Asynchronous Online Written Communication Employing Social Networking Sites for EFL Learning: Achievements and Challenges

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Abstract

This practical report describes the design and implementation of an asynchronous online written communication activity connecting EFL students in Japan with JFL (Japanese as a Foreign Language) students in the UK through an educational social networking site. The achievements and issues of the activity are assessed based on the qualitative perceptions of the EFL students. It was found that this form of authentic communication with the JFL students contributed to the motivation of the EFL students to learn and that the online activity helped them understand the importance of the careful usage of grammar, vocabulary, and writing for successful interaction. On the other hand, the findings concerning student understanding of a different culture indicated that the EFL students tended to gain only a surface-level understanding of popular cultural events from their JFL counterparts, which might lead to the formation of cultural stereotypes. It is evident that advanced cultural information exchange that inspires critical awareness and avoids promoting stereotypes is challenging when the communicating with novice language learners.

Keywords: asynchronous online written communication; social networking sites (SNS); language learner perception; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); intercultural understanding

Introduction

In this digital era, social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Instagram attract enormous numbers of people worldwide, as they can easily connect people wishing to share their interests and exchange information, ideas, photos and videos regardless of the time or distance barriers (Kamel, 2016). Such characteristics of SNS can be applied to communication activities in EFL learning, and, hence, SNS-based approaches are being increasing used as a tool for learning English as a second language (Murda, et al., 2022). Chotipaktanasook (2016) argues that using SNS enables EFL learners to participate in online conversations or tasks, give their ideas or thoughts through messages or texts, and engage in online peer group discussions. Harting (2017) asserts that the use of SNS allows foreign language learners to express their thoughts easily. Izmaylova (2017) demonstrates that SNS can provide meaningful communication in online exchange programs. Other advocates have added to the list of benefits associated with the use of SNS in language instruction: (1) enhancing learners' motivation (Paulsen, & Taekke, 2013; Dogoriti et.al, 2014; Ekoc, 2014); (2) developing the target language skills (Al-Tamimi et al., 2018; Albashtawi & Al Bataineh, 2020; Al Momani, 2020; Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021; Ariantini et al., 2021); (3) nurturing intercultural understanding (Chen, 2017; Álvarez Valencia & Fernández Benavides, 2019).

Reflecting on the advantages of adopting SNS for foreign language learning, the author, an EFL instructor in Japan, established an SNS-based asynchronous online written communication activity that connected his students with other members of the global community. This paper describes the design and implementation of the activity and reports its achievements and challenges.

Context

In the context of EFL learning in Japan, authentic language use is an important element for learners to develop their English language skills and extend their intercultural understanding (Illés & Akcan, 2017). However, it is often difficult to provide this key element in conventional EFL classrooms since the classes consist of homogeneous, non-native speakers, and the communication activities tend to be rather artificial interactions that give students an opportunity to practice their lessons. To address this challenge, the author sought a way to provide more authentic interactions by having his students communicate in English with university students in an English-speaking country using SNS. To this end, the author created the blueprint for an appropriate international online written communication activity. To find a partnering group for the activity, the author used his personal network and contacted an ex-colleague who was currently teaching JFL (Japanese as a foreign language) at a university in the UK. Once the blueprint was explained to her, the JFL instructor agreed to help conduct the activity with her students.

To implement the planned exercise, an asynchronous online written communication activity was incorporated into the author's compulsory English course focused on reading and writing. The class consisted of 28 first-year Japanese university students, hereafter referred to as JUS. All the JUS were intermediate English learners. The author had taught the JUS during their first semester, which gave him insight into their overall attitudes towards English learning. He also had a clear understanding that all the JUS were motivated to study English. Their UK counterparts in the activity (hereafter referred to as UKS) were members of the JFL instructor's class, which consisted of 27 students, with a mix of years and majors. All students were novice Japanese language learners.

In accordance with ethical considerations at the Japanese university, the EFL instructor asked the JUS for permission to use their written responses in the study. He assured the JUS that their feedback would be anonymous and that declining to participate would not affect their final grade. Twenty-seven of the JUS filled out the feedback questionnaire and agreed to having their responses used in the study.

