

Edmodo as a tool for the global connection between Japanese and American college students in language learning

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【原著論文】

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Abstract

This study investigated how English learners at a university in Japan perceive connections with students in the US through an educational social network platform, called Edmodo. An instructor of English at a Japanese university cooperated with a Japanese language instructor at an American university and they incorporated Edmodo into their language classes. In the project activity, 62 Japanese and 53 American college students were paired or grouped in threes and interacted with each other on Edmodo. The students answered a feedback questionnaire at the end of the project. The study focused on Japanese students and their feedback on the Edmodo project was analyzed qualitatively. The findings indicated that almost all Japanese students positively perceived the connection with American students, and they recognized that the authentic communication was fun, valuable and an interesting experience. The connection, moreover, enabled Japanese students to identify differences in college and daily life between the two countries. However, the findings also suggest that more frequent interactions involving a number of different students be considered for further implementation of using Edmodo for involvement of the global community.

1. Introduction

The Web 2.0 technologies¹, including social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), has recently enabled people around the world to connect with each other online more easily than in years past. Nevertheless, in English language education in Japan, connecting with native speakers of English or non-native English learners in different countries is limited for students who have little or no experience spending time in English speaking countries. Most of their experiences are interactions with Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) from different countries in English classes at elementary and/or secondary schools, but they are not one to one interactions in class. Therefore, it is difficult for the students to be satisfied with communicating with native speakers of English because it does not often allow them to talk about their personal things or preferences freely beyond studying in class.

Considering such a situation, providing authentic opportunities of English communication should be importantly placed so as to develop their motivation for learning English and communicative competence. In order to deliver authentic communication in English at the tertiary level, one English instructor at a private women's university in Japan and one instructor of Japanese language courses at a state university in the US collaborated and set communication activities, using a social networking platform, namely Edmodo. The instructors termed this activity as the Edmodo project and facilitated students' online communication in the target languages.

2. Literature review

Edmodo is an education-oriented social networking platform developed in the US in 2008². Edmodo is a highly user-friendly platform, whose interface is similar to Facebook, but its access is limited to students and teachers

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who are registered. Edmodo has been known as one of the popular online learning tools around the world. Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies (2015) notes that in the latest survey Edmodo was ranked 39th among the 2015 top 100 tools for learning around the world³. Edmodo can be utilized for various domains in education and the use of Edmodo for language learning can be specifically categorized as Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) (Walker & White, 2013⁴). This is mainly because Edmodo has a context that people's feelings and intention are shown on the online thread. Walker & White (2013) emphasize that TELL can be recognized as a context where language exists. Thus, it can be argued that Edmodo as TELL is one of the attempts that can embody learning language in context.

The recent studies on Edmodo related to TELL show its effectiveness for language learning. For instance, Dowling's (2011) study indicated that Edmodo enabled the students to enhance their English skills and computer skills simultaneously⁵. Shames-Abadi et al. (2015) examined the outcome of Edmodo on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' writing performance and their findings indicated that Edmodo contributed to developing students' English writing skill⁶. Shames-Abadi et al. (2015) discussed that one significant factor for the enhancement in writing is for students to compare their writing with other classmates.

Edmodo seems to enable learners to develop their motivation for learning EFL mainly because Edmodo can contribute to facilitating a learner-centered approach for EFL teaching and to reinforcing learners' active engagement. Al-Kathiri (2015) argued that Edmodo enabled Saudi-Arabian secondary students to have more positive attitudes towards learning EFL than traditional instructions⁷. Similarly, through 69 Japanese students' written feedback, Okumura (2015) identified that Edmodo provided authentic communication opportunities for EFL students at a Japanese university, and as a result, the students were able to actively engage in English learning, interacting among classmates⁸. Okumura (2015) then proposed a possibility of using Edmodo that students can interact with those in a foreign country, if appropriate exchange partners in foreign countries can be found.

Although a number of previous studies proclaim that Edmodo is an effective tool for enhancing EFL learning, Ali (2015) notes that individual differences exist in terms of perceptions of using Edmodo for learning English⁹. In his study, some students gave positive feedback on the use of Edmodo; in contrast, some negatively perceive it. Among the negative perceptions it is majority that "Edmodo may not be able to achieve understanding about particular skills in English"¹⁰. Ali's study suggests that Edmodo is not an almighty application to enhance language learning. Thus, it is important to further examine how Edmodo can contribute to EFL learning, considering individual differences.

Based upon the related literature, this study will attempt to use Edmodo as a tool for involvement of the global community. In particular, the study uses Edmodo to connect Japanese college students with those in the US for their language learning. The present study will focus on Japanese students and will investigate how they perceive the connection with American students through Edmodo. The research questions to be explored are:

1. What did the Japanese students perceive for the use of Edmodo for learning English connecting with college students in the US?
2. How was the connection with American students on Edmodo useful for the Japanese students?
3. What did the Japanese students suggest for the use of Edmodo connecting with college students in the US?

