

Synchronous Online Discussion Forums as a Supplement to Video Discussions in an Online English Discussion Class

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Abstract

This paper details the use of a synchronous online discussion forum activity as a supplemental activity used alongside video discussions in an online English discussion class. A rationale is provided for the choice of activity as well as the decision to have students participate synchronously. The author reflects on the progress shown by students in their forum discussions and considers ways that the challenges that were observed could be addressed in future implementations of the activity to allow for greater opportunities for learning. The author also considers the potential influence that participation on the online discussion forum may have had on the ability of the participants to genuinely interact with each other in their video discussions. The author concludes that the activity did help students learn to interact with each other and functioned well as a preparatory activity for their video discussions, but did not observe an impact on their turn-taking ability or their ability to discuss each other's ideas in their video discussions.

Keywords: synchronous online discussion forum

Introduction

All first-year students at Rikkyo University are required to take an English Discussion Class (EDC) designed to improve their ability to discuss contemporary topics in English with their peers (Hurling, 2012). Since its inception, the class was always taught in person and students were expected to participate in face-to-face discussions on a topic provided to them each lesson, allowing for the lesson to be driven by student-to-student interaction. However, in the Spring 2020 semester, the lessons were taught entirely online due to the spread of the novel coronavirus in Japan. Concerns about students' access to the technology required to participate in extended online video lessons meant that many teachers split their classes into two groups. This allowed each group to have a shortened video lesson taught synchronously on the Zoom platform supplemented with other activities that students would be expected to complete independently.

When choosing an activity to pair with the video lessons on Zoom, many teachers ended up selecting an online discussion forum activity. This allowed the activity to still include student-to-student interaction and to be targeted at improving the ability to have discussions in English. While using online discussion forums in place of face-to-face discussions is not truly an equivalent exchange, the use of online discussion forums has been observed to be beneficial for speaking skills (Satar & Özdener, 2008). Coffin and Donohue (2014) also assert that the structure of online discussion forums allows for fluidity similar to that of a conversation, further supporting their use in a discussion class.

Using online discussion forums also provided the teacher an opportunity to use some of their benefits to address challenges previously observed in the EDC and in Japanese learners of English. Students in the EDC have struggled with turn taking in discussions (Young, 2015; Hennessy, 2020). Hennessy (2020) also observed that intermediate students struggled with discussing ideas introduced by other speakers, noting that instead of collaborating, they would share multiple ideas in one speaking turn and fail to take further turns on a given topic. Williamson (2019) suggested cultural influences

may drive Japanese speakers' difficulties with turn taking and Young (2018) suggests pedagogical intervention may be necessary to address these issues. Online discussion forums are inherently interactive activities and Murphy (2004) found that, while learners would usually start by only stating their own perspectives, they would eventually progress to responding to the perspectives of others. In addition, Coffin and Donohue (2014) suggest that discussions on online discussion forums tend to move away from the starting issue and into other ideas presented by the participants. If this holds true, then the online discussion forum could be a powerful tool to help students learn to collaborate in their discussions.

Of course, using an online discussion forum would still present issues that would need to be addressed. Uneven participation can be a significant drawback to using forums, with the discussions being driven by a few active participants while others contribute little (Coffin & Donohue, 2014), and students often find that their contributions to the discussion forum are left without a response (Coffin & Donohue, 2014; Thomas, 2002). While the expectation may be that discussions should naturally move away from the starting topic, it is likely that if students frequently do not receive a response to their comments that this drift may not happen. As EDC classes are small, usually 10 students or fewer, uneven participation could also lead to a struggle for interaction if too few students are active on the forum. A lack of responses could lead to the discussion forum reinforcing the students' struggles with turn-taking if they adjust by sharing more information in a single post, further reducing the chance for collaboration. This means that it is necessary for the forum activity to feature an emphasis on interaction and replying to classmates to encourage genuine interaction.

