

Are You Pinterested? A Study into an Online Collaborative Homework Task

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects upon a year-long project which aimed to provide English Discussion Class (EDC) students with a more meaningful topic knowledge through a supplementary and optional homework activity prior to the in-class discussions. Before each class students are expected to complete a course text reading for their lesson in preparation to participate fully in the class as a whole. However, typically many students complete this reading task minutes before the lesson starts or even in some cases neglect to prepare at all. In order to find a solution to this issue and also to blend the use of MALL into the EDC curriculum - I offered the students an optional homework activity – a class collaborative Pinterest board, whereby the class members could add and share ‘on topic’ info-graphics which may provide them with more visual, easily digestible information and an alternative take on the general lesson discussion theme.

INTRODUCTION

The age of information can be characterized by the evolution and modernization of technology, which has in turn driven great changes in the way that students communicate with each other. This modern phenomena and social evolution may have a greater potential to underpin how students academically achieve. If then assuming by default we are all ‘connected’ by our membership to social media sites and smart phone messenger apps, does that give the students a platform to collaborate outside of the discussion classroom? The Pinterest homework project aimed to explore the potential for social media collaboration between students and assess and analyze the direct effect that such collaborative tasks may have on in class production of language in discussion and, to a wider extent, enjoyment of the course, as a whole.

To encapsulate the notion of collaboration we can assimilate aspects of peer interdependence but also that of learner autonomy. Also do such collaborative activities help to create a community for support and learning? What learner styles and motivations are accommodated by the facilitation of collaborative tasks online? And lastly in this context, are there implications for curricula change on a micro and macro level?

Extra Homework Teacher?!

The social media platform Pinterest is best characterized as a virtual “notice board” or “white board” for adding and sharing ideas. Users can curate their class board and add images, info-graphics and videos. It can act as a visual bookmarking tool which can be shared with all members of that specific and closed group (in this case, the discussion class). Most importantly this task was to be conducted by using the Pinterest application – the students were instructed how to use the smart phone app and of course made aware that it was an entirely optional task.

The “elephant in the room” here is that what was asked of the students was to do something extra outside of course expectations. In explanation of the task, albeit unfortunately somewhat hurried due to lesson timing constraints, I sought to encourage the students to work together outside of the classroom and to add, what they thought would be some interesting or useful material/information in the form of an info-graphic (see Appendix). This collaboration between the students might enable them to be better equipped to tackle the rather heavy weekly discussion topics.

If looking through a Vygotskyian social cultural theoretical framework, the pedagogy of

collaborative learning posits that learning occurs through the co-negotiation of understanding between learners, each interdependent on learner styles, skills sets, life experiences and motivations. Through such collaboration, participants actively construct their own knowledge – the responsibility resting on the learner moreover the educator. So in assuming that developmental processes take place through participation (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) rather than through isolated effort, with engagement between others a critical factor in the process (Stockwell, 2006) then how might this be better facilitated in this specific cultural and academic context? Studies into how scaffolding collaborative tasks away from the formal classroom (Ikeda, 2014) have suggested that such learning processes strengthen the students' out of class learning. It is then that the reliance on each other, the virtues of the collective group dynamic promote positive interdependence and individual accountability (McCafferty, Jacobs and Iddings, 2006).

Whilst social media is driving the dissemination and our consumption of information, the digital revolution can be seen to be quietly taking place in the landscape of Japanese academia (Lockley, 2011). A slow rethinking of the tasks and student activities in the language classroom has been attempted – much less without the authoritative guidance of the teacher. Student autonomy, self-awareness and actionable goal setting have become significant issues within this particular EFL context, but where does that inquiry into autonomy posit itself within the realm of CMC and MALL in Japan? One of the main obstacles to fully embracing CMC and learning technologies in the classroom is the lack of (or institutional reluctance to encourage) learner autonomy or ability to conduct self-directed/independent learning (Yoshida and Nakano, 2013).

