
Opinion and Perspective

Beyond Screens: Reflecting on the Pedagogical Benefits of Paper in the Language Classroom

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The emerging trend in the areas of education, technology, and wider society is the growing use of electronic records and applications to replace paper. Instructors and universities are moving away from physical paper to embrace technological advances in administering courses to learners. In many universities in Japan and around the world, Learning Management Systems are used not only to coordinate courses, but also to facilitate testing and track student grades. This development is certainly beneficial and when used effectively, offers convenience and efficiency for internal and external stakeholders. However, while online applications are encouraged as they support student engagement and participation and assist them in preparing for the world of work, activities in the language classroom such as role-playing, note-taking, idea organisation, flashcards, and posters are best done with physical paper. This paper explores the advantages of using physical paper in English language classes at a university in Japan.

“The faintest ink is stronger than the greatest memory” – Confucius

Before going into the debate about paper versus electronic applications, it is important to highlight the current environment in which this reflection is situated. My current university has a very diverse community of both international and domestic students. As part of their admissions, students are required to take a test to place them into appropriate language course levels. The Ritsumeikan APU 2025 Handbook highlights that there is a Standard and Advanced Track used for English language subjects and placement. The Standard Track requires students to take 24 credits of English language courses and depending on their

placement results, they may start at different levels in the program. The courses range from Elementary English A and Elementary English B which, using the widely recognized standard test International English Language Testing System (IELTS), would be 4.0, while at the far end of the scale is Upper Intermediate English A and Upper Intermediate English B, which is the equivalent to IELTS 5.5. On the other hand, the Advanced Track requires students to take 12 credits of language course beginning at the Advanced English 1A and Advanced English 1B, which is equivalent to IELTS 6.0. A last point to note is that while A courses focus on grammar, vocabulary, writing, and speaking, B courses tend to focus on building reading skills and vocabulary. This context sets the stage for examining how paper-based and electronic applications support students across the different language learning tracks.

Research on physical paper versus electronic mediums has produced varied results. Studies have shown that students read more when books are in electronic form versus paper versions (Amirtharaj et al., 2023) and that note-taking on personal computers may be more beneficial and efficient for learners than note-taking on physical paper (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). However, similar research suggests that students who take notes on physical paper achieve better test results and demonstrate higher levels of retention and focus (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2013). While online applications promote interaction, their excessive use can overstimulate students and have adverse effects, particularly regarding time management and the number of applications used concurrently (Dontre, 2020). In this paper, I will explain my own experiences and insights into using a folder system for language learners which involves using physical paper alongside a Learning Management System (LMS) to create an environment where students remain organized and engaged with learning materials.

The 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic led to a rapid shift to online learning, and instructors and students became heavily reliant on technology to conduct classes and administrative tasks (Figueroa et al., 2022). For almost two years, it remained the only option available to many institutions as people adjusted to the new normal. During that time, instructors across Japan learned a lot about what works and what does not in the digital classroom. There were challenges

in managing attention, engagement, interaction, and communication (Kaur & Rothinam, 2024). My own experience with the shift to online classes was filled with a mixture of successes and challenging moments. While technology has undeniably brought convenience and flexibility to the classroom, it has not been a one-size-fits-all solution. As institutions and instructors continue to explore new methods of teaching and engaging with students, the debate about whether digital or more traditional approaches to teaching and learning are more effective is still ongoing (Al-Madani, 2021; Kymaz & Kis, 2020). Research on this is mixed, with proponents of both approaches highlighting their distinct advantages.

There has been tremendous growth in the availability and usage of applications in the classroom since the start of the pandemic. Students and educators alike are constantly adapting to these new platforms and evaluating each for their suitability for classrooms. Each semester, I have spent time to evaluate the applications that support student needs and reflect on their suitability for students at different levels. For example, when reviewing vocabulary is it best to use Padlet, Quizlet, or Kahoot? All of these applications are very interactive, and they enhance user experience, but I wonder if there is some benefit to printing the entire vocabulary list of 1000 words and giving it to students at the start of the semester. There is no denying that technology has brought about remarkable changes in how we learn and teach. However, I believe we have reached a point where it is important to pause and consider the benefits of returning to something more traditional: using paper in the classroom. While using paper may have economic and ecological drawbacks, as well as cause some inconvenience, it can reduce distractions and enhance learner outcomes.

