Feature Article

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Promoting Student Autonomy with a Simple Online Learning Management System

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This paper explores the use of an online social learning platform to create affordances for Japanese university students to discover and share language content for in-class discussions. Since this was my first attempt at using an internet-based platform to supplement and support weekly face-to-face meetings with my university English communication class students, I resolved to examine the experience in the form of an action research study. In this paper, I first discuss my rationale for the decision to use computer-mediated communication to support the development of oral communication skills. Next, I outline the action research questions I set out to answer along with the pedagogical aims of the online component of the course. Finally, I explain my implementation of the project itself—the context and participants, student tasks, and data collection procedures followed by the conclusions and further questions I came to through this research.

Rationale and Previous Research

According to Graham (2006), blended learning systems are defined simply as those that "combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction" (p.5). Having experienced blended learning in graduate school as a means of interacting with teachers and classmates, I had a fairly strong sense that such interactions, though textual in nature, contributed significantly to my ability to speak more articulately about the various issues discussed online when they came up in face-to-face meetings. Although my students' situation as undergraduate EFL learners obviously differed significantly from mine as a graduate student, I wanted to see if the addition of a blended learning environment could help promote fluency and vocabulary development the way it had for me as a first language learner of domain-specific language (that of TESOL and applied linguistics).

The second factor that encouraged me to introduce blended learning into my English oral communication class related to readings I had done in second language acquisition literature which showed that the addition of online interaction has positive effects on students' progress in the target language. Since the mid-1990s, research has shown a variety of benefits to the use of learner management systems. Kern (1995), for example, pointed to the simple but significant fact that when language learners interact using social tools online, they increase the total volume of language they are exposed to, and also frequently "output" more language. Other research (e.g., Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999; Ortega, 1999; Warschauer 1998, 2007) has also highlighted some of the ways that online communities increase student access to native speakers and promote peer learning—two factors clearly significant to language growth. Even more recently, research by Thorne (2009) and Gee and Hayes (2011) has pointed to the positive affective connections to

motivation that occur with the formation of what they term "Internet interest communities" and "passionate affinity spaces," respectively. These researchers highlight the unique affordances of online spaces for learners to work collaboratively around common interests. Finally, Benson (2011) highlights three important ways that technology-based approaches can support student autonomy:

(1) they place the learner (as controller of the technological device) in direct control of key aspects of the learning process;

(2) they allow wider access to authentic target language sources; and

(3) they allow wider access to interactive use of the target language. (Benson, 2011, p.152)

Of course, such technological affordances for student autonomy are difficult to realize if students are resistant to the use of technology for social interaction. In previous years I had been wary of introducing technology into my classes because of a general lack of computer literacy that I perceived to exist among students at my university. But in the case of this particular class, the students had expressed interest in, and familiarity with online communication, and, though they had varying levels of confidence in their own technological literacy, they all spoke about involvement in online social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, Line, and Mixi. From my discussions with the students about their knowledge and use of such technology, I felt sure that they had the potential to benefit from blended learning activities. This is the third factor that prompted me to introduce blended learning activities into this class. As long as I could find an online social learning platform that was simple and user friendly, technological competence would not likely present itself as the most significant barrier to successful online interaction.

Pedagogical Aims and Action Research Questions

With relative confidence in the suitability of online social interaction for language learning from my own experience and readings in SLA literature, and with enthusiasm from students themselves, I decided to trial a blended learning approach over the course of the second semester. I wanted to explore the usefulness of such an approach to support the broad academic goals I'd set for the course: the improvement of students' oral communication fluency and accuracy with an emphasis on vocabulary development, strategy use, and speech genre awareness. I also wanted to explore how the addition of an online component to the course might:

- draw upon students' existing digital media knowledge as a way to promote peer-to-peer communication about new content and language;
- promote student autonomy in using online tools to explore topics that they themselves found relevant and interesting; and
- create new affordances for the improvement of students' English skills.

I was particularly interested in how students more accustomed to interacting with teacher-selected texts would react to the task of choosing and introducing their own texts. The action research questions which I sought to answer were:

1) How would students react to the task of choosing their own texts for class discussions?

