Computer-Mediated Asynchronous Discussions on the International Virtual Exchange

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Abstract

In Spring 2020, several Rikkyo University discussion lecturers incorporated computer-mediated asynchronous tasks into their courses. The purpose of incorporating these tasks was to help students achieve the goals of the class: (a) increase their spoken fluency, (b) practice using formulaic discussion and communication phrases, and (c) generate content or ideas related to the topic of discussion. In the future, Rikkyo lecturers might wish to incorporate self-study discussion tasks in the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project. The exchange allows Japanese students to discuss topics with university students from other countries. The forums are free, sponsored by a Japanese government *kaken* grant, and monitored by lecturers whose classes are involved in IVE Project (Hagley & Cotter, 2020). Previous students of the discussion class at Rikkyo University reported having difficulty fully formulating their ideas in English in the classroom, but they wished to engage with the international community. Incorporating such tasks for out-of-class assignments might help students (a) achieve the course goals to a greater extent, (b) assist in helping students more fully express their ideas in the face-to-face discussion class, and (c) attain some of their instrumental motivations for studying English. These reasons are explored in more detail and avenues for potential research are discussed.

Keywords: *CALL*, *asynchronous*, *task*, *computer-mediated*, *discussion*

Introduction

The discussion class at Rikkyo University is required for all first-year students. The course is designed to (a) improve students' spoken fluency, (b) build discussion skills (e.g., giving opinions, giving different viewpoints, and asking to join the discussion), and (c) increase communication skills (e.g., paraphrasing, asking for repetition, and checking comprehension). Pre-coronavirus pandemic, the discussion class was flipped insofar as students prepared to discuss the topic by reading the passage in the textbook. Students had weekly reading passages on relevant topics such as the globalization of Japanese culture, learning a foreign language, or entering the workforce to build content knowledge of the topic before class. However, in the 2020 Spring semester, administrators moved all academic courses online due to the pandemic. As a result, many professors and lecturers adapted, modified, and changed their courses to accommodate new online environment.

University courses utilized software such as Zoom or Google Hangouts to conduct 40- to 50-min online lessons in lieu of the pre-pandemic 100-min face-to-face lessons as there were concerns regarding students' internet connectivity and bandwidth. To increase student discussion, lecturers assigned self-study tasks such as participating in online discussion forums and chat rooms with their classmates and writing online journals. Students were not only reading the weekly passage, but also engaging with the topics in the textbook in computer-mediated asynchronous tasks with their classmates. However, students from previous semesters have expressed a desire speak English outside of the classroom and to use English to interact with the global community. They have also stated that they felt that they could not fully express their ideas in the face-to-face discussions.

One opportunity to engage Japanese students in intercultural communication is through the

International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project. Hagley, a research fellow at Hosei University, leads the IVE Project (International Virtual Exchange Project [IVEProject], 2020). The IVE Project brings students together from around the globe to participate in asynchronous online discussions. Lecturers monitor student output in the forums and can assign grades according to students' participation (IVEProject, 2020). Universities and colleges participating in the IVE Project are from many countries including Colombia, Taiwan, Korea, Brazil, and more (IVEProject, 2020). Over 34 universities and colleges in Japan have participated to date (IVEProject, 2020). Hagley stated that students involved in the virtual exchange produce videos, post images, and even exchange recipes as a way to share cultural information (E. Hagley, personal communication, September 17, 2020). These tasks might be particularly useful for students in Rikkyo's English discussion class as textbook units include living abroad, the globalization of Japanese culture, foreign language learning, and foreign customs.

Affordances and limitations can be categorized according to psycho-social, linguistic, and technological domains; however, these domains overlap. Psycho-social benefits to incorporating IVE Project include the potential effects of IVE Project on students' second language (L2) motivation, international posturing, and Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Linguistic affordances and limitations include effects of expanding pre-task planning on language proficiency and other aspects of discussion performance. Technological affordances include developing greater technology skills whereas technological limitations include a lack of online access or connectivity issues. Readers interested in a discussion on the affordances and limitations of incorporating the IVE Project as self-study assignments in their English discussion classes might find the following research brief useful.

Discussion

Motivation of Japanese Students

Yashima (2000) posited that international posturing explains Japanese students' attitude regarding foreign language learning and the international community. International posturing captures a propensity for Japanese students to relate themselves to the world community rather than any one specific English-speaking country such as England or the US (Yashima, 2000). International posturing consisted of four components: international friendship orientation, interest in international vocation/activities, interest in foreign affairs, and intergroup approach-avoidance tendency (Yashima, 2002). Japanese students with international posturing view themselves as linked to the global community, have concerns for worldwide affairs, openness to different cultures, willingness to go overseas, and hold a keenness to work together with foreign people (Yashima, 2009). She stated that this concept of international posturing influences students' motivations and that their motivation influences their English proficiency (Yashima, 2002). Yashima (2002) found that international posturing directly tied to students' WTC. Students who exhibit a WTC actively seek out opportunities to communicate in their L2.

