

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Global issues – Online and face-to-face discussion

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Eighty-four technology majors in two university classes did research on global issues and discussed their findings online and face-to-face. Students first found Japanese web articles on the issue, read, copied, and distributed them to their group members, and selected useful words from these web articles. They wrote these words in Japanese and in English in their vocabulary workbooks, and used these words in their discussions. Discussion was first conducted face-to-face and later, students used a Moodle forum to further discuss the issue online. Course-end survey results showed that students thought that this class was interesting, and helped them to improve their spoken English, their discussion skills, and their vocabulary, as well as their reading and writing skills. Student interest in global issues increased. Students found the information that they learned to be useful and interesting, and they were motivated to read news on the Internet in the future.

2つの大学のクラスにおける技術メジャーがした84は地球規模問題であって議論するところでオンラインであって面と向かった状態でそれらの調査結果について研究します。学生は、最初に、読まれた問題の日本のウェブ記事が彼らのグループのメンバーにそれらをコピーして、分配して、これらのウェブ記事から役に立つ単語を選択したのがわかりました。彼らは、日本語と英語でそれらのボキャブラリーワークブックにこれらの単語を書いて、議論にこれらの単語を使用しました。議論が最初に面と向かって行われました。そして、後の学生はさらにオンラインで問題について議論するのにMoodleフォーラムを使用しました。コース終わりの調査結果は、学生が、彼らの話された英語、彼らの議論技能、およびそれらのボキャブラリーを改良するためにこのクラスがおもしろくて、助けられた彼らであると考えたのを示しました。それらの読書と文章技術と同様に。地球規模問題への学生関心は大きくなりました。学生は彼らが、役に立っておもしろいことを学んだという情報を見つけました、そして、彼らは、将来インターネットに関するニュースを読むために動機づけられました。

In 2007, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) wrote, “It is necessary to develop people who can act independently with a global point of view in society that is becoming more international” (MEXT, 2007, p. 9) and called for “enhancing education to deepen international understanding.” As English language teachers, we have an excellent opportunity to help our students to become more aware of the world outside of Japan. Learning a foreign language, in itself,



opens doors to international communication, but learning a language does not guarantee any form of understanding of culture, foreign worldviews, or global issues that concern us all. Discussion of global issues in English is an interesting way to promote English discussion ability while bringing the outside world into the Japanese classroom.

From April to August of 2008, I taught two classes of second year technology majors at the Kitami Institute of Technology in Hokkaido, Japan. The two classes involved in this study were one class of Mechanical Engineering majors (41 students) and one class of Material Science majors (43 students). The courses engaged students in online and face-to-face discussion of global issues. There were three main goals for these classes:

1. *To encourage students to use their English skills to discuss global issues.* To fully engage students in their discussions, I chose high interest global issues, which affect students themselves as well as the world around them. It was hoped that these topics would stimulate students and motivate them to discuss issues deeply in English, something that would be a first for many students.

2. *To improve students' speaking skills, discussion skills, and vocabulary.* Japanese students have rarely had the chance to practice speaking English, so I wanted to design a course that incorporated many speaking opportunities. Discussion gives them the chance to speak, while also improving their discussion, presentation, and argumentation skills. I also designed specialized vocabulary study to improve each student's individual vocabulary corpus. Students selected their own words for study.

3. *To encourage students to use the Internet as a source of information.* The Internet is a valuable source of information when doing research. I wanted students to get used to using the Internet to find information on topics that affect their lives.

Ensuring that all voices are heard

Japanese university students, although they have studied English for six years in junior and senior high school, have rarely had the chance to speak English and many find it difficult. In order to help Japanese students become confident English speakers, several forms of discussion may be of use. Oral discussion, also known as face-to-face discussion, in pairs or groups is a common form of discussion used in language classrooms, and with good reason. Students need regular practice speaking English if they hope to improve their spoken English.