3. Current Edmodo project

3.1. The students

Sixty-two Japanese students who belonged to advanced classes of an English course offered at the Japanese university participated in the project. At the American university 45 students who took a beginner level Japanese course and 8 who studied in an intermediate class joined in the project. The Japanese and American students were paired and some were grouped by threes for the online activities.

3.2. Whole process of the project

The instructors assigned the students to write about given topics both in English and Japanese. The topics in the current project included self-introduction, students' favorite places, daily activities and memories of childhood. Selecting the topics was considered based upon the American students' Japanese language level and what they have already learned.

The students were asked to communicate with each other four times during one semester about each topic. More concretely, in the first phase of the project, the American students wrote their self-introduction on Edmodo, and the Japanese students commented on their partners' postings. In the second phase, the roles were reversed. The Japanese students introduced their favorite places in Japan (e.g., popular sightseeing places for foreigners) and the American students commented on the Japanese students' postings. Then, posting and responding were repeated alternately in the third and fourth phases. In the final phase, the students wrote feedback on the Edmodo project in their native languages. The feedback questionnaire included overall evaluation of the project, usefulness of the project and suggestions to improve the project. Before the students wrote the feedback, the instructors explained that they would like to use the students' feedback for the current study and asked for their consent. The instructors ensured the students that the feedback would be anonymous, and agreement or rejection does not affect their final grades in the classes. Sixty-one Japanese students responded to the feedback questionnaire and all of them agreed with using their responses for the current study.

In order to proceed through the project smoothly, the instructors often contacted each other through emails and exchanged ideas. Additionally, they sometimes have discussions on Skype, if necessary, so that they can identify and solve issues they encountered.

4. Data analysis

The present study will draw upon a qualitative approach to see students' perceptions on the use of Edmodo involving Japanese and American college students online. According to Esterberg (2002)¹¹, data analysis for a qualitative study is a process of making meaning. Esterberg (2002) also notes that analysing qualitative data is essential for qualitative researchers to extract meaning from raw data. In order to answer the research questions, the Japanese students' comments were reviewed manually. Specifically, key words and expressions related to the research questions in each comment were categorized as subordinate concepts, and finally the concepts were accumulated as generic concepts according to meanings. For the current study, the generic concepts were translated into English as the Japanese students wrote their comments in Japanese. Some parts of the students' comments were also translated into English to use for citation. In addition, the students' posts and replies were reviewed to see how students' activities on Edmodo affect their perceptions.

5. Findings and discussion

The current study set three research questions mentioned above and discussion of the findings will be presented from research question 1 to 3 in order.

5.1. Students' overall perceptions of the Edmodo project

As can be seen in Table 1, a number of positive items emerged in the feedback, and thus it can be noted that the students overall positively perceived the current Edmodo project. In particular, many students thought that the Edmodo project was enjoyable, valuable and interesting. It is important to note here is that the meaning of “interesting” in their comments is closely associated with intellectual curiosity which enables students to learn or experience something new (see Extract 1).

Extract 1

I thought that communicating with American students was interesting and enabled me to have freshness of attitude. I identified that a different culture exists and some parts of the culture were similar to Japanese one. (Japanese student A)

Table 1 The Japanese students' overall perceptions of the Edmodo project

No.	Students' perceptions	Frequency
1	Enjoyable	21
2	Valuable experience	17
3	Interesting	12
4	Freshness of attitude	9
5	Useful to gain knowledge	5
6	Encouraging	3
7	Stimulating	2
8	Difficult	2
9	Useful to gain thinking skill	1
10	Disappointing	1

Several students ($N=17$) felt that the Edmodo project was valuable experience. For example, one student had a feeling that she connected with someone in the world. Another student felt foreigners near to her as she has not had an opportunity to communicate with foreigners.

On the other hand, two students felt that the Edmodo project was difficult. More concretely, both of the students had a difficulty in expressing what they want to say in English simply. One student was disappointed with the project because her partner forgot to respond two times. Such insufficiency is discussed as an issue of the current project.

5.2. Usefulness of the Edmodo project

Every student wrote at least one item on the usefulness of the current project. Their appreciation varied and thus items were further grouped for analysis here. For instance, as Table 2 shows, items related to developing English language skills include No.1 ($N = 19$), No.3 ($N = 10$), No. 4 ($N = 8$), No.6 ($N = 5$), and No.14 ($N = 1$). More specifically, items which indicate high frequency (No. 1, 3, 4) are closely associated with developing communication skills rather than enhancing specific knowledge including vocabulary and grammar. Extract 2 is an example that students were aware of the importance of intelligibility in English communication. It is obvious that authentic opportunities of English communication enabled many students to consider how to make their expressions more intelligible.

