:265) supports this idea by pointing out that the participants, not only the academic researchers, have expectations on what counts as a well structured part of a story in conversation. This supports the idea that social negotiation of meanings and shared understandings are at the heart of discourse.

Narratives can be used in practice to establish the views of the participants in a conversation, as well as to find out about one's own beliefs. Sakui and Gaiés (2003:155) used narratives, which, as they stated, could be either personal stories, letters, oral histories or conversations, to find out about the beliefs and metaphors of an English teacher. They (2003:154-155) point out that using narrative inquiries help teachers to “contextualize their knowledge and beliefs” and that narratives can also “empower the teachers”. Sakui and Gaiés (2003:155) add that listening to the experiences of others can also help to reflect on one's own teaching. This is another example of forming one's own beliefs through verbalizing them and also reshaping them through discourse.

Edwards (1997:264) sets out to explore and analyze narratives using framework that draws from discursive psychology as well as conversation analysis. In his opinion there are three things an analysis of narratives, or any discourse for that matter, can be aimed. Firstly we can examine the way different events are narrated. The second area of interest could be how
people perceive or understand these narratives. Finally we can look deeper into the discourse and the actual speech acts.

In Edwards’ (1997:271) view all of the three different areas of interest can have different methods of analysis. The first approach is to examine the events behind the discourse; secondly one can take interest in the psychology of the speakers and thirdly focus on the discourse itself and to what is actually being said (Edwards, 1997:272). In my research I am interested in the language learning experiences that lead to certain beliefs and metaphors appearing in the texts, the shared experiences that come across through the discourse and how can both of these factors be interpreted from the texts.

In addition, Edwards (1997:266) points out that in many areas of study the focus on narratives has been on the generalized structures of narratives as opposed to the way they can perform “social actions in the telling”. In this research I am setting out to find out how these narratives from the authors of the website perform social actions and serve the purpose of helping other learners to reach their goals and form new learning beliefs.

2.5 Developing Tools and Environments for Learning

As discussed earlier, learning, and more precisely language learning, can be viewed as a social phenomenon. Learning environments and tools have a strong role in the learning process and inevitably in the learning outcome. Gruenbaum (2011:53) sheds some light on how the environments for learning have changed in the course of history. The classroom has served as the most traditional learning environment through decades; however, learning from our elders and peers has been an essential part of learning through the developmental history of education. There are many political and historical developments affecting the development of formal education,
however the informal domain of education has become more and more available through the use of Internet as a place for learning. Herring (2010:5) suggests that in the course of history the term conversation has been dependent on the tools that were available to us at each point in time. As a result, through computerized communication technologies, the meaning of conversation can no longer be only referring to spoken language.

Gruenbaum (2011:53) points out that the development of printing presses and the increase of literacy enhanced the possibility to learn without a direct contact to the teacher. Thoughts and ideas were, consequently, more likely to spread around the world. Independent learning was now a new chance for people who had the time and possibility to educate themselves. When discussing the technical developments in the classroom environment Gruenbaum (2011:54) adds that visual aids, such as films, slides and overhead projectors, were already used as common teaching materials in the second half of the 20th century. Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:37) state that the Internet has developed from various different communication technologies, such as the printing press, telegraph, telephone, the radio and the television. As naturally as the audiovisual teaching aids became increasingly usual in the classroom environment, consequently, also the Internet became a tool for teaching, learning and sharing ideas and beliefs.

The use of computers in formal education started in the late 1980’s. Gruenbaum (2011:54) states however, that even though the Internet has existed for about 40 years it has only been applicable for common households since the 1990’s. According to Gruenbaum (2011:54) the speed of technical developments can be seen in the fact that we moved from the situation where only a few students could afford to have a slowly functioning PC, to a situation where nearly all students have laptops in only a few decades. Gruenbaum (2001:55) seems to view technology as something
that is ever altering towards faster, smaller and more user-friendly innovations. As the social and commercial world is moving in this direction, so should the tools and environments we use for education follow the world in which we are living in.

Even though a new tool for online interaction was created, it took time for the communication to reach the level that it currently has. Gruenbaum (2011:55) explains that in its early days online interaction was quite one-sided. Information was given from the large companies to the individual users. After a while, as the web developed it allowed the users more freedom to interact with each other. Gruenbaum (2011:55) describes this change, starting from the freedom for the users to create their own webpages, to interactive forums and chat rooms, to critical customers who are able to rate and recommend products to each other, leading up to a new type of internet, also known as ‘Web 2.0’. 

Gruenbaum (2011:55) asks a very interesting question that also relates to informal and formal knowledge: “Who decides that the individual, or the organization is an ‘expert’?” As the amount of information in the internet increases, it is often harder to determine the source and the reliability of the messages represented. As individuals we also have our own preferences of the facts we choose to follow. Gruenbaum (2011:56) gives an example of this as he compares the reliability of theory based information and information based on popular views. They can both be proven right or wrong according to the situation. This point of view can be seen as supporting both formal and informal paths for gaining knowledge in various settings. It supports the growing interest for autonomous education that is also presented as motivation for this study.

Wolfe (2001:91-112) describes options of creating informal online learning
environments. Wolfe (2001:92-93) first stresses the differences between formal and informal education, focusing on the settings where learning takes place. Wolfe exemplifies (2001:92) that academic settings such as schools are the most traditional for formal learning, whereas the term informal education is used more loosely to describe voluntary learning situations outside the places created traditionally for learning purposes. In addition, Wolfe (2001:91) points out that the Internet helps children to grasp abstract ideas easier than learning them only through theory in the school environment. Wolfe (2001:92) emphasizes the usefulness of the Internet as a learning environment by stating that it is possible to trigger the natural curiosity for experimentation of children, for instance by concretizing certain scientific abstractions. According to Wolfe (2001:94), interaction, the possibility to make alterations to the learning environment and chances to create new content for the other users to see, are the things that can greatly benefit learners using an informal online environment.

According to Herring (2004:1) online interaction is mostly done through discourse which is usually typed on a keyboard and read as text on the computer screen. In addition to the written communication there are many other ways of communicating through videos, pictures, and emoticons. These other forms used to portray a message are being used to add context and meaning to the online conversation. The interaction possibilities the Internet offers today have developed to the extent where it is possible to simulate real life situations for formal and informal purposes. These formal or informal situations can, for example, take place in game-like 3-D environments where the participants use ‘Avatars’ to represent themselves. The participants in each interaction have different tasks and goals to achieve according to their personal or, in a more formal setting, professional goals. Gruenbaum (2011:61) gives examples of the formal use of Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs) for nurses and paramedics to deal with situations that could be considered too expensive or dangerous to perform in real life. This is but one example of creating virtual environments for learning.
Gruenbaum (2011:61-62) adds that the most famous MUVE Second Life has different applications used in various fields of education, for instance training nurses, simulating behavior of microscopic organisms as well as training negotiation skills. In addition to the previous example of quite a concrete and modern day example of creating a learning environment, the web has, through the years of its development, offered its users various types of platforms to group up and join different social environments.

Thorne, Black and Sykes (2009:804) point out that even with the modern tools for interaction, the L2 classroom provides limited possibilities to engage in long-term communication with the target language. In their view the classroom environment has some restrictive qualities. Instead of language socialization the focus in a standard classroom is often in learning about language. According to Thorne, Black and Sykes (2009:804) there are many possibilities for L2 engagement, development and socialization through the social networks and constantly developing communication technologies.

Steel and Levy (2013:1) studied the evolution of computer assisted language learning (CALL) tools between years 2006 and 2011. Their findings point towards some important developments in the field of CALL. According to Steel and Levy (2013:12), the traditional language learning tools, such as dictionaries and grammar books have evolved and combined with new technologies. There are now various types of language learning platforms online. Steel and Levy (2013:12) mention that online dictionaries often include “practice drills, games and exercises [....] with automatic feedback”. This helps the learners self evaluate the learning process and assess their progress.
In addition, Steel and Levy (2013:14) found that students increasingly use their own technologies in formal and informal learning settings. They (2013) collected information of L2 student’s use of technologies inside class, outside class and in both surroundings. Among the technologies that learners reported were: online dictionaries, web-based translators, Youtube, online movies, social networking sites, mobile phone applications, conjugation websites, mp3 devices, online language games etc. According to the findings of Steel and Levy (2013:9), 50% or more students used the technologies mentioned above. This finding supports the notion from Thorne, Black and Sykes (2008:804) about the growing trend of using social networks and online communities as places for language learning. Steel and Levy (2013:10) add that the technologies used by the learners, often supported “language learning skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing in addition to language learning areas such as pronunciation grammar, vocabulary and discourse.” (Steel and Levy, 2013:11)

Steel and Levy (2013:11) describe these language learning technologies as something “that students personally select and use on their own devices rather than through VLE [Virtual Learning Environments] or other centrally provisioned technologies” (Steel and Levy, 2013:11). According to the findings of Steel and Levy (2013:8), in 2011 the out of class technology use was substantially higher than the technology use in classroom environment. Steel and Levy (2013:8) interpret this as a growing trend in learner autonomy and independence. Steel and Levy (2013:11-12) suggest that universities should focus more on accommodating students’ personal learning technology preferences into their teaching and assessment.
2.6 Computer-mediated communication

2.6.1 Features of CMC

Communication has gone through changes in the course of time due to many technical developments that have enhanced discourse between people who are separated by space and time. Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:14) state that computer mediated communication (CMC) has broadly a fifty year old history. In addition, Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:15) use the term CMC to refer “to any human communication achieved through, or with the help of computer technology”.

Today text based CMC has become a part of everyday communication. The term text based computer-mediated communication (CMC), refers to textual correspondence performed via e-mail, instant messaging, real-time chat environment, discussion forums, Web pages etc. (Herring, 2010:1). Despite the fact that many may be prone to thinking that conversation commonly involves speech, text based CMC has gained exceedingly popular status in the internet communities in comparison to Voice-over-Internet Protocols (VoIP) such as Skype. (Herring, 2010:1). An individual is often participating in CMC multiple times a day. We share our thoughts in the social media or, for example, send text messages to our friends and family on daily bases. Herring (2010:1) suggests that written discourse has and will continue to be the most typical form of communication in the World-Wide-Web.

There has been some debate about whether text based CMC can be interpreted as conversation. Herring (2010:1) states, however, that there are implications that it is at least, conversation-like. Some examples of this arise from the users of CMC. They often refer to their texts as conversation using verbs such as ‘talked’, ‘heard’ and ‘said’ as opposed to ‘typed’, ‘wrote’ or ‘read’. Nevertheless, there are features which differ between CMC, face-to-face interaction and real time and space interaction.
Herring (2010:2) elaborates that there are two types of text based CMC, synchronous (e.g. online chats or Skype) where the conversation is happening in real time, with all the participants at their computers simultaneously, and asynchronous (e.g. discussion threads, email exchange, blog commentary etc.) where there can be days, weeks or months between each response. In this study the data is gathered from an asynchronous mode of CMC where the author publishes his writings to the audience who, after reading the published article, give their responses in the ‘comment’ section.

Already in the early years of Internet the New London Group (1996:60) addressed some of the issues of literacy pedagogy in regards to the developments of the new communication technologies. As new text forms, linguistic tools and communication patterns were developing, language education should take these developments into consideration. The New London Group (1996) also introduced the term hybridizing for a communicative practice used often in the online environment. Hybridizing means using multiple different communication tools (such as written text, images and videos, etc.) simultaneously to convey a message. This is one of the reasons why online communication should not be viewed as only text based interaction or written communication. The participants in online communication often substitute the lack of face-to-face interaction and the inability to interpret or react to the participants’ facial expressions, with pictures or videos. Expressing emotions and tones that could be misinterpreted through text-based interaction is done through images and by exchanging files. In this study I will consider the additional audiovisual means and imagery used for communicational purposes as valid means of conveying a message in the text based CMC. In other words I am taking into account the multimodality of online discourse in all the forms it occurs.
Crystal (2001:1-2) exemplifies that there have been worries about the Internet and its effects on online users' language proficiency. Crystal (2001:2) adds, however, that there has always been criticism towards new communication technologies, starting from the time when the printing press was developed. Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:46-47) discuss the criticism that CMC has faced during the years. They (2004:47) point out that usually the criticism towards CMC comes from lay people or journalists who state that online communication affects users' offline communication skills by making them antisocial and asocial. In addition Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:46), mention the opposing view that online communication has also been complimented for the possibilities it gives for bringing people together, breaking geographical and social boundaries as well as creating communities for people to share their knowledge and beliefs.

Due to the common attitude that people tend to idealize offline interaction, Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:50-50) raise relevant questions concerning the relationship between online and offline communication and the different attitudes between the two. How can we be sure that the mediated message goes through to the recipient in the way we intended it to however it is mediated? Can we necessarily say that the messages and cues we give to the other participant in a conversation are interpreted better in face-to-face interaction than in online communication? According to Coupland (1999:3) communication can be in itself miscommunication due to the fact that it is based on interpretations. Whether the communication is face-to-face interaction or online text-based interactions there are always possibilities for flaws and misunderstandings. These misunderstandings are actually so common in everyday communication that we actually enjoy them as humor and enjoyment in our everyday lives.

Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:51) highlight the similarities between
online and offline communication by stating that our basic needs behind the
communication are often similar whether in CMC or offline interaction. The
number of users who communicate online regularly is on a constant rise.
Thurlow, Lenger and Tomic (2004:51) point out that many people have long
lasting and close relationships that are maintained through online
communication. Relationships have started and ended via CMC.
2.6.2 Language learning and online communities

The online environment has given people increasing possibilities to group up according to their social, political and professional interests. Sockett and Toffoli (2012:146) underline the significance of virtual communities in language learning. Sockett and Toffoli (2012:146) give three different arguments in favor of learning in virtual communities using Facebook. Firstly the learners benefit from the opportunities to use the target language in authentic contexts, such as, hobbies, interests and work related issues. This is not often a possibility in formal language learning settings. Secondly Socket and Toffoli (2012:146) give an example of Facebook as a good platform, offering various roles for learners especially in written communication:

The multiple roles afforded by the Facebook interface, of author, respondent, commenter, recommender, approver etc., give fledgling English users many easy ways to enter into communication in a contextually supportive setting (Socket and Toffoli, 2012:146)

Finally Socket and Toffoli (2012:146) propose that the number and status of users in different social medias can be more beneficial and relevant to learners than artificial classroom conversation participants. Knowing the counterpart in the communication will make the conversation more engaging and meaningful to the learner. In addition, Socket and Toffoli (2012:146) compare authentic virtual communities such as Facebook to artificial virtual worlds such as Second Life. The authors state that an authentic situation, using participants’ real names may assist language learning, in comparison to a virtual setting with pseudonyms and avatars.

I would disagree with the previous statement to the extent that there are exceptions within groups of special interests that are interested in online
gaming and role-playing. Within these interest groups the participants are less interested in the real identity of the players than the successful communication and managing the task at hand. There has been research done about the language learning within gaming related communities. It is, however, common that even the participants of specific interest groups use their true identities in the social media. It is quite usual for a person to have multiple roles in different online environments.

Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:59) claim that there are individuals who regard their online relationships as more valuable than the offline relationships. It is under constant discussion whether this type of tendency in social behavior should be seen as alarming due to the problems that arise from people socially alienating from the concrete world. However this type of grouping effects can be seen in all aspects of life and are these days, if not required then expected from e.g. certain political parties or the staff of a certain company.

Danet and Herring (2007:7) regard Internet users as members of different speech communities, who through written or spoken language share their know-how, ideas and moral views. According to Danet and Herring (2007:7), participants of these speech communities share “sociolinguistic norms” similar to those that apply in face-to-face interaction. Danet and Herring (2007:7) also view that similarly to the speech communities outside the Web, the norms for online speech communities are affected by social change and developments in the course of time.

The language of an online speech community is often determined and negotiated socially by the members of the community. As an example the web site that is under my examination uses English as a lingua franca. Danet
and Herring (2007:22) state that although there is more than one reason for the strong status of English used as L2, the Internet has, due to the amount of technical vocabulary and multicultural target audiences strengthened the expansion of English as a global language.

### 2.6.3 Computer-mediated discourse analysis

There are multiple communication tools that we use in educational settings. Kress (2011:205) focuses on the multimodality of texts and conversations in educational settings. In addition to spoken and written language there are many additional ways of communication even in the most traditional classroom settings. According to Kress (2011:207) using a term text in discourse analysis can be used to refer to spoken, written, visual and audio -means of communication. Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004:18) agree with the multimodal aspect of communication adding that it is also multifunctional according to the different agendas people may have behind the message conveyed.

Kress (2011:207-208) elaborates this by presenting a normal classroom situation where a drawing is used to exemplify the quite abstract construction off a simple cell. In the example situation a pupil is asked to draw a cell with a nucleus. By setting a task for the pupil in addition to just spoken explanation of the issue at hand, the teacher gets to know more about the pupil’s skills and comprehension of the field of study in question. A lot more is involved in this conversation than only written and spoken language. As human communication entails many ways of communicating, the artistic or, for example, humorous undertones should be taken into account in the analysis.

Referring to the social nature of education, Kress (2011) strongly brings forth the importance of taking the semiotic relationships into account in discourse
analysis taking place in educational settings. In addition to a regular school environment Kress (2011:213) gives another example of an operating theatre where communication in education is happening through actions, speech, gazes and touching. Although communication that requires physical presence of the participants is not common for online interaction, it is important to remember that it is a common feature in online interaction to use imagery and sounds to strengthen and clarify the message. These visual and audio means of communication are often used for making the interaction more natural.

Herring (2004:1) states that the advantage of examining computer-mediated discourse comes from the fact that the socially meaningful communication leaves textual trace that is easier to research and examine. Computer mediated discourse analysis offers us new possibilities for research. CMDA uses linguistic methods of analysis to examine interaction through computerized tools. Herring (2004:4) sees CMDA more as an approach than a theory or a method due to the fact that it allows the examination of various theories of discourse, in computer mediated setting. As an example Herring (2004:2) lists different “logs of verbal interactions (characters, words, utterances messages, exchanges, threads, archives etc.)” as the data for analysis in CMDA. This means that any type of recordable, textual or spoken, online behavior can be examined through CMDA.

CMDA applies methods adapted from language-focused disciplines such as linguistics, communication, and rhetoric to the analysis of computer-mediated communication (Herring, 2001)

When examining the data, there are 4 different layers: structure, meaning interaction and social behavior, which can be viewed using CMDA (Herring, 2004:3). Structure refers to the micro level of the language such as typography, orthography, word formation and sentence structure. When researching meaning in discourse, one should focus on the word meanings,
speech acts and specific utterances. Interaction can be examined through turn taking, topic development and negotiation. The social level is seen through the way the discourse participants bring forth their humor, react to conflict, assert themselves and portray group membership. (Herring, 2004:3) Herring (2004:3) also adds a fifth level in which group participation can be looked into by examining the frequency and length of online messages. As this study examines the interaction in an online community, meaning, social, interactional and participation -levels are of the most relevance for the analysis.


3 Data and Methods

In this chapter I will try to shed some light on how I approach my data. The research is done from a qualitative perspective using the methods of narrative and discourse analysis. More precisely I am using the model of computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) developed by Herring (2004).

3.1 Characteristics of the data

This study focuses on computer mediated discourse and the exchange of ideas and responses in an online environment. For this purpose I chose the culture and language learning website tofugu.com. Due to the fact that this webpage is full of information about culture as well as different specific areas of learning the target language, and furthermore, new entries are written several times a week, I needed to restrict the focus of analysis to selected sections of the website.

The information available in the webpage is divided into four different sections: articles, learn, store and contact. The Learn-section offers learners Top 10 Japanese resources, Japanese resource reviews and guides for facing differences in cultural and social situations. The Store-section is mainly for marketing online-learning materials developed by the creators of tofugu.com. Picture A presents the design and layout of the webpage on the 19th of June 2013.
A. The article section consists of written work by various writers of tofugu.com. In addition to the staff of tofugu.com, there is written work by Tofugu interns and westerners currently living in Japan. The majority of the articles are written from a perspective of the westernized public, as it seems that most of the writers are originally from English speaking countries. To name a few headings covered in the article section, they included:

- Happened in Japan
- Japanese News
- Oh So Cultured
- People, Persons and Anti-People
- An Epic History
- Reviewing the Products
- Delicious Japanese Food

The articles section covers a large amount of topics related to Japan, including culture, language and current affairs. The articles I chose for closer observation are from the Learn Japanese section.
I decided to use articles dealing with one major topic about language learning from different perspectives. These articles were published online between 20th of September and 23rd of November 2011. In these blog entries one of the authors, who is also the creator of the Tofugu-webpage, discusses the Japanese language learning process from his personal perspective. In addition he uses examples that are found in different sources that examine language learning as a phenomenon. He writes about how the goal of language learning is making the target language “obvious” to the learner. This gives an implication of his belief that it is possible to fully acquire a language to the extent that it becomes obvious to the learner. After giving examples of his experience the publisher often asks his audience for responses to these issues. The areas of my interest are specifically: the beliefs that come across the texts about making the target language “obvious”, the way these beliefs are narrated to the audience and the way the language learning community is responding to these beliefs. There are altogether 5 articles about different learning theories under one big ‘umbrella’ heading “Making Japanese Obvious”.

The origins of the authors and publishers of the target website should also be taken into account. As citizens of USA, with mixed cultural heritage, their ideas have been affected by both American and Asian cultures. The members of this online community have various learning backgrounds also due to the fact that they belong to many different nationalities. The language for all posts from the publishers is English, which is used as a lingua franca in this multicultural language community. The audience occasionally post brief comments in Japanese but the majority of the responses are in English.

In this research the data can be viewed as more natural than in a conversation like interview, due to the fact that it is obtained from an authentic discussion and comments given without the participation of an
interviewer. The voice of the participants of each conversation or of the authors of the articles is unaffected by the presence or goals of the researcher.

3.2 Structure of the analytic approach

In this case study I set out to find answers to the following questions: What different beliefs come across through the texts about making the target language obvious? How are they narrated? How is the language learning community responding to those beliefs? How does the webpage serve as a platform for these types of discussions and what advantages/ disadvantages could this kind of language learning environment have for the learners?

In the following chapter, I address each article in its own section. As a structure base for my analyses, I examine the data using Herring’s 4-layer-model (3:2004). In other words I am looking at the meaning, structure, interaction and social behavior, the beliefs that they present in the articles and the responses given by the readers, active members of the web page. I chose to examine the articles in the order in which they are published due to the fact that I am interested in how the discourse develops between the participants in the course of time.

The five articles I chose to look at are:

20th September 2011, Making Japanese Obvious
27th September 2011, How the Little Epiphanies Add Up
4th October 2011, Confused? Good. That Means You’re Understanding
13th November 2011, Conscious Japanese Competence
23rd November 2011, Actionable Ways to Make Japanese Obvious To You
The articles are discussed in chronological order, each in their own subchapter. This helps to treat the text as an ongoing discussion that progresses with each topic relating to the previous one. In the discussion chapter, the findings are discussed in relation to the research questions. Attention will be paid to the similarities, contradictions and general observations that arose from the articles and the responses.

As the data I analyzed is published merely online it may go through some changes in the course of time. The blog posts are currently visible on the pages and available for more comments every day. The data I am discussing is printed from the webpages on the 14th of June 2012. Some of the comments may have been placed in a different order than they are in the prints I took of the pages in question. The commenters of the webpage may use nicknames, real names or be anonymous in their comments. Some of the registered commenters also have profile picture that may be a symbol or their own picture depending on their preference. I chose not to include any information on the commenters’ characteristics when referring to their statements. I made no distinction in their sex age or cultural background unless they specifically brought it up in their comments. I have numbered the printed out comments with ordinal numbers starting from the first comment of the first article and ending with the last comment on the fifth.

With regard to the analysis of the images it should be stated that the website had gone through some changes in its visual look between the 14th of June 2012, when I printed out the material and May-August 2013 when added the screen shots to this thesis. The images portray the same things as before but some of them can be stylistically somewhat different or they may have some more details in comparison to the images from summer 2012. As the creators of the webpage have the right to change their website in any way they
This study presents the situation as it was between June 2012 and August 2013.

In order to find out how specific beliefs are narrated, I will look at the metaphors the publisher of the article and the community members use to describe different learning experiences and beliefs. These metaphors shed light on how the members of this community share their experiences and how they individually view the language learning process. Metaphors are used in making the discussion of quite abstract and personal experiences approachable for many participants. Metaphors are often used for sharing feelings and emotions that are usually quite subjective.
4 Analysis

Chapter 4 closely examines the articles written by one of the authors of tofugu.com, as well as the comments and discussions each article has raised among the members of this language learning community. The articles are discussed in chronological order and dealt with in two sections. Firstly, I present some specific characteristics of Koichi’s writing. I will take a look at how Koichi presents each issue for discussion in the actual article. Secondly, I look at specific comments and overall reactions from the other members of the community. The areas of interest in this chapter are the actual methods of communication used in the online community for sharing learning experiences and beliefs.

As mentioned earlier, all the articles I examine have the same author who writes under the name Koichi. He uses very popular terminology, gives examples from everyday life and also refers to other blogs (e.g. Bassett 2011) and written work. All of these articles contain pictures, links to other pages or videos related to the issues covered in them. Koichi clearly has his own voice coming through his writing. He does this through the style of humor and cultural reference. From time to time he seems to assume that the readers follow similar type of popular media as he does. His writing is quite speech-like, containing little pauses for jokes and questions through which he may be trying to take the point of view of the language learners. He writes from his personal experience and perspective.

1. In order to know Japanese, Japanese has to be Obvious to you. D’uh. That’s pretty obvious itself, right? I think the really interesting question, though, is how to get to this point. Sure, you could say you want to “learn Japanese” but what does that mean?