However, there are some problems with face-to-face discussion. First of all, some students contribute little or nothing to group discussions. This may be because they are shy, a commonly cited problem with Japanese students, or because of limited ability to speak English (Claro, 2008). These factors can contribute to unbalanced discussions, with more confident or more vocal students contributing too much and others contributing too little (Warschauer, 1996). In addition, students often switch into their native language when discussing a topic in groups. It is very difficult for the teacher to monitor the whole class and keep everyone speaking English.

To rectify these problems, I developed an oral discussion game called Soccer English in which the rules of the game enforce a more balanced discussion and reduce the amount of Japanese input. In Soccer English, the “Referee” (a student in that group, the role of Referee changing each time the game is played) gives a yellow card to anyone speaking Japanese. If a player speaks Japanese a second time, he or she gets a red card and is “out” and cannot contribute any longer to the discussion. Points are awarded for sentences that are 5 words or longer, and each student must ask at least one long question to another group member before the time is up. The Referee keeps track of how much each student contributes and uses small cards to boost contributions. One goal of the game is a balanced discussion, with all members contributing more or less equally. I have had great success with this game and use it regularly. All students participate, and even the quiet students speak because groups get points for balanced discussions, and if any one student doesn’t speak, the group loses points. All students quickly get used to the “no Japanese” rule and instead of constantly having to remind them to speak English, I monitor quietly and join a few discussions. Soccer English greatly reduces the frequency of students switching into their native language, Japanese. In addition, a more balanced discussion results from the counting of contributions made by each student.

Another form of discussion known to language teachers that promotes balanced discussions is online discussion, also known as Computer Mediated Communication, or CMC. Researchers report that online discussion promotes the equalization of participation of language students in discussion (Bohlke, 2003; Warschauer, 1996). Students who

do not contribute much in face-to-face discussions contribute more online. Indeed, it is the students who participate least in face-to-face communication who increase their participation the most in electronic discussion (Warschauer, 1996). This is likely because all students can write what they think without having to wait for others to finish, as they have to do when taking turns in speaking. Because of these positive reports on the effectiveness of CMC for balancing discussions and promoting the contributions of students who participate little in oral discussion, I selected online discussion to be a component of this course. In addition, because in CMC everything is written, and the student knows that the teacher will be reading it, all contributions are made entirely in English.

Course design

The chosen Learning Management System for these courses was Moodle, a free program that offers many online activities such as online discussion (forum), chat, and surveys, in addition to the organization of the online portion of the course. Moodle was selected for its ease in use, its excellent support system, and its ability to display text written in both English and Japanese.

This class was organized around six global issues, which were: fair trade, 9/11, the global food crisis, genetically modified food, doping in sports, and cell phones and health. Each topic took 2-3 weeks to cover. At the beginning of the semester, students were assigned to groups of four. In Week 1 of each topic, one student from each group became the “Referee”. They found a web article on the given topic for their group members. In Week 2, students printed that

article, and had several things to do for homework, including reading the printed article, finding their own web article, and writing in their vocabulary workbooks. In Week 3, students discussed the topic first face-to-face and then online in a Moodle forum. Then a new topic was introduced and the cycle reverted to Week 1.

Week 1

Students were given some brief directions on how to identify a good web article. This included, among other things, checking to see who the author was and if there was contact information available, checking the date of submission, checking for accuracy and coherence, etc. Then, I briefly described the first global issue (fair trade) in both English and Japanese. For homework, the Referee had to find a Japanese article on the Internet on the chosen topic.

The web articles selected by students were written in Japanese only. This choice was deliberately made to facilitate student understanding. The point at this stage was for the students to inform themselves about the global issue. As well, students found their own web articles instead of the teacher giving them pre-selected articles. This was to ensure that the students themselves did the research on discovering information about the chosen topics. In later, more controversial topics, this allowed students the freedom to analyze information from various sources and points of view and come to their own conclusions.