2) What learning gains would be apparent as a result of the online practice?

The Action Research Study

Context and Participants

The institutional context for this project was a medium-sized private four-year university in Shizuoka, Japan. The project described here took place in a high intermediate-advanced level oral communication class open to third-year students in the university's Department of American and British Studies. In this department, students are divided into leveled tracks using bi-annual TOEIC results. The students enrolled in this elective class came mostly from the English department's highest-level track, with scores ranging from 585 – 855. As an elective class, the students who enrolled can be said to have been highly motivated towards improving their English oral communication skills. The class was small, with only six students enrolled, making for a close-knit class atmosphere and a high degree of familiarity among the students at the time of this project in the second semester of the 2012-2013 academic year.

Data Collection

To explore my action research questions, I kept an electronic journal and made weekly notes on my students' interactions online and in-class. At the end of the term students were also given a paper copy of a brief survey in Japanese (Appendix 2) that asked open-ended questions about their experience in the blended learning project. Participation in the final survey was optional, anonymous, and carried out with informed consent. Students handed in completed surveys to a designated administrator in the university's student affairs office, who then returned them to me after the semester's grading was complete. This survey served as a significant source of qualitative data used in my evaluation of the project's effectiveness.

In the period between the time when the surveys were completed and the time they were returned to me (approximately two weeks), I wrote my own reflections about the project, making note of any problems or other issues that had come up, and trying to critically evaluate the project's successes and failures from my own perspective.

The Online Learning Platform

This project involved the students' use of an online social learning platform called Edmodo to interact with each other and with their teacher before and after weekly face-to-face class sessions. Edmodo is a platform that provides a private online space where students and teachers can share text, images, audio, and video. I chose Edmodo for its simplicity, usability, and broad compatibility with desktop and mobile computing hardware/software.

Edmodo is accessible via web browser and/or smart phone application (iOS and Android) and its user interface is simple and user-friendly—similar to that of social networking sites such as Facebook. Once users sign in, they are presented with a wall of recent posts, and they have the ability to easily post their comments, links, videos, or other files independently or in response to other community members' posts.

Teachers form Edmodo communities for specific groups of students (usually classes). Once the teacher creates an Edmodo group, he or she receives a code to give to students, which they use to join the group. This registration method has two benefits: first, it simplifies the process of student sign-up. Students do not need to input email addresses or other personal information to register with the site in order to participate. They just need the code they receive from their teacher. The second benefit is that students can

choose their level of anonymity on the site. The registration process requires students to create a username and password for themselves, but does not require an email address or even a real name. This helps alleviate concerns that might otherwise arise about the sharing of personal information on the Internet. My students registered with their given names and the first initial of their family names. Some of them chose to register their email addresses too because this allowed them to receive notifications of site activity.

Implementation

I introduced Edmodo at the beginning of the semester in a workshop during class time. I explained how the system worked, helped students get signed up, and informed them of how they would be expected to use the site later in the semester. During this workshop, all the students chose to download the free smartphone app to their mobile devices, and by the end of the workshop session, they were all signed up and ready to go.

I gave the students five weeks in which to acclimate themselves to using Edmodo.   During this initial period, I occasionally posted supplementary materials related to readings and in-class discussions. Students were asked only to comment on articles or other posts if they felt so inclined (it was not required). Several students did in fact post comments in response to articles I posted, and one student used the site to clarify confusion she had about a reading assignment.

Toward the end of the initial five-week acclimation period, students were given written instructions online (Appendix 1) and additional oral instructions in class about their assignment to choose a topic, share materials online, and lead a discussion in class. Each student was randomly assigned a forthcoming week in the second half of the semester during which they would be responsible for posting articles, videos, or other materials relevant to their own interests, along with critical discussion questions for their classmates to consider and discuss online and in class. There were no requirements about how much material students were to post and comment upon, but each discussion leader was required to post his/her material by the Friday before our Wednesday class meeting in order to allow everyone ample time to absorb the material and comment upon it if they so chose.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the use of Edmodo as a tool to promote student-initiated discussions and learner autonomy fulfilled my expectations. During the initial acclimation phase, I frequently shared links to articles and videos that related to topics we were discussing in class. One advanced student told me that though many of these texts were more difficult than those he had encountered previously, the online setting made it easier to quickly look up words and research topics more deeply. Several students commented on my posts, and occasionally asked questions for clarification. This indicated to me that the students were ready and willing to take over the responsibility of finding topics by themselves.