2. The real question that’s on most Japanese learners’ minds, though, is this: How the #@! do I get to this point? How do I make Japanese obvious?
Extracts 1 and 2 serve as examples of Koichi’s speech-like text. He uses informal language, symbols for swearing and utterances that rarely take textual forms, such as d’uh, in the extracts above. He uses questions to awaken and direct the audiences’ interest and curiosity. In the final sentence in extract 2 Koichi makes an assumption about how the learners could respond to his statements. Due to these assumptions he is making about his audience it seems as if he is taking both the role of the speaker and the listener in the conversation. Koichi uses pronouns I, me, my to refer to himself and his own experiences and relations to each subject. The humor Koichi uses is very typical in his writing and he uses humor to bring forth his persona in the community. The structure of his texts often bears a resemblance to chains of thought that also try to predict the views of his readers. For these reasons his text could be viewed as conversational.

The target audience for the blog is language learners, specifically learners of the Japanese language. However, these articles mostly discuss learning in general. There are but a few remarks that are specifically applicable for Japanese language learning. In this analysis I focus on the use of metaphors, imagery and the shared personal learning experiences that come across in the discourse between Koichi’s posts and the responses from his audience.

4.1 Learning something means it becomes obvious to the learner.

4.1.1 Koichi’s theories of learning in article 1

In the first article and commentary Koichi wants to make his theories of learning more familiar to the readers. It could be viewed as an introductory article to the other four. He approaches the learning process firstly, talking about the goal and secondly the steps one needs to take to reach it. Koichi
uses the first entry to introduce his learning philosophy to the audience. Due to the style of his writing it could be stated that Koichi’s philosophy is formed simultaneously as the text progresses. He seems to write directly and personally to the reader. This can be interpreted from his text and the way he makes jokes, asks questions and speaks directly to his audience. Koichi’s text is journal-like and conversational, with short pauses to joke in between the actual issue at hand.

Extract 3 is an example of his personal writing style

3. I’d say the main point of his article is that when you’re learning or doing something (in his case math or programming) you struggle with a bunch of little things and have a bunch of little epiphanies until you reach the point where things are “obvious.” When things are “obvious” you can look back and be like “oh, jeepers, that was easy. I should have been able to do that much more quickly” (yes, I am assuming you talk like Shaggy from Scooby Doo). (tofugu.com, 2011)

On the last utterance of the extract above Koichi pauses his explanation to talk directly and personally to his readers. He makes an assumption or a joke about his way of writing and makes a reference to a popular American cartoon, Scooby Doo. He steps out of the main topic to address the reader and gives examples deriving from the popular media. He uses a very characteristic stylistic tool to make the text light and approachable. By using these references, he makes an assumption that his audience shares a similar cultural background and is familiar with American popular culture.

In extract 4 Koichi is explaining why he decided to write about the topic at hand. In addition he brings up the assumption that there are some readers that are benefitting from this web page from the point of view of self-learning and doing the work alone, without a concrete mentor or a tutor.
4. Now I’ll be writing these crazy learning theories out so that you can all benefit from them in at least a sort of abstract sense while you’re studying Japanese on your own. (tofugu.com 2011)

The whole atmosphere, discussing these crazy learning theories is very relaxed and casual. In addition, Koichi uses the phrase the more I think about it which implies that he is engaged in the conversation and simultaneously actively thinking about the subject. In normal conversations what we say is rarely fully planned and the thought process is formed simultaneously with the speech. Koichi’s tone is therefore quite conversational. In his blog entries Koichi has many instances of self-deprecating humor. In Extract 5 Koichi discusses learning by referring to it as a journey of learners approaching their learning destinations. He also highlights that learners face similar phases as their learning progresses.

5. The more I think about it, though, the more it seems to me that there are a lot of things that all Japanese learners share with each other in terms of their journeys to ‘learning Japanese’ (tofugu.com 2011)

6. So, over the next couple months I’ll be posting about “Making Japanese Obvious” in an attempt to help you to reach that beautiful peak yourself. A lot of the info actually parallels what I do in TextFugu, but now I’ll be writing these crazy learning theories out so that you can all benefit from them in at least a sort of abstract sense while you’re studying Japanese on your own. Either way, I hope it’s going to be incredibly helpful. (tofugu.com 2011)

In extract 6 Koichi also states that the article is an attempt to help the learners reach that beautiful peak of making the target language obvious through self-learning. This statement suggests that he sees language learning as a mountain, which one must climb. Mountain climbing requires goals, planning, getting the right equipment and strong will power. All of which are things required in learning as well. This metaphor connects language learning to moving from one place to another. A struggle or a climb, after which the reached peak is the achieved goal. Consequently, the peak is
reached when the target language becomes obvious. This metaphor gives a strong impression of language as a skill that can be fully mastered. Scholars disagree, however, on what mastering a language actually means or whether it is even possible to fully master a language.

Koichi mentions possible “pit falls” that may occur during the learning process. He continues stating that discussing them in the articles may help the learners so that they “run fewer walls that could possibly end your Japanese learning career”. These metaphors are closely related to movement and running. Falling in a pit during the journey, or running against a wall are physical incidents used to determine a psychological block. However, in this entry, he does not give any examples of what he thinks these blocks could be in practice.

In the end of his post Koichi asks the readers to think about their personal lives and what steps they have taken before something became obvious to them. He states that even if it seems that these realizations came out of nowhere there have been certain incidents or things to lead the learner there. Koichi encourages his audience to think about what could be done to make something obvious and how these things could be applicable to other aspects of life.

7. Over the next few days, think about things you think of as “obvious.” How did you reach that state? It might seem like magic… but there were certain things you did to get there. What are you good at? What did you have to do to make it obvious? How can you apply that to other things in life? Noticing little things like this that are normally hidden can really give you a boost – that’s exactly what I hope to do with Japanese learning for you with these “Obvious” posts. (tofugu.com, 2011)

Extract 7 leads the reader already towards the topic of the next post from Koichi. It represents the idea of learning through many small realizations that add up to wider understanding. This suggestion can be seen especially
applicable when talking about language learning. Many different aspects of learning a language can add up to understanding wider cultural and political issues.

Koichi strengthens his messages with images and links to other sources on the subject. In this first post Koichi used three visual aids. Picture B is of a character from the cartoon series South Park, Captain Hindsight. Picture C is of Captain Luc Picard, a character in a science fiction television series Star Trek. In the end of the article there is also a You Tube video, a joke made from a G.I. Joe cartoon series.

B.

Picture B serves as a cover picture to the first post. Captain Hindsight is a cartoon character, a caricature of a superhero who, as the name suggests, enters the scene of a disaster, tells the people involved what should have been done to prevent the disaster, after which the hero flies into the sunset. In an example situation this character’s role could be to point out the correct placement of sprinklers when the fire has already started. In other words, he is telling people something that should be obvious. This is a good example of the way that Koichi employs icons and characters from popular culture and the issues they represent to strengthen his message. Hindsight is in fact often
beneficial to learning. Learning from mistakes usually prevents learners from making them again.

Picture C is a good example of the type of imagery Koichi uses to make a humorous comment. The reason for using these images in this case could be to soften or popularize the topic and to make the concept more approachable to the audience.

C. [Image 71x378 to 482x570]

That Is So Obvious!

I should have known that big square thing was up to no good...

Picture C serves as an example of portraying a feeling in an online conversation. Realizing something that should have been obvious from the start can sometimes feel frustrating. The image of a person placing a hand over their face, in layman terms ‘facepalm’, is also very familiar to many Internet users as a gesture or an icon for frustration or embarrassment. In addition to pictures, people online often use it also in its written form in written online conversations. Picture D also included a caption added by Koichi to make the connection between the picture and his text more apparent.
In the first article we are introduced to Koichi’s way of writing and his tendency to lighten the subject with humor and cultural references. Koichi presents his theories and beliefs about learning. He introduces the idea that learning consists of struggles with many smaller issues before one can reach the final goal. Koichi points out that this learning experience should be shared because learners face similar difficulties in their learning paths. He uses many travel metaphors such as climbing a mountain or a going on a journey to describe the learning process. Koichi uses images and references of popular culture, which makes the topic more approachable and less academic.
4.1.2 How does the audience respond?

The audience's reactions to the post are mostly in a positive and encouraging tone. Feedback was given about the chosen topic, personal experiences related to the topic and about the person writing the articles. The vocabulary used in the comments was from time to time very emotional and speech like. For instance, in comments 2 and 5 the learners use phrases: “I’m freaking out” and “hit the spot”. These two are common idioms that in this case are used to describe feelings connected with learning. Comment 1 is an example of positive feedback to the writer of the article. The comment includes a bit of code switching from English to the target language in addition to strong attitude towards Koichi and towards Japanese as a language. Using the target language implies a strong will to share and show the knowledge already acquired by the learner. Also referring to a language as cool suggests that the learner has quite a positive attitude towards learning Japanese. This strong phrase also implies how much the learner feels the mentor has affected the learning of Japanese in the west. This evaluation takes also into account that the site seems to be specifically designed to westerners learning an Asian language.

**Comment 1:** I think Koichi is the best thing that happened to Nihongo, The Japanese language in the west ever. The only thing cooler than him is the language itself.

Most comments, however, were about the content of the article. Comment 2 evaluates that this article series may help in getting back on track in the learning process. Comment 2 can be seen as feedback to the writer and also something personal to share with the rest of the audience. It implies anticipation of the future articles and it also reveals the current learning situation of the commenter.

**Comment 2:** Looking forward to this maybe it will help get me on track my perfect routine has been blasted out the window by college and I’m freaking out.
In comment 5 the commenter states that s/he believes that knowing another language has helped in the learning process. This suggests that s/he believes that there are similar techniques to language learning regardless of the target language. Commenter 5 mentions a train of thought that has to be learned when approaching a new language. Learning a new language will introduce the learner to new mindsets. This metaphor is quite fitting with the other railway related metaphor of comment 2 where the commenter mentions getting back on track. The train of thought is getting back on the right track. This metaphor connects learning with not only traveling but also a specific means of transport. It could be that comment 2 is affecting the language use of commenter 5. This suggests that commenter 5 is appropriating his/her speech acts to fit the conversation. These are apt examples of using metaphors to describe different stages of learning. These members of the audience are using concrete subjects to describe abstract phenomena.

**Comment 5:** [T]his post really hit the spot for me” “Everyone is different but I believe that me knowing another language(s) is what helped me more than anything.[...]I have to not only learn Japanese but I have to learn the train of thought that goes with it”

Overall, there were no apparently negative comments concerning the post or the author. However, there was a comment (6), which can be a general statement or it could be interpreted as a frustrated or a sarcastic joke.

**Comment 6:** Obvious Japanese is obvious...

There were two comments in which the writers describe their own learning metaphors. The following comments give an imaginative example about the time spent during the learning process.
Comment 3: It's like hacking through an jungle with a machete. The only time you're going to see a trail is when you look back on the ground you've already cleared out.

In comment 7, the commenter is consciously creating a very specific metaphor comparing the learning path to a rocket launch. The metaphor is used to better describe the personal learning experience and beliefs connected to learning.

Comment 7: [...] You know the rockets that we launch into space? Those have to crawl at a horrible pace (about 3-5m/ hr.) just to get to launch pad. Once there, after a T-10 countdown, they go shooting off into space at an incredible speed.” “Once you pass that point when you feel like you’re crawling, you grasp things quicker, and like the rocket you go blasting off…(metaphorically of course!)

In the first article both the creator of the webpage and the people commenting his post connect learning with movement from one place to another. It seems that forming different learning metaphors comes quite naturally to the author of the article and his audience. There metaphors are used in dialogue to better describe individual learning processes. Whether it’s climbing a mountain, taking a journey or skyrocketing into space, movement is strongly connected to the metaphors used in this post. In addition, in comment 3 learning a language is described as a struggle through a thick jungle. The progress is slow and the path ahead remains unclear. The results can be seen when looking back on the learning process and comparing the early stage of the learning path to the point reached.

4.2 Little epiphanies lead to great realizations.

4.2.1 Koichi beliefs about the process of learning in article 2

In his second post Koichi is writing about the different steps learners need to take in the learning process. When learning greater wholes we need to approach our main goal through first grasping smaller units of information.
Koichi mentions that he does not have background knowledge or scientific studies to back his epiphany theory. He is relying on his personal experience as a language learner. Koichi states that we come across small epiphanies in the language learning process which one by one lead us to better understanding of the whole.

Koichi elaborates what he means by epiphanies in extract 8. In extract 9 Koichi stresses that the learners have to be constantly looking for epiphanies and notice them to be able to benefit from them. He encourages the learners to monitor their learning process in order to know the direction where they are headed in their learning. He points out that learners can become better at noticing these epiphanies if they practice.

