Taking English outside of the classroom through social networking: reflections on a two-year project

Louise Ohashi[1]

Abstract. In Japan, like most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, students have few opportunities to use English in daily life, and this limits their ability to develop their language skills. To address this, many teachers provide homework tasks and guide students towards autonomous learning. In an effort to do the latter, a private Facebook group was created for students at a women's university in Tokyo. Through the group, the teacher aimed to provide out-of-class opportunities for English communication; facilitate access to English-language resources; motivate students to study/use English; and create a learning community that had student leaders. This article draws on a small-scale questionnaire, participant interviews, and activity within the Facebook group to examine the extent to which these goals were achieved.

Keywords: independent learning, learning community, Facebook.

1. Introduction

The Japanese government has described English proficiency as "crucial for Japan's future" (MEXT, 2014, Background to the Reform section, para. 1) and implemented numerous strategies to help students develop it. Despite this, proficiency is still far from reach for most secondary school students (The Japan Times, 2016) and Japanese speakers generally achieve below-average scores on proficiency exams (ETS, 2016). At university level, motivation can be low, particularly among students who are studying English only because it is required, but many students I taught at a women's university in Tokyo expressed the desire to improve their English skills, and some showed a willingness to look beyond coursework. Although students can search for learning opportunities themselves, teachers can also play an important role in supporting autonomous learning (Reinders & Hubbard, 2013; Smith & Craig, 2013). In an attempt to

1. Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan; ohashi@meiji.ac.jp

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do so, I created a Facebook group for my students. The main aims of the group were to provide out-of-class opportunities for English communication, facilitate access to English-language resources, motivate students, and create a learning community that included student leaders.

2. Method

2.1. Managing the Facebook group

I created a private Facebook group in May 2014 and in the following two years invited approximately 400 students from my English classes and a previous Facebook project (Ohashi, 2014) to join. Membership was completely voluntary and had no bearing on homework or grades. Those who wanted to participate sent me a request through the Facebook group, and once approved they could write on the group's 'wall', read other members' posts and comments, and add new members. In the first two years, 145 students joined the group.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Data collection took three forms. First, posts and comments were tallied, and posts were categorised by type to identify patterns in teacher and student contributions. The number of posts each student made were recorded, the search bar was used to check if each member had commented, and the 'seen by' function was used to check if they had read/seen posts. Second, an online questionnaire (N=30) was used to gather basic information about participation and motivation. Finally, two students were interviewed to obtain more detailed accounts of students' experiences and views.

3. Results and discussion

As outlined above, the Facebook group was created with four aims in mind. These are examined one by one in the sections below.

3.1. Providing opportunities for English communication

There was strong evidence of students taking the opportunity to communicate in English, as shown by their 215 posts and 1000-plus comments. Some of their posts and the 186 that I made sparked lengthy threads involving multiple students, with

the longest eliciting over 30 comments. However, although 145 students joined the group within its first two years, only 69 of them posted. Furthermore, posting was not evenly shared by these students, with some posting multiple times (N=37) but others posting only once (N=32). 50% of questionnaire respondents did not post more frequently (or at all) because they lacked time, 23% were deterred by their shyness, and 20% felt under-confident. Confidence was affected by the high level of some contributions, with one student noting, "I feel like I have to write high level, influential posts like [other members] do, so I cannot post much. I feel like it's difficult for me to write motivating posts like that"[2]. While posting was challenging, commenting appeared to be less so, with 90 students writing comments. The remaining 55 students never wrote anything, but they all participated as readers. Questionnaire results (N=30) reflect the patterns shown above, indicating that students were more likely to read posts (100%) and read comments (97%) than write comments (70%) or write posts (60%). The output (writing) figures suggest that the opportunity to communicate was not taken up by some. However, *reading* messages from their teacher and peers was one side of a communicative activity, and feedback from the questionnaire showed that 90% of participants read other students' posts 'often' or more frequently, with even higher figures for the teacher's posts (97%). Therefore, it can be concluded that all students engaged in at least one-way communication, with two-way communication occurring between those who chose to interact by reading *and* writing.

