Improving the English Proficiency of Native Japanese Via Digital Storytelling, Blogs, and e-Mobile Technologies

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Abstract. This paper reports on the use of digital storytelling and blog activities to make CALL classes more dynamic and personalized for both instructors and learners alike. An empirical research study was carried out to determine if a blended-learning environment incorporating m-learning could help improve the English listening, presentation, and blogging skills of native Japanese undergraduate students at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. The blended-learning activities included three components: "iUniv" lectures, digital storytelling, and student blog activities. The goal of the study was to examine the effectiveness of the blended learning activities in improving the English language proficiency of native Japanese students, including their presentation skills through the use of blogs and PowerPoint. An assessment of pre-training and post-training computerized assessment system for English communication (CASEC) scores revealed that the students had adequately comprehended the iUniv lecture contents and their overall listening skills improved. A questionnaire administered to students after their exposure to the activities indicated they were satisfied with and motivated by their exposure to the blended learning environment incorporating m-learning.

Keywords: digital storytelling, blog writing, e-mobile technologies.

1. Introduction

Learning today takes place at any time and at any place due to of the swift development of mobile technologies. E-mobile learning technologies such as the iPhone, iPad, podcasting, video-casting, and others, are rapidly gaining popularity as an effective way to improve foreign language skills around the world. Mobile technologies have also transformed learning methodologies (Vinu, Sherimon, & Krishnan, 2011). One such type of methodology that has received great attention in recent years is blended learning (BL). BL combines traditional face-to-face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities, resulting in a more integrated approach for both

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instructors and learners. BL can increase the options for greater quality and quantity of interaction in a learning environment (Wilson & Smilanich, 2005).

"Five years from now on the web for free you'll be able to find the best lectures in the world" (Gates, 2010). The above quote, uttered by Bill Gates at a conference in August 2010, was a bold prediction he made of the future state of "open" lectures, social media, and smartphones, which has helped to usher the world into "the next era" of the web. Social media and the smartphone have indeed brought about the "the next era" to the web, and have also created a new relationship between education/learning and society which current education or e-learning has not realized.

According to social constructionism (Burr, 1995, 2003), people can create new knowledge and learn most effectively through social interaction and exchanging information for the benefit of others. Constructionism holds that learning can happen most effectively when people are active in making tangible objects in the real world. In this sense, constructionism is connected with experiential learning and builds on some of the ideas of Jean Piaget (Bandura, 1977).

The present paper reports on the results of a year-long study to ascertain if a blended-learning environment incorporating m-learning can help improve the English listening, presentation, and blogging skills of native Japanese undergraduate students. We take advantage of the cyber community where 1) Learning Management Systems, 2) Blogs, 3) Digital Storytelling, and 4) Mobile Computing are all used to teach language and communication (Obari, Kojima, & Itahashi, 2010).

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants were 60 first year university students, all native speakers of Japanese, enrolled in an undergraduate course in English Writing and Communication. Each class met once per week for 90 minutes in a CALL laboratory during two consecutive 15-week semesters. The following explains the three-phased, blended-learning environment incorporating m-learning that the student participants were exposed to as a way of improving their English listening, presentation, and blogging skills.

2.2. iUniv lectures

During the first semester, the students were assigned to listen to at least six iUniv lectures on YouTube using their mobile devices. The students typically accessed the lectures out of the classroom using their mobile devices, and practiced listening to the lectures at their own pace. One of the more popular lectures the students downloaded was *Justice* by Harvard University's Michael Sandel. Students downloaded the iUniv lectures with scripts onto their mobile devices, listened to and summarized the lectures, and then broke up into small groups of four or five students to prepare

PowerPoint presentations based on their summaries. The presentations were delivered both individually and as a group in front of the class.

2.3. Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling includes the process of story creation with the impact of pictures and sounds, and it can be transferable, storable, and accessible in order to create communities where people can share goals, experiences, and teach each other what they have learned. Digital stories usually contain some mixture of computer-based images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips and/or music. During the second half of the first semester, after having summarized the iUniv lectures and given their PowerPoint presentations, the students created digital storytelling recordings of their summaries for the purpose of developing their speaking and pronunciation skills.