Extract 2

I thought how to make what I want to say intelligible and I had different senses which I do not have in usual English classes. Moreover, I learned that I can tell what I want to say using simple English expressions only. (Japanese student B)

Table 2 Usefulness of the Edmodo project

No.	Usefulness of the Edmodo project	Frequency
1	To identify how to communicate with others in English intelligibly	19
2	To identify American college students' life and American culture	12
3	To identify English expressions native speakers use	10
4	To identify other Japanese students' various writing expressions to say what to be said	8
5	To identify a difficulty to use Japanese for Japanese language learners	7
6	To develop English vocabulary	5
7	To develop motivation for learning English	4
8	To widen own perspective	3
9	To develop grammatical knowledge	3
10	To be able to use prior knowledge	2
11	To understand Japanese culture	2
12	To have an opportunity to know people in a different country	1
13	To be able to have a confidence to communicate in English	1
14	To identify own mistakes when writing English	1
15	To develop motivation for going abroad	1

Japanese students uploaded a couple of pictures with their writing in order to express what the students want to say and to let American students understand it more effectually. For instance, Japanese student C used three pictures to explain about a shrine in Kyoto, fortune paper and Japanese traditional food in both English and Japanese (see Appendix 1). Concerning the use of pictures for effective communication, Japanese student C commented:

Extract 3

I tried to tell what I want to say by using simple English and photos, and as a result, I came to think how to make my English expressions more intelligible. (Japanese student C)

On Edmodo, every post can be read by all participants in the registered group. Thus, students can learn various expressions each other by reading other students' posts. Therefore, in the project the Japanese students were able to learn various English expressions, being exposed to American students' expressions. Appendix 2 is an example of one American student B's post. As the capture shows, the American student used simple and natural English expressions and the Japanese student also replied naturally. Likewise, several students commented that other Japanese students' writing was useful to know a variety of expressions. In this regard, it is claimed that the Japanese students could be exposed to two kinds of role models in English writing.

Furthermore, it should be noted that some students ($N = 12$) thought that the Edmodo project allowed them to acknowledge American students' life and culture. In the topic about daily activities, American students wrote about their college life, and Japanese students were able to understand that there are a number of differences between American and Japanese university systems.

Although only one student commented that she identified her own mistakes when writing English, it is an important perspective on learning EFL. Writing their own thoughts and ideas in English is not a simple task for many EFL learners. Learners need to read their own English writing repeatedly and edit by themselves if necessary. Such series of the wiring activity can develop learners' grammatical awareness, which allows learners to use the target language correctly.

5.3. Issues and suggestions to improve the project

Thirty eight students commented on issues or suggestions to improve the project. As shown in Table 3, some students ($N = 11$) thought that it is better not to make pairs, so that students can communicate with various students. In fact, as noted above, a few students were not able to communicate with American students efficiently because there were some cases where an American partner forgot to reply to the posting of the Japanese students.

Since the current Edmodo project was the first attempt for the instructors, it was concerned that some students may not have any reply from other students. Nevertheless, fixing pairs caused the problem that several students did not receive replies from American students. In order to solve this issue, for instance, it is better to make smaller groups in order to communicate with different students, and to allow students to reply to other students' posts concurrently.

Table 3 Issues and suggestions to improve the project

No.	Issues and suggestions to improve the project.	Frequency
1	Not to form pairs in order to communicate with various students	11
2	To increase frequency of communication	8
3	Wanted to feel closer friendship	6
4	To do this project in class	5
5	To fix due date to post and reply	3
6	Not to fix topics in order to discuss what we want to talk freely	3
7	Wanted to communicate with students not only in the US but also in a different country	2
8	Difficult to find a partner's posting	2
9	Wanted to teach correct usage each other	1
10	Wanted to interact with the partner at a daily basis	1
11	Wanted to communicate with students of a women's university in the US	1
12	No responses from the partner	1
13	Encountered a log-in trouble	1
14	Wanted to have in-depth discussion beyond the given topics	1

Increasing frequency of communication ($N = 8$) seems related to students' desire to feel closer friendship ($N = 6$). In fact, it would be difficult for students to possess a sense of solidarity by posting and responding once in each topic. On the other hand, a few pairs went beyond and responded to their partner's response and continued their conversation. If students can connect with each other by finding similar interests, they might be easier to continue their interaction. Consequently, the students would be able to develop their feeling of solidarity in the Edmodo project.

6. Conclusion

The current study approved that the Edmodo project was overall successful for almost all Japanese students to communicate with American students in English. Especially, it allowed the students to perceive that authentic communication can be pleasurable, appreciated and interesting.

