A Facebook Project for Japanese University Students: Does It Really Enhance Student Interaction, Learner Autonomy, and English Abilities?

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Abstract. Facebook is the most popular social network service (SNS) in the world and a great platform for a link to the world. It can also be used effectively for language learning in EFL environments. However, that is not the case in Japan. The number of Facebook users accounts for less than 6 % of the population. This is partly because the most popular SNS in Japan is MIXI, which is available only in the Japanese language. This study examined the potential of Facebook for Japanese university students to develop their English skills as well as student interaction and learner autonomy. It describes how to introduce and integrate Facebook into a freshmen English course in a Japanese university. The survey conducted at the beginning of the semester revealed that only 15% of the students had a Facebook account. In order to habituate the students to using Facebook and improve their English skills, a writing task on Facebook was assigned every week. The results of the project, based on the feedback from the students and two surveys conducted at the beginning and the end of the semester, will be presented. I will also discuss how Facebook can facilitate not only the language learning of students, but also the interaction between the students, and access to the outer world.

Keywords: social network, Facebook, learner autonomy, writing.

1. Introduction

Facebook is the most popular social network service in the world. Since Facebook launched its service in Japan in 2008, it has been growing rapidly. The company announced this March that the number of Japanese Facebook users has doubled since last September and exceeded 10 million (Nihon, 2012). As a platform for a link to the world, Facebook has great potential for language learning in EFL environments.

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By integrating Facebook activities into English lessons, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Facebook can help students to improve their English, and whether it can facilitate student interaction and self-motivation for learning English.

The Facebook project is an ongoing one-year research. In the first semester, the main goals were to introduce Facebook to the students, teach them how to use Facebook, and help them to make a habit of writing regularly in English. In the second semester, the students are being given an opportunity to exchange opinions with American university students on Facebook so that they can expand their views about the outer world. This research will investigate the following three questions:

- Does the Facebook project encourage student interaction?
- Does the Facebook project enhance learner autonomy for studying English?
- Does the Facebook project help to develop the students' English skills?

This paper will report on the first part of the study, Facebook project (1), which was conducted in the fall semester of 2011.

2. Methodology

The Facebook project (1) was conducted at University of Marketing and Distribution Sciences in Japan in the fall semester of 2011. The participants were 13 freshmen in the special English course who took three English classes a week. The project was conducted as a homework assignment in the "general English" class.

The students' English level was quite basic, with an average TOEIC* score of around 360. At the beginning of the semester, the first questionnaire was conducted to obtain information about the students' usage of Facebook. It was found that only three out of 13 students had a Facebook account. Subsequently, an orientation session was provided by the teacher and the students were instructed how to set up an account and use Facebook. A closed group was formed on Facebook so that only the members were able to get access to the group.

The teacher provided one topic every week as a homework assignment, and all the students wrote about the same topic in 4-6 lines. The Facebook project (1) lasted throughout the semester and the students wrote about 12 topics. The project was included in their grade.

As for correcting mistakes, the teacher solicited one grammatically incorrect sentence from each student's comment and made an "error correction" worksheet every week. At the beginning of each lesson the students were instructed to correct the mistakes in about 10 minutes. Afterwards, the teacher provided correct answers as well as explanations.

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* Test of English for international communication

3. Result

In order to collect the students' feedback and investigate the students' views, a post-study questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester.

The first three questions were in the format of a five-level Likert scale: 1. Strongly disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Neither agree nor disagree; 4. Agree; 5. Strongly agree.

In response to Question 1 (Figure 1), 61.5% of the students either strongly agreed or agreed, with the average of 3.7. It should be noted that a few students showed unfavorable responses to the project. The reason may be that they are not generally fond of any computer-assisted learning.

In the case of Question 2 (Figure 2), 85% of the students either strongly agreed or agreed. The average was 4.2, indicating that most of the students believed that writing a comment in English regularly was very helpful to their English study, and they actually felt their English ability improved.

In response to Question 3 (Figure 3), the average was 4.2. 77% of the students stated that the error correction was beneficial, suggesting that most students appreciated the fact that their mistakes were pointed out and corrected directly by the teacher.

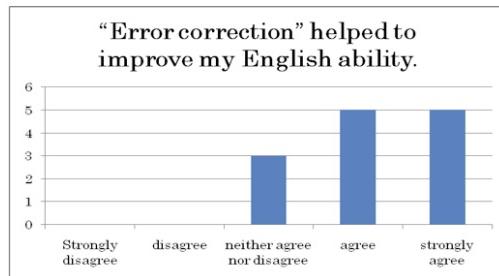Figure 1. Question 1
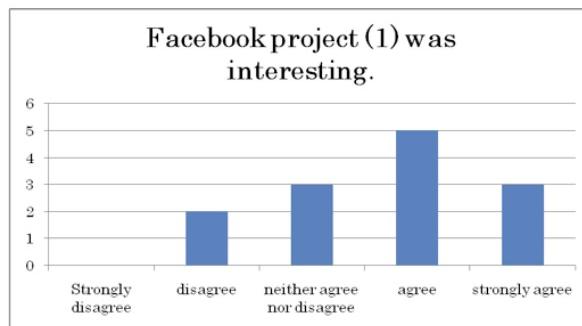
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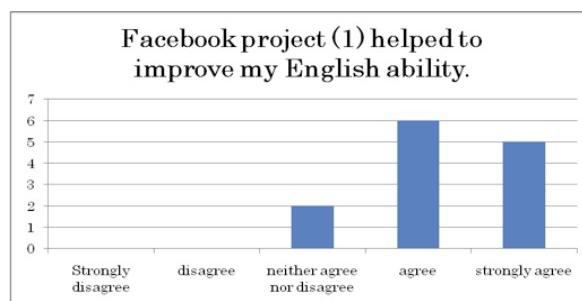
Figure 3. Question 3