While discussion forums are usually asynchronous activities (Abrams, 2003; Shenker, 2019), with Shenker (2019) in particular noting the advantages of allowing more flexibility and time to think and plan contributions to the forum, there is some evidence that synchronous use of computer-mediated communications can be more beneficial for increasing the quantity of output in face-to-face interactions (Abrams, 2003). One could also speculate that synchronous participation could reduce the impact of varied schedules on participation and could even help reduce the number of posts that do not receive a reply as it would be less common for participants to add comments after other participants had stopped using the forum. Japanese learners of English have been observed to question the extra work required to participate in an online discussion forum (Nielson, 2013) and as the students in the EDC were participating in online lessons due to a global pandemic, not by choice, I believed that asking them to participate during normal class times as opposed to asking them to fit more work into the rest of their schedule might help improve participation.

This paper reflects on the use of a synchronous online discussion forum activity with three 10-student classes of intermediate learners of English in the Rikkyo EDC. It considers both the development of their discussions on the forum using the Blackboard learning management system, and any impacts the forum may have had on their spoken discussions on Zoom. The focus for the semester was specifically on improving student-to-student interaction and collaboration both on the online discussion board and in their spoken discussions on Zoom.

Discussion

Procedure

The synchronous discussion forum activity was used in 11 of the 12 lessons during the semester with the only exception being the first lesson, where students were only asked to post a self-

introduction. In each lesson all students joined a Zoom meeting at the beginning of the class to allow an opportunity for the teacher to give feedback from the previous lesson and to explain the focus of the lesson, including both the topics of discussion and any target language that was being introduced or reviewed. The entire class was together for approximately 10 minutes before being split into two equally sized groups. Each group would participate in both an online discussion forum activity using the Blackboard learning management system, and an interactive video lesson using Zoom. One group began on Zoom where they practiced the target language and participated in a spoken discussion before moving to Blackboard to complete the online discussion forum activity, whereas the other group would have the same lesson but in the opposite order: participating on the forum before the Zoom lesson. The Zoom lessons were approximately 40 minutes long and students were expected to participate in the online discussion forum for 45 to 50 minutes. I would review the discussion forum from the group that started with that activity before they began their Zoom lesson to give any feedback that I believed would help with their video discussion and I gave advice to the group that began on Zoom to help them in their discussion forum. The groups did not change between activities in a single lesson but were shuffled week-to-week to allow students to work with all of their classmates over the course of the semester and to experience using the discussion forum both before and after the Zoom lesson. This also addressed a common student complaint about online discussion forums mentioned by Shenker (2019) regarding the inability of students to change groups during the semester.

The discussion forum was set up prior to the start of class with between four and eight starter threads about a topic similar to the one that would be discussed in the Zoom lesson, and based on one of the discussion preparation activities from the in-house textbook, "What's Your Opinion." These starter threads were refined throughout the semester to help encourage discussion and, by the end of the semester, I made the decision to limit the forum to four starter threads as it seemed to increase student-to-student interaction. In general the discussion board was intended to be a free discussion based on these starting topics and the role of the teacher was to set expectations, check for comprehension before the activity began, and provide feedback when it was finished. As it seemed like most students began the semester with little to no experience in using a discussion forum in this way, it was critical to be clear in setting expectations and goals for the students to ensure active participation and to encourage interacting with their classmates' ideas. Feedback was tailored to each groups' strengths and weaknesses to ensure that they understood when they were succeeding and when there were areas that could be improved.

Students were given a period of time during which they were expected to continuously participate in the forum, and they were given a post count goal for each lesson starting approximately halfway through the semester. While it was not expected that all students would reach the goal in every lesson, and their grades were not reduced for failing to reach the goal, it was a useful benchmark to help students understand the expectations regarding participation. Students were also explicitly instructed to begin by sharing their own ideas and then to interact with their classmates by agreeing or disagreeing, asking questions, and answering questions directed at them. This was emphasized throughout the semester to encourage students to allow their discussions to move away from only answering the initial questions, as supported by Coffin and Donohue (2014) who suggested online discussion forums often drifted away from the starting topic, and to help reduce the number of posts left without a response as was observed by both Coffin and Donohue (2014) and Thomas (2002).