Challenges of Physical Paper

For the past two semesters, I have used a folder system in my Standard A classes. This involves printing all the materials required for lessons and periodically reviewing each student's folder to check organization, handwritten worksheets, and class activities. While students take their midterm and final tests using the LMS, the folder system has highlighted three major problems. Firstly, there are

practical factors to consider, as using physical paper may be more costly and less convenient compared to other methods. The use of printed materials in classes not only includes the cost of paper but also the cost of printers, ink, and electricity. Environmental factors must also be considered when choosing to use paper in the classroom, given that producing paper requires cutting down trees, which destroys forests and contributes to carbon emissions (Environmental Paper Network, 2007). To mitigate these adverse consequences, institutions are often encouraged to recycle and reuse paper. I wonder if most teachers actively consider environmental factors in deciding to use paper or if there is a sizable population of tertiary language learners who place high priority on the environmental costs of producing their grammar handout.

The second challenge of using a folder system in my classes is that some students reported feeling burdened by being required to carry an additional book for classes. There are also risks associated with damage or loss, as I have witnessed students accidentally spilling coffee on their folders and materials. Furthermore, during the Fall 2025 semester I taught two Standard A-Track courses with an average of 20 students in each, and two students reported that they left their folders in their hometown when they went to visit during the quarter break. At the same time, research on the use of physical textbooks versus e-textbooks has revealed that there is no clear difference in the learning outcomes of the two groups and further concluded that electronic textbooks are just as effective as traditional textbooks (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2013). This strengthens arguments questioning the necessity of physical materials in certain classroom contexts.

The final major challenge of using the folder system is that it does not accommodate all learning styles equally, particularly across different generations. The world is moving forward, and the way people interact with technology is changing. There may be differences and similarities with the way different generations of learners interact with digital and physical learning resources and applications. Generation Alpha (2010–2025) and Beta (2025 onwards) may not interact with physical material the same way Gen X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Gen Z (1997–2012) do or did. This is an area that should be explored to better understand generational attitudes toward using technology

in classrooms and learning outcomes. Furthermore, research by Amirtharaj et al. (2023) suggested that students spend more time reading ebooks due to their portability and added convenience versus physical books. Perhaps a detailed study on how different generations of language learners interact and perform with tools geared towards language learning is required.

Benefits of Using Paper

Given the issues highlighted, why should teachers still use printed materials in 2025? Paper-based learning can promote greater focus among learners by limiting on-screen distractions. The design of browsers on laptops encourages students to multitask by having numerous tabs open and receiving pop-up messages from social media sites (Dontre, 2020). By reducing the time students spend on personal computers and instead using physical sheets, they can limit the distractions posed by devices. Using paper, therefore, may promote greater focus in the classroom. In my classes, students are not allowed to use smartphones unless there are some special circumstances; however, they are encouraged to use their laptops and tablets for research.

Some students have downloaded social media applications to their personal computers and have resorted to using these on their laptops in classes. Printing materials on paper is one way to curb the distractions mentioned above. For example, students are given a worksheet with explanations of a particular grammar point. The students are then required to complete some gap-fill exercise followed by some activities which encourage them to showcase their learning. They are then placed in groups and must interact with each other without devices to showcase their understanding of the particular topic. After this is completed, students are then directed to go their online platform to complete other activities on the LMS or a prescribed application. However, the bulk of the work is done in class using pen and paper. While technology can certainly be a helpful tool, it also comes with its own set of challenges. When students are working with paper, there is less temptation to check social media or respond to messages, leading to a more focused and productive classroom environment.

