

A Facebook Project for Japanese University Students (2): Does It Really Enhance Student Interaction, Learner Autonomy, and English Abilities?

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Abstract. Facebook is, in most countries, a very popular Social Network Service (SNS). Since the launch of its service in Japan in 2008, it has been growing rapidly. As a platform for a link to the world, Facebook can also be used effectively for language learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) environments. The purpose of this project was to investigate how Facebook can help Japanese university students to improve their English by integrating Facebook activities into English lessons, and examine whether it could facilitate student interaction and self-motivation for learning English. The Facebook project was conducted over the course of one academic year in two parts. A previous study reported on the results of the first semester (Hamada, 2012). In the second semester, the students were given an opportunity to exchange opinions with American university students. A writing task on Facebook was assigned to both Japanese and American students every week. In this study, I will present the results of the second semester based on a survey and feedback from the students. I will also discuss how the Facebook exchange with the American students can facilitate not only the language learning of the Japanese students, but also the interactions between students and inter-cultural understanding.

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

1. Introduction

The number of Facebook users in the world has exceeded 1.1 billion (Stotland, 2013). As a platform for a link to the world, it has great potential for language

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learning in EFL environments. By integrating Facebook activities into English lessons, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Facebook can help students improve their English. The study also examines whether or not it can facilitate student interaction and self-motivation for learning English.

The Facebook project was conducted over two semesters. In the first semester, the main goals were to familiarize the students with Facebook and help them get in the habit of writing regularly in English. 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. However, it was also found that most students were reluctant to make foreign friends on their own and their Facebook activities in English were quite limited (Hamada, 2012).

In the second semester, upon consideration of the results from the first semester, the Facebook exchange project was re-designed to further motivate the "reluctant" students. They were provided with an opportunity to exchange information and opinions with American university students and broaden their views about the outer world. This research investigates 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?

2. Methodology

The Facebook exchange project was conducted in the spring semester of 2012 with the collaboration of Portland State University (PSU). The Japanese participants from University of Marketing and Distribution Sciences (UMDS) consisted of 12 sophomores with an average Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score of around 420. The project was conducted as a homework assignment and was included in their grade. Ten PSU students in a first-year-Japanese class volunteered to participate in the project.

A closed group was formed on Facebook so that only designated student members were able to have access to the group. A writing task was assigned to both PSU and UMDS students every week, and all the students wrote about the same topic using at least four lines of text. The Facebook exchange project lasted throughout the semester and the students wrote about 15 topics.

As for correcting mistakes of the UMDS students, the teacher selected one grammatically incorrect sentence from each student’s comment and made an “error correction” worksheet every week. At the beginning of each lesson, approximately 10 minutes of class time was devoted to allowing the students to correct their mistakes on their own. Afterwards, the teacher provided correct answers as well as explanations.

3. Results

A questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester in order to collect Japanese student feedback and investigate their views.

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. The formats of the other questions are displayed in Figures 4-8.

In response to Question 1, 75% of the students either strongly agreed or agreed (Figure 1). The average was 4.0, indicating that most of the students enjoyed the Facebook exchange project. They commented that they especially enjoyed learning cultural differences.

In the case of Question 2, 75% of the students either strongly agreed or agreed, with the average result of 3.92 (Figure 2). The result suggests that most of the students believed that the project was helpful to their English study. According to their feedback, they benefited most from the acquisition of new vocabulary.

In response to Question 3, the average result was 4.3. 83% of the students stated that the error correction helped them to improve their English ability (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Question 1

