Using Asynchronous Discussion Board Forums to Complement Online Discussion Classes

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the usage of online asynchronous discussion boards as a tool to improve students' online discussion classes by allowing them to interact and prepare their discussion opinions and ideas. In total, twenty-nine students took part in the study. I employed a mixed methods approach in order to garner qualitative data in the form of notes taken in class by myself of students' utterances during online Zoom classes, and students' written participation in the online forums. In addition, quantitative data was collected via a Google form survey issued in the final lesson of the semester. Overall, the students gave positive responses to the usage of the discussion boards (DBs), and the inclusion of this tool seems to have benefitted the online classes. The paper concludes with some contemplation of the effectiveness of using DBs as a tool to complement online discussion classes, as well as my reflective thoughts on the process as a whole.

Keywords: Online, discussion boards, forum, asynchronous

Introduction

This study took place at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. Due to onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an urgent need for universities worldwide to provide online classes for their students. This university was obliged to switch to online classes due to the sudden outbreak in Japan in mid-March, which was a few weeks before the scheduled beginning of term. Therefore, the start of term was set back until May in order for the university to rethink their delivery of lessons. The participating students were all enrolled in the English Discussion Center (EDC) module, a 14-week (adjusted to 12-week) course wherein students are required to discuss contemporary topics using a variety of marked language functions. The main goal of the course is to encourage maximum verbal output from students, and is designed to improve their ability to have balanced and interactive discussions about current topics in English with their peers (Hurling, 2012). Each class consists of nine or ten students, with each student placed into classes with other students of a similar English competence. Ideally, 10- and 16-minute discussions take place in every lesson, and should be balanced, interactive and co-constructed by all participants. However, due to the classes moving online and the implications this change brought, achieving this optimum scenario became more demanding.

Each student was required to attend one 45-minute Zoom class per week. In a conventional semester, classes would be 100 minutes, and I would be able to monitor all of the students effectively by walking around the two groups, listening, and writing what they say. After the class, I would be able to give verbal feedback via the whiteboard and facilitate student-to-student feedback. Since the classes were online, I split the students into two 45-minute classes in order for me to be able to monitor them effectively and give appropriate feedback. Since these classes were much shorter than usual, students were required to study the chapter and topic of the textbook themselves before each lesson, as well as the language functions that they were expected to use.

Usefulness of Discussion Boards

DBs have long been the focus of an abundance of research. One of the main benefits of utilizing discussion boards is they allow students the opportunity to interconnect at their own pace, giving them time to think carefully about their contributions and edit them prior to entering the discussion (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003; Ortega, 1997). In addition, they prevent dominant students from monopolizing the discussions, which can take place in face-to-face discussions (Ortega, 1997). Online discussions also provide a platform for ESL (English as a Second Language) students to achieve new levels of linguistic competence and express ideas in their own words (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003). Furthermore, they can practice new language in a supportive learning environment (Kahmi-Stein, 2000; Wilson & Stacey, 2004).

Moreover, St. John and Cash (1995) highlighted some additionally related benefits to DBs in online second language learning. They argue that students can correct their lexical mistakes by noticing differences in their usage and that of their peers. This implies that their peers of a higher language competence are unwittingly providing feedback and scaffolding to them. This in turn results in the learner being able to boost their pragmatic competence swiftly by adopting their peer's useful expressions.

Therefore, it would seem that students have additional time to reflect on the language being used and the ideas being exchanged, allowing for deeper consideration of the topic. Lamy and Goodfellow (1999, p. 43) termed this as "reflective conversation," whereby students interact unprompted, while remaining attentive and conscious on form in their contributions.

Gerbic (2006) offers three distinctions we can make between online DBs and face-to face lessons. The first is the lack of visual cues. This may lead to some misunderstanding in meaning. Face-to-face discussions may be more competitive and require more confidence for students to agree or disagree with one another. In addition, compared with free flowing synchronous settings, the learner has time to reflect and reply with more consideration. Finally, the emphasis is on reading and writing, compared to speaking and listening. Satar and Özdener (2008) offered that Computer-meditated communication could offer students a safe environment to practice and evaluate themselves, while also noticing benefits for speaking skills.

Although there is much support for the use of DBs in research literature, with regard to studies about DBs in a Japanese university setting, the results have been somewhat mixed. Miyazoe and Anderson (2010) reported that students found the formation and expression of their ideas in DBs as both useful and challenging. Meanwhile, Neilsen (2013) also relayed that Japanese university students found DBs to be useful, but that some had reported that they did not appreciate the extra work outside of the classroom.