In addition, the students studied 15 lessons of the DVD series *World Adventures*. This DVD series enables students to learn about the main characteristics of 15 different countries by introducing famous UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Students broke up into small groups of four or five students and created a total of two PowerPoint presentations during the class meetings. Windows Movie Maker was used in the production of the two digital stories.

2.4. Blog activities

Next, the students worked on creating a social network of shared experiences through writing blogs, which took place during the second semester. The purpose of the blog writing was to help the students develop their own language skills by reflecting upon what they had learned during the first semester. Once again, the students broke up into small groups of four or five students and spent approximately 30 minutes of each classroom meeting to prepare for their blog presentations, as well as spending extra time outside of the classroom accessing the materials via their mobile devices. In total, it took the students approximately eight weeks to prepare their blog presentations before presenting them in front of the classroom. Finally, an evaluation sheet was uploaded on the bulletin board of a learning management system (LMS), which enabled the students to share and evaluate their blogs on the web and to assess their presentations later on for critical feedback and reflective learning.

3. Assessment

For the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of the blended learning program using m-learning, we next present some empirical data that we collected before and after the students were exposed to the BL activities, including results from the CASEC test and a post-activity questionnaire that was administered to the students for the purpose of attaining their feedback on how they felt about their BL experience.

3.1. Computerized assessment system for English communication

CASEC evaluates English proficiency based on item response theory and consists of four sections: knowledge of vocabulary; knowledge of phrasal expressions and usage; listening ability – understanding of main ideas; and listening ability – understanding of specific information. All of the students were administered by the CASEC before and after their exposure to the blended learned activities. The results showed that the overall average score increased from 533 ($SD = 94$) in April 2011 to 588 ($SD = 84$) in January 2012. A series of t-tests revealed a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test CASEC scores ($p < .01$), indicating the blended learning program incorporating m-learning had a positive effect on the students' overall English proficiency. In addition, the pre-test (April 2011) and post-test (January 2012) data results indicated that the number of students who obtained a score of higher than 600 points (maximum score = 1000) substantially increased from 10 to 32 students out of a total of 60 students.

3.2. Student questionnaire

After their exposure to the blended learning activities, the students were administered by an on-line questionnaire to determine how motivating and beneficial they felt the activities were. The first question of the questionnaire dealt with student opinion of the usefulness of digital storytelling in learning English. Nearly 80% of the respondents felt that the digital storytelling was "useful" in learning English. The second question addressed whether the students considered the digital storytelling or the blog activities more useful in learning English. Overall, students felt that the blog activities (56%) were more "useful" than the digital storytelling (44%) in learning English. The third question asked whether the students thought the blog-making and presentations activities were useful in learning English, with 85% responding favourably. It is clear from the results of the questionnaire that many of the students felt the digital storytelling, presentation, and blog activities were all beneficial in learning English.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results of CASEC revealed that a combination of blended learning activities with m-learning had a positive effect on improving the Japanese students' overall English language proficiency. The results of the questionnaire confirmed that the students considered the activities to be helpful in developing their English language skills. Also, the questionnaire feedback revealed the students were satisfied with and motivated by their exposure to the blended learning environment using m-learning. The students devoted a significant amount of time and energy in researching and discussing their topics, in learning how to create their blogs, and finally in planning, developing, and delivering their group and individual English presentations in front of the class. Through all of these processes the students could improve their English and acquire new knowledge about their topics and develop their ICT skills.

One of the main goals of our blended learning program incorporating m-learning was to try to motivate our students by offering them a more integrated approach to learning English, including individualized guidance and support during the learning process. Through the m-learning activities students were able to work both in and out of the classroom and to actively explore their learning environment to gain more experience in collaborating with their classmates, thus making their overall language learning experience much more fun and enjoyable.

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