Early Reflections

At the beginning of the semester students struggled with turn-taking and interaction in their Zoom discussions as expected and described by Hennessy (2020). They would often share their answer in a single speaking turn and would rarely speak again on a topic after another student took the floor. Few students responded to ideas brought up by a classmate and even fewer would do so if they had already taken a turn on the topic. This was especially clear when students left disagreements or different opinions entirely unexplored. In one Zoom discussion students were discussing whether it was easy or difficult for university students to be independent and, while four of the five participants agreed that it was difficult, the fifth disagreed. However, after that student shared their differing opinion the group moved onto the next question rather than exploring the difference of opinion. The online discussion forum activity also had issues with unbalanced participation, and there was little genuine interaction early in the semester, as Coffin and Donohue (2014) and Thomas (2002) had previously documented. In early lessons it was not uncommon for one or two students to have dramatically fewer posts on the forum than their classmates, and students frequently shared their opinions on a topic and then did not write anything else in that thread. For example, in one class four students replied to the forum thread asking if they thought that going to university after high school was a good idea and shared their opinions but none interacted with their classmates' replies, despite sharing similar reasoning. However, the discussion forums did provide some examples of attempts at genuine interaction early in the semester as well. In the same lesson that students were discussing going to university after high school they also discussed getting a full-time job instead. Two students were observed trying to interact with each other's ideas in the following exchange.

Student A: *I think it is not good idea. It's mainly because we can't study enough until high school.*

Student B: *I agree with you. But there are many people who can't go to university or vocational school due to financial reasons. What do you think about those people?*

Student A: *I think those people don't have to go to university or vocational school. But, if they don't want to get a fulltime job and want to learn more, their parents should give them some support.*

While this was only a basic interaction it was an example of students learning from each other's ideas and replying to new information presented by other speakers even after stating their own opinions. Early feedback was centered around identifying examples of success like this to help students understand what success looked like, and students were praised for interacting with their classmates' ideas on the discussion forum and in their video discussions. Missed opportunities were also brought up to help students see when they had chances to improve.

As the semester continued students did seem to increasingly be capable of having more in-depth discussions, especially on the discussion forum. In the fifth lesson students were discussing the topic of being homesick when working abroad and had two separate comment chains stemming from one student's initial reply. In one chain the original poster had a back-and-forth conversation with one other student about how they were able to overcome homesickness in an experience traveling. In the second chain (included below) three more students joined in to discuss how the types of food available in a country they were visiting could impact their ability to adjust to living there.

Student A: *I have been abroad two times. First is **Country A**, where I felt homesick because of foods of there. Second is **Country B**. I didn't feel homesick so much, so I think I wouldn't be homesick if I*

lived and worked abroad.

Student B: *Why do you think you didn't get homesick in Country B?*

Student A: *First, staying Country B was homestay between two weeks, while Country A was 1 week staying in university and hotel for studying culture and language. I could communicate with host family deeply. Second, I didn't hate foods in there more than Country A's. However, there were some foods I wasn't able to stand. By the way, what do you think of my idea?*

Student C: *I think Country A's foods use many Chinese medicine, so you couldn't get use to their foods*

Student D: *I agree with you. On the other hand, I heard Country B's food is easy to get used to.*

Student C: *But I like Country A foods, because I think it's smell is bad, however taste is good.*

In all three classes that were observed, this kind of extended interaction became increasingly common in the online discussion forum activity but was rarely seen in Zoom. In a few cases I was able to provide feedback based on successes in an online discussion forum activity and see students attempt to talk about their classmates' ideas in the following Zoom discussion. However, this behavior did not continue beyond the lesson in which the feedback was given, which suggested that the improvements on the forum were not helping in the video discussions.

Unfortunately, while I tried to focus my feedback on praising successful interactions, a large amount of feedback in the early lessons had to be focused on participation as it was common to find some students participating actively for the duration of the activity while others would simply post their own answers and then stop participating. While this was expected based on the research, the discussion groups being capped at a maximum of five participants meant that poor participation from any students could impact the ability of other students to have meaningful interaction due to the overall reduced activity.