Additionally, the project was useful for the students to identify how to efficiently deliver their own thoughts and ideas in English and to enhance English learning, being exposed to two different role models in writing, namely native speakers' and EFL learners' one. This result supports Dowling's (2011) and Shames-Abadi et al.'s (2015) findings to claim that Edmodo contribute to developing English skills.

Besides, the authentic communication with American students enabled Japanese students to know different cultures with perspectives of the same generation. As few studies dealt with the Edmodo connection with foreign students in English learning, this finding will give a useful insight for a further possibility to use Edmodo for involvement of the global community in language learning.

As mentioned in the literature review section, Edmodo is a popular Web 2.0 tool around the world and it seems no longer innovative, especially in Western society. However, an important thing to consider when we use Edmodo for involvement of the global community is that it should not be only a one time event to pay attention but be a sustained, ongoing activity of language study. In order to do so, language instructors need to have a

sustainable and reliable global network.

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- 1 Web 2.0 technology refers to the second generation of the World Wide Web including blogs, wikis and social networking.
 - 2 <http://www.edmodo.com>
 - 3 Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies (2015). *Top 100 tools for learning 2015*. Retrieved from <http://c4lpt.co.uk/top100tools/> (Access 10 September, 2016)
 - 4 Walker, A. & White, G., *Technology enhanced language learning: Connecting theory and practice*. Oxford University Press, 2013, p.9.
 - 5 Dowlings, S., Web-based learning - Moving from learning islands to learning environments. *TESL-EJ*, 2011, 15(2), pp.1-27. Retrieved from <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume15/ej58/ej58int/> (Access 8 September, 2016)
 - 6 Shams-Abadi, B. B., Ahmadi, S. D., & Mehrdad, A. G., The effect of Edmodo on EFL learners' writing performance. *International Journal of Educational Investigations*, 2015, 2 (2), 88-97
 - 7 Al-Kathiri, F. Beyond the classroom wall: Edmodo in Saudi secondary school EFL instruction, attitudes and challenges. *English Language Teaching*, 8 (1), 2015, pp. 189-204
 - 8 Okumura, S., The use of an educational social networking site for English language learning beyond the classroom in a Japanese university setting. *Research Bulletin of Education, Education Major, Graduate School of Letters, Mukogawa Women's University*, 2016, Vol.11, pp.39-45
 - 9 Ali Z., A case study of tertiary students' experiences using edmodo in language learning. *International Journal of Language Education and Applied Linguistics*, 2015, Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/35368281.pdf#search=%27A+case+study+of+tertiary+students%27+experience+using+edmodo%27> (Access 3 September, 2016)
 - 10 Ibid, p. 43
 - 11 Esterberg, K. G., *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. 2002.

Appendix A

Japanese student C

Hill'm ○.I introduce Kyoto which famous city of Japan. There are many temples and shrines. And there are many delicious foods.

I eat a delicious thing whenever I went to there. In coming season, covered leaves are very beautiful. I will visit to see it with my friends.

I want to know your recommend place.

Please teach me!

1まいめのしゃしんをみてください。

きょうとにはこのようなじんじゃがたくさんあります。

2まいめのしゃしんをみてください。

これはおみくじ(parer fortune)といってじぶんのうんせいがかいてあります。じんじゃにいくとそれをひくことができます。これ

は1まいめのあのじんじゃでひいたものです。

3まいめはおばんざいといって、きょうとのむかしながらのあじのごはんです。とてもヘルシーでおいしいですよ！

...

すべてのノートを表示する



いいね ・ 1 通の返信 ・ 共有 ・ ブラウズ

2015年 10月 12日



American student B

Kyoto sounds interesting. I have heard Kyoto is one of the few cities with classical Japanese architecture. As well as Kyoto is the old capital of Japan.

I would personally recommend seeing one of our many forests and lakes; you could even camp there. As well as the trees here are beginning to change color too and its nice seeing the many colors in the fall. Though winter is coming.

Have a nice day.

Appendix B



American Student A

はじめまして。
わたしは○です。
さんねんせいです。
はたちです。
放送と映画芸術です。
よろしくおねがいます。

I like to watch anime and play video games.

I really like making people happy and laugh.

I really enjoy how movies can make people happy, that's why I want to make movies.

I think Japanese culture is very interesting and love learning about it.

I hope to one day visit Japan and maybe study abroad there. 表示を少なくする

いいね ・ 4 通の返信 ・ 共有 ・ ブラウズ

2015年 9月 22日

返信をもっと表示する



American student A

I haven't seen any Japanese movies. What is a good one I should Watch?



Japanese student C

I think you should watch Japanese animated film for example DORAEMON & DORAGONBALL.



American student A

I love Dragon Ball. It's one of my favorite. I will watch Doraemon and tell you what I think. I'm Looking Forward to it. デジモンをみますか。 That one is my favorite of all time. デジモンアドベチャーtri. 11月21日。