8. Basically, it's something you realize all of a sudden. Now, most people usually think about big, life changing epiphanies when they think about epiphanies. But, I don't think these are particularly helpful when it comes to language learning. Little epiphanies are where the progress is at - the problem is that you just don't notice them too well. Just the act of noticing little epiphanies (they really do happen quite often, as long as you get little enough) will change your outlook on your progress through life (as well as your progress through the Japanese language). (tofugu.com, 2011)

In the previous extract Koichi wants to make the learners aware of the progress they make in smaller units to reach greater goals in language learning. These smaller units can be small and specific, such as, how to pronounce a certain word, learning the imperative sentence structure or knowing the proper use of a compliment in a specific environment. After a while this specific grammar rule can become an automatic part of the learner’s language. In addition Koichi stresses the importance of noticing the epiphanies. He stresses that to fully benefit and learn from the experience the learner should be aware of what is happening in the learning process. In extract 9 Koichi adds that although difficult to master, noticing the epiphanies can become a natural way to approach new information.
9. Paying attention seems simple enough, but it’s actually really hard. You have to constantly be thinking “am I realizing something?” throughout the entire day, and that gets difficult to do until you do it enough (and it just becomes a natural question in your head). Whenever you feel confusion, or something similar, you should automatically get ready to notice your epiphany. When you have one, think through it and how you came to it in your head. Eventually, you’ll actually get better at having epiphanies. Epiphanies are the steps towards greater understanding – you want to have a lot of these if you can. (tofugu.com, 2011)

In his second article Koichi is giving more concrete advice and approaches to learning languages and noticing epiphanies. In extract 10 Koichi suggests writing down things that are unfamiliar to the learner.

10. Bring a small notepad with you wherever you go or set up Evernote on your phone. Writing things down that you don’t understand is a lesson in humility and a lesson in epiphanies. You should go through your list every day and take note of the things you understand (between the time you wrote them down and the time you looked at them again). Then, think back to how you came to that understanding. What epiphany brought you over the edge? What epiphany made that concept make sense? Think through the epiphany and slow it down (usually they come on pretty suddenly!) so you can figure out how you reached that point of understanding. (tofugu.com, 2011)

Koichi points out that it is possible to improve skills in getting and noticing epiphanies while learning. He stresses that writing things down and revising the things a learner knows and doesn’t know is a good way of gaining self-knowledge. Koichi adds that consistency is the key to learning. According to Koichi it is better to study consistently than in bursts in order to have more epiphanies. In his view it is more beneficial to reach for smaller goals and reach them often, than struggle for a big goal for a long period of time. I would also add that it is probably more motivating to have small frequent victories. Koichi also states that it important to stop a little when reaching an epiphany and take a look where it came from and how it was reached. This would imply that he sees patience as an important part of the learning process.
11. Shoot for the small stuff - they add up automatically into the big stuff without you knowing (that's why “obvious” status will sneak up on you!). Don’t make your goals gigantic, make them small. Achieve your goals often.

The second article has three pictures as visual aids to illustrate the main idea to the audience. The first picture is a photo of a pile of logs. The second is a photo of a notice signpost. The third is a photo of multiple lit light bulbs.

The first picture of a log pile demonstrates the main idea of the article. Smaller units make a big structure; many singular logs make a big pile. This pile of logs could be seen metaphorically feeding the fire of knowledge.

D.

**Noticing Your Epiphanies**

![Picture D](image)

One thing I want you to try is to pay close attention to your epiphanies. I believe epiphanies are happening all the time, you just have to think smaller.

Picture D is a humorous photograph of a signpost connected to the part of the text where Koichi talks of noticing epiphanies.

E.
I find picture E especially apt for this text due to the fact that light has, through centuries, been metaphorically connected with knowledge. This quite ordinary metaphor is used as an image but it is not stated in the text. In popular culture, cartoons and comic books, a light bulb lighting up on top of a person's head signals a newborn idea, in other words, an epiphany. Though not implied in the text, the ancient metaphor that demonstrates educators as torchbearers of the society could be connected to the imagery used in this article. Picture F also illustrates the power of multiple epiphanies as small sources of light, which together illuminate wide spaces. The picture of a log pile and picture F are connected through the metaphoric use of fire and light.
4.2.2 Audience’s responses to Epiphanies

I have categorized the comments from the audience to Koichi’s second post as positive, critical, supporting and personal experience stories.

Comments 12, 14 and 16 are audiences’ personal experiences that support the message of the post. These are examples of the personal narratives the audience use to convey their experience of epiphanies.

Commenter 12 uses a phrase from J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings to demonstrate the importance of the epiphany. The original phrase by Tolkien used in the book and in the motion picture trilogy is “One ring to rule them all”. Commenter 12 discusses the One Epiphany to Rule Them All. This suggests that not only Koichi is using cultural reference and assuming that the audience is familiar with it, but the audience answers using similar stylistic tools and communication methods. However, the epiphany of commenter 12 seems to be quite substantial in the learning process in comparison to the many small ones mentioned by Koichi.

Comment 12: About 2 months ago I noticed that I had reached the One Epiphany to Rule Them All. That was the moment I realised that I knew enough Japanese to learn Japanese using Japanese alone. That is, doing away with English as a medium. The moment you can use a kokugo dictionary and no longer really need an English <=> Japanese dictionary, you enter an exponential curve of improvement, and I feel like my proficiency is almost doubling every month now. This One Epiphany to Rule Them All also makes it so you can easily study 8 hours+ a day without getting tired, since you can think quite a bit in Japanese naturally. It took me roughly 5 years on and off to get there.

Commenter 14 had a realization about the differences between spoken and written language and the importance of getting the message across. Commenter 16 gives quite concrete examples of epiphanies while learning vocabulary. The commenter states that recent epiphanies are more easily noticed than old ones. S/he also includes a statement of the satisfaction of
learning. In addition, both comments 14 and 16 include different ways of language learning through conversation groups, watching anime (Japanese cartoons) and cramming for grammar.

**Comment 14:** [...] My latest epiphany: At our local Japanese conversation table, I realized that I had been focusing too much on having 100% perfect grammar, to the exclusion of actually listening to and understanding what the other person was saying, or even really trying to get the point across of what I was saying. When practicing conversation, it's far better to immerse yourself in the moment and to not spend all your time worrying about making mistakes.

**Comment 16:** Most of my epiphanies are single kanji or vocab words, usually ones that I’ve learned recently (I tend to notice them more if they’re recent acquisitions). Like when I see 数える and not only know that it means to count, but also know that it's pronounced かぞえる, or when I watched No. 6 (an anime) and understood the word 工場 (こうじょう·factory) without subs. It’s all about the little pleasures :)

Comments 11, 13 and 15 were encouraging with positive feedback. Comment 11 mentions the aspect of learning how to learn which is quite an essential topic for the whole article series. The commenter states that s/he had an epiphany about having epiphanies, which suggests she had a realization about the construction of the learning process and the practical usefulness of learning skills. Commenter 11 is underlining the message of the article through stating her/ his own relation to it. The commenter is also using the pronoun we, to refer to the whole audience and the community as a group of learners with similar goals. Finally the commenter states her/ his appreciation of the article.

**Comment 11:** I started reading this and was thinking how abstract this concept was. Then I had an epiphany about having epiphanies and realized how applicable this really is. Essentially you are learning how to learn and when you pay attention to how to learn things you can learn them faster and more efficiently. I appreciate the article.
Firstly comment 13 includes some positive feedback for the creators of the website. Secondly comment 13 includes a follow up question to other language learners that were taking part in the conversation. The commenter is also referring to the group with the pronoun we, which suggests a feeling of togetherness and belonging to the group. This comment encourages the group to follow up with further discussion.

**Comment 13:** Great post, Koichi. First off, thank you, Hashi and John for all the work you put into this. It’s much appreciated. I wanted to pose the question. How did we, as youngsters, learn? Do you think we had small epiphanies as well? Or were things just perfunctory growing up for us? Can anyone remember having epiphanies growing up (and I do mean as a young child)?

Commenter 15 uses capitalized letters to emphasize certain words and to give more tones to the text. The beginning of the comment is positive feedback to Koichi and the other authors of the webpage, in addition to a statement about the learner’s own attitude towards the target language. This commenter makes an onomatopoetic expression duhn duhn duhnnn, which derives from a dramatic sound effect used in a movie or series. This gives the comment a more vocal feel that is typical in online conversations. Comment 15 has also a smiley emoticon and brackets that give the text quite a speech like quality.

**Comment 15:** It’s OBVIOUS that you love teaching Japanese! :) I love learning about Japan and think you’re funny. OBVIOUS. But I didn’t know I’d learn fun tips for other studies! i.e. Cell Bio... duhn duhn duhnnn (If you don’t add that last part people don’t know what you’re talking about.)

Comment 17 is criticizing the topic of the post and comment 17.1 is a response to it from Koichi. The commenter makes a statement that implies that the article was a waste of time. Koichi responds sarcastically to the comment. He doesn’t really attack the statement directly but makes an assumption of what comment 17 entailed.
Comment 17: So you just wrote three pages of text about how realizing things about Japanese helps you learn Japanese. College must have been a breeze.

Comment 17.1: So what you're saying is that this stuff is... OBVIOUS

It seems that a lot of the language learners visiting the page were able to relate to Koichi’s post. Many learners felt that they wanted to share their own experiences that were similar to the examples Koichi was presenting. Feeling that the learners can communicate and share their experiences openly strengthens the idea of a language learning community. Sharing experiences is done through shared communication tools, which included shared cultural references, referring to the community as we, using humor as a tool for sharing experiences and speech like expressions of emotion. Despite comment 17 that implied that the post was a waste of time, there were many who wanted to thank the makers of the webpage for their time and effort in updating the page and writing helpful and interesting material. After examining the second thread of comments, it could be stated that in addition to giving information about learning, the page is helping the audience to share their enthusiasm and interests with each other.
4.3 Confusion leads to learning

4.3.1 Koichi’s beliefs on confusion in article 3

In relation to his previous article, specifically to extract 9 where he mentions that epiphanies can come after feeling confused, Koichi sets out to examine the relationship between confusion and learning. The main idea of this article is that confusion is an essential part of learning and learners shouldn’t be afraid of this uncomfortable stage in the learning process.

Koichi starts his third post by giving a strong statement about students and teachers in Extract 12.

12. I’ve had some terrible teachers and a lot of it comes down to clarity... but most of the time, this is the wrong way to judge teachers (at least if you want to actually learn anything). Turns out that a) students are a terrible judge of what they know and don’t know, and b) confused students actually know more than students who aren’t confused. Sounds weird, right?

In the previous extract, Koichi is stating that students are not very good at evaluating their knowledge and being confused about a topic will lead to better results in the long run. Koichi bases the topic of his third post, on another post published in a Computing Education Blog.


The use of other online sources is quite a common method used in blogs. Koichi uses other sources as evidence to reinforce his statements. Regardless of the topic it is quite usual for bloggers to use links to videos, references to further information or specific scientific information published on another webpage as a back up for their statements. This is a good example of using the vast amount of information available online as a support for the text. It is
quite usual that even when not given more information, the readers will find out facts that either support or contradict the points of view of the writer.

The post in the link above is about Eric Mazur, a physics education researcher in Harvard. Koichi used Mazur’s findings as inspiration for his language learning blog. He focuses especially on Mazur’s findings on how confused students answered a questionnaire more correctly than the students who thought they knew what they were doing. In extract 13 he explains his interest toward the topic of confusion. Picture E is a chart of research results that are presented first in the computing education blog and which Koichi also added to his post.

13. The part of the keynote that I thought was particularly interesting (at least when it comes to this series of “Making Japanese Obvious”) was the bit on “confusion,” where confused people actually answered the questions more correctly than those who stated they weren’t confused (by quite a bit, too). He asked students a couple of hard questions in a test (on things they hadn’t faced previously). Then, afterwards, he asked if they were confused or not confused. These are the results.

Koichi adds a table from the computing education webpage, which demonstrated the percentage of confused students who had 44% correct answers and 56% incorrect answers whereas students who didn’t feel confused only got 25% of the answers correct and consequently 75% incorrect. According to the results, confused students had a bigger percent of correct answers than the students who claimed they were not confused. Koichi states that this may be due to the fact that students who do not feel confused may have wrong assumptions and might remember things incorrectly. Students who are confused, however, have to work hard to arrive at the correct answer. Confused students have to ‘connect the dots’ and retrace the knowledge they already have to get new realizations. Koichi sums up the idea of his post in extract 14.

14. So, if we believe all of this, then the goal is to become confused. If you’re confused, then you’re showing understanding, even if it’s a partial understanding (I don’t think anybody can say they understand everything just from watching a demo or reading something). It shows you’re
learning and that you know enough to be confused in the first place. People who aren’t confused just don’t know enough to be confused, I think.

With the previous extract Koichi arrives at the essence of his third post. Getting confused is a necessary part of learning and learners should not be afraid of not understanding everything merely after reading a book or attending a lecture. It takes time to be able to process, comprehend, not to mention apply knew knowledge correctly. Koichi adds that stages of confusion should not last very long. Confusion should be a short natural phase through which learners can reach learning goals.

Koichi criticizes the formal school environment for its lack of tolerance for confusion in extract 15.