Setting Goals and Making Adjustments

As the semester continued I felt that many students were making significant progress with their discussions on the forums but still believed that poor participation from some members was an issue that wasn't being resolved by the feedback I was providing. In the fifth lesson several students in one class made 10 or more posts on the discussion forum while another student had only five and yet another student had only two. It was also common for some students to begin the activity immediately while others did not make their first post until 10 or 20 minutes later. This not only impacted the performance of the less active students but gave the students who were participating actively fewer opportunities for interaction. Starting in lesson seven I provided each class with a goal for the number of posts they should try to make during the activity to address this problem. This goal started at 10 posts and was eventually raised to 12. I also included a goal of asking at least two questions in that lesson and added other goals related to answering questions and agreeing or disagreeing with classmates later in the semester. Setting this clear expectation for students did seem to help improve participation in these classes. All observed classes increased the total post count following the addition of a goal. One class increased from 113 total student posts to 120 in the first lesson they were given a goal, and to 136 in the following lesson. Another class increased from 101 to 128 to 136, and the third class increased from 81 to 82 (with one student being absent and thus lowering the total number of participants for the lesson) to 106. In addition, in the first week that the goals were added only three students of the 29 who were present had seven or fewer posts, while the minimum was six.

Participation generally remained at this increased level throughout the semester which allowed me to focus my instructions and feedback on the goal of genuine interaction.

Following this improvement, it became easier to find examples of interaction on the online discussion forums and to encourage students to continue this behavior. Noticing how students often built their replies entirely on the information presented in the original post without trying to move the discussion to a new idea led me to try an activity where each student was asked to write only one sentence per post. This activity did increase the number of questions students asked but they still usually let the student who made the original reply lead the direction of the discussion by answering those questions, as opposed to building on the ideas themselves. Later, I focused my feedback on which sections of their discussions would be interesting to discuss further to attempt to help them spot missed opportunities. This had more of an impact as students began to try to add interesting information to their classmates' ideas, especially on the online discussion forum. In one group, all five students chose to participate in the thread discussing whether giving more vacation time was a good way to improve the work-life balance of employees. They allowed the discussion to drift a little, mentioning laws about vacation time in Europe, wondering if too much free time was boring, and showing concern for economic issues if workers had too much vacation time. The excerpt here demonstrates how this group's discussion developed:

Student A: *I think Japanese people don't have enough vacation time than other countries.*

Student B: *I think so too, but having so much free time is boring, isn't you?*

Student A: *Surely, we may be boring, but many of Japanese workers have only two week summer vacation. It is short for me. How about from your point of view?*

Student C: *I also think Japanese summer vacation is too short for workers, but if it becomes longer, workers maybe don't want to work (more) than now.*

Student B: *I think if workers don't work, they can't live, so after all they will work.*

Student C: *What you said is true, however in our society has a hikikomori or NEET problem, how do you think about it?*

The drift of topic from work-life balance to a concern about excess time off leading to an unwillingness to work was only one way that this forum post evolved but still demonstrated significant improvement from early in the semester. In a different lesson another class was discussing the advantages and disadvantages of social media as it related to news and information and had a discussion about the relative importance of the ease of access to information as it compared to the dangers of finding false information. They were able to continue this discussion by asking for potential solutions and bringing up the necessity of media literacy to deal with the problems created by social media. These improvements continued, and by the end of the semester I was fairly satisfied with the discussions that students were having on the discussion forum.

Another realization came later in the semester when it became clear that students were having more in-depth discussions when they were given fewer overall topics to discuss. When they had an excess of options for discussion they tended to have superficial discussions about all of the options, whereas when they had fewer topics to discuss they would ask more questions and share more information about each. Following this realization all of the forums were limited to four starter threads. Following this change the discussions seemed more consistently interactive and interesting but unfortunately, the change came too late in the semester to evaluate exactly how the discussions improved.