Even though technology offers convenience and flexibility, students'

preferences for traditional materials highlight certain limitations of using web-based resources. Digital educational materials appear to be an inadequate replacement for printed materials (Gupta, 2011). For example, in their study, students perceived printed materials as more useful for studying and retaining information more effectively. Students often appreciate having a physical copy of their materials, as it offers a tangible reference that can be easily accessed. In my own classrooms, I have embraced the use of paper in ways that have helped my students and me stay organized. At the beginning of the semester, each student is given a folder with the first two weeks of materials. This folder becomes an integral part of their learning toolkit, helping them stay structure and remain engaged. In my case all class materials including the syllabus, course overview, worksheets, and assignments are printed out and stored in these folders as part of a structured system. When students need to refer to a handout from a previous lesson, they do not have to navigate through digital files or remember which app they used to access the material. They have a class folder with them, and they know exactly where to find what they need.

In previous semesters, I had printed the materials, but students often misplaced them. By including a folder, students have a place to put the material so they can access them easily. These folders are periodically reviewed by the instructor, and students are encouraged to keep them in good order. Using a physical folder promotes structured learning practices, especially when students are juggling multiple assignments or projects. Furthermore, the act of having physical copies of materials helps students stay on top of their work by allowing them to track their progress and make notations in their folders. But, it is not just about keeping things organized; it is about creating a tangible connection to the learning process. Research by Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., (2013) highlights the benefits of physical materials for retention and engagement. The study compared students who read academic texts on e-readers to those who read physical texts. The findings revealed that students who read printed materials showed a slightly higher rate of comprehension and retention and perceived printed materials as easier to navigate and review than digital texts. Furthermore, the study also found that print reading supported active learning and critical thinking. These

data align with my use of printed materials for teaching grammar, as it may promote deeper cognitive processing in language learning. The materials are also made available for students in a OneDrive folder which contains all the relevant materials. Those who miss classes often print their own sheets and add them to their folders.

Research by Amirtharaj et al. (2023) on the use of printed books versus e-books indicated that each format offers distinct benefits depending on the context. This suggests that the optimal choice depends on the specific activity and individual preferences. This is what has led me to choosing the current format for my classes. As mentioned previously, at my current university there are Standard and Advanced Track A and B courses for students of different levels. Standard Track A classes are focused on speaking, writing, grammar, and listening, and as such I have encouraged the use of physical paper. However, for Standard B Track courses, I encourage the use of online tools for reading but still use paper to explain key concepts and highlight particular reading skills.

The proliferation of educational applications in the classroom, such as Quizlet for vocabulary and Xreading for extensive reading practice, has led to less integrated learning. Each week there are new and improved applications developed geared towards language learning in different forms such as Padlet, Miro, ThingLink, etc. This can create a challenge for educators who need to learn how to use and apply these tools in order to make them useable for students. A more ideal situation would be to have a single LMS tool that integrates all necessary functionalities required in language learning. To streamline the teaching process and foster a cohesive learning experience, I employ a physical folder system in class, focusing on face-to-face, paper-based instruction. Meanwhile, I encourage students to use electronic tools as supplementary resources for homework, thereby reducing cognitive overload and creating a balanced, effective educational environment.

Conclusion

The debate between paper-based and online tools in the classroom remains unresolved. There are benefits to using electronic tools and applications, such as

promoting engagement among students and encouraging autonomous learning. In addition, there are the benefits of convenience and efficiency in the language learning process. However, what is clear from the literature is that one size does not fit all, as different groups of students require tailored approaches to learning. Using physical paper promotes retention and reduces distractions. In today's classrooms, distractions abound, often hindering effective learning. One practical approach to managing these distractions is the use of physical pen and paper. This method not only fosters greater focus among students but also allows teachers to manage and control the flow of information more easily. By reducing reliance on digital tools, educators can create a more structured and engaging learning environment free from the myriad distractions.

Educators must evaluate their classes to identify the best approach for each case. To teach reading and vocabulary, we may find it more beneficial to use online tools. However, to teach grammar and for note-taking and recall, it may be beneficial to utilize physical paper. In my case, my students are often distracted by social media or text messages. Using paper has helped to create a more focused environment with fewer distractions. Overall, since the implementation of the folder system, I strongly believe that my classroom management has noticeably improved by creating greater structure and efficiency. I am not staunchly opposed to the use of technology in the classroom. My position is that the integration of an excessive number of educational tools, applications, and software may result in cognitive overload, leading to distractions and ultimately diminishing educational outcomes.

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