【保育・教育実践ノート】

The use of an educational social networking site for English language learning beyond the classroom in a Japanese university setting

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Abstract

This study describes an attempt of using an educational social networking platform, which is called Edmodo, for English language learning outside classrooms at tertiary level. Considering the notion of communicative competence, the instructor incorporated Edmodo into his English classes as a project which is a formal assignment. In the project, the students posted their self-introduction in English and replied to other students' postings on Edmodo and they then wrote feedback on their tasks. The students' feedback demonstrated that the use of Edmodo held a number of positive aspects which support the previous studies identified that students can develop their communication networks with other students. In English language learning Edmodo also had an opportunity to enhance the development of the students' communicative competence. The current Edmodo project enabled the instructor to acknowledge the importance of authentic opportunities to use English with new technology.

1. Introduction

The use of information communication technology (ICT) has been recently highlighted in education throughout the world. Especially for language education, computer assisted learning (CALL), which aims at developing the target language with computers, has been widely known in the field and often adopted in language classes. A variety of application software for computers which contributes to language education has been developed and a number of language teachers try to adopt it into their classrooms in order to provide effective language teaching and learning opportunities.

More recently, the term CALL has been replaced to "technology enhanced language learning" [1] (TELL) (Walker & White, 2013). Walker & White (2013) state that in TELL the use of various ICT tools including mobile devices and tablets is recognized as a context where language exists and is utilized[2]. Under such a situation, social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter have been utilized for interactive language learning (e.g., Shih, 2013[3]). However, these SNSs are not originally established for educational purposes and thus, some education-oriented SNSs have been developed.

One education oriented SNS, which has recently been highlighted by teachers is Edmodo.[4] This SNS which was developed in the United States in 2008 aims for facilitating interaction. Many researchers and educators refer to Edmodo as the "Facebook for Education" [5] (Enriquez, 2014, p. 1). According to the survey results of Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies [6], Edmodo has been recognized as one of the popular online learning tools used in the world. This SNS is free in its license type and it is totally secured only for students and teachers who are registered.

The use of Edmodo is very simple for both teachers and students. This site is supported in various languages such as English, French, Chinese and Japanese, and thus users can utilize a preferred language to manage their accounts. For launching activities on Edmodo, the teacher firstly creates a teacher account and set a group. Capture 1 indicates an interface of Edmodo's sign-up page.

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Capture 1　A screenshot of Edmodo's sign up page [7]

Edmodo then provides a group code with the teacher, which can be accessed by the students. A student creates a student's account and then signs up with the group code provided by the teacher. As the registration for the group in Edmodo is restricted, only authorized students are able to participate in the activities. Capture 2 designates a screenshot of Edmodo of a teacher's account.
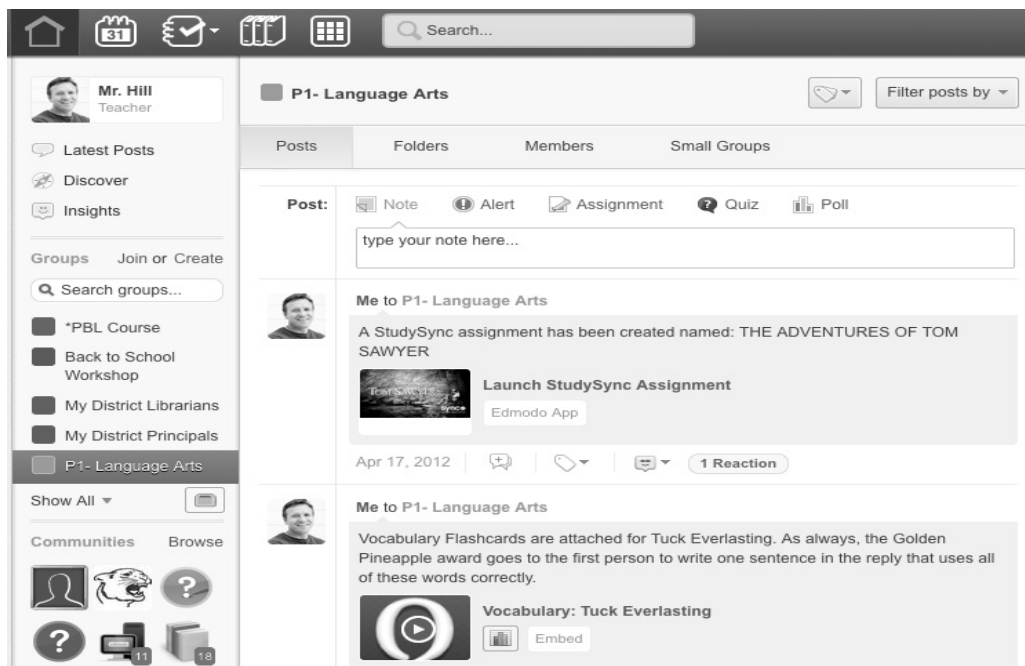
Capture 2　A sample screenshot of Edmodo blog page [8]