15. In fact, I think confusion is something you can learn to love. The problem is that most schools beat confusion out of you. The goal in school is to study for the test... to get that A+ rating and to pass your classes. The goal isn’t to learn and to enjoy learning, so you learn to avoid the confusing stuff and do just well enough to get the grade you need (or your parents need).

In extracts 15 and 16 Koichi questions learning motives and motivation offered in formal learning environments. He argues that human beings are designed for natural curiosity. Therefore, learning should be arranged with that inner design in mind. Outer motivation leads students to only go as far as they are required to, not as far as they are able to go. Here Koichi presents a strong belief of the effects of personal motivation and growth that is connected to successful learning.

16. We’re naturally wired (until it’s taken out of us) to get joy out of solving problems and fixing things... that’s been shown again and again in various studies. Confusion is part of that process, and solving problems that cause confusion will release all sorts of great chemicals in the brain as a reward. Once you learn to enjoy learning for the sake of learning, confusion won’t be so scary anymore. Confront it as much as possible. Confusion is great.
In the extract above Koichi, not only talks about learning to learn, but learning to enjoy learning. He gives importance to the great feeling of accomplishment and achievement learners can attain during learning, as well as a result of the learning process. Koichi also implies that problem solving releases ‘great chemicals in the brain’, thus taking into consideration the positive affects learning can have for mental health. Koichi seems to believe that learning and its different processes are a natural part of humanity and the effects of successful learning enhance our mental wellbeing.

In his third post, Koichi uses two images. Both pictures are used to convey messages of confusion. The first picture presents a yellow block or a cube with a question mark on it. The second picture is of a small child with a balloon looking confused.

A block with a question mark is quite an iconic picture with a strong message. The question mark is often used on its own as an icon of confusion. The block in itself can refer to various things. The shape of the block is similar to Rubik’s cube, which is considered one of the most famous puzzles in the world. A block can be a metaphor for writers block or some other obstacle that comes in the way of progress. This may also imply that there is a surprise to be found inside the box once the problem is solved. Having a puzzle as an image can also refer to human nature and how our natural curiosity can be seen in the popularity of solving problems in our free time.

The small child facing an obstacle is probably easy to relate to. Growing up is often based on regular moments of confusion. A picture of a small child possibly wakes emotions and memories in the audience. Koichi sees problem solving and confusion as a natural part of human development therefore a picture of a child with limited knowledge is an apt choice for describing natural confusion. This picture presents a problem-solving situation of a
person with very little life experience but who is equipped with natural curiosity towards new things.

4.3.2 Comments on confusion

The article on confusion awoke a multitude of different ideas, personal stories in addition to some resistance and critical perspectives. Comments 24, 28 and 29 are cases of learners who share their personal experiences about confusion and learning.

Comment 24: I agree Very good article and so true! Confusion is a need for us to evolve. I'm french and I had the chance to experience 2 different school system : USA and French. I can tell you there is a big difference in term to be confused and I fully agree with you when you say that in North america all what school want is you to pass with a A+ not you to understand...In other hand in France they make it normal to get confused in order to develop your critical thinking. However, not everybody can follow, it's very hard on your ego. So can we have a mix of the bests from both?

Comment 24 serves as an example of how the multicultural audience views the webpage. The benefit of having a wide audience is that people have these different experiences to share with each other to find the best learning style for themselves. The commenter starts by agreeing with the article and continues by sharing an experience from two culturally different learning environments. S/he agrees with the belief that confusion is necessary for people to evolve. S/he uses the pronoun us, which again implies that the commenter talks about a group of people to which s/he feels s/he belongs. The end statement gives an ideal of learning from both cultures and combining the methods to create a new approach.

Comment 28: My Chemistry professor always tells us to come to class confused. She says that the process of learning is Chaos ->Confusion->Clarity
Comment 28 portrays a personal experience situated in a formal education environment. The commenter shows his/her support to the author by giving an example of a university authority figure that agrees with the views of the author in seeing learning as a process with different specific stages. Even though the commenter is not stating personal ideas or opinions, the words of a professor confirm the idea of the article.

Comment 29 is a description of a specific learning task of how the commenter cleared the stage of confusion regarding Japanese vocabulary learning. The commenter is using very moving and engaging words and expressions, such as, struggling to figure out, then it hit me, digging my brain. Below the commenter also describes what the feeling of realization was like.

**Comment 29:** Ironically, just yesterday I had some time to pick up my Kanji Learner's Dictionary and start to look at compound kanji and figure out why it [the compound] means what it means. For example:

国産

国 (country) + 産 (native) = domestic

At first I was struggling to figure out what those 2 words together could mean, "country... native? country... native?" and then it hit me, since I was looking at a food product I realized that it must mean something along the lines of locally grown, local product, and sure enough, I went to jisho.org and saw that it meant "Domestic." Now, since my kanji knowledge is still in infant stage, I realize that maybe this could mean something else in different context. So I'll just keep going 'til it's... obvious!

Quite honestly, I enjoyed digging through my brain and leaving jisho.org as a last resort. It's a great feeling to be confused and then to find the answer, and even more so, to know that your answer was close to the original meaning.

[Great post Koichi]

~ fv

Comments 34 and 35 both criticize the goal oriented education system that focuses mainly on the achievements as opposed to the ways learners should approach their goals. Having old information conflicted with new one can awake various emotions. Feeling uncertain is often viewed as unpleasant but
it is also seen as a necessary stage towards new knowledge. In the beginning of comment 34 the commenter gives an example of how s/he thinks s/he has understood Koichi’s message and puts it in her/his own words. The commenter also gives a personal experience on how the confusion affects her/him. This is also a negotiation of meaning and beliefs due to the fact that the commenter is first interpreting Koichi’s comment and then stating her/his opinion. This is often done in everyday communication when trying to get to a shared consensus by affirming and restating what is said and then giving an example of a personal experience.

Comment 34: I think I know what you mean when you say school puts all it's focus on Good grades and achievements; if a kid is not confused in the class, they either a) already know the material or b) don't know the material. There was no learning process for either of those. And the point of a class is to help them learn or understand the material being taught.

To me, when I am confused on something, it is because I am having a conflict with what I know is to be true (or so I think), to what is being taught. So I can see how confusion is a good thing because it is replacing old information with new information

Commenter 35 expresses appreciation through thanks and positive feedback by agreeing with the issues in Koichi’s article. The commenter uses a polite Japanese honorific to address Koichi (Koichi san), which also implies the appreciation toward the author and the interest toward the target language. In addition the commenter hopes to benefit from this discussion in the future by learning how to better tolerate confusion.

Comment 35: Koichi san thank you for this article! I am in my last year of university with a Japanese minor, and I do agree that the academic system focuses too much on achievements and not enough on the process...hopefully I will learn to learn this year, and actually enjoy the confusions and get better at things.

Comment 22 bases the statements on scientific research done in the field of education. The 4 stages of knowledge, also referred to by Watkins, Lodge and Carnell (2000:12) as unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence,
conscious competence and unconscious competence, in addition to the Dunning–Kruger effect are presented to the other members of the website viewers. In the four-stage model, two stages of knowledge are compared with each other.

Comment 22: This makes me think about "the 4 stages of knowledge" and the Dunning–Kruger effect. The 4 stages, from worst level of understanding to the best, are:

- You don't know you don't know. (In other words, you suck so much that you suck too much to realise that you suck.)
- You know you don't know. (You know enough to realise a lack of understanding.)
- You know you know. (You understand, but it's conscious and requires mental effort.)
- You don't know you know. (Your understanding is now an unconscious motor reflex.)

The trap is that level 2 and 3 make you feel confused, while levels 1 and 4 makes don't. So, perfect knowledge and utter ignorance both feel like you can think straight. Sad thing is that many people at level 1 think they are at lv 4. Personally I don't like confusion because it makes my brain hurt and feel overwhelmed. When there is something I don't understand, I try to find out what it is right away, otherwise my brain turns to jell-o.
It may feel discouraging that number one, where the learner falsely assumes that s/he has knowledge and the fourth one, which is the stage where knowledge is finally achieved and easily accessed, may mix up in the learner’s mind. Commenter 22 also describes the feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed that can take place in the stages 2 and 3 that this model presents. The commenter uses a strong image of her/his brain turning into Jell-o, a famous American gelatin dessert. In this situation the commenter narrates a personal situation to help other members and to seek validation of the learning community. In my opinion being aware of these different stages, self-evaluation, peer and professional feedback can help to keep the learner aware of their stage of learning.

Commenters have given a lot of thought to learners judging their own knowledge and confusion as a part of learning. Comments 23, 25 and 32 share thoughts and from time to time criticism on the topic of whether confusion is actually necessary for learners to fully grasp new knowledge.

Comment 23 challenges the writer of the article and questions its function.

**Comment 23:** That article was quite confusing! I guess that means I learned something?!

The commenter in 23 seems to take the meaning of the article literally and makes an implication that there are two different ways to view the article. Either it was too complex for the commenter to understand right away or that it was not written very well. The writer of the article did not answer this comment so it is uncertain how it was eventually interpreted.

Comment 25 was quite long and commented on various aspects of the article. The main focus was on the statement that students are not very good judges of their own knowledge. First the commenter states that he agrees with the
statement on average, however he does not see the statement as infallible. The commenter seems to think that students can learn to learn and overcome the feeling of confusion. The commenter implies that having old information contradicted by new information is an aspect of learning that one has to face multiple times in one’s lifetime and the learner can prepare for it. In addition she/ he brought up the interdisciplinary factor as he took examples of learning physics. The commenter seems to think that self-awareness and self-knowledge is the key to assessing self-learning.

**Comment 25:**

> students aren’t a very good judge of their own knowledge

On average, that’s true, but one of the things about really smart people is that they learn to overcome this (not completely, of course, but to a significant extent), very deliberately cultivating an awareness of how they know things and how sure they are of them. [...] When faced with hard questions to which none of the students have previously encountered the answers, the better students will start by saying "I don't know, this is new" and then proceed to think it through and attempt an educated guess based on all available information. In doing so, they’re both more likely to realize that they were confused and also more likely to come up with the correct answer [...] .

Commenter 25 also made some evaluation about the article used by Koichi. S/ he uses capitalized letters to emphasize and set a tone for the text.

The very dramatic nature of the differences reported in this story suggest that the test was carefully constructed. If you use questions that are WAY too hard for the students, everyone will be confused and nobody will be particularly likely to come up with the right answer. [...] 

Additionally, comment 32 challenges the fact that confusion is invariably the path to knowledge. The commenter states that there are situations where the learners’ instincts can be trusted and the learning proceeds logically without
contradictions to existing information. Comment 32 starts with the statement I guess to give the author some validation on his point, however the point of the comment is to state that sometimes people indeed grasp things quickly and learn without much confusion. The subtle agreement in the beginning can also be used to soften the tone of the opposing statement.

Comment 32: I guess sometimes the fact that you're confused or that you find some information conflicting with what you already know maybe a sign of progression, but that doesn't mean that the fact that Not being confused about something means you didn't understand, there are some things that we can grasp quickly while others demand a bit more effort

Comment 26 is a feedback comment with a question. The commenter uses capital letters to strengthen the message. The commenter’s interest towards the subject is underlined as well as appreciation for the trouble that Koichi may have to go through in order to reply. THANKS! Already implies that the commenter is expecting a reply. The message is a request for more knowledge and some source material on the subject and therefore the capital letters can used to appeal to the writer for a more likely answer.

Comment 26:
Will you tell me where I can find more info on what you wrote below? I am VERY interested in this topic. THANKS!

"We're naturally wired (until it's taken out of us) to get joy out of solving problems and fixing things... that's been shown again and again in various studies. Confusion is part of that process, and solving problems that cause confusion will release all sorts of great chemicals in the brain as a reward."

26.1: Oh gosh, let's see if I can remember... I think I've read this study / info on this idea in at least two places... but the one I remember (I hope, anyways) is from the book Drive. Some psych/ business-ish kind of book. Possibly an orange cover? Probably wrong on that. :) 

Koichi’s answer is quite vague and speech like. He uses expressions that are often used in conversations to give the speaker more time such as Oh gosh
and let’s see, as if the person asking the question was there demanding the answer right then and there. Due to the fact that he is using words like I think, possibly, probably and actually stating that he might be wrong it seems he is questioning and doubting his own knowledge or at least the source of it. The answer can be interpreted as quite indefinite and evasive in comparison to extract 15 which the commenter is referring to. This strengthens the idea that Koichi’s basis for his learning beliefs and theories arise more likely from his own experience rather than scientific research.

Comments 30 and 31 were praising and supporting comments targeted towards the writer of the articles and the content. They are not very specific on which aspects of the article they found great. However it seems that they only want to express that the article was useful to them in addition to the appreciation they want to express for the writer. Comment 30 makes a humorous comment through the juxtaposition of clarity and confusion.

