

Implementing an English Language Learning SNS Activity at a Japanese Online University

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Abstract

In this paper, I will explain the design and implementation of an ongoing extracurricular English language learning activity that utilizes a social networking site (SNS) platform at Cyber University. First, I will provide a rationale for the activity by briefly reviewing the literature on using SNS for English learning purposes. Next, I will describe the activity using examples from when the activity went live. Finally, I will analyze the activity's success by reflecting on student engagement over the past three semesters.

Keywords: English language learning, Online learning, Extracurricular activities, SNS in education, Student engagement

1. Introduction

The internet has become a ubiquitous part of our lives. This is especially true in Japan, where the share of the population that uses smartphones has reached over 85%¹⁾. In particular, the use of social networking site (SNS) platforms such as Line, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram is popular in Japan²⁾, with 46.8% of the population using SNS daily and 41.1% using SNS platforms multiple times per day³⁾. But why do Japanese internet users gravitate towards SNS platforms? Izutsu and Izutsu⁴⁾ postulate that Japanese people enjoy “monologuing” (i.e. giving their opinion or telling stories without necessarily intending to invoke a reaction). Takahashi⁵⁾ further points out that Japanese prefer to communicate in small groups, even online. Most SNS provide either anonymity or the ability to limit who sees what is posted, making them ideal avenues of online communication for many Japanese people.

Japanese university students' familiarity with SNS platforms and their conventions, as well as the socially malleable nature of SNS, provides several

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affordances for learning. Affordances are dynamic opportunities that depend upon both the features of what is being interacted with and the person interacting with them⁶⁾. For example, Almukhaylid et al.⁷⁾ identified 13 affordances for learning provided by social media, including: interaction, engagement, networking, communication, collaboration, and participation in a community. These affordances make SNS platforms a potential tool to be used by foreign language educators, particularly teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In the next section, I will provide a brief overview of research into how SNS platforms have been utilized for ESL/EFL education, with a focus on Japanese learners of English.

2. Literature Review

Recent events, such as the global COVID pandemic, have caused a boom in using digital technologies such as SNS for foreign language instruction⁸⁾. Research into the use of SNS for English language instruction has provided some interesting insights. For example, Zainuddin and Yunus⁹⁾ in a meta-analysis survey of 30 journal articles in which SNS was used for English language learning found that SNS use provided several benefits including student exposure to natural language use, increased opportunities for interaction and dialogue outside of class, community support during the language learning process, and the opportunity to build relationships with other students and teachers. Furthermore, using SNS was seen as enjoyable by students and led to increased motivation.

These results align with research done in Japan. Abraham et al.¹⁰⁾ explored Japanese students' universities' perceptions of using SNS for language learning and found that students believed SNS platforms could be useful for improving their English skills, particularly their confidence and vocabulary. Thomas and Park¹¹⁾, who discovered that the majority of Japanese university students' L1 reading and writing practice was conducted on social media platforms, designed an activity that integrated Instagram into the curriculum of the freshman English communication course at their university and found that students' reactions to the activities were overwhelmingly positive. In fact, the students were more motivated by the SNS activities than their regular reading and writing class activities. Fukui and Kawaguchi¹²⁾ similarly found students enthusiastic about the use of a protected educational SNS for foreign language learning, as it allowed students to study when and where they wanted.

Even without prompting, it seems some Japanese university students are using SNS to learn English on their own. Healy¹³⁾ investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic changed Japanese university students' study practices and found that the use of online

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resources for education increased dramatically due to the pandemic and that 18% of students at the university where the research was conducted were already using SNS to study English. Perhaps this should not be surprising, as SNS allows students to actively engage in dynamic interactions for authentic purposes, which is crucial for language learning¹⁴⁾. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, SNS usage in Japan is extremely popular^{1) 2) 3)}.

3. Designing the English Lounge: An SNS English Language Learning Activity

3.1. Research Site

This research was conducted at Cyber University, a mid-sized Japanese university with around 4,000 matriculating students. The university is unique in that it conducts all classes fully online in an on-demand format. In order to earn their degree, students must take two years (four semesters) of English classes or demonstrate via proficiency test (e.g. TOEFL, TOEIC, etc.) that they have already achieved a level of English proficiency similar to that of students who have finished their coursework. The majority of students at the university are between CEFR levels of A1 (Beginner) and B2 (Upper Intermediate), although around 100 students per semester enroll in elective English courses that target the C1 (Advanced) CEFR level.