Hagley and Cotter (2019) conducted a survey on participants' opinions after 8 weeks of using IVE Project. In the survey, 79% Japanese participants (n = 594) felt that their L2 was more important after IVE Project than before IVE Project and 77% of Japanese participants stated that they have greater interest in other countries because of IVE Project (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). Japanese participants (n = 264) stated that IVE Project provided "a sense of intercultural understanding" and 227 Japanese participants stated that IVE Project provided "a sense of participating in the international community" (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). Only 31 Japanese participants stated that an increase of motivation was a

benefit from participating in IVE Project (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). From Hagley and Cotter's (2019) study, the term 'increased motivation' was ambiguous. It might mean increased motivation to (a) study their L2, (b) communicate with foreigners, (c) learn about other cultures, and so on.

Hagley and Cotter (2019) investigated the common problems or complaints with using IVE Project. Of the 594 Japanese participants surveyed, 257 participants experienced no complaints or problems (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). Of the participants who reported problems or complaints, technological issues were the most problematic (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). Japanese participants (n = 216) stated that they had system issues including uploading photos as well as other tech issues (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). The second major complaint was 51 participants were not satisfied by other participants' efforts (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). For example, the 51 Japanese participants felt that international participants were not replying fast enough or that at times no one would reply to their comment or question (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). Researchers suggested that this complaint might be a positive indication that participants wanted a greater number of exchanges and replies from their partners (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). It also underlined a shortcoming with asynchronous tasks in a discussion forum. In synchronous discussions, the likelihood of long wait times and no replies would be much lower.

In Hagley and Thomson's (2017) survey, Japanese participants of IVE Project were also irritated by the few replies and posts from Columbian students, who due to technological issues (e.g., internet connectivity and lack of training on how to use the forum), were not participating as much as the Japanese and Taiwanese students (Hagley & Thomson, 2017). However, the researchers created workshops designed to help educate teachers on how to use the IVE Project so that when the teachers teach their students how to use IVE Project, students might encounter less technical issues (Hagley & Cotter, 2020). In Hagley and Thomson's study on IVE Project, students also stated that students felt the exchange was time-consuming because they had to access the virtual exchange at least two times a week to write comments and replies (Hagley & Thomson, 2017). In Hagley and Cotter's (2019) study, only 11 participants wrote that IVE Project was time-consuming. Therefore, participants in general do not report problems or complaints, but when they do, it most likely relates to technological issues or the effects of the forum's asynchronous quality and not due to any negative socio-cultural experiences that participants encountered.

A possible research study would be to conduct a pre-treatment survey and post-treatment survey using a pre-existing survey to determine the extent to which participants' exhibit Yashima's (2002) attitude of international posturing comprising international friendship orientation, interest in international vocation/activities, interest in foreign affairs, and intergroup approach-avoidance tendency. One group of students would participate in IVE Project, but the other group would not, but would still participate in the surveys. Researchers should collect data on the amount of individual participation in IVE Project to cross-examine whether participants with higher levels of international posturing correlate to higher number of posts, log ins, and typed words. Additionally, an interesting avenue would be to collect data on the amount of words participants contribute to in-class discussions to figure out whether the amount they participate on the forum correlates to the amount they participate in face-to-face discussions on the same topics.

An important aspect of the study would be participants' view of IVE Project. In other words, to what extent do participants believe that participating in IVE Project equates to participating in the international community and to what extent does participating in the international community equate to helping them achieve their goals (e.g., traveling, working for an international company, and making friends with foreigners). This survey should also include questions indicating the extent

to which students feel motivated to increase their L2 proficiency (i.e., more specifically what aspects of L2 students feel motivated to increase) as a result of either interacting with IVE Project (i.e., for treatment group) or hypothetically interacting with IVE Project (i.e., for non-treatment group). Another avenue would also be to investigate the feelings that students experience when they have IVE Project tech problems, slow responses by other participants, or no replies to their messages.

Adding a qualitative, longitudinal aspect to the study by asking participants to journal their feelings about their experiences using IVE Project over the course of the 8 weeks would be helpful in understanding participants' thoughts during these experiences. For example, from the journal, researchers should gather how many Japanese participants experienced no replies or long delays in response times. Additionally, researchers might ask participants to reflect on reasons they believe for receiving no replies as well as strategies that they employed to cope with it. Research might help lecturers better understand ways in which they can help participants who do not receive as many replies on IVE Project. Motivation is a dynamic, multifaceted, and complex construct (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Therefore, collecting different types of data over an extended period might provide a deeper understanding of the effect of using IVE Project on students' L2 motivation, WTC, and international posturing.