In the student discussion leader phase, students found and posted articles and videos with relevant discussion questions on a variety of topics: nuclear power (video), flashmobs (videos), vegetarianism (articles), employment discrimination (articles), Disneyland (article), and whether or not parents should lie to their children about the non-existence of Santa Claus (articles). Students seemed to enjoy this freedom to introduce new content to their classmates, and the broad variety of topics presented suggests that learners were in fact using this opportunity to pursue their own interests in English.

The semester-end survey that I prepared (Appendix 2) contained a total of ten questions, addressing two main areas: students' assessment of Edmodo as a tool (including information about how they used it), and their feelings and thoughts about participating in a blended learning environment. The information gathered from these surveys was very useful in helping me reflect upon the successes and failures of the blended learning initiative.

The semester-end survey confirmed what I suspected about students' means of accessing Edmodo. The survey indicated that the primary means of accessing the online platform was via smartphone: five of the students said they accessed the site via smartphone at least some of the time, whereas only one claimed he or she used a computer exclusively as their means of accessing the site.

The student surveys also indicated that the participants were largely appreciative of the opportunities afforded to them by Edmodo. Here, I focus on responses to the survey questions that asked how students felt about using the site and how useful they felt it was as an aid to stimulating in-class discussions.

Question 3 asked what students thought of the activity of finding English content (articles and videos) and posting it to Edmodo for discussion. Student responses to this question were mostly positive. A few students wrote that they found the process of posting materials technically challenging, but the majority (70%) wrote comments indicating satisfaction with this process. Some comments, translated from Japanese by the author, are listed here:
- When someone posted an article or video, everyone could see it.
- I was able to discover a variety of new (English) websites.
- It increased my opportunities to come in contact with English.

These comments indicate a growing sense of community supported by the sharing of content based on student interests. They also suggest that students were aware of the value of these additional opportunities to read and interact in English.

Question 8 asked students how they felt about the oral communication class's online component in general terms. One student did not answer this question, and one responded that he or she felt that the online component was "not really necessary", but other responses indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the student-generated content approach enabled by the online learning environment. Two indicative responses are listed here:
- It was good to know my classmates' thoughts online. I think if [the learning system] were used even more actively it would help further improve our English language skills.
- It was a fresh way to give students a central role. I thought it was a good experience.

Based on these and the rest of the survey responses collected, I was reassured that most seemed to have had positive educational experiences with the blended learning tasks they engaged in. For sure, a few students found the transition to interaction in an asynchronous virtual environment challenging, but their trepidation may have had more to do with the burden of leading discussions (online and in class) than it did with the technology itself.

In my own reflective journaling, I noted surprise at the controversial nature of some of the topics students chose to discuss (e.g., nuclear power, job discrimination), but was impressed at how students

handled these and other topics critically and sensitively. For example, the student who posted a video about nuclear power production in Japan asked a hypothetical question about choices classmates might actually be presented with in the future such as, "If you could get a cheap apartment or house in an area around a nuclear power plant, would you want to live there?" Another student, who presented on the lighter subject of whether parents should lie to their children about the existence of Santa Claus, provided both pro and con articles for his classmates to consider before the discussion.

In reflecting on the results of the semester-end survey, I speculated that the (two) students who seemed least satisfied with the project were those who were more comfortable with a more didactic pedagogy. Though the surveys were anonymous, I suspect that two students who expressed some reservations about the use of Edmodo were those who in fact participated least and most reluctantly in online discussions. These students seemed to find a shift to more autonomous, socially co-constructed learning difficult. Further investigation would be needed in order to verify this claim. Were they, in fact, resisting more autonomous learning, or were there perhaps other factors at work (e.g., time constraints, lower overall motivation, anxiety related to lower proficiency)?