**Comment 30:** Inspiring article, Koichi. All hail the clarity of confusion! :D

**Comment 31:** I should create a japanese blog and make a series on "How Koichi saved my japanese learning just teaching how things get obvious" :D

The comments above serve as good examples of sharing beliefs and negotiating meanings in an online conversation. Many of them included different conversational aspects such as humor, appreciation gestures and different tools to bring forth their “voice” in an online conversation. There were many instances where the participants wanted to find a common understanding between the members of the language learning community. The commenters take time to rephrase what Koichi has written or take into consideration more specific aspects that surfaced from the article. A good example of the exchange of beliefs and ideas on the website is how this comment section leads the article series towards the next topic. Comment 22 may have been an inspiration to some of the topics for Koichi’s next post.
about conscious language competence. It may also be that Koichi had already prepared to discuss these issues. In any case, moving towards the next topic seems quite a natural step and for the commenters to raise these theories on their own shows that they were motivated by the discussion.

4.4 Conscious language competence

4.4.1 Koichi’s beliefs about the different stages of learning in article 4

In this article Koichi discusses the learning theories presented in the comments of the previous article. This implies a dialogic nature between the writer of the articles and the commenters. Another interesting feature in the beginning of the article is how Koichi takes the possible negative feelings of the audience into consideration.

17. [...] Don’t worry, it only sounds boring. It’s really quite interesting, I think, and something all Japanese language learners will (and need to) run into. It’s much better if you know about it.

The previous extract implies that Koichi is reassuring his audience of the importance of this post. He is trying to confirm the attention of his audience. It might also be that he is putting himself in the audience’s position in assuming that the information may sound tiresome. Considering the number of responses to the previous article, one is inclined to think, that he is stating this in vain. The number of comments suggests that the audience is quite interested in the learning stages. However apologetic the beginning of the extract is, in the end of extract 17 Koichi states that Japanese learners will and need to run into the issue, which he is discussing. He takes quite a strong position behind his own writing and his beliefs as something that are definitely useful to the other members of the community to be aware of.
Koichi starts by explaining what conscious competence means and what steps learners need to take before conscious competence is reached.

18. “Conscious Competence” is when you know you’re good at something. In the case of this particular article, you are aware that you are good at Japanese. Or, at least, you know what you need to do to get better. That’s good, because you can always move forward, one step at a time.

In order to get to this point, though, there are other steps everyone has to take, whether you’re learning Japanese or you’re learning underwater basket weaving. Conscious Competence just happens to be a really important step in the big picture of things. To help you understand this, we need to take a look at “the stages of learning.”

Koichi’s reference to underwater basket weaving implies that the stages of learning are similarly functional in the process of gaining theoretical or practical knowledge. Koichi seems to view learning as progress as he is talking about taking important steps on the path of learning. These metaphors, similarly to the ones in the first article, reflect movement and progress, conscious steps that a person needs to take in order to master a language.

Koichi presents the stages of learning, which are based on the learning stage model developed in 1970 in Gordon Training International USA by an employee Noel Burch. The same model is referred to in comment 22 in the previous article.

Koichi uses a graph as a model to illustrate the four stages of learning.
In order to get to this point, though, there are other steps everyone has to take, whether you’re learning Japanese or you’re learning underwater basket weaving. Conscious Competence just happens to be a really important step in the big picture of things. To help you understand this, we need to take a look at “the stages of learning.”

**The Stages Of Learning**

You go through several stages when you’re learning. They are the following:

Picture F, a screenshot of a graph presented twice in the article, is used to describe the four stages of learning as they occur during the learning process. The light blue line acts as a boundary between competence and incompetence. The darker blue line, between the red dotted learning stages of competence, represents the stages of learner motivation during each stage. Koichi sets out to explain what each of the stages means in practice and afterwards he focuses on two of the stages especially. After presenting the picture K Koichi explains what each level means in relation to learning Japanese. These levels of competence are explained in Koichi’s characteristically informal tone. Some statements are in brackets and the writing is targeted directly to the reader. In addition, Koichi makes predictions of the learners’ feelings during each stage of competence.

19. **Unconscious Incompetence:** This is when you first start out. You have no idea what you’re doing, and everything is fun and exciting. You are unconscious of your incompetence (i.e. you have no idea you’re bad, and everything you do seems great).

**Conscious Incompetence:** This is when you’ve studied a bit, and you’ve learned enough to know that you’re not very good at Japanese. You finally have enough knowledge to look at yourself and say “omg, I don’t know this this this this and that. Crap.”[...]
**Conscious Competence:** This is what we’re talking about in this chapter. Conscious Competence occurs when you know enough to know what to do. When you don’t understand something, you know where to go in order to understand it. You know what to do, and you can solve any problems. Doesn’t mean it’s easy, but you’ve fought through the incompetence to get to the other side.

**Unconscious Competence:** This is when you’re so good you don’t even know you’re good. The Japanese language (and learning it) has become second nature, and learning has become easy and fluid. This is awesome-sauce stage. You really want to get here, though it will take hard work and persistence.

Koichi states that the learning aim for most Japanese learners should be conscious competence. Even if all the information is not yet clarified in this stage, the learner is familiar enough with the sources to be able to find the missing information. Koichi calls the final stage of learning the awesome-sauce stage, which is yet another example of his humorous approach towards his topics. This expression that has speech-like qualities and a humorous tone lightens the theoretical topic.

Koichi describes the stage of conscious incompetence in extract 18

20. Conscious Incompetence is the lowest of the low. You don’t have that initial excitement, and you don’t have the knowledge to be better at studying Japanese. If you’re going to quit at learning Japanese, you’re going to do it here, most likely. This, I’d say, is week two or three, sometime after learning hiragana, for most people.

Koichi describes conscious incompetence as the most discouraging stage of learning. However knowing that there is such a level and that it is a natural stepping-stone to reach the other levels will most likely help the learners get past the frustration that conscious incompetence may bring. Koichi also places this level of learning at a specific stage of learning Japanese. This stage usually occurs after learners have learned the first set of writing symbols used in Japanese. Different languages naturally have different specific difficulties that are similar for many learners. In German it may be adjective
conjugation or in Spanish the difficulty could be the verbs. It is important to accept confusion as a stage before overcoming these obstacles.

Koichi ends his post by stating that his next post will entail some practical tips and strategies for getting closer to conscious competence in Japanese learning. Again, he asks questions from the audience and gives some advice and advertises some sources of information their pages provide.

20. Have any of you seen yourself going through these phases? Where are you right now (or, where do you think you are...?). Have no idea where you are because you’ve never started learning Japanese before? You should try TextFugu, where you get guided through the whole competence process. Want to know more about conscious competence, the above graph, and more? The Dip by Seth Godin covers all this and is a really interesting (and inspiring) book that covers this sort of thing.

There are three picture used as visual stimulation in the fourth article. Picture G is a partial photo of a famous statue, The Thinker by Rodin. It has a quite an obvious connection with learning. Contemplating a problem, being puzzled and afterwards reaching a solution could be seen as the core of learning.

G.
Picture H has a small monkey in a similar position as The Thinker statue. It creates a humorous link to the headline picture of the article. Picture H is a good example of Koichi’s way of softening the tone of the article and making the topic approachable and less serious. Picture G and H may also refer to the stages of human development in the course of history, from grasping quite simple ideas such as using tools, on to figuring out abstract ideas and forming new philosophic schools of thought.

H.

Conscious Japanese Competence [Obvious]

To fling poo, or not to fling poo. That is the question.

In the caption of picture H Koichi has added a joke utilizing a famous quote from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Koichi uses a Shakespearean structure in a context suitable for the purposes of the monkey. Koichi’s juxtapositions of highly culturally valued items with an animal that can be seen as quite primal, is visible when comparing pictures H, G and the caption. Koichi may be using both the cultural and the natural sides of humanity to appeal to his audience.
Picture I is a computer animation of a glowing brain and a stylistically Japanese animated little girl staring at it. The brain may represent the mental processes of learning and the green glow could be viewed as a reference to brainpower, the electric currents in the brain, or it could be representing the idea of enlightenment.

I.

Conscious Competence

Conscious Competence isn’t the end goal but it is the goal, I think. Unconscious Competence happens when you’ve gone through enough Conscience Competence. Conscious Incompetence happens when you haven’t built up

These different stages of learning could be seen as the pit falls or the up hill climbs that were used as metaphors in the journey of language learning. Once the learner passes different stages s/he makes progress towards the ultimate learning goal. These stages underline Koichi’s idea of learning as a natural process with different stages between the beginning and full competence, the stage where the language is obvious. The fact that Koichi thinks that conscious competence is the best stage suggests that Koichi has a very positive take on learning as a challenge and a process. The stage of unconscious competence, where the language is already so familiar that the learner doesn’t have to even think about it, is not given as much value.
4.4.2 Comments on the stages of learning

Many of the comments on article 4 are answers to Koichi’s question on where the learners of Japanese think they are placed in the stages of learning. In comment 42 the commenter presents a model of moving back and forth between different stages of knowledge. This perspective is differs from Koichi’s view which seemed to present the different stages of language learning as constant progress from one stage of learning to the next.

Comment 42: In my case I see[m] to be rolling back and forth between conscious competence and conscious incompetence.

It happened to me too often, after it's all set in my head and I am "Finally! I'm getting all that perfectly now!" and have somebody come and say "Actually, that's wrong..." for me to stay at the conscious competent point for long. What doesn't help me is just how Japanese go around talking about your Japanese skills. It usually goes on like that: "OMG! You are so great and natural sounding! Everything is completely on mark! Except that, and that, and that, and that, that part I actually cannot make any sense of, what did you mean by that, that part is just stiff sounding, that part is silly, I'm actually holding my sides here, OMG I can't breathe! Can we talk again tomorrow, you are so cute sounding like a toddler with a post-doc.".
In comment 42 the learner explains the difficulties of facing native speakers and tries to explain the feeling of discouragement when the native speakers comment on the learner’s language skills. The commenter imitates the native speakers who comment on his language use. Although the learner uses quotations to separate her/his voice from the native speaker’s it could be said that the message is the learner’s interpretation of what was actually said. The commenter uses some common abbreviations such as, OMG (oh my god) and post-doc (post doctoral degree).

Comment 43 seems to be trying to locate her-/himself in the graph presented by Koichi, however it seems that s/he finds it difficult to determine, which stage to belong in. Commenter 43 makes a humorous comment in brackets that the two stages ruling each other out creates a black hole for some reason. This might be some sort of science fiction reference. The commenter uses an abbreviation lol (laughing out loud) and a onomatopoetic sigh of relief phew. This sigh of relief is commonly used in comics or graphic novels.

Comment 43: If I think about it I would say I’m somewhat unconsciously competent at this point...but then again, wouldn’t my consciousness of this make me consciously competent? lol (frantically tries to shut black hole.... 0/0 ) ....phew, cancelled it out thank god...

Commenter 46 starts out by giving another interpretation on how to look at the levels of learning in practice. The commenter believes her/his skills are at different levels. As knowing a language consists of different skills to master, this sounds quite possible. Commenter 46 discusses that depending on the situation s/he feels that her/his language skills move in the different areas of the graph presented by Koichi. The commenter uses some Japanese to refer to Japanese drama series which is possibly a way the commenter presents her/himself as an established learner or confirms her/his place in the learning community.
**Comment 46:** I think different parts of my skills are at different levels. That is to say, simple basics like hiragana and some vocabulary are up there in Unconscious Competence— to the point that, when I'm tired, I speak Japanese instead of English for some things. But sometimes my overall communication can jump all over that fancy graph of yours. Sometimes I understand an episode of a ドラマ [do-ra-ma - Japanese drama] with Conscious Competence, then the very next episode I feel like I'm back at Conscious Incompetence. These sorts of things happen frequently. It's a little exhausting.

Comment 47 answers Koichi’s question as well as gives some advice and encouragement to other learners. Similarly to comment 46, commenter 47 argues that learners may drift in different stages of learning during their learning process and be on different levels in different language skills, depending on the situation.

**Comment 47:** I have been studying Japanese for close to five years, and I believe that I am somewhere around Conscious Competence. I know what to do if I want to learn something, and I am aware of how to learn it. However, I feel that conscious incompetence is a matter of situation, mostly, and in that sense, I still experience bouts of conscious incompetence. Every time I go to Japan and speak, there always (and inevitably) comes a time where you can't express yourself further anymore, and that's when you get the oh-so-Japanese head tilt, followed by an "え？ちょっと待って、どういう意味？" and that makes you realize that you said something that wasn't quite right. It's discouraging, but powering through it is necessary! Giving up is something I wouldn't recommend. I've found that drawing a picture if you can helps a lot better than just throwing in the towel.

I've just found that the best thing to do in that situation is to buy a notebook and, if you can, write down the mistake you made and put the correct version in (having a Japanese who knows English is amazing for this) […]
In the end of comment 47 the commenter gives some practical tips for memorizing words and dealing with mistakes in order to make the most of learning from them. It can be seen that the commenter is a bit ahead of Koichi’s next post, where Koichi discusses some similar tasks that help to reach new levels of knowledge.