2. Review of Literature

The study on the use of Edmodo in education is new but a number of educators have recently investigated possibilities of Edmodo for teachers and students. Evans and Kilinc (2013) described that Edmodo provides teachers with an interconnected classroom supervision toolkit in order to utilize through their class periods [9]. Thibaut (2015) also mentions that Edmodo enables teachers to conduct class-related activities outside the classroom. [10] In addition, a number of researchers and educators deliver positive feedback on Edmodo in their research or through their practices. For instance, Dogoriti & Pange (2014) acknowledged that Edmodo is a user-friendly SNS [11], and Kongchan (2012) argued that it is very friendly even for non-digital-native teachers [12]. More specifically, Enriquez (2014, p.5) emphasizes that "Edmodo appears to be a wonderful learning platform which is so simple that observations and data show a high level of acceptance and response by the participants." [13] Furthermore, in his study in 2010 Nevas (2010) revealed that students actively engaged in more stimulating work due to increased interactive opportunities through Edmodo [14]. According to Mills & Chandra (2011), Edmodo enables students to connect each other closely and it also contributes to developing a strong classroom community. [15] These studies confirm that Edmodo is an innovative online tool for education admitting the effectiveness of ICT tools in any domain.

Especially for the use of Edmodo for language education, Al-Kathiri's study (2015) in Saudi Arabia revealed that the secondary students who used Edmodo had more positive attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language (EFL) than those who received traditional EFL instructions [16]. It is supposed that Al-Kathiri's result is remarkable for educators who have a plan to use Edmodo in EFL context.

Nevertheless, several educators claim drawbacks of Edmodo in education. For instance, Davies (2013) reports that Edmodo is not compatible with iPads although it offers both iPad and iPhone applications. More concretely, some students cannot log in Edmodo with iPads easily though they enter the correct information. [17] Another drawback is that it may be difficult for some students to keep their sequential attention on Edmodo outside classrooms [18] (University of Huston, Education, 2015). In the literature, drawbacks of Edmodo are fewer than benefits but it is important for any teachers who use Edmodo in class to consider disadvantages, so that they can provide an effective use of Edmodo.

3. Edmodo project for English I classes

I decided to incorporate Edmodo into my English classes at Mukogawa Women's University as a formal assignment task which could encourage the students to use English outside the classrooms. In designing the project, I firstly took into account a linguistic theory related to second/foreign language learning. I then selected the classes to be involved and established students' tasks on Edmodo.

3.1. Theoretical consideration for the Edmodo project

The linguistic theory which I highlighted for the current Edmodo project is the notion of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972 [19]; Canale and Swain, 1980 [20]; Canale, 1983 [21]). In short, communicative competence includes grammatical competence which is related to the rules of word and sentence construction, meanings, spelling and pronunciation, sociolinguistic competence which is associated with appropriate usage of language in various social context. Strategic competence includes communication strategies which enable communicators to develop their communication, and discourse competence involves cohesion and coherence in discourse. In developing and conducting commutation activities in my English classes, I always try to reflect this theory in

students' tasks.

3.2. Target classes, the students and the class content

In semester 1 of the 2015 academic year, I had three English classes for 1st year students and two of them focused on speaking and listening skills. These two classes were at the same level and consisted of beginning level students who were grouped by an English placement test conducted in the beginning of the semester. The number of the students in one class was 37 and the other class consisted of 32 students.