In addition to the citations I have referred to above, I felt that in the unique situation that students found themselves in, which was being unable to come to campus and having to work from home in isolation, the DBs would provide them with an outlet to connect. I also felt that it would be a useful tool for them to practice using the marked language functions in the textbook and sharing their ideas online about the topics before the Zoom lessons took place.

Procedure

Since this was the first time that the discussion course was to take place online, I felt that it was important for the students to be able to connect with each other and practice using the discussions

skills online in a non-judgmental setting. Bikowski and Kessler (2002, p. 27) define a DB, as an "an electronic forum in which people with common interests can share comments and questions on specific topics."

The discussion classes had weekly topics that the students were required to discuss in weekly Zoom classes. I decided to set up the DB on the Blackboard learning management system page of the module. Students could easily access this by logging into their university webpage. Initially in week one, I created the first discussion forum as a means of allowing students to introduce themselves to myself and all of the other students before the first lesson began. I initiated a thread (a response to a post), and wrote my introduction as an example follow. I noticed that all of the students made a good effort with this. Thereafter, I created weekly forums related to the topics of each weekly lesson from the textbook "What's Your Opinion," (for example, social media; foreign customs) and initiated a thread with a question. When creating and interacting on the forums, I took into consideration some recommendations by Northover (2002) who outlined a number of factors essential to the success of interaction in an on-line discussion, including making discussions that are challenging and interesting, giving feedback and encouragement, and ensuring that the learning from the DB is realistic and meaningful to the student.

Research Method

Using a single case-study research methodology, this research employs mixed method data collection. A Google form survey was issued to students in the last lesson of the course, requiring responses to five-point Likert scale based questions, and comprised eight statements written in English to which students indicated their level of agreement or disagreement. I felt this was the most efficient way to collect data from the participants, and I estimated this form would take around 5 minutes to complete, which would not put too much stress on the students. The survey contained eight statements. Each statement had five agreement options, from 1-5, providing a reasonable spectrum of response options. A neutral option acting as the midpoint of the rating was included so that students would not feel obliged to choose a positive or negative answer if they did not have an opinion about a given question.

Qualitative data was collected in the form of students' online DB posts, and their utterances made in the Zoom discussion lessons. Thematic analysis was the method chosen for analyzing the qualitative data, which Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) state is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data." I chose this method because of its flexibility, as this allowed me to delve deeply into the data gathered of the small sample of participants (28, one student did not consent to the survey).

Findings and Student Comments

General Findings

The participants overwhelmingly gave positive feedback and responses to usage of the DBs. The two main advantages mentioned were finding new ideas about the topics, and being able to use the DBs as a place to organize their ideas before the Zoom classes. Some of the other advantages mentioned by the participants included feeling happy about getting agreement and replies, can read anytime, can compare and carefully consider classmates' opinions before classes, being helpful to

prepare and practice, can develop writing and grammar skills, and do not have to worry about Wi-Fi trouble. I will now consider some of the main advantages mentioned by participants, and then other noteworthy themes that arose from the data gathered.

Finding New Ideas

In total, students explicitly changed their written opinions seven times on the DBs. This number seems low, since, 96.4% of students, agreed with the statement on the Google form "Using the DB allowed me to discover new ideas about a topic from my classmates" (see appendix). The relatively low changing of written opinions may be due to it being time consuming for them to write. I wanted the DBs to be a place where students could delve into the topics deeply and to develop critical thinking about the topics before they discussed them. I did not ask the students to write changing opinions on the forums, but I did urge them to ask follow-up questions. Here are a few of the examples:

Hi (name) I had a different opinion, but I was very sympathetic to your opinion. Certainly, we can experience many things in university life, so I think going to university will improve our skills.

I never thought about that until you mentioned! I agree with you. I think it is important to have purpose or dreams in life.

I thought I could learn about foreign culture in two months, but after hearing (name)'s opinion, I felt it might be short in two months. Since the culture students can experience differs from season to season, I think it would be better for them to study abroad for a longer period.

I totally agree with you. As you said, it is difficult for Japanese to hug with others and stay awake on the train. I did not know that we could not sleep on the train. Thanks for giving new opinion!

These examples of students changing their opinions in the forum, whilst also issuing praise to the original person who had the idea or opinion suggests that the forums were collaborative and supportive. It may also be some indications of the students thinking more deeply and developing critical thinking skills about the topics, and supports research by Ware (2004).

Organizing Ideas and Thinking Deeply

Another of the main advantages given by participants was that they could organize their ideas and think more deeply about the topics by getting various perspectives before the Zoom discussions took place. In the statement "Using the DB was troublesome and did not help my Zoom discussions", 92.8% of the students disagreed, suggesting that they were a useful tool for them. Some advantages mentioned by students on the DBs are displayed below:

One advantage of using a discussion board is we can organize our own opinion before the lesson. Having the opportunity to think about the topic in advance is very important for a good discussion.