Comments: 50, 50.1 and 50.1.1 serve as an example of the conversation like quality that the comment section has. The commenters support and challenge each other’s views. Where comment 50 could be interpreted as a negative statement about the small progress made in a long period of time, the commenter in response 50.1 suggests that the criteria of learning time are different than time in general.

**Comment 50:** I've been learning Japanese for years and I wouldn't say I've reached Conscious Competence yet

**50.1.** But that is just real world time. If you asked me how long I have been learning Japanese I would say less than a year, even though I have been 'officially' learning Japanese for years and only learned the kana earlier this year or late last year.

Just because I said I was trying to learn doesn't mean that I put in much quality learning time. I just didn't have the resources or methods to learn a foreign language, nor was it very fun as all I did was cram. In fact, most of that stuff I tried to learn years ago when I first started learning, I've forgotten.

What I'm trying to get at is, like this guy at www.alljapaneseallthetime.com says, it's not about the real world years, it's about the time you spend in the language. Once you hit the point where you know what you need to do to get better and have the resources to do it in a fun or engaging way (so you don't forget later, or strain yourself) it's all downhill... or uphill if you look at the chart. Just a matter of 'do it'. [...]

Response 50.1 also includes a webpage for further information for the commenter 50. Referring to other sources of information online is a very common tool in the conversations in this website. In addition there is a
second response to the chain of comments, that agrees with 50.1 and shares her/his experience about active learning time. This is a good example of sharing personal stories to support other learners in the language learning community.

**50.1.1.** I agree with what you're saying. I've been at this for a year and a half now, but I can clearly remember that it wasn't until I was about 4mos. deep into studying the language that I really started to get very very serious about it. I think it was a testing period [the 4 months or so], fast-forward to today and I get up every morning without even thinking "Am I going to study today?" I don't think that because it's automatic... Of course, I'm going to study today!

~ fv

Other examples of the members of audience supporting and helping each other are comment 51 and response 51.1, where a person first asks where it is possible to gain further information on the topic. Response 51.1 is not made by the author of the article but by an active member of the commenter group.

**Comment 51:** This is really interesting.
When you say that most people quit before they achieve conscious competence, do you know that just because of personal experience or has someone actually measured this? Can you recommend any good resources for finding out more about the conscious competence model?
(I ask for research purposes)

**51.1.** Here is one source: [http://www.businessballs.com/](http://www.businessballs.com/)...

Hope that helps.
It can be clearly seen in the comment section that these learners do not only support the different stages of learning presented by Koichi but they also widen the perspective to use and look at it from their personal learning experiences. Through these new approaches they try to see where they are placed in their learning process and also support others by sharing their experiences of progressing from one stage to another.

4.5 Practical tips, be smart about your learning & learning to learn.

4.5.1 Koichi summary of his beliefs and practical advice in article 5

In the beginning of the final and longest of his five articles, Koichi goes through all the topics he and the audience have discussed before this last post. He also states that after all the theoretical discussion the final article is about concrete advice and practical things learners can do to reach new stages of learning. This article may be a little bit more targeted to the specific requirements of learners of the Japanese language. However, the learning tips and recommendations are quite applicable to other languages as well.

21. [...] Now, instead of talking about theory and the steps one goes through in order to reach "Japanese-is-obvious" levels, we’re going to talk about solid things you can do (and do right now) that will get you to this oh-so-awesome mountain peak of Japanese learning. I should warn you though… you’ll still have to think long term.

Before going further to explain the specific practical tips, Koichi discusses “The Long, Difficult Trail” of learning. Here he is using the same travel metaphor that he had in the beginning of this post series. Koichi brings up a new aspect of the journey metaphor by stating that depending on the learning goals the path towards perfection can last a lifetime. It is important
to be prepared that the process can be slow from time to time. Koichi uses a familiar metaphor of climbing a mountain to describe the process.

22. Now, if you had a giant mountain or hill to climb, what do you think the best way to do it is? Climbing for 8 hours all at once, one day a week? Or, how about climbing a little bit every day? I’d definitely go for the second option. Your legs will get stronger, and they won’t atrophy while you sit there doing nothing the other 7 days. Consistency wins this race. Hopefully you’ll remember that. If you aren’t consistent, and you don’t do a little bit every day, none of the strategies below will help you one bit. If you are, well, then you should try these out.

Consistent practicing and training is also mentioned in the extract above. Koichi states that the practical tips are not helpful to learners who do not keep on practicing every day. It could be said that Koichi stresses the importance of constant movement and progress.

Koichi presents five practical tips for more efficient studying. Firstly, Koichi advises to find good spaced repetition software (SRS). These programs are supposed to help learners to grasp and memorize larger quantities of information so that a newly learned topic can be saved and will be repeated after some time has passed. The SRS program Anki, which the staff of tofugu.com recommends, uses flash cards as learning devices. In addition, these programs help learners to schedule their learning. Koichi lists three things that a good SRS program should be able to do.

23. Really, though, it doesn’t matter too much as long as the program you’re using does a few different things:

1. It helps you to study things you don’t know more often.
2. It keeps track of time so that you have cards that are “due” to study.
3. Optional: Preferably it also doesn’t give you multiple choice. Multiple choice teaches you to “narrow down the answer” not to pull the memory out of your head. It’s much better to have to come up with the answer from nothing (or a mnemonic) otherwise it’s nothing like real life.
In extract 23 the last piece of advice is to avoid learning through multiple choice due to the fact that it rarely helps to maintain the right answers in the long-term memory. In the last line of extract 23 Koichi states that “it’s nothing like real life”, which suggests that his aim is reaching authenticity in learning. He seems to value engaging the learning process from the problem solving perspective.

The second piece of advice from Koichi is to study sentences. Koichi recommends using Anki for this purpose as well. Studying sentences will help to gain new vocabulary as well as cultural and practical knowledge. In extract 23 Koichi states however that sentence-based learning is not necessarily suitable for beginners. Koichi is viewing sentence learning through the use of the Anki tool, which in my opinion restricts his view of the learning process a little. In language learning in general there can be cases where it is useful for the beginners to know the most usual sentences as wholes first. In the beginning it is often recommended to start with some common compliments and requests. After the learners’ knowledge progresses it is easier for them to understand why a certain phrase has a specific structure.

In the case of Japanese however it is often difficult to remember longer sentences straight away. In order to fully know a sentence the learner has to be familiar with the pronunciation as well as the writing patterns. Japanese has three sets of symbols for different purposes in a sentence. One symbol may have various meanings according to each context. These factors contribute to the fact that the learner should have quite consistent knowledge of how each symbol is pronounced and the different meanings it conveys before they can know how it functions in a more complex sentence.
In his third practical piece of advice, Koichi uses an interesting metaphor. Koichi compares vocabulary learning to building a puzzle. He states that it is important to know in what order the vocabulary should be learned in order to get the best results. Koichi sees the most common words as the side pieces which outline the puzzle and the inner puzzle pieces, as the more rare and specific vocabulary.

24. Let’s hark back to the “Puzzle Pieces” example again. Some pieces are more important than other pieces. Edge pieces, for example do a ton to help you place the center pieces. “The Most Common Vocab” are like those side pieces. If you put those down first (i.e. learn them first) you can put everything else down more easily. Basically, 10% of all the existing vocab make up 90% of the benefit… so, why not learn those first? Makes everything else easier, and you can start using everything a lot faster too.

Koichi’s puzzle reference can be connected to the common idiom for understanding: ‘getting the big picture’. After the learner has finished connecting the pieces of the puzzle, the result is getting the picture as a whole. These concrete metaphors may help the learner picture the learning process.

The fourth tip for the learners in this article is to keep making mistakes. This advice can be connected to the confusion theme in the third article. Koichi states again that schools discourage and punish students for making mistakes where they should be encouraging making mistakes and benefitting from them. Koichi also makes a point about learning not to be afraid of mistakes.

25. Being scared of making mistakes will stop you from learning. If you freeze and cringe every time you mess up, you’ll be stuck at the back of the line, so to speak. So, to make Japanese obvious, you have to make a lot of mistakes. How would someone go about doing that, then?

One great way is to use Lang-8 ... and use it A LOT. You write journal entries in the language you’re learning (Japanese) and then native Japanese speakers correct your journal entries for you. It’s pretty awesome, but not made for someone who isn’t really into their mistakes. If you’re a lower-mid
intermediate level Japanese student (or higher) you should use Lang-8. Every time someone corrects a mistake, figure out why they corrected it that way. Starting to see a pattern? Well, then you aren’t learning from your mistakes.

Koichi suggests another tool to help the learners get used to their mistakes. He also offers a way of making a motivational contact with the native speakers of the target language. Even if making mistakes could be demotivating it could be overlooked because of the chance to communicate with some authentic people from the target country. Koichi adds in the end that fear of failing and making mistakes stands often in the way of progress.

The final suggestion that Koichi makes for the language learners is that they should try explaining what they have learned to others. Peer teaching can be beneficial in revision and recap. This practical tip can be connected to the article about conscious competence.

26. Having to explain / teach something you’ve learned makes you think about it in a totally different way. You have to process things that you “just know” into things that follow some sort of order. If you can teach something, then you understand it as well. Things you teach tend to be a lot more obvious to you than things you can’t teach.

Koichi encourages the audience to use the Internet as a tool for its possibilities in connecting people together. Not everyone can find an interest group with similar ambitions close by. Therefore the possibilities of the Web can be practical.

27. Not everyone has a friend they can sit down and teach everything they’ve learned (booooring), but luckily in this digital age there are ways to replicate this and gain sort of the same effect. By starting a blog, YouTube channel, and so on, you can write up lessons on the things you’ve learned. Hey, you never know – perhaps someday you’ll gain an audience as well. Wouldn’t that be fun?
Koichi suggests using a blog or YouTube to write, record and share learning experiences. This could also be interpreted as a kind of a learning diary. It helps to establish learners’ own progress as well as share interests with others. The various possibilities online give the learners more tools of sharing resources and experiences. In addition, customizing a blog space is a nice way of employing possible creative talents and a chance to connect the learning process with other interests.

Koichi finishes the final article by stating that in addition to the advice he gave earlier, there are various things that learners can do to make the language more obvious to them. He mentions that learners should stay alert and “be smart about [their] learning”. Koichi ends his article by asking the audience to share their experience.

28. Obviously there are more “obvious” things for you to do to help make your Japanese more obvious, but I hope the tips above will help you to get started. Really what it comes down to is consistency, and if you are smart about your learning you can add that to your arsenal as well.

What things do you do to help make Japanese more “obvious” to you? What actions get you one step closer that other people can do too? Share them in the comments below.

In the extract above Koichi uses the word obvious almost excessively for humorous purposes. It may be that his goal is to consistently make the audience aware of the aspect of obviousness as the goal. Or it can also be to make the reading experience lighter and more humorous.

Koichi used several images in the final article of this series. The first two images are metaphorical. The main picture has two light bulbs, one dark and one lit. Similarly as the light bulb picture used by Koichi in his article on epiphanies, these light bulbs can represent enlightenment and clarity of grasping new knowledge.
Picture J illustrates the metaphor that Koichi uses when he talks about the long, difficult trail of learning. The picture in question has a rough terrain. It is also impossible to see the final destination. Both of these aspects are visible in the picture and discussed by Koichi when he states that for some learners the language-learning journey can last a lifetime and that the journey is often “an uphill climb”. The picture may be used to visualize Koichi’s metaphor and learning philosophy to the learners.

The five following images are connected to the five practical things Koichi mentions to help learning. The first picture demonstrates what Anki - SRS program looks like. It doesn’t seem to have a lot of metaphoric messaging as it seems to only demonstrate the design of the program in question.

The second picture on practical language learning presents a sentence written on a strip of paper that may have been folded in sections for learning purposes. The folding could represent the fact that sentences consist of separate units, which have different functions.

In the third picture, there is a mixed stack of pieces of magnetic poetry. Magnetic poetry consists of magnetic words that can be attached to objects such as refrigerator doors or chalkboards. These words can be combined to
form little stories, phrases or poems. Koichi connects picture S with the importance of consistent vocabulary learning. In addition to representing the multitude of words this picture also suggests a way of learning vocabulary in practice. The fourth picture is of a fallen glass of wine to represent making mistakes.

The final image in the last article presents an empty podium and a clean white screen in a lecture hall or a classroom. It is used as illustration for the topic of learning by teaching. This image could be used to invite learners to fill the empty “stage” and make their mark in the cycle of learning. By this cycle I mean the way knowledge is shared first from the expert to the novice and through gaining experience the novice becomes the expert and can share the knowledge further. Koichi’s encouragement also implies that the novice – expert gap isn’t necessarily so deep, but even learners can teach each other and learn from one another.
4.5.2 Practical tips from the audience

The final article had various responses from the audience. Furthermore, Koichi was more involved in responding and commenting to the questions from the audience. The comment area in the fifth article included more jokes and loosely related issues than the comment streams in the previous topics. Below is an example of an unrelated topic and humorous conversation between the author of the article and a commenter from the audience. As the joke that Koichi told did not get through to the other participant in the conversation Koichi used image K to elaborate his meaning.