The content of the classes was basically based upon topics in a textbook, "Skillful, Listening & Speaking"[22] (Bohlke, 2013) which aims at developing students' academic language skill in English speaking context. For the students above, the foundation level was selected by the school and is used for a year. The units in the textbook include self, family, stuff, money etc. and each unit includes conversational discourses and the associated grammatical components.

3.3. Students' tasks in the Edmodo project

In the current project, I expected my students to use English outside the classrooms in order to develop their autonomy for learning English. Furthermore, I expected the students to know more about others through my English classes.

After creating their own accounts, the students did the following tasks. First, each student wrote her self-introduction in English. I indicated basic examples including her name, residential place and hobbies, and I also encouraged the students to add other personal information which enabled others to be interested in the writer. For this task, I announced that the students had to write more than 6 sentences, utilizing what they learned in Semester 1. Second, after all the students posted their self-introduction, they commented on two students' postings. As I could monitor all the students' activities on Edmodo, I asked someone to write comments to the students who did not receive any comment from their classmates, so that all the students were able to obtain two comments. Finally, the students wrote their feedback on the use of Edmodo in terms of their own writing and classmates' postings.

4. Students' performance on Edmodo

All the students participated in the project and did the required tasks on Edmodo. Concerning writing self-introduction, most students wrote their self-introduction with typical components such as names, nicknames, ages, residential places, and hobbies. Many of the students wrote their dreams or favorite things including musicians and songs. For instance, one student wrote that she likes Mr. Children and she thought that their music is wonderful and cool. Most students focused on explaining facts; in contrast, some of the students described things in more details, utilizing various adjectives. For example, one student stated that she likes watching the Harry Potter movies and they are very interesting. She then added that she often goes to the Harry Potter attraction in Universal Studio Japan and she recommended going there. In grammar, most students' writings were grammatically correct possibly because they were able to carefully check their writing on their own and to find their mistakes. This is the critical difference between spoken and written languages. That is, it is often difficult for speakers to check their grammar while speaking; in contrast, it tends to be easy for them to monitor and check their grammar during their writing activities. Although some students had a few mistakes in their postings, the mistakes were not significant in understanding the writer's intention. The mistakes include

omitting articles and misusing plural forms, which can often be identified in English writings of many Japanese university students.

4.1. Students' feedback

As noted in 3.2, I asked the students to write feedback on the Edmodo project and let them write their feedback in the final class. Before the students wrote the feedback, I explained that I would use the students' feedback for my study and asked them if they agree with using their feedback writing anonymously. I, furthermore, informed the students that each student's agreement or rejection never affects her final grade in the class.

The feedback consisted of two perspectives on the Edmodo project. One was about writing self-introduction and the other was about reading the others' postings. The former aimed to identify how each student maximized originality and what she considered in her writing. The latter expected to recognize how each student read and thought about other students' postings.

4.1.1. Feedback on the students' writings

When reading the students' feedback on their own writing, I tried to identify if each student's comments were related to the four components of communicative competence (see 3.1). Through my reading all the comments, I admitted that many of the students' comments on their writing can be categorized based upon the four components of communicative competence. Of the four components, grammatical competence was the most frequently identified in their feedback. For instance, one student reported that she checked grammar and vocabulary while writing and also she carefully used grammar, in order to write English correctly. Another student stated that she tried to use simple expressions, so that other students can easily understand what the writers want to say. In sociolinguistic competence, a few students considered that the communications on Edmodo aimed at knowing their classmates and they showed friendliness for their postings so as to make new friends. For example, one student informed that she used several pictographs or exclamation marks, so that other friends could relate to one another. With regard to discourse competence, some students thought the beginning and the ending of the posting (e.g., hello and thank you). Other students reported that they tried to use various conjunctions, so as to expand their writings. Strategic competence was the most difficult to be identified in the students' feedback mainly because it is often associated with spoken communication. However, I identified strategic competence in one student's feedback. She wrote her self-introduction using questions, so that other students can easily respond to her posting. I recognized that writing questions is a strategy to expand interactions between participants in communication.