Pre-Task Planning Effects on Discussion

During in-class discussions, lecturers follow the stages of Present, Practice, and Produce (PPP). In addition to PPP, there is an extra production stage (i.e., PPPP). Before the first and second production stages, there is an opportunity for pre-task planning. Students have roughly 5–7 min to prepare their ideas about the discussion topics with their partner. By incorporating IVE Project as out-of-class assignments, students have the opportunity to engage in an additional pre-task planning stage. Their engagement with IVE Project might have positive effects on their in-class discussion task performance. Therefore, another research avenue would be the extent to which IVE Project might increase L2 proficiency and in-class discussion performance thereby possibly helping students to achieve the course aim to a greater extent.

Following Levelt's (1989) model of speech production, humans engaging in producing speech first start by conceptualizing (i.e., idea generation), then formulating (i.e., lexical and grammatical forms selection), and lastly articulating (i.e., vocal cords and mouth movements use). They monitor their performance via their speech comprehension system to make conceptual, formulative, or articulative adjustments (Levelt, 1989). Understanding the rationale behind pre-planning's ability to improve discussion performance starts with humans' limited working memory (Ellis, 2009). Working memory means human's capacity for holding information in human consciousness actively as humans engage in daily cognitive tasks (Carruthers, 2013). Limited working memory might cause students' difficulties in focusing on meaning and form simultaneously (Ellis, 2009). Pre-planning lessens the burdens of limited working memory, which helps students to recall linguistic resources that have not been made automatic (Ellis, 2009). Additionally, lessening the burden of limited working memory might help students focus on other aspects of their L2 proficiency and task performance (Stroud, 2019).

Ellis (2009) categorized different types of planning: rehearsal, strategic, and online. Rehearsal pre-task planning is defined as performing the task to completion before doing the main task (Ellis, 2009). Regarding rehearsal pre-task planning of spoken tasks, students engage in conceptualizing, formulating, articulating, and monitoring. Strategic planning is defined as planning the content of

what to say as well as how to say it, but not performing the task (Ellis, 2009). Strategic pre-planning for spoken tasks includes conceptualizing, formulating, and monitoring, but not articulating. Students can strategically plan for a discussion by writing key points and that would be categorized as strategic. Online planning is defined as planning during and throughout the task (i.e., students are given nearly an unlimited amount of time to complete the task so they can plan as much as they want). For online planning, students have plenty of time to plan within the task so they might devote attentional resources to conceptualizing, formulating, and monitoring stages (Yuan & Ellis, 2003).

The type of planning students undertake for IVE Project tasks is categorized as online planning. They plan during and throughout the IVE Project task. In past discussion classes, students have complained that they cannot fully express their ideas during the face-to-face discussions. In terms of Levelt's (1989) model, students have an idea of what they want to say, but they have difficulty formulating their idea into English. They often add that they need more vocabulary and occasionally, they state that they wished they could use more complex grammatical structures to express their ideas. On IVE Project, students have the ability to look up vocabulary words and translate using applications or websites on the internet. Additionally, they have access to viewpoints of students in other countries if they need help thinking of different ideas.

Yet, IVE Project tasks can also be treated as pre-task planning (i.e., online strategic planning) for in-class, face-to-face discussions. If discussion lecturers ask students to discuss topics that they will cover in the class on the IVE Project, students will be engaging in conceptualizing, formulating, and monitoring (i.e., cognitive processes that might lift the cognitive load when they do in-class discussions with their classmates). In this sense, IVE Project tasks can be categorized as online strategic pre-task planning for the face-to-face discussions. An avenue of research into IVE Project would be questioning the extent to which students believe that they can fully formulate their ideas on the IVE Project and to what extent they are using the ideas from IVE Project in their face-to-face discussions. Yuan and Ellis (2003) stated that online planning allows students to closely attend to conceptualizing, formulating, and monitoring so students might feel that they have time to fully express their ideas.

IVE Project might provide a space for developing more complex ideas on the topics covered in discussion class, but if students want to use ideas from the forum, they would have to recall and re-formulate for in-class discussion as there might be an extended period of time between strategic online planning and the face-to-face performance. Yuan and Ellis (2003) noted that for pre-task planning that occurs right before the task, students would probably remember their conceptualizations, but not more thorough pre-planned formulations. Students would mostly paraphrase their ideas from IVE Project interactions rather than be able to recall word for word. Therefore, Yuan and Ellis stated that increased Complexity, Fluency, and Accuracy (CAF) is a mostly the result of the effort that students devoted to conceptualization and to a slight extent, formulation, especially in terms of grammatical morphology. The content from IVE Project would therefore not be in students' working memory, but would be stored in their long-term memory.