A Community for Support and Learning?

An online student collaborative virtual space post/pre-lesson for discussion preparation as a point of self-access for learners may well further fuse and aid MALL and autonomy however it will be interesting to extend from the theoretical tools of the Socio-Cultural theory to studies into communities of practice, and with that in particular CALL/MALL. This project aimed to harness a definite cultural characteristic, a shared sense of community and willingness to contribute, aid the willingness to communicate and observe how online individual to group interactions affect communicative competency.

PROCEDURE

This project was conducted over two semesters – with the managed pilot and subsequent data collection collated in the spring. The more 'hands off' project was conducted in the fall semester. The spring semester project commenced from lesson 2 in April. The students were all given a 'how to' guide to use Pinterest (of which most of them had never heard of before). The Pinterest site and group board were shown on the class monitor in classes where applicable. The students all received an email invitation to join the board and to start to add and share visual information as they saw fit to complement the preceding week's discussion topic. Each Pinterest board had the appropriate lesson topic heading and key word search hints for the students to use in their search for "Pins" on the website. This weekly activity ran for 12 weeks of the semester and the students were given verbal and written reminders and encouragement in post lesson feedback and in their online lesson comments to take part in the optional homework task. During lessons 13 and 14 feedback data was collected and collated on the semester long task and presented in the results section of this paper.

After receiving favorable results and feedback of using Pinterest as a supplementary homework activity in the spring semester – the project continued into the fall semester. The same procedure followed with the exception that I left the students to curate the boards themselves and infrequently reminded them to collaborate and share ideas. The rationale being that the results

from the spring suggested that the students, with functional and technology guidance, may intrinsically take more ownership of the board and curate it themselves from week to week.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A survey was administered at the end of the spring semester to gauge the attitudes of the students of the pilot project and below some of the key findings are revealed.

Students get Ready

Sample > 83. Students ranked their responses from 1 very prepared to 5 not prepared at all.

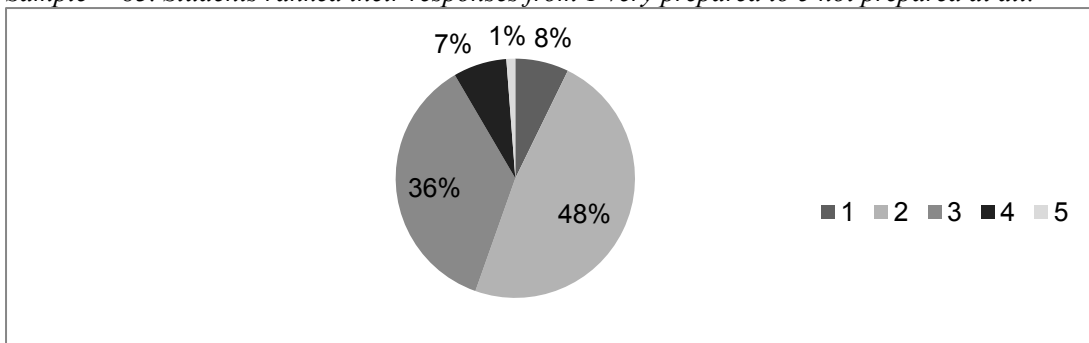


Figure 1. How prepared do you think you are to discuss the lesson topics each week?

The survey revealed that the majority of students felt they were prepared enough to discuss at length the topic in focus. The weekly interaction with the class Pinterest board may have been a contributing factor or these results may be due to the ease and familiarity of most of the spring semester discussion topics. In hindsight I think it would have been beneficial to survey the students as to what their definition of being ‘prepared’ to discuss deeply and critically meant. In this particular context, simply completing the required homework tasks might have been the stock reply.

Get Uploading

(Rank 1 very helpful to 5 not helpful).