In addition to the above aspects in relation to communicative competence, I acknowledged that several students expected the Edmodo project to develop their social network in the English class. For instance, one student stated that she wrote about clothes, so that she tried to find friends who have the same interests. Another student wrote about her dream to study abroad because she wished other students would become interested in her dream. These students' feedback seemed to aim at developing a class network and connecting other students more closely. My findings support Mills' (2011) assertion that Edmodo plays a crucial role in developing a strong classroom community. The students eagerly wrote the feedback on their posting activity and all comments were highly useful for me to consider the possibility of Edmodo in teaching EFL.

4.1.2. Feedback on the students' readings

The students' comments on reading the others' postings allowed me to identify that the feedback can be divided into three aspects: content, language and communication. The majority of the students wrote about the content of other students' self-introduction. One student stated that she enjoyed reading other students' postings because she was able to know what she did not know about them. More concretely, the students could know about their favorite songs or sports. Another students reported that she was able to have sympathy for other students' social experiences. Many students, additionally, pointed out that reading other students' postings enabled them to acknowledge variations of vocabulary and grammar in the given context. In this regard, one student knew that it is not necessarily to use difficult grammar structures but simple grammar is enough to communicate with other students in the context. Some students claimed that the communication on Edmodo became a useful opportunity to know other students with whom was not familiar before the project commenced, and as a result, it became easier for them to talk to the students. Another student thought that she could develop her English communication skill by replying to other students. As well as the comments on the posting self-introduction, all the students made valuable comments and these overlap the findings or discussions in the previous studies.

4.1.3. Issues of Edmodo in the current project

Although almost all the students had positive perspectives on the use of Edmodo for English learning, a couple of students provided suggestions for improvements of the current Edmodo project. One was that it would be better for students to reply to more than two students, so that they can enjoy commutating with different students. Another suggestion was that the first session when students create accounts should be conducted in class because some students had a problem with creating their account with iPhones. I also identified that several students struggled with creating accounts on their iPhone or computers at home and supported them to do it in my office. As Davies (2013) claims, Edmodo is sometimes not adaptable with iPhones or iPads and my students encountered the same problem.

5. Further activities on Edmodo in Semester 2

Considering the students' positive feedback on Edmodo, I decided to continue to use Edmodo in the following semester. In Semester 2, I am able to continue the project for one of the two classes involved in the previous semester. In the first class in Semester 2, I informed the students that they would continue the Edmodo project and they agreed with the continuity. As the students have already been familiar with Edmodo, I planned to let the students interact with other students on Edmodo fortnightly. From week 3 we started the Edmodo project. For the first assignment, I let the students write about their summer vacation and at the same time I encouraged them to upload pictures related to their postings since the visualized postings will help both writers and readers understand the content of the postings. All the students described their experiences in the summer with some pictures. As the following tasks, a topic to post will be related to the content of each unit of the textbook.

As the future plan in the Edmodo project, I am seeking potential Edmodo partners resided in English speaking countries, so that my students can interact with people in English. I consider that the ideal partners are students who study Japanese, especially at the beginning level. The significant reason for this consideration is that those students are often looking for opportunities to interact with Japanese natives. In addition, those students are interested in Japanese culture. Thus, my students will have a necessity to use English in order to describe Japanese culture. If I can find those students, my students will be able to not only communicate in

English but also exchange cultures on Edmodo.

6. Conclusion

The current Edmodo project, over all, supported the benefits the previous studies demonstrated, which enhance learners' communications outside classrooms and nurture close ties with other students. Focusing on English learning, the Edmodo project contributed to developing English skills, associating with the four components of communicative competence. More concretely, it includes polishing grammar, recognizing the appropriate language use, constructing effective discourse, and expanding communication. In this regard, it is important to note that posting messages in English on Edmodo is not a simple task assigned by the instructor but it is an authentic commutation opportunities which express oneself and accepts others. This study suggests that Edmodo is a potential educational tool for young learners who grow with new technology, and that the use of Edmodo allows teachers to consider the significance of updating new technology for education.

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6 http://c4lpt.co.uk/top100tools/

7 http://www.edmodo.com/

8 This snapshot is cited from https://blog.edmodo.com/2012/12/17/getting-started-with-the-latest- version-of-edmodo/. I decided not to use my page of Edmodo in order to protect my students' privacy.

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