Impact on Spoken Discussions

As students improved on the online discussion forum it was possible to look at their video discussions on Zoom and to look for potential parallels that could indicate a positive effect coming from what they were learning from the forum. Early in the semester it was clear that students were struggling with both the video discussions and the forums and, while I was hopeful that the forum would help students to have more interactive discussions simply due to how discussion forums worked, that wasn't the case. While the forums were always able to serve as a reasonable warm-up or a place to practice something that was difficult during the Zoom discussion, it was necessary to help students build up the skills for successful online forum discussions before they could have any carryover to their video discussions.

Towards the end of the semester it did seem that students were showing more interaction on both the online discussion forum and in the video discussions. One group had an excellent video discussion about the use of robots and artificial intelligence as solutions to the problem of Japan's aging population. They discussed the benefits of reducing the work needed to be done by humans, considered the negative of lost jobs, brought up examples of service industry jobs that were already being done by robots, and generally had an interesting interactive discussion. However, this was not a consistent improvement among groups. My notes from one of the final lessons for another class showed that students were having great, interactive discussions on the forum, but in video discussions they were still answering questions and then not speaking again until the topic was changed. This inconsistent improvement in video discussions, contrasted with the more universal improvements in the online discussion forum, makes it unreasonable to suggest that the success in the forums was a cause of the improvements in their video discussions.

Student Feedback

In the final lesson, the discussion forum activity focused on the students' opinions of the activity. In general they seemed to think that the forum was useful as preparation for their spoken discussions and that they were able to think of more ideas and get a better understanding of their classmates' ideas by discussing on the forum before having their spoken discussion. This may not be any different from having another speaking activity for discussion preparation, but it was good to see that students did find it helpful.

More interestingly, some students also felt that the discussion forum allowed them to have deeper discussions than they were able to in their video discussions. One student wrote that they did not have to worry about the timing when discussing in the forum and another student noticed that they often participated for a much longer time than in their video discussions. Some other students wrote that they were able to take more time to understand their classmates' ideas and explain their own ideas which made it easier to interact with each other on the forum. Other students found taking turns more difficult on the forum, noting that sometimes the discussion would move on while they were writing their opinion and they would feel like they contributed too late. When combined with other frustrations expressed by the students such as losing track of comments, struggling to find unread comments, and posting the same idea as someone else, it seems likely that students' lack of familiarity with using online discussion forums in this manner impacted their ability to make the best use of the forums. However, the positive points such as being able to discuss more deeply on the forum also suggest that it may be possible to use this activity in the future to emphasize this behavior

for video or face-to-face discussions. While students did still struggle with turn-taking in their video discussions this semester they may still have improved in their ability to discuss a topic more deeply from the online discussion forums. While this may be in part due to the added challenges of having their discussions online instead of in person, it also means that more teacher intervention would be necessary to create carryover between the two activities.

Conclusion

Over the course of the semester students did improve in their discussions using the online discussion forum and they self-reported the ability to learn from each other and interact with each other's ideas on the forum. While students struggled with many of the issues common to discussion forums such as uneven participation (Coffin & Donohue, 2014), posts without replies (Coffin & Donohue, 2014; Thomas, 2002), and early attempts being dominated by comments limited to the students' own perspectives (Murphy, 2004), they improved significantly in response to instruction and feedback. While many of the improvements that students made to their forum discussions would have also been a positive change in their video discussions, there seemed to be little transfer between the activities. It was not clear if the forum activity had any impact on the video discussions beyond use as a preparatory activity.

As an option to allow for student-to-student interaction while face-to-face interaction is limited, online forums did seem to be an effective tool for teaching some of the key parts of discussion and building up the ability of students to discuss contemporary issues in English, as is a goal of the EDC (Hurling, 2012). This activity could be enhanced by improving instruction and setting goals to target participation and interaction from the start, and by limiting the starting topics from the first lesson. I would like to try this activity again with those adjustments and see if it is possible to see success with the forums earlier in the semester and thus be able to draw on those successes to help students develop their ability to take turns and interact more successfully in video discussions or face-to-face discussions. This could increase the value of the online discussion forum activity in a speaking focused class such as the EDC.

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