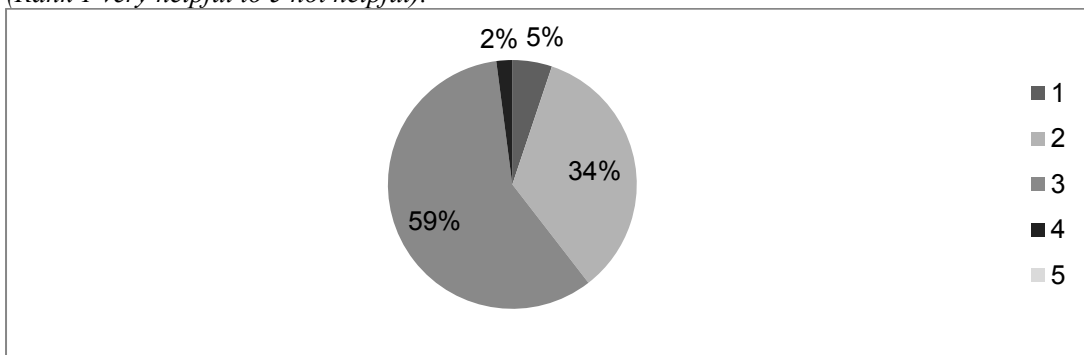


Figure 2. How helpful was Pinterest for you to discuss the lesson topic in class?

With 59% of the students reporting somewhat neutral feelings towards the effectiveness of using

Pinterest as a supplementary tool - this may indicate a lack of knowledge of how to effectively use the application. This result seems plausible as many of the students had some difficulties in understanding what they actually had to do. Frequently after lessons I spent time with the students explaining how to search, add and share info-graphics to their class board. In addition, approximately a third of responses noted in the survey that they had logged in to the application and browsed but had not contributed and shared any information. The 39% in agreement persuaded me to continue with the project into the fall semester. Subsequent revisions were made, and the students were given a guide in Japanese on how to correctly use the application.

Get Involved?

(Rank 1 I really want to - 5 I don't want to).

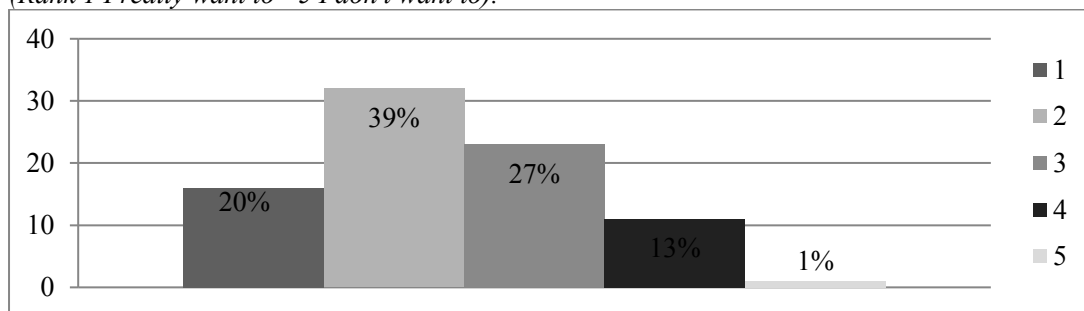


Figure 3. Would you like to do some extra research to better understand the lesson topics?

The survey prompt indicated favourably towards the students' willingness to better prepare themselves for their discussion class. Aside from the course textbook reading, the students may indeed feel they need guidance from their teachers on how exactly to do this. Take for example the lesson topic from week 8 of the spring semester – 'Becoming Independent'. This could be seen as quite an abstract issue for students of their age and maturity to discuss extensively. Given a clear path and the opportunity - students may indeed invest more in the course and the weekly topic. Let us turn to some responses on a potential way forward.

Get Into it?