Objectives

In offering EFL students the opportunity to communicate in English with their counterpart JFL students, the objectives of the asynchronous online written communication activity were as follows:

(1) to provide additional motivation to study English

(2) to reinforce awareness of the careful usage of vocabulary and grammar in written communications

(3) to facilitate student understanding of a different culture

These objectives were consistent with the overall aim of the course.

Activity Design

As a first step, course details, including student tasks and the implementation schedule, were discussed. The instructors exchanged ideas and opinions mainly through email, using video conference systems synchronously when necessary, to support their email discussions. Regarding the duration and frequency of the planned activity, the instructors considered their academic schedules. They chose an overlapping time frame that coincided with the two universities to implement the activity. The instructors identified topics for communication that would relate closely to the interests and general experiences of university-age students and could be easily personalized. According to Ushioda (2000), personalized topics allow students to develop the motivation to express their real voices. The instructors also considered the students' language levels, especially in writing Japanese, since the UKS were novice Japanese language learners. In terms of the selection of an online learning platform for the activity, the instructors adopted an education oriented SNS, Edmodo. Like Facebook, Edmodo allows learners to write messages, add comments to others, and upload pictures and PowerPoint Presentation slides. By sharing a code to participate in a particular online class, students can connect with other students in different schools or countries and communicate on the message board provided (Sanders, 2012). Importantly, Edmodo is a safe SNS, as access is restricted to registered users (Okumura, 2017).

Implementation

The asynchronous online activity included the planned reading and writing tasks (see Table 1). The topic of the first post for both classes was "self-introduction"; the topic of the second post was "my favourite restaurant" for the UKS and "recommended tourist spots for foreigners" for the JUS. All students posted their comments in both English and Japanese. The EFL instructor asked the JUS to write simple sentences in Japanese when posting, using hiragana and katakana characters, so that the UKS could easily understand their posts in Japanese. In replying to the comments of the UKS, the JUS were asked to write comments to at least three students. Additionally, the instructors encouraged their students to continue their interactions freely by asking questions and giving answers in either English or Japanese in order to facilitate more inter-personalized communication, with the aim of increasing their motivation and fostering their understanding of another culture.

Table 1. Schedule of the activity

Time	JUS tasks (topic)	UKS tasks (topic)
Early Oct.	Posting (self-introduction)	Replying to JUS posting
Mid Oct.	Replying to UKS postings	Posting (self-introduction)
Early Nov.	Posting (tourist spots for foreigners)	Replying to JUS postings
Late Nov.	Replying to UKS postings	Posting (favourite restaurants)

Outcomes

Objective 1: To provide additional motivation to study English.

Through observations of the performance of the JUS during the activity and a review of their reflections, the author assessed the effect of asynchronous online written communication on EFL learning. The students' reflections produced several useful insights. First, 89% of the JUS found the activity to be enjoyable and

exciting. One possible reason for this is related to the novelty and appeal of using their target language with foreign students. Tomoko's comment illustrated this enthusiasm: "It was my first time communicating with foreign students. I had a freshness of attitude. It was fun, and I was glad when I had replies from the students and continued communication."

The fact that most of the JUS considered the experience to be "enjoyable" and "exciting" suggests that connecting with English speakers residing in a foreign country sparks academic interest, which supports Hagley's (2020) finding that online interaction with English speakers can enhance the motivation of Japanese students in their EFL studies.

Similarly, interacting with foreign university students of the same generation played a key role in motivating the JUS. Hana's comment effectively conveys this notion: "It was enjoyable for me to interact with British people of the same age in class because I am interested in foreign countries and people." Although the students lived in different countries, their thoughts and interests appeared to be similar, and they were connected through a commonality in their personal lives (boyd & Elisson, 2008). Through this online communication, the JUS were able to exchange their ideas, interests, and personal views in a manner that is not generally possible given the typical teacher-student relationship in class.