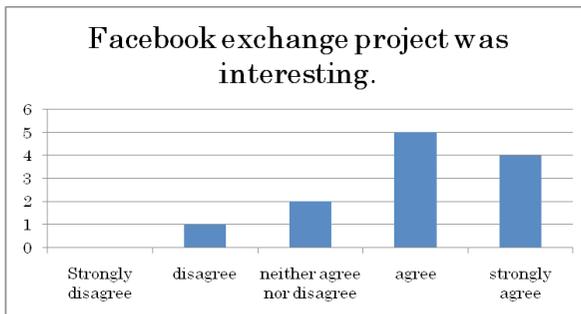


Figure 2. Question 2

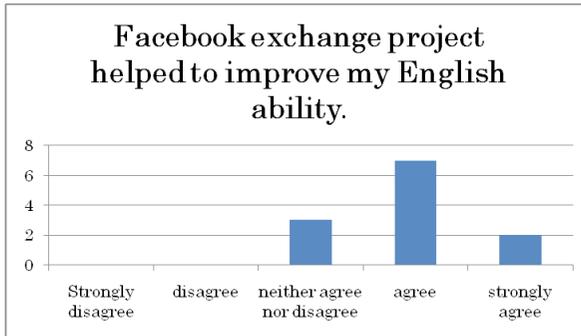
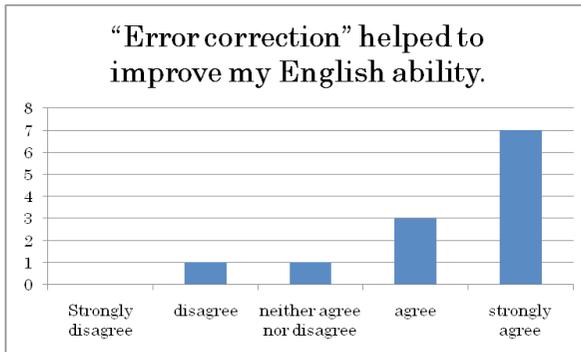


Figure 3. Question 3



Concerning Question 4, 10 students out of 12 made at least one friend, indicating that they got more closely connected with the PSU students privately (Figure 4). As regards Question 5, whether the opportunity of using English on Facebook had increased, 8 students stated “Yes” while four students stated “No” (Figure 5). It seems that the students were divided into two groups: one motivated to use English on Facebook voluntarily, the other not. It was also found that the three major activities by the first group were socializing with the PSU students outside the group, making new foreign friends other than the PSU students, and getting information in English.

Questions 6 and 7 were given to the first group who answered “Yes” in Question 5. The two figures show that the students engaged in reading activities more than in writing comments (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

To Question 8, 75% of the students stated that they wanted to continue the Facebook exchange project, mainly for English study and staying connected with the PSU students (Figure 8). There was only one student who answered “No”. The reason was that she did not like the SNS activities.

In addition to the data above, open-ended questions were given to the students. To the question, “Since you started to use Facebook, how has using it helped you with your English study, other than in the area of assignments?”, the answers included getting information about other countries and the interests of people in those countries, as well as increasing their opportunities for using English.

To the question, “How do you want to use Facebook from now on?”, several students commented that they wanted to make more foreign friends and broaden their world.

