

Online English practice with Filipino teachers in university classrooms

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Abstract. Globalization has led to an increased need for Japanese students to improve their communicative abilities in order to compete on the world stage. As a result, the Japanese government has reformed the English education system in Japan to focus on more practical communication. Due to a lack of time and resources available to do this successfully, some institutions in Japan have introduced online components to their courses. This study examines both qualitative and quantitative data regarding students' engagement in online English education and some of the practical issues that can arise.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, foreign language anxiety.

1. Introduction

As a result of globalization, improvement of English language ability is extremely important for the future of Japan. The Japanese government is now reforming English education, but while various reforms have been introduced, they have not been enough to boost the level of English education. One of the biggest problems is the limited amount of time spent on practical English communication. To alleviate this, some institutions are introducing online English communication courses with teachers based in other countries. This study examines some of the issues that can arise in the use of online classes and reviews the results of both qualitative and quantitative research undertaken on the impact of online classes on the motivation, language anxiety, and level of English ability of the students.

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2. Method

Over three years, six groups of first year chemistry majors at a national university in Japan took part in synchronous, online sessions with teachers based in the Philippines. Before the sessions were held, the students were given a thorough orientation and assigned to groups which remained the same for all of the Skype sessions. The students used mini iPads and all of the sessions were recorded. The students were given a different topic for each session; self-introduction, Japanese life, Filipino life, and free choice, and were asked to research and prepare a five minute presentation individually. During the sessions, they gave their presentations, the Filipino teacher asked some questions and gave feedback, and then there was a short time for some whole group discussion.

Qualitative data was collected through the use of focused essays, a method recommended by MacIntyre, Burns, and Jessome (2011) which allowed us access to the thoughts and feelings of the students. The students had thirty minutes during class to write two essays, one on what they liked about the Skype sessions and the other about what they disliked. The answers were analysed using an open coding process adapted from Holton (2007). The quantitative data was collected using questionnaires using a Likert scale based on the *foreign language classroom anxiety scale* (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) which was translated into Japanese and administered at the beginning and end of the sessions.

3. Discussion

The data from the focused essays revealed five significant themes:

- perceived improvement in English language skills,
- increased motivation to study English,
- international posture,
- change in language user identity, and
- ambivalence about using English.

Firstly, many students remarked that they believed their English ability had improved, for example, “When I talked with them at last time I can speak

fluently than for the first time”. As the sessions were limited in number, the change in their language skills may not have been significant, however, the students’ belief that there had been an improvement is important, as an emphasis on successful experiences should lead to an increase in motivation and self-confidence and in turn proficiency (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Secondly, the students showed increased levels of motivation. Many compared the Skype sessions positively with their previous experiences learning English in school, for example, “Before English was just for tests now I can use English another way. I am fun”. Working together in groups led to a positive atmosphere in the classroom which in turn helped build students’ confidence and motivation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

The importance of international posture and identity was highlighted by the students. Yashima (2009) suggests that Japanese learners do not identify with native speakers of English, but view English as a medium through which communication with people from around the world is possible. Through the Skype sessions the learners were able to develop international, English-using versions of themselves, “I had never known interesting point about English before this class. But I can notice about talking with foreigner is very very interesting”. The Japanese education system and the place of Japan in the outer circle of language users position Japanese learners in a passive role without a sense of ownership of the language. However, through speaking to the teachers in the Philippines, the students were able to develop an image of themselves as active users as we can see in the following comment, “I studied a lot for tests in high school, but I did not speak. I had to use my English to talk on Skype”.

Notwithstanding the positive feedback regarding the Skype sessions, the students did express some ambivalence. The duality of their experience is captured in the following comment, “I liked it and I hated it. It was hard to do, my friends said too. But it was interesting”. This comment highlights the mixed feelings and complicated processes the students are undergoing during L2 communication.

The results of the quantitative data revealed a complicated picture when the pre- and post-data were compared. The sessions clearly led to an increase in anxiety as can be seen in the answers to several questions. In Question 1 (*I feel nervous when I speak English*), there was a 12% increase in students who strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Related to that, in Question 3 (*I feel nervous when I can’t remember proper English phrases*), agreement increased significantly by 22%. Question 9 (*I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes*) showed a 10% increase, and finally Question 10 showed an 11% rise.

The data showing decreases in anxiety showed more complex changes. For example, in Question 11 (*I am afraid that other students think my English is poor*), there was a 10% decrease in the number of students who strongly agreed with this statement, but an 11% increase in students who agreed showing a slight reduction in anxiety levels. There was a 4% decrease in the number of students who agreed with Question 12 (*I am afraid the teacher will scold me when I cannot answer some questions*) and a 3% increase in students who disagreed also revealing a decrease in anxiety. Finally, Question 13 (*I feel upset when I hear other students' good pronunciation*) showed a similar pattern with an 8% decrease in students who disagreed and a 2% decrease in those who strongly disagreed.

We can see that there was an increase in anxiety concerning the learners' own performances, and a frustration with the disparity between the level of their thoughts and their linguistic ability. However, there was a decrease in anxiety related to external issues such as fear of negative evaluation from the other students or the teachers.

Several practical problems unique to studying online arose during the Skype sessions. One problem was some students hid their scripts out of view of the camera and just read their presentations, which was not allowed. It was also sometimes hard for the teachers to evaluate the students' body language and the volume of their speech due to the limitations of the computer or tablet. To solve this problem, we introduced wide conversion lenses and microphones for the Filipino teachers so they could see all the students easily, which has led to smoother group interaction and a reduction in the use of scripts.

Another problem was that the students presented in groups and sometimes those who had finished presenting lost interest and did not participate in the other students' presentations. In order to solve this problem we decided to give roles to each group member, such as Questioner, Time Keeper, and Recorder. We also introduced peer evaluation, which helped students to improve their reflective abilities and increase interaction. Finally, to improve the quality of the activities, all the students' presentations were video-recorded.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Skype sessions appeared to be beneficial to the students in a number of ways. Through practical experience communicating with the Filipino teachers, the students realized which areas of language learning they needed to

focus on while building up their confidence and altering their self-perceptions to form images of themselves as successful language learners.

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