Objective 2: To reinforce awareness of the careful usage of vocabulary and grammar in written communication.
A full 92% of the JUS believed that the activity was useful for their English learning, with 60% of the students indicating that the activity helped them expand their vocabulary and learn new expressions. This sentiment is effectively expressed in Aki's comment: "It was a little difficult for me to express my feelings and what I wanted to say in English. On the other hand, I learned various expressions used in others' postings. Those were new to me." Some students learned how to organize English text through posting and replying. Yumi described this well: "I thought I gained techniques in learning how to construct texts in English on my own."

The students exchanged their posts on the message board and shared their language output. In reporting their experience with the exchange, the JUS noted that they paid careful attention to their use of grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure in their writing so that the UKS could read their posts without misinterpretation. They also indicated that reading the posts of other students allowed them to recognize variations in vocabulary and grammar. It was apparent that exposure to the authentic language use by the UKS had a positive effect on the English learning of the JUS, which supports the findings of previous studies (Pinkman, 2005; Chen & Brown, 2012; Gardner, 2013) that asynchronous text-based online communication is beneficial for learning English writing.

Objective 3: To facilitate student understanding of a different culture
Sixty-seven percent of the JUS commented that the activity allowed them to discover elements of the culture of the UK. In particular, the favorite restaurants mentioned by the UKS helped the JUS learn about the British food culture, which differs significantly from the Japanese culture. Yoko's comment is a good indicator of this perspective: "I learned about British culture because a British university student introduced the local food in

detail with pictures." Overall, however, the activity accomplished less than the author had hoped or expected in terms of fostering intercultural understanding. Çiftçi (2016) argues that a critical investigation of cultures rather than a mere acknowledgement of simple facts about cultures is indispensable and that it can be accomplished through communication with people who have different cultural backgrounds. However, the understanding of British culture reported by the JUS tended to focus only on one aspect and represented little more than surface knowledge. Yoko's comment seems to suggest that this exchange might reinforce cultural stereotypes rather than inspire critical awareness and perspective-shifting.

Conclusion and Implication

This practical report describes the design and implementation of an asynchronous online written communication activity that connected EFL and JFL students through an educational SNS. It describes the achievements and issues of the activity based mainly on EFL student perceptions of the activity from a qualitative perspective. Overall, it was observed that the SNS activity allowed the EFL students to use English to effectively express their thoughts and seemed to produce communications that were meaningful to them. The perceptions of the EFL students provided evidence of the successful nature of adopting SNS for EFL learning and suggested that their authentic communication with JFL students in the UK contributed to cultivating their motivation to learn English, which supports the findings of previous studies.

Another effect of the activity was to enable the EFL students to gain a better appreciation for the careful usage of grammar and vocabulary in written communication. By sharing language output on the discussion board, the EFL students were exposed to a variety of English expressions that were unfamiliar to them and encouraged them to use new words and phrases. The EFL students were able to monitor their English language use after posting and compared it with others.

Despite its usefulness, the study has limitations. Since language proficiency data were not collected for the EFL students, it is suggested that, in future research, student progress in their language proficiency be assessed more objectively in order to analyze the impact of using SNS for improving EFL skills. One possible approach would be to evaluate the accuracy, complexity and usage of words and phrases that are acquired by the EFL students through this type of activity.

It was also concluded that the goal of increasing student understanding of a different culture was only partially realized. While the EFL students learned elements of British culture, their knowledge was primarily of a superficial nature and could lead to cultural stereotyping. When student language skills are limited, advanced cultural information exchange that inspires critical awareness and avoids cultural stereotyping is highly challenging. It is important for beginning learners to recognize that understanding surface culture is a useful stepping stone to acquiring a deeper understanding of a foreign culture and a better command of the language.

To conclude, it is clear that online communications through SNS with other members of the global community can contribute positively to learner motivation. It helps cultivate the learner's self-awareness of language use and promotes intercultural understanding, as many advocates suggest. It is recommended that EFL instructors

share their efforts and experiences in this regard so that others may become familiar with the achievements and challenges of online communication utilizing SNS for EFL learning.

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