(Rank 1 I really want to - 5 I don't want to)

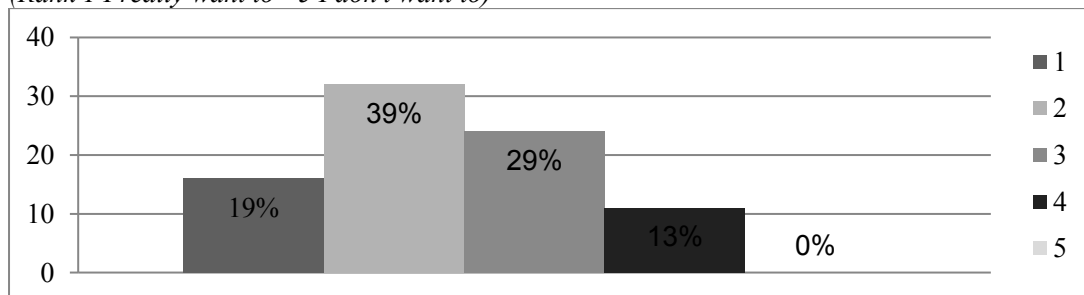


Figure 4. Would you like to work together online more with your group out of class?

If we temporarily disregard the indifferent and neutral standpoint on this prompt (29%) then 58% of the students feel that they would like to explore further the option of studying together, on topic

and specifically ‘online’ out of class. Given the wide range of online options/platforms available to us as educators these tentative results suggest willingness on behalf of the students to collaborate on homework tasks and thus create and curate discussions that, to some extent, are more meaningful and student centered.

Stay on the Scene?

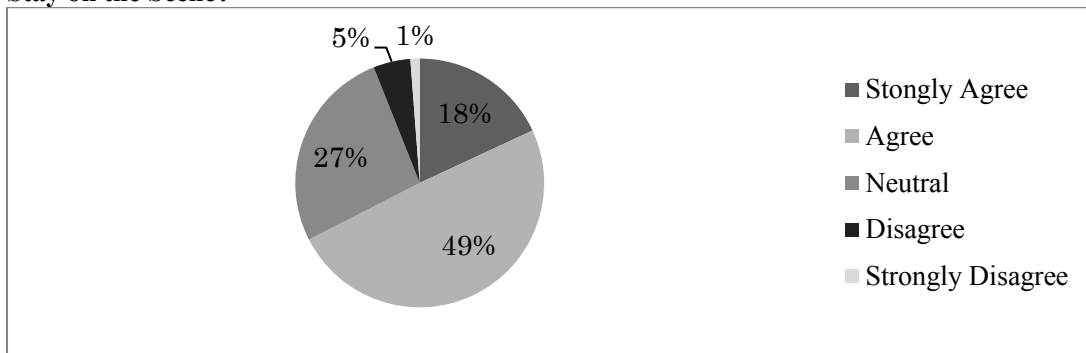


Figure 5. Preparing for class using the internet and social media is more interesting for me.

One of the major drawbacks I found with this project was that the students needed constant guidance on how to effectively use the Pinterest application – with its functionality hindering quick and effective involvement. Anecdotally I heard students saying that it was hard to log in or that they couldn’t find an info-graphic on the lesson topic. However, the results collated above tend to the view that the students would find social media ‘research’ (in its various guises) enjoyable with 68% of responses in agreement with the prompt. In any further potential studies, I would certainly place MALL functionality and familiarity of greater importance.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of MALL over the last decade has enabled language educators to go beyond the classroom thus opening avenues for research into how MALL might better facilitate second language acquisition. The ubiquity of smartphones and the rapid rise and use of social media over the last ten years has challenged educators to dovetail pedagogy with ever changing technological innovation. The Japanese university system has indeed taken time to catch up with the pedagogical changes that have been implemented over the years. Homework tasks however are, for the most part, unimaginative and performed solitarily.

Some conclusions that I have taken from this small scale project is that there seems to be a willingness from the students to collaborate out of class and thoroughly ready themselves for somewhat rather heavy discussion topics, sometimes of a concrete nature but often quite abstract for a university first year student. The interest shown by the students in the project was also tempered and hindered by the obvious fact that it was an optional task - ungraded and outside of course expectations/requirements. The fall semester being the indicator that if the students were not encouraged by the teacher to be more ‘involved’ in their course, then they simply reverted to the norm and performed the course reading, for the most part, just before the class started.