I agree with you, (name). As you said, discussion board is good place to think deeply about the topic. In addition, I also believe we can find new perspective from our classmate's thought.

Getting various perspectives is interesting. I always check before the class and learn different points of view about the topic.

The main advantages reported by students seem to indicate that the DBs encouraged students to

consider the topics more deeply and developed their critical thinking skills before the Zoom lessons took place. In a conventional face-to-face class, students may not have considered the topics so much beforehand and would have had to think about the topics in the classroom a lot faster. Therefore, the DBs helped allow students to envisage what they would like say in the online Zoom discussions on the various topics.

Different Verbal Opinions in Zoom Discussions

Students would usually give their same idea or opinion from the forums in the Zoom verbal discussions. However, students gave different verbal opinions in the Zoom discussions from their opinions in the DBs 16 times throughout the semester. This may have been due to changing their opinions about a topic between the time that they participated in the forums and the verbal discussions, or not being willing to or unable to disagree with students during the verbal discussions. This may also be partly attributed to the high ratio (96.4%) reported by participants that they found new ideas about topics through participating in the forums which corroborates research by Ware (2004).

Who Starts and Finishes

In all of the classes, a pattern emerged of who would start the discussion in the thread, and who would usually go last. In the fifth statement "It was difficult to start the discussion threads on the DB", 60.9% of students agreed with this (see appendix). Spread across the three classes in this study, there were six male students (20.7%) and 23 female students (79.3%). Out of the 36 online discussions, three male students started the discussions a total of 20 times (55.6%), and were last to contribute just four times (11.10%). Six female students started the DBs 16 times in total (44.4%) and were last to contribute 32 times (88.8%). This would suggest that the male students were more willing to be assertive and give their initial opinions at the start of each thread. In addition, 20 students did not start any of the discussions (68.9%) which suggests that most students were reactive rather than assertive. This pattern could be related to one of the difficulties of using DBs reported by students, which was finding a different idea from other students. Therefore, perhaps some students were motivated to participate early in order to be the first to share their idea, and not have to simply agree with others or spend time thinking of their own original idea or opinion.

Frequency of Agreement

In the three classes, there was a clear pattern of students agreeing with each other. When giving instructions about the DBs, I encouraged learners to reply to each other and to ask follow-up questions, following Nielsen's (2013) suggestion. Out of 433 entries onto the forums, students used the phrase "I agree/partly agree with you (or name) 203 times (46.8%). Participants only used the phrase "I disagree with you/name" eight times (1.85%). Indirect disagreeing terms were used 30 times (6.93%), such as "I think", "I understand, but" and "I don't think so." Participants often complimented each other before disagreeing. For example:

Though my opinion was different from yours, I think you have a great opinion and I think so too a little. In Japan, I think there is a tendency to put emphasis on educational background when you take an employment examination or job interview. So going to university is advantageous to you in job hunting.

Difficulties in Disagreeing

In the final online discussion of the term, the participants discussed "What are the advantages and disadvantages of using discussion forum?" The main disadvantage mentioned was that it was difficult to disagree with fellow classmates. A few of the opinions given are shown below:

I think there are both aspects. An advantage is that I can find a new opinion from my classmates. However, a disadvantage is it is difficult to disagree with others' opinion.

I agree with you, (name)! As you said, we tend to agree with classmates because we can only read their feelings from their words. So, I usually try to speak politely.

Another disadvantage is that it is difficult to disagree with others opinion. Because we cannot meet face-to-face, I worry that I may offend someone.

Disagreeing was difficult. Japanese people worry about what other people think. The Corona situation has made things worse, so we tend to agree with other people's opinions more.

However, students did not indicate this clearly on the Google form survey. In the statement "It was difficult to disagree with my classmates on the DB" (see appendix), 39.3% of students agreed with this statement. The relatively high ratio of students that agreed with this statement could be related to the relatively high amount of ambiguous and indirect disgreeing phrases that were used in the forums.

Some of the other difficulties mentioned included not being able to read classmates' feelings from expressions, difficult to express opinions accurately, having to take time to be careful about spelling and grammar, and time differences between individual replies, which support findings by Neilsen (2013). This final difficulty mentioned leads to me considering that synchronous DBs could be an interesting route to explore in future research.