Week 2

In the CALL room, students printed out the article their

Referee had selected for them. For homework, students had to:

1. Read the Referee's article.
2. Find and read their own web article, using the same criteria for selecting articles as the Referee.
3. Select 10-20 Japanese words that they thought would be useful for discussing the topic. They had to then translate these words and write them in their vocabulary workbook. They were asked to study these words before the next class.
4. Write 3-5 main points of about their own web article in their vocabulary workbook in English. This was to ensure that they had read their own article, had done some thinking about it, and were prepared to introduce the main points to group members during discussion.

Thus, students read two web articles on each global issue: one selected by the Referee, and one that they selected themselves.

Week 3

First, students studied the vocabulary they had written in their own vocabulary notebook. After a few minutes, students exchanged vocabulary workbooks and tested each other orally by saying a word first in English and asking for the Japanese translation, and later by saying the word in Japanese and asking for the English translation. Students seemed to enjoy testing each other, and it ensures that they have indeed learned some new vocabulary. After quizzing

each other on vocabulary, students discussed the global issue face-to-face in English using Soccer English for about ten minutes, which seems to be enough time for them to get into the issue in detail without losing motivation.

After discussing the topic face-to-face, students began an online asynchronous discussion using the Moodle “forum” module (which is similar to a bulletin board) on the same topic, but with a more focused question to answer. While the goal of the face-to-face discussion was to exchange information and discuss the topic in general, the goal of online discussion was for students to use what they had learned to answer a specific question I had asked online. Students had to finish their answers by the following week. They had a further week to reply to the posts of their group members. I graded all posts, including the replies, out of a maximum score of 10 points. This grading system is a function of Moodle, and students can see their scores the next time they log in to Moodle. As well, I gave feedback in the following class, such as what makes a good post and a good reply, and examples of how I score posts.

Finally, students were asked to answer several survey questions using the Moodle “choice” module, which allows you to ask a question and provide multiple-choice answers. I used it for end-of-the-topic questions such as, “Should Japanese farmers grow GM foods?” as well as for a much longer course-end survey, with over 50 questions, which will be discussed in the Results section .

At the end of the Week 3 class, students were briefed on the next topic. New Referees were asked to find a Japanese web article on the new topic and send it to me by e-mail, thus initiating Week 1 of the new cycle.

Problems

Although this program was successful overall, I did encounter two main problems. While the problem I had with my host was fixed during the course, the use of online translators remains a problem.

The host

I initially used SiteGround (<http://www.siteground.com/>) as a host for the Moodle website. However, there was not enough bandwidth for a chat, and the site crashed twice while students were in the middle of a chat. In addition, Japanese characters were not recognized by the system and showed up as squares and random symbols. I used Japanese when giving instructions on how to do homework, so this was a concern.

To remedy this, I switched to manabu3 (<http://manabu3.com/moodle/>) and these problems were solved. There were no more problems with the site crashing, and Japanese characters were recognized. As well, bilingual support at manabu3 was available 24 hours a day and was easily accessible by email or telephone.

Online translators

Students often used online translators, even though they were told not to. As a result, some messages were difficult or impossible to understand. 55% of students in the course-end survey agreed with the statement “It was difficult to understand the meaning of what my teammates wrote.” Here are three examples of translated messages:

1. *The problem is said that much so that there is not it.*
2. *It is that it is thought in the days of a thing of now to get up someday.*
3. *I do not understand it I do it to there, and what wants to do it.*

If a student writes their message originally in Japanese, and uses an online translator to translate it, there is no use of English on the student's part. A problem for the teacher is that it is sometimes difficult to know whether an online translator has been used to produce the message, or if the student wrote it on their own. As a result, grading such messages is difficult.

Unfortunately, the use of online translators persisted throughout the course. In the course-end survey, I asked students how often they had used online translators. 4.8% of all students chose "I translated 100% of my messages from Japanese to English using an online translator." 33.3% of all students chose "I translated most of my messages using an online translator." Only 8.3% chose "I did not use an online translator at all."