In assessment of the deep-seated and perennial problems that exist but also in optimism of what changes can be made, this study aimed to build and extend upon the current CALL/MALL philosophies of creating student-centered, meaningful and most importantly intuitively usable material. To what extent could collaborative, technology enabled tasks better prepare the students for a face to face discussion? – And are there any implications for this small scale project toward

institutional curricula changes of blended learning.

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APPENDIX – Sample Info-graphics from Lesson 3 - Fall 2017

AROUND THE WORLD IN 42 HAND GESTURES

It's great to learn to speak a whole new language for a trip abroad, but it can take a lot of time and effort before you can converse easily. An easy approach to understanding the locals is to know the physical cues, especially considering 93% of communication is non-verbal.

Brush up on your body language with this simple guide to some of the most common gestures from around the world.

1 ITALY



GESTURE:
Run finger into your cheek.

MEANING:
"Delicious!"



GESTURE:
Cup your hands together as if trapping a bird. Wave them up and down.


MEANING:
"I can't believe I'm hearing this! What are you saying?!"



GESTURE:
Swipe your upturned palm outwards from your chin.


MEANING:
"I don't give a damn."

2 PERU




GESTURE:
Tap your forehead with bunched fingers.

MEANING:
"I don't get it, I'm not smart enough."



GESTURE:
Point at a person, then to the door.

MEANING:
"Ya se fue – bad joke, he's out of here!"



GESTURE:
Wave forefinger in front of your nose.

MEANING:
Indicates a rich and good looking person.

3 GHANA



GESTURE:
Scratch the palm of your left hand.

MEANING:
Indicates 'money'.



GESTURE:
Flapping hand upwards with palm facing down.

MEANING:
"Come here."



GESTURE:
Tap your stomach with your right hand, then raise hand.

MEANING:
Sign of satisfaction.

4 THE PHILLIPINES



GESTURE:



GESTURE:



GESTURE:

25 POTENTIAL CULTURE SHOCKS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



The American Tipping Culture

One major culture shock for foreign visitors to the US will be the tipping culture, as you're expected to tip for just about everything. After a meal the waiter will give you a bill with a 'take total' which you're then expected to add a 15-25% mark up to. The same goes in bars, hotels and even with hotel attendants.



Eating What You're Given

South African guests visiting tribes or townships are often offered a cultural or locally known delicacy as a form of greeting and respect. This can range from insects to organs from sacrificed animals, if they're not eaten it can be a sign of disrespect and could offend the locals.



To Empty Or Not To Empty Your Plate

This point can be a real culture shock to some people as traditionally most Westerners grow up with a 'clear your plate' view of eating. However, clearing your plate in some Asian countries such as China is seen as a sign that you'd like more food, which your host may find offensive or it could result in them simply giving you more food to eat.



Manner Mode

In Japan, train commuters receive a barrage of recorded announcements telling them to switch their mobiles to silent or vibrate, referred to as 'manner mode'. Using a mobile in public is frowned upon in a land where collective needs are put above the individual's.



Invasion of Personal Space

The distance at which we stand from someone as we speak has meaning. In the US for example, standing too close can signal familiarity or aggression. The English and Germans tend to stand further away, while Mexicans however stand extremely close, which can be rather disconcerting.



Not All Toilets Are Created Equal

Whether you're from a Western or Eastern country you're likely to come across this particular problem especially in China: some toilets have lids, some have a lever you push, some you pull, while with others you have to balance and squat over a hole, possibly on a moving train, which is good fun!



Pub Culture

The sight of a packed pub sprawling out onto the road is no shock to those who have lived in the UK for a while, but can be slightly intimidating to newer residents. Pubs have been central to the culture of British socialising for centuries and still continue to be just as popular.