From my own informal observations of adding online asynchronous discussion forums and chat rooms, students had a perceptible increase in their lexical complexity in terms of sophistication (i.e., rareness of the words) and it might be due to this increase in lexical sophistication that there have been a noticeable increase of negotiations of meaning during Zoom meetings. Yet, Suzuki (2017) examined 28 studies for the effect of pre-tasking planning on CAF and found that the effectiveness on pre-task planning have been mixed and therefore, contradict literature that has been widely accepted in the field. For example, some studies stated that it increased a combination of CAF measures

whereas others indicated that it did not increase these measures. Suzuki noted that the majority of pre-task planning studies that she synthesized did not entail specific guidance on how to plan (i.e., what students should do during their planning time) nor what they actually do with their planning time. Thus, there were few verbal protocol analyses in the field to gain insights into the students' cognitive processes and the complexity that pre-task planning entails.

Stroud (2019) also wrote that there have been major issues with the research to-date on pre-task planning. One problem is that the vast majority of studies have monologic tasks (e.g., presentations) rather than dialogic (e.g., group discussions or group problem-solving tasks) and therefore, researchers cannot conclude that the results for monologic tasks would be the same as dialogic because students in dialogic tasks attend to more processes (Stroud, 2019). These additional processes include feedback, turn-taking, and negotiations of meaning. These dialogic characteristics cause more complexity in tasks which might hinder students' output (Ellis, 2003). Thus, Stroud stated that the field needs more case studies to uncover the effect of pre-task planning on dialogic performance. Another issue is the effects of planning can differ according to their proficiency, so the field needs more case studies that discuss different proficiencies within the same classroom (Kawauchi, 2005; Lynch & Maclean, 2000). Lastly, Stroud stated that previous studies only focused on the linguistic aspects of CAF; however, participation and interaction should also be measured. In Stroud's study, he measured words spoken and turns taken by students to assess the effects of planning on participation.

Stroud's (2019) study was the only research study in the field that I could find that measured the effects of planning specifically for group discussions. In Stroud's study, he investigated the immediate effects of three conditions: rehearsal, strategic planning, or no planning on group discussion task performance on 24 Japanese university students with an average TOEIC score of 450. Additionally, he investigated whether there were any differences between participants who contributed a lot to discussions versus participants who did not contribute as much. He measured the speech rate (i.e., words per minute) of high versus low participators to determine significant differences occurred in fluency across three discussions. For the strategic planning, students wrote their ideas on the topic for 10 min, but were not allowed to discuss it with others. For rehearsal, students were paired with partners from a different discussion group and practiced discussing the topic for 10 min. The design was counterbalanced so each participant participated in all three conditions.

In Stroud's (2019) study, planning outperformed the no-planning condition. The planning condition had a medium effect sizes for words spoken, speech rate A (i.e., untrimmed), speech rate B (i.e., trimmed), pauses, reasons per turn, and reference clauses per 100 words (Stroud, 2019). For rehearsal, there was significant (a) increase in words, (b) increase speech rates, and (c) decrease in pausing (Stroud, 2019). No significant effect for rehearsal compared to no-planning condition was found for accuracy, complexity, discourse complexity (Stroud, 2019). For strategic planning, participants had significantly (a) fewer pauses, (b) less reference clauses, and (c) gave more reasons in each turn. No significant effect on accuracy, complexity, or participation was found. Planning had a significant effect on low participators for more reasons per turn, less reference clauses, and more words per turn (Stroud, 2019).

A potential avenue of research would be to mimic the design and measurements that Stroud (2019) used, but compare the extent to which IVE Project's online strategic planning effects in-class discussions. Researchers can compare participants with IVE Project online strategic planning to participants without IVE Project. Additional measurements might be the amount of negotiations of meaning episodes and whether there is an increase for other types of discussion skills (e.g., follow-

up questions, examples, sources of information, and viewpoints). On its own, IVE Project might help students to improve CAF and discussion performance, but I think researchers at Rikkyo University ought to collect some evidence that IVE Project can also assist in helping students with performances of in-class discussions to a greater extent than without IVE Project.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research brief covers the literature in the field on aspects of motivation and pre-task planning that could potential justify using IVE Project in discussion classes. More work needs to be done in creating research questions and designing the study. Previous students of the discussion class have stated that they have difficulty fully formulating their ideas in English during group discussions, but they wished to use English outside of the classroom to engage with the international community. By incorporating the IVE Project for take home assignments, lecturers of the discussion class might help students (a) achieve the course goals to a greater extent (e.g., develop strategic competence, spoken fluency, and use of discussion skills), (b) assist in helping students more fully express their ideas in the face-to-face discussion class, and (c) attain some of their instrumental motivations for studying English.

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