Conclusion

The project described here used an online learning management platform to give EFL students of oral communication control over the selection of topics and content for online and face-to-face discussion. Survey feedback confirmed my observations that, though the system was not appealing to all students, more motivated learners recognized the benefits afforded by the additional interactions they had with each other and with their instructor online. Edmodo proved to be a simple and effective technological tool for enabling such interactions, and it allowed me to hand over control of discussion topics and materials to the students.

Returning to my initial action research questions about student autonomy and learning gains, I conclude that most students in fact showed themselves to be quite autonomous and capable at discovering and sharing their own English materials online. For a few students the tasks of finding and posting materials, leading discussions, and contributing in class and online were a significant challenge. Still, all students seemed to benefit from the creation of an online community which supplemented our in-class meetings. Even the less motivated and less technically adept students seemed to enjoy sharing items they found, and the in-class discussions that related to student-initiated topics appeared to be engaging and educational for all who participated.

I also conclude that giving students' responsibility for generating and posing discussion questions to the group on self-selected topics seemed to be an effective tool for encouraging critical thinking. To encourage rich in-class discussions in the past, I had previously often (without much thought) formulated such questions myself. But giving students the opportunity to formulate as well as answer such questions seemed to be a very effective way to help students engage critically with a variety of issues that were meaningful to them. By generating critical questions themselves and being exposed to a range of responses, students can become agents of their own learning, and thus more likely to develop more autonomous and critically reflective thinking habits.

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Appendix 1: Assignment Instructions (posted on Edmodo)

Since we have a good platform for interacting around digital content, let's use it: I would like you to take responsibility for finding some articles, videos, photo essays, or other digital media that interests you. It could be the English version of an article about a news story that you are following. Or maybe you want to show us a TED video you like. You will post some content to this site for all of us to see and discuss. You should write a little introduction to everything you post, and also some questions for us to think about and discuss (here and in class). Due dates will vary because each of you will curate a different week.

Appendix 2: Student Survey

アンケート

このアンケートは自由参加です

参加するかしないかいずれも、成績に関係ない

名前を書かないでください

日本語で答えてください

遠慮なく率直に答えてください

1) Edmodoを使い始めた時にインターネットのSNSなどに関する能力はどうでしたか。When you started using Edmodo how skilled were you in the use of internet social networking sites?

他の授業のオンライン参加は経験したことがある？あればその経験について説明してください。Have you interacted online in the context of other university classes? If you have please explain about your experience.

2) Edmodoは殆どパソコンでアクセスしたか携帯でアクセスしたか。

Did you mostly access Edmodo through a computer, or through a mobile device?
　　　あ）パソコン　a) computer い）携帯 b) mobile device　う）両方　c) both え）場合による　d) it depended on the situation（説明してください）(please explain)

2.1)　使いやすいですか。使いにくいですか。Was Edmodo easy to use? Or was it difficult?

使いにくいと思った人は、その理由を述べてください。

If you answered that it was difficult, please explain how / why.

3)　自分で英語の記事やビデオを探して、Edmodoに投稿する作業についてどう思いますか。What did you think of the activity of finding and posting your own articles and videos on Edmodo?

4) 教科書のみの授業はよかったですか。（この質問は私たちの使った教科書の評価ではなく、教科書のみの授業をした方がよかったかどうかということ。Would you have preferred a class that only used a textbook? (This question is not asking for an evaluation of our textbook, rather it is asking whether or not you would have preferred to use a textbook alone without the online component).

5)　オンラインで先生とクラスメイトと質問したりすることは平気だった？ためらった? Did you feel comfortable asking your teacher and classmates questions online?

6)　Edmodoでの参加はほとんど自由だったが、オンライン上の参加は授業において必要であるべきだったと思いますか。 A good portion of your participation online (through Edmodo) was voluntary. Should more participation online have been required?

7)　全体的に、Edmodoについてどう思いますか。Overall, what did you think of Edmodo?

8)　全体的に、このクラスでオンライン参加の部分があったのはどうでしたか。Overall, what did you think of the online participation portion of this class?

9) 他のOCの授業で（例えば来年のOC3で)Edmodoを使うべきですか。Would you recommend using Edmodo with other oral communication classes (for example with next year's OC3 class)?
10) 他にコメントがあれば述べてください。Please express any other comments you wish to share.