3.2. Assisting students to access English-language resources

This aim was met through a combination of my efforts and those of the students. 41 of my posts had links to educational materials and an additional 26 were provided by the learners. Materials shared ranged from video clips and news articles to quizzes and book recommendations, with the majority primarily useful for developing listening, reading and vocabulary skills. In addition to this, I uploaded 26 posts about English-language competitions and events, and the students posted 30 more. These posts provided information about things like speech competitions, guest lectures, debates, and lunchtime English chat sessions, with most focusing on face-to-face opportunities to listen and speak.

3.3. Motivating students to study and use English

In recent years there have been many studies that highlight the complexity of L2 learner motivation (e.g. Apple, Da Silva, & Fellner, 2013; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013;

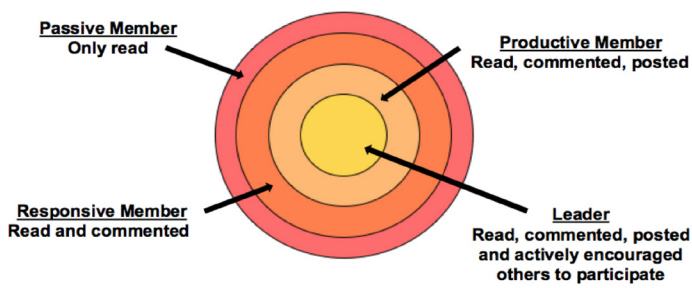
2. Translated from Japanese

Ushioda, 2013). In this study, motivation was addressed in a very limited way by asking students (in the questionnaire and interviews) if and how the Facebook group motivated them. Some students reported being motivated by the efforts of others, with one explaining, "[t]his group motivate[s] me because I feel like studying English harder and harder when I read posts". Members did not need to be good at English to motivate others, with one student noting, "[s]ome are not good at writing English here but they are trying to improv[e] their skills by continuing to write posts. That's impress[ive] and [makes] me feel like studying more". The group could also push students to try when they were unmotivated: "[w]hen I am tired of studying English, I read the posts in this group and they encourage me to keep it up"[3]. Furthermore, there was evidence to suggest that knowing what others were doing was motivating, with one student explaining, "[w]hen I read about other students going overseas I want to go too, and that makes me want to use English more"[4]. Although the impact the group had on each and every member remains unknown, the questionnaire responses, interviews, and comments exchanged within the Facebook group provide some evidence of its motivating effects.

3.4. Creating a learning community with student leaders

The students in this group took on four different roles, as shown in Figure 1. Those on the fringe were *passive*, only participating as readers (N=55). Those slightly closer to the centre were *responsive*, reacting to what they read by commenting (N=21). The third role, which was more *productive,* involved not only reading and reacting, but also providing posts for others to read (N=56), and those who assumed the fourth role were *leaders* who did all of these things and actively tried to engage others (N=13).

Figure 1. Roles within the Facebook group



3. Translated from Japanese
4. Translated from Japanese

I adopted the leader role, posting 186 times, commenting on all of the students' posts, and responding to their comments. In addition, I prompted members to post and comment, with 34 of my posts devoted to asking new members to post and/or soliciting contributions from the group. Furthermore, many of my other posts included questions. As noted above, 13 leaders emulated my role, and although their participation was more limited than mine, they were pro-active members who encouraged others in their learning community to participate. When two of the leaders were interviewed, they suggested ways to help passive students into more active roles. One recommended creating opportunities for students to meet face-to-face, as this would make them feel more comfortable writing in the group. The other suggested encouraging students to press 'like' as it shows writers that others have read their posts. This student acknowledged the reciprocal relationship between readers and writers, noting that "writers motivate the reader, but also the reader can motivate the writer to write more" by reacting to them.

4. Conclusions

The preliminary findings of this investigation suggest that the private Facebook group provided students with opportunities to communicate in English outside of class, gave them access to a wide range of English-language resources, and motivated some of them to study and use English. In addition, there was evidence that the group had evolved into a learning community that was not solely teacher-led, as some students had taken on leadership roles. The benefits reported by students make it worthwhile to continue hosting the group, and may serve as an incentive for those who are considering offering similar opportunities to their students.

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