Figure 4. Question 4

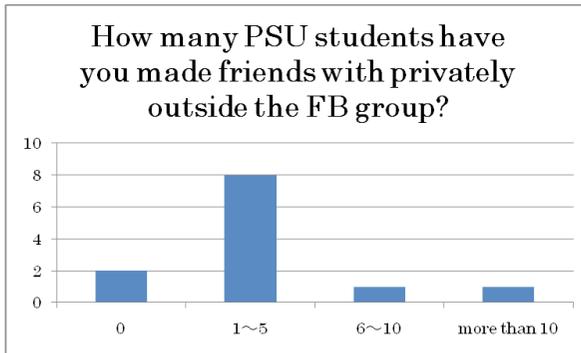


Figure 5. Question 5

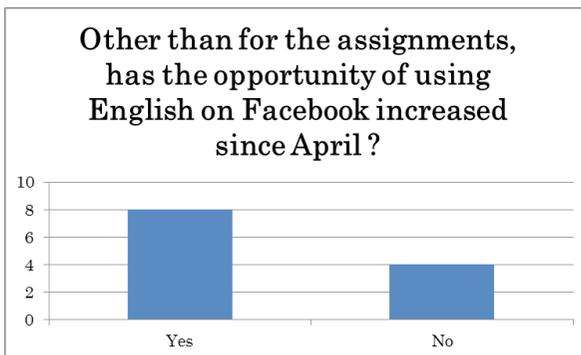


Figure 6. Question 6

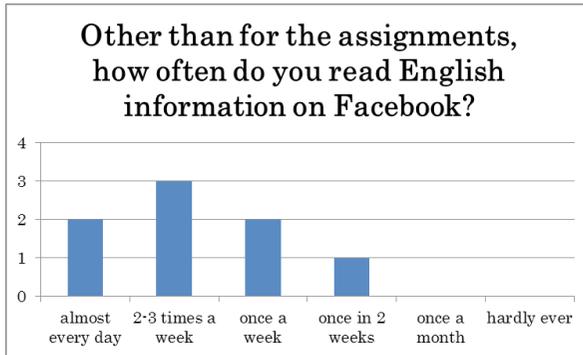


Figure 7. Question 7

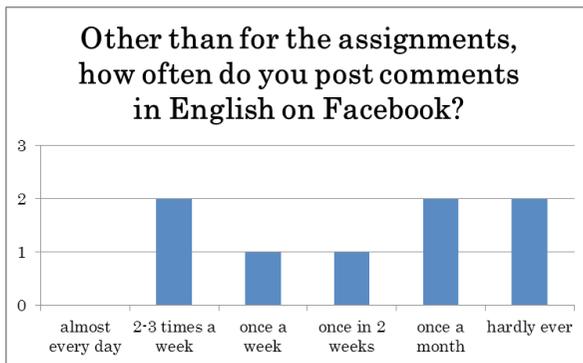
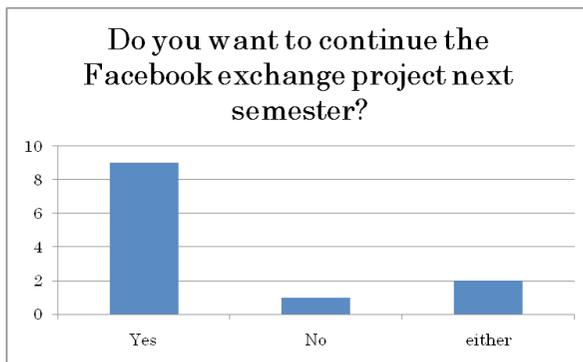


Figure 8. Question 8



4. Discussion

The overall results indicate that the Facebook exchange project was very successful in that it stimulated the Japanese students' curiosity and their "intrinsic motivation" to communicate with the PSU students and learn more about their lives, culture, and ways of thinking. What they experienced was not anything "artificial" or "virtual" but communications with real people, which naturally motivated the Japanese students to learn the English language itself. This finding supports Gardner's (1985) claim that there is a close relationship between motivation and success of second language learning. The main focus in the second semester was on encouraging student interaction and enhancing learner autonomy.

Concerning research question one, it was observed that there was a lot of interactions between the UMDS and PSU students. They enjoyed not only reading posts but also actively commenting on these posts. It seems that the UMDS students especially enjoyed learning about cultural differences by interacting with the PSU students. The survey also showed that most of the UMDS students got connected with PSU students privately outside the group, indicating that the project did encourage student interaction.

As for research question two, the survey strongly suggests that the project enhanced learner autonomy. It was found that in addition to the weekly assignment, all of the Japanese students voluntarily used Facebook for getting information in English. Most students commented that they wanted to make more foreign friends, learn more about different cultures, and broaden their views. One student stated that she was now writing posts in English almost all the time. Another interesting finding, however, was that most of the students were engaged in reading activities more often than writing ones. This may support Schalow's (2011) view that Japanese students are rather passive learners or "inhibited learners" (p. 100).

As regards research question three, the findings indicate that the project helped them to improve their English ability. The two main skills the students felt were improved were vocabulary and grammar. Most of the students commented that they learned new expressions by reading the PSU students' posts. The error correction also helped the students with grammar and vocabulary.

It can thus be advocated that Facebook activities in English will help the students to become more independent learners, and that they can improve their English ability without making too much "effort" or feeling they are being made to "study".

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented the second part of the Facebook project to investigate how Facebook can enhance student interaction, English study, and learner autonomy. It was found that the project encouraged the students to become interested in learning about cultural differences and initiating interaction with others. The project also facilitated learner autonomy, motivating the students to spend more time voluntarily using English on Facebook. It was also indicated that the project helped to improve the students' English ability, especially in regard to grammar and vocabulary. It is unknown, however, how long and voluntarily the rather "passive" students will continue to be engaged in Facebook activities in English from now on, without any assignments. A follow-up study will be needed to further investigate the effect of Facebook for their language learning.

It is hoped that the students will continue to enjoy broadening their knowledge and views through Facebook, and to use English not only for learning English, but also for communicating with people throughout the world.

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