Giving Praise to Increase Motivation

At the beginning of each class when I was introducing the topic, I would praise some of the interesting ideas that they had discussed on the forums before the class. In the early lessons, I noticed that students who had given minimal participation on the forums seemed to be uneasy or embarrassed that they had not contributed more. After a few weeks, students seemed to realize that participating on the forums was a good chance for them to hone their ideas in preparation for the verbal discussions. Prior to the main verbal discussions taking place, I would remind them that they could use the same ideas from the forums. The forum topic question was the same as the main discussion a total of five times. In addition, I made a final comment on each DB thread, praising the interesting points that they had made and sometimes asking an additional question for them to consider before they began their Zoom lessons. It is unclear if this had any effect, as there was no noticeable change in the volume of their content on the DBs. However, the online Zoom lessons did become more and more animated and dynamic as the semester progressed.

Connecting in the Pandemic

In contrast to how some students mentioned a difficulty of communicating on forums during the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants reported how the forums had benefited them during this

time. This is one written statement made by a student in the final DB of the semester:

The advantage of using a discussion board is that I could learn new and interesting things from my classmates. I think learning new opinions from my classmates will give me a broader perspective. An acquaintance told me that I should interact with a variety of people during my college years. While I cannot meet classmates due to Corona, I think this discussion board has been a tool to get in touch with a variety of people.

This quote suggests that students were not only practicing for their discussions in written form, but that they could also experience some connectivity during the isolating times of online learning. This could be linked to Dörnyei's proposed L2 Motivational Self System (2009), which argued that learners are motivated to learn a second language when they want to create a desirable self-image of themselves through integration.

Conclusion

It would seem that overall the inclusion of the DB forums into the online discussion lessons was a success. The asynchronous nature of the forums allowed participants ample time to gather ideas and form their opinions about the weekly topics before class. Samovar and Porter (2001) argue that disagreeing with others in Asian cultures is seen as confrontational and undesirable, where harmony is highly sought after. Although many of the students reported on the forums and verbally in the lessons that disagreeing with their peers was difficult for them, these views were not reflected so explicitly in the anonymous quantitative survey. This may suggest that stating that disagreeing was difficult for them was a convenient and acceptable answer, since some of the participants mentioned that it is difficult for Japanese people to disagree because they worry what others think.

The reporting by students that the forums helped them to find new ideas about topics, organize their ideas and use the forums as a place to practice seems to advocate further usage of forums in future classes, and supports claims from Kahmi-Stein, (2000); Wilson and Stacey (2004) and Lamy and Goodfellow (1999). The claim by some students that the forums also helped them with grammar, spelling and vocabulary would also support this, and lends credence to Biesenbach-Lucas (2003) and St. John and Cash (1995).

Using DBs may also provide a place for students to connect with their peers during the pandemic. The contemporary topics were pertinent to their lives. Creating tasks that allow the learner to connect to English using the ideal self, facilitates knowledge creation that is meaningful and requires the learner to make opinions and think critically in English (Yashima, 2009). Keeping in mind that the primary goal of the discussion classes is oral output, asynchronous interaction does lack a variety of pragmatic information, for instance, gestures and intonation (Satar & Özdener, 2008). Nevertheless, due to the current necessity of online learning, this reflective study would tentatively suggest that DB forums are conducive with weekly discussion classes.

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Appendix

Question	Agree/ Disagree	Number of students	Percentage
1. Using the DB allowed me to discover new ideas about a topic from my classmates.	Strongly Agree	21	75%
	Agree	6	21.4%
	Neutral	1	3.6%
	Disagree	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0
2. Using the DB helped me prepare and practice my ideas for the Zoom discussions.	Strongly Agree	17	60.7%
	Agree	11	39.3%
	Neutral	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0
3. By using the DB, I could learn interesting thing about my classmates.	Strongly Agree	17	60.7%
	Agree	6	21.4%
	Neutral	4	14.3%
	Disagree	1	3.6%
	Strongly Disagree	0	0
4. I felt happy when someone replied to my answers on the DB.	Strongly Agree	11	39.3%
	Agree	11	39.3%
	Neutral	6	21.4%
	Disagree	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0
5. It was difficult to start the discussion threads on the DB.	Strongly Agree	2	7.1%
	Agree	15	53.6%
	Neutral	5	17.9%
	Disagree	6	21.4%
	Strongly Disagree	2	7.1%
6. It was difficult to disagree with my classmates on the DB.	Strongly Agree	5	17.9%
	Agree	6	21.4%
	Neutral	9	32.1%
	Disagree	8	28.6%
	Strongly Disagree	0	0
7. I felt sad if someone disagreed with my opinion on the DB.	Strongly Agree	0	0
	Agree	3	10.7%
	Neutral	5	17.9%
	Disagree	13	46.4%
	Strongly Disagree	7	25%
8. Using the DB was troublesome and did not help my Zoom discussions.	Strongly Agree	0	0
	Agree	0	0
	Neutral	2	7.1%
	Disagree	16	57.1%
	Strongly Disagree	10	35.7%