The only way to prevent the use of online translators seems to be to explain to students why they should not use them. The main reasons are that if they use an online translator, (a) they are not using their own English ability, and (b) they may receive a low score for their message. However, there does not seem to be an effective way of eliminating the use of online translators and this is a continuing problem.

Results

On the last day of the course, 84 students answered 50 questions in an online course-end survey, created using the Moodle choice module. Questions were designed to gauge student interest and the effectiveness of various elements of the course. There were five possible choices for each question: strongly agree, agree, so-so, disagree, and strongly disagree. It is not possible to include all of the results here because of space limitations. However, Table 1 shows the 14 statements that students agreed most strongly with.

The three goals of this class were: to encourage students to use their English skills to discuss topics of interest, to improve students' speaking skills, discussion skills, and vocabulary, and to encourage students to use the Internet as a source of information. According to the course-end survey, all of these goals were met. Students agreed that their spoken English skills (65.5%), discussion skills (61.9%), and vocabulary (63.1%) all improved during this course. In addition, 65.5% of students found Internet web articles to be useful, and agreed that they should read web articles regularly to learn news and other interesting things. These are very encouraging results. However, there was also some negative feedback as seen in table 2.

While none of these negative statements were agreed with as strongly as the positive statements in table 1, the fact that more than 50% agreed with them indicates a need for change in some areas.

Also, in the course-end survey, the six global issues I chose were ranked by students in terms of which topics were most interesting. One improvement that could be made is that students could have had input into choosing the topics to be studied.

Table 1. Course-end statements students agreed most strongly with

Statement on course-end survey	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Total (%)
Soccer English was useful for helping me to practice my English.	13.3	57.8	71.1
The information I learned in this class is useful/interesting to me.	14.3	54.8	69.1
This class was interesting.	20.2	47.6	67.9
This class helped me to improve my spoken English.	16.7	48.8	65.5
In this class, I learned that Internet web articles are useful. I should read web articles regularly to learn news and other interesting things.	15.5	50.0	65.5
This class helped me to improve my English writing skills.	14.1	50.0	64.3
This class helped me to improve my vocabulary.	10.7	42.4	63.1
It was good to read web articles in Japanese instead of in English.	11.9	51.2	63.1
I am more interested in global issues now than at the beginning of this class.	13.1	50.0	63.1
We should discuss controversial topics like 9/11.	19.0	44.0	63.0
This class helped me to improve my English discussion skills.	20.2	41.7	61.9
This class helped me to improve my English reading skills.	11.9	48.8	60.7
This class was challenging, and I enjoyed it.	16.7	44.0	60.7
I worked hard in this class. I did my very best.	19.0	41.7	60.7

N=84

Table 2. Negative feedback

Statement on course-end survey	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Total (%)
Our topics were too serious.	14.3	45.2	59.5
We should have studied grammar.	19.0	36.9	56.0
We should have studied pronunciation.	14.3	40.5	54.8
We should discuss all topics in Japanese first.	14.3	38.1	52.4
It would be good to read English web articles sometimes.	8.4	42.2	50.6
We spent too much time using computers.	20.5	30.1	50.6

N=84

Table 3. Topics ranked in order of most interesting

Topic	% of students who chose this as “most interesting topic”
9/11	25.0
Cell phones and health	23.8
The global food crisis	16.7
Genetically modified food	16.7
Doping in sports	13.1
Fair trade	4.8

N=84

Three communication modes

In the course-end survey, 44.0% of all students chose face-to-face discussion as their preferred mode of discussion. 34.5% of students chose chat, and 21.4% chose online discussion. However, students did find online discussion to be worthwhile. In the course-end survey, 13.1% of students strongly agreed and 46.4% agreed with the statement “Online discussion was useful for helping me to practice my English,” for a total of 59.5% positive response. As well, over 50 percent of all students agreed with these statements: *I enjoyed writing English in an online discussion more than speaking English face-to-face. (52.4%) I could express my thoughts and opinions in English in the online discussion. (52.4%)*