Concerning the number of times they log on to Facebook to perform an action not related to the assignment (Figure 4), five students stated "every day" while two students stated, "hardly ever". Again, it seems that the students are divided into two groups: one in favor of using Facebook, the other not. To Question 5 (Figure 5), the students were allowed to choose more than one answer. It was found that two main purposes were "communication with friends" and "getting information". As regards Question 6 (Figure 6), only four students answered yes. However, the other nine students answered that they want to make foreign friends. This suggests that although the students are interested in making foreign friends on Facebook, most of them are not motivated enough to take action voluntarily.

   In addition to the data above, the students were asked to comment freely on the Facebook project (1), and they provided the following feedback:
- I can get a lot of information from abroad;
- I gradually got used to writing in English. It was fun
   to read the classmates' comments, too;
- I had a lot of chances to make English sentences;
- I made foreign friends;
- I had a chance to communicate with people in different age groups;
- I was happy to receive requests from friends and acquaintances;
- I got in the habit of looking up words in a dictionary
   and learning new expressions;
- It was fun to look into communities and get information about foreign people;
- I was happy that I got more chances to write in English
   on Facebook than before. I also communicated with more
   people on Facebook and enjoyed chatting in English;
- It was good for me to think about how to write what I want to say in English;
- I can catch up on foreign friends' updated information easily;
- I can get information about my favorite foreign artists;
- English is becoming more and more fun for me;
- The topics for writing were interesting;
- It was too bad that I couldn't interact with foreign people on Facebook;

- I think it may be a good idea to upload comments in English outside the closed group;
- It is difficult to make foreign friends.
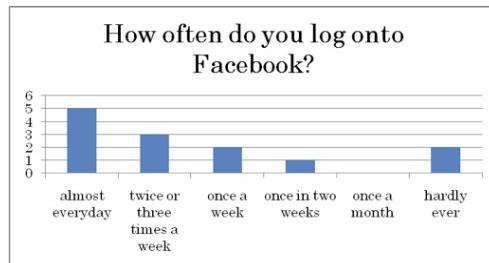
Figure 4. Question 4

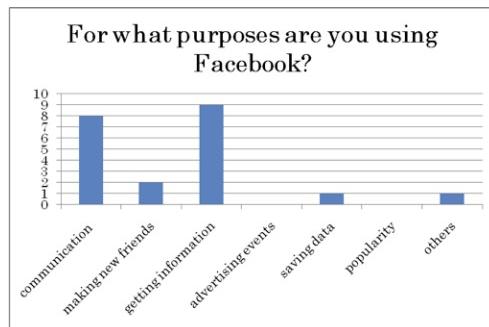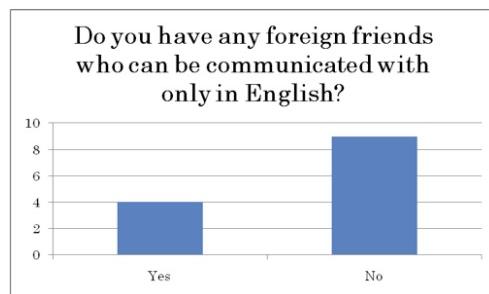How often do you log onto Facebook?

Figure 5. Question 5

For what purposes are you using Facebook?

Figure 6. Question 6

Do you have any foreign friends who can be communicated with only in English?

4. Discussion

The goals of the first semester were to familiarize the students with Facebook and help them to make a habit of writing regularly in English. It appears that the goals were

successfully accomplished in that the students uploaded comments in English every week and their overall reaction to Facebook was positive.

As for research question one, it was observed that the students commented on the classmates' posts actively. The survey also showed that one of the main purposes of using Facebook is to communicate with friends. As described in the feedback, it seemed fun for the students to read classmates' comments and interact with each other.

Concerning research question two, there was an interesting finding in the feedback. It was found that in addition to the weekly writing assignment, some students voluntarily used Facebook in order to make English-speaking friends or get information that was available only in English. This type of activity will certainly enhance learner autonomy and help the students to become independent, motivated learners of English. However, it should be also noted that most students were still reluctant to make foreign friends on their own. As Schalow (2011) pointed out, Japanese students may be "inhibited learners" who are rather passive without taking voluntary actions. The students may need further support to increase opportunities for interacting with foreign people on Facebook.

In the context of answering research question three, it was found that most students felt that the project helped them to improve their English ability. Based on the feedback in the open-ended question, several students commented that the opportunity to write their own opinions helped them to get used to writing in English as well as learn new expressions and vocabulary. Furthermore, a few students stated that they enjoyed chatting or getting information in English, which indicates that their activities can help them to improve their reading, speaking, and listening skills as well.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented the results of the first part of the Facebook project to investigate the potential of Facebook for enhancing English study and learner autonomy. It was found that the students' overall reaction to Facebook was positive and they became accustomed to writing English comments on Facebook. It was also indicated that the project could help to develop the students' English ability and facilitate learner autonomy to some extent. More longitudinal research is needed, however, to further investigate how much Facebook can stimulate the students' self-motivation for English learning and improve their English ability. It is expected that further analysis and discussion will be possible when the second part of the research is done and the data is collected.

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