Comment 55: Oi o i o i o i o koichi I just remembered this now but what every happened to your awesome panda hat?

Koichi 55.1. You know that huge warehouse full of wooden boxes in the Indiana Jones movies...?

55.1.1. No? I never watched Indiana Jones. Is that where it is?

Koichi 55.1.1.1. Oh no! Haha, well, that messes up my joke then! :P

(Panda hat's in storage)

K.
In his last response in 55.1.1.1 Koichi adds a picture that illustrates what he meant by the warehouse in an Indiana Jones movie. Although the commenter did not first understand the essence of Koichi’s humor, the picture is used to demonstrate what image Koichi was aiming at when the message was that his panda hat was in storage. This is a good example how miscommunication is solved in online conversations. Adding imagery to the conversation helps the participants see through each other’s minds’ eyes. As we have seen earlier Koichi uses a lot of references from western popular culture, through which he is making an assumption of the target audience having similar cultural knowledge. Some of the material he is referring to is from a science fiction or adventure genres of popular culture. This points toward a certain sub-culture from which Koichi is assuming his audience is coming from or familiar with.

There were several comments, which included practical things learners had found useful in their learning. Comments 54 and 56 are examples of learners who share their positive experience with different learning tools and techniques.

**Comment 54:** Good points here. One of the things I do daily is read twitter and facebook, through which I follow a lot of Japanese users. I can’t read everything, but I’m often surprised by how much I can read and use the dictionary or Rikaichan to look up things I don’t know. It helps me to use it in a natural way, to reinforce vocab or call to my attention new vocab I should be studying.

**Comment 56:** [...]For those who are intermediate level and getting bored of just sentences, but still find novels overwhelming, I’ve had some success with inputting short dialogs and text excerpts in Anki too. [...] And yup, “teaching” really does help you learn too. I totally agree. I’ve “accidentally” learned a ton just by trying to explain or find the answer to other people’s questions. Sometimes you stumble upon interesting things and end up learning something new yourself.
Comment 56 includes positive experiences of the teaching and learning issue, which Koichi presents in the article. Commenter 57 has found it useful to do translations from English to Japanese in comparison to doing them from Japanese to English. This approach could be more useful in an authentic face to face language learning situation, where the person has to rely on forming a sentence in the target language.

**Comment 57:** I don't know if there is any sort of theory of learning behind this, but what helps me a lot is that I try to move from English to Japanese. By doing this, it gets me to think in Japanese versus always trying to think in English. For example, when I input new cards into my anki decks, I always have the Source Language (English) shown, and then I have to think about what the word is in my Target Language (Japanese).

I've noticed that as learners of a second language we have a tendency to always go from target language to source language; i.e. reading a passage, dissecting sentences, learning new vocabulary, etc.

I don't know if there any evidence that proves this is more effective, but it does help me a lot.

**Comment 58:** Lately, I've been working on something to help me with my kanji compound words. I switched the lang on my iPhone to 日本語, and that actually helps with kanji compounds. I look at a compound, bring out my dictionary and start analyzing the phrase/compound. For instance,電話, when I first learned that word TextFugu で, I was like, okay, but when I understood the kanji, I was like Oooookaay!!!

電話 - electricity
話 - speak, talk; story; etc

Phone - Electric Talk! Who knew!

Great post Koichi.

~fv

Commenter 58 gives an example of making the target language part of the learner’s everyday life. By switching the language on a communication device that is in everyday use, in addition to its growing use as a tool for online social activities, the learner gets an opportunity to face the target
language several times a day consistently. These technological appliances that have become part of our everyday life can help us to surround ourselves with the target language. Comment 58 presents quite a fresh phenomenon of the technological possibilities that enhance our daily language learning. Using a mobile phone is now a convenient way of keeping the language learning technology close to us regardless of the limitations of space and time.

Commenter 62 praises the creator of another language learning page (http://www.alljapaneseallthetime.com/blog/) Khatzumoto and also tofugu.com due to the language learning possibilities they offer in comparison to the year when s/he started learning the language. The commenter refers to her/himself humorously as an old codger while making a point about technological improvements during the last three decades. Using vocabulary such as interwebthingie and techie goodness, makes the comment quite light and comical. The commenter states her/his appreciation of the freedom from having to be in a specific location in order to learn. Comment 62 demonstrates that there are learners of various age groups with various language learning backgrounds using the page as means of sharing their experience.

Comment 62: Dudes. Khatzumoto is King. And Tofugu Rocks. It's 2011 and soon will be 2012. We have this interwebthingie and lots of techie goodness. It's not 1981 anymore when old codger's like me started trying to learn Japanese. Now in 2011 not being in Japan is no excuse. Do what Khatz and Tofugu tell you to do. You can learn Japanese no matter where you live. Just do it.

In response 62.1 a commenter makes a statement about the relevance of studying grammar. This approach differs quite a bit from the previously discussed advice on language learning. The commenter in response 62.1
seems to prefer the approach of a different language learning site in comparison to tofugu.com. However the other members of the community do not respond to it at all.

62.1 I would say mostly just do what Khatz tells you…. don’t learn gramm[a]r

In the final article Koichi sums up the things he finds the most beneficial in the practical learning process. He starts by repeating his strong ideological metaphors of a journey and an uphill climb. He adds to this the notion of a life long learning path with different phases. It could be said that the final article brings the topics of this article series together. After beginning with a revision he moves on to practical advise. Koichi’s final advise is a method he seems to be using for his own audience. When learners share knowledge and experiences with each other they learn simultaneously. Trying to teach something to others makes the learner think about each issue from a different perspective. This brings forth a strong belief about the nature of pedagogy through negotiation and discussion.
5 Discussion and conclusions

This chapter discusses some of the most interesting findings that arose from the five articles examined in the previous chapter. The findings are examined in light of the research questions that were stated in the beginning of chapter four. I found that the articles and the comments were in constant interaction with each other. The discourse between Koichi and his readers can be seen as an ongoing negotiation of each topic at hand. In the following section I will take a look at the learning beliefs that arose from these discussions.

5.1 Beliefs shared, beliefs contradicted

In the analysis I came across various beliefs stated by the author of the articles as well as the public viewing the article. In this section I will take a deeper look into these beliefs and what kind of outlooks on learning they present as a whole. The beliefs are discussed separately under their own headings. The following headings represent the strong beliefs, which surfaced in the texts and discussions of the online community.

5.1.1 Learning is progress

Due to the fact that the target website was a language learning site, one of the most common points of view on learning was that learning is an enhancement to the status quo. The members of the community came to the site with a shared interest of wanting to learn something new. The idea of learning as progress is also visible in the way it is constantly connected to movement and change for the better. Learning new things is seen as something positive and beneficial.
5.1.2 Learning and metaphors of moving.

There were many instances where learning was depicted as physical movement. Something abstract was elaborated in more concrete terms. The struggle of the mind was compared with the struggle of the muscles. Learning was often described as moving from one point towards another. Koichi used a metaphor of learning as a journey. Opening up one’s mind toward different challenges and facing obstacles or “pit-falls”, as Koichi called them, was a part of this journey that possibly lasts a lifetime.

5.1.3 People are “naturally wired” to learn.

Koichi discussed the natural human curiosity, which actually triggered curiosity in a member in the audience. Koichi sees the willingness to learn as something that is common for every human being. He also takes a natural approach when he discusses vocabulary learning and compares it to solving a puzzle. His fondness for the puzzle metaphor can also be seen in his imagery for instance in the yellow cube. Koichi also talks about the mental processes of learning in addition to the positive affects that learning has for our mental wellbeing. In addition to our natural inclination towards learning, the articles mention that efficient learning requires being aware of the different steps in the learning process. Even though we have the natural capability we should know how to approach new knowledge to be able to fully benefit from it. Through the discussion in chapters 2 and 3 about epiphanies and confusion we can see that the author and the audience are forming a belief of awareness that one can develop for efficient learning.

5.1.4 Confusion and frustration are part of the learning process.

Learning something new often means questioning previous knowledge. When facing knowledge that seems contradictory to learners’ former ideas, the learner is bound to experience some feelings of confusion and frustration. The commenters, as well as Koichi share these feelings, in the chapter on
confusion and in their discussions about different stages of learning. Some members of the audience did not fully agree on the statement that confusion is necessary for grasping new knowledge.

5.1.5 Learners face similar difficulties, therefore they can learn from their shared experiences.

As Koichi sees learning as a natural phenomenon, the different stages of learning are also viewed as a shared experience. The social surroundings make the interaction possible and many commenters in the audience were quite pleased to be able to share their experience and actively taking part in the conversations. There were instances where the audience developed Koichi’s theories to different levels or helped other members of the community to approach the issue from a more practical standpoint. In addition, Koichi points out that a good way to learn something is to teach it to others.

5.1.6 Learning processes are similar in various scientific fields.

There are various examples where Koichi compares learning a language to other fields of study or different mechanical skills. There are many mentions of mathematical subjects. The stages of learning were developed for business use, which is also an implication of the applicability of these theories. This would suggest that the mental processes of learning could be applicable in various sciences.

However, organizing learning can differ between different fields of study. In math for example learning has to progress linearly. New information rests upon information that is previously learned. In other fields, such as languages, the learners can approach their goals through organizing their personal path of realizations. Language teaching is often organized by giving
the learner certain ‘building blocks’ to support learning. However, as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) suggests, language learning covers different areas of skills, such as listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing, and it is possible to be quite proficient in some fields and less capable in the others. This can also be seen in the way native speakers of a certain language may be less proficient in the grammatical aspects of their language than the learners who study the same language as L2. The CEFR structure of language proficiency seems to support Koichi’s language learning theory. Both agree on the statement that knowing a language as a whole consists of different skill sets and various smaller units that lead to fuller proficiency. This aspect of language learning is visible in the discussions of article 4 about the four stages of learning. Many of the commenters felt that they were experiencing different stages at the same time depending on the language skill. In practice this means that they could feel that they were unconsciously competent in listening skills but consciously incompetent in writing.

5.2 Website as a learning environment, responses, possibilities

My findings show that the users of tofugu.com had various opportunities and tools available to enhance their learning using an online learning environment. First of all they had access to various online learning tools. Tofugu.com offered some links to enhance learning, however they also sell some learning packages with vocabulary and grammar resources. In addition these online conversations served as possibilities for sharing source material and finding new information. There were instances were both Koichi and the members of the audiences shared links to other online sources. The comment area also gave the community members opportunities to discuss the issues and rate the tools that they had used. Koichi encouraged the audience to communicate by asking questions and targeting their attention towards individual issues raised from the article.
5.3 Points of view toward traditional learning

Both Koichi and his audience direct criticism towards only encouraging success without giving the learners opportunities to learn from their mistakes. This was seen as a characteristic fault of the traditional learning environment and the settings in schools and universities. Realizing that failure can be approached from the point of view of benefitting from previous mistakes can be valuable in relation to learner motivation and toleration of failure also in other aspects of life. Making mistakes is seen as a part of humanity. This attitude is also visible when Koichi is talking about people's natural inclination to learn. However, taking courses, having a tutor and making contact with people are encouraged. It can be said that this website is seen as a means for supporting learning in and outside the online environment.

5.4 Opportunities for future development

The possibilities online have opened new tools for human interaction. Even though the methods of interaction have changed, learning has maintained its social nature. There is a need for more negotiation based learning environments that have been the backbone of developing new knowledge since the first ancient philosophical schools of thought. This study presents a model of language learning that is based on negotiation of learning beliefs and methods in an autonomous online learning environment. The use of textual and visual metaphors can be seen as a specific characteristic of this particular online community. Further research is required in order to apply these methods of conveying beliefs for a wider target group. Before this study, online communities have not been under much examination as places of language learning. There is an increasing need for further research on the
As shared beliefs are used to encourage and engage learning in the case of a language learning website, it is not impossible to create a platform also for the uses of formal learning. It could be beneficial to offer our young learners possibilities for exchanging experiences with authentic engaging conversations on a global level. This could be done also in the settings of formal English education. There are many possibilities of creating online learning environments where the learners could use different learning tools to form content and interact with each other.

It is advisable to engage authors, teachers and tutors to post relevant cultural material, ask questions and encourage the users on the site. In my opinion it is possible to develop this kind of platform for the use of national schools in Finland. A person or a team working on this website should be making contact with the learners on regular basis. It would also be wise to establish contact with other learners of English to create a multicultural platform where the language could be used as lingua franca to enhance authentic language use.

Considering the opportunities of online language learning on a global level the lack of resources and the inequality of people and finances between countries may cause online learning to be an exclusive privilege. Even though the westernized world is quite well connected in terms of the Internet, we have to consider that even in these modern times this type of learning environment may not be able to reach everyone. Although most commenters did not reveal their countries of origin the cultural references in the discussions and the texts are strongly western. This study only presented
a restricted group of learners whose takes on learning derive from the western cultural background.
6 Bibliography


The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment


Tofugu.com http://www.tofugu.com/ (20 October 2013)