Students were also asked to write comments at the end of the survey. Here is a student quote about these three modes:

I think that online discussion and face-to-face discussion (Soccer English) are very suitable for

the discussion. When online discussion is done, it is possible to put in plenty of time. As a result, the content can be firmly understood. Moreover, it is possible to harmonize opinions. In addition, it is a chance that it can touch a new word. Face-to-face discussion (Soccer English) can see other party’s expression. The content can be understood more from other party’s expression and gesture. The pronunciation can be learnt. The chat is interesting. However, thinking time is a little.

Online discussion using Moodle forum module

Student posts on global topics in the online forum varied in quality and length. For example, one student’s full answer to the question “Should Japanese farmers grow GM foods? Why or why not?” was, *“I think that do not have to develop. Because I am calm even if there is not it.”*

While there were short and superficial posts like this scattered throughout the online discussions, for the most part, student posts were insightful, well-expressed, and showed evidence of critical thinking. For example, here is a student post on genetically modified food:

GM food have advantage and risk. But I have one fear. GM food is cheap than other food. I think poor people eat GM food more than rich people. So GM food help poor people. But this thing may be mean sacrifice poor people to development GM food technology. Is it good? I don’t know.

Chat

I used the Moodle chat function twice. Although some groups got off-topic at times, overall the level of exchange was good. For example, here is a short excerpt of a chat on the topic “cell phones and health.” In this exchange, students include information as support for their statements, ask and answer questions related to the topic, and offer solutions to the problem being discussed:

A: The regulation for the Japanese cell phone is too easy.

C: Do you think cell phone is danger than PC?

A: I think PC is danger than cell phone.

D: Why do you think about it?

B: The younger the driver is the more the use of the cell-phone has increased.

D: Do you think that there is a solution?

A: PC’s screen gives an electronic wave, and it is said that this worsens eyesight.

C: When I but a cell phone, I choose a model with a little electromagnetic wave.

B: I do not have the idea of life without the cellular phone.

Face-to-face discussion

While according to the course-end survey, face-to-face discussion was the most popular of the three modes, no

student quotes are available. In future studies, I hope to videotape students having face-to-face discussion and compare these exchanges to their online exchanges.

Changes I made based on results of student surveys

Students indicated a need for more basic English study, as evidenced by survey results for the grammar and pronunciation questions. Therefore, in this semester, I changed the textbook, and allotted more time for English study and practice. As well, I will encourage students to use English web articles as sources too, and we will continue to discuss topics in Japanese first when the topic is complicated.

Another change I made was that in my current courses, students each select one web article and then print it for each of the four group members to read. Thus, students read four web articles on each topic instead of two.

Finally, students thought some selected topics were too serious. Global issues topics are serious by nature, and I will continue to select serious themes that I think will challenge students. However, I will try to identify topics which are less negative, to add some good news to the course. Students discussed some heavy topics – it might be a good change for them to discuss some lighter topics too.

Conclusions

Global issues as a topic of discussion proved to be a good choice. Students thought that this class was both challenging and interesting, and that it helped them to improve their spoken English, their discussion skills, and their vocabulary,

as well as their reading and writing skills. Also, student interest in global issues increased. Students found the information that they learned to be useful and interesting, and they were motivated to read news on the Internet in the future. Although students preferred face-to-face discussion to online discussion, they agreed that online discussions helped them to practice their English. Although this course will continue to evolve in the years ahead, the foundation seems strong.

Jennifer Claro teaches English at Kitami Institute of Technology in Kitami, Hokkaido. Her current research interests include virtual learning environments, using the Internet as a source of information, and under what conditions student ability to speak English is enhanced. <claro1@mail.kitami-it.ac.jp>

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