3.2. Platform

Given the above-cited research into the benefits of utilizing SNS for language learning, it makes sense for universities to establish an online place where learners can practice their English in a familiar setting. However, SNS platforms do come with some risks. In public SNS, negative interactions with other participants can occur and additionally, students can be exposed to very informal or inappropriate English such as emojis or swear words⁹⁾. To minimize these risks, it made sense to utilize the university's own private SNS platform, known as "University Community."

The University Community SNS was released in 2022 as a way for students to deepen relationships with each other and faculty. It allows students, alumni, and faculty to easily interact via PC or smartphone app and is both monitored and restricted in the types of content allowed. Like most SNS, the University Community provides anonymity, as users can choose an alias to represent themselves rather than use their real name. Given that previous research has shown that Japanese SNS users prefer anonymity as well as the ability to limit who can see their posts⁵⁾ the University Community seemed like an ideal platform to trial a SNS-based English language

learning activity.

3.3. The English Lounge: First Semester

3.3.1. The English Lounge: First Semester (Spring 2023)

The English Lounge was initially envisioned as a weekly themed post on the University Community SNS in which I provide a topic or question and invite students to reply in English. To scaffold this task, instructions are provided in both Japanese and English. Learners are encouraged to write as much or as little as they like in response to the posts. To alleviate fears about making mistakes, I make it clear to students that I do not correct student posts, nor do I discourage the use of AI or machine translation when students compose posts.

The English Lounge kicked off officially about quarter-way into the spring 2023 semester. In total, 10 topics were posted weekly on the following topics: pets, movies, food, sports/music, hobbies, jobs, books, the future, clothing, and exercise. I modeled an example answer for each topic to help start the conversation. For example, the first topic was pets and was introduced to students as follows:

Welcome to the English Lounge! My name is Jared and I manage the English Lounge. The English Lounge is a space where you can relax and practice your English without fear of making mistakes. Each week, I will post a topic or question to talk about in English. Feel free to reply in English with as much or as little detail as you are comfortable with. You can also get extra English practice by replying to other people's posts. I will give my answers to the topic or question and comment on your replies as well. So, let's begin! This week's topic:

Tell us about your pet or pets. If you don't have a pet, tell us about a pet you'd like to have someday.

The same information was also posted in Japanese, including the hashtags “#English” and “#EnglishLounge.” As the first reply to the posting, I provided the following comment as a model answer:

My family has four pet goldfish. They are in a big fish tank in our dining room. We have had them for almost two years. They are brothers. We raised them from eggs to adulthood. We think they are very cute.

All weekly English Lounge posts followed this format, with a new topic being introduced and the first reply to the post being my model answer.

3.3.2. The English Lounge: First Semester Results.

The response to the first semester of English Lounge topics was encouraging,

with 13 unique users commenting a total of 92 times across the 10 topics posted during the semester. Unfortunately, due to the anonymous nature of the SNS, it is not possible to provide more background information about these students. However, a closer analysis of the comments revealed that the majority (around 80%) of the posts were made by the same four commenters. These four commenters were regulars of the English Lounge and posted a reply to almost every topic posted during the semester as well as occasionally each other. Still, given these results, it was decided that the English Lounge would be continued in the fall semester as well.

3.4. The English Lounge: Second Semester

3.4.1. The English Lounge: Second Semester (Fall 2023)

After a discussion with the English department team members, it was decided that a slight alteration to the English Lounge format should be made in the fall semester. To encourage student engagement, besides a theme, I provided several potential questions for the students to answer. The students were free to answer any of the questions as they saw fit or write a freestyle comment related to the topic. Here is an example of how the prompt changed in the fall semester:

Welcome to the English Lounge! My name is Jared and I manage the English Lounge. The English Lounge is a space where you can relax and practice your English without fear of making mistakes. Each week, I will post a topic to talk about in English. Feel free to reply in English with as much or as little detail as you are comfortable with. You can also get extra English practice by replying to other people's posts. The questions are just ways to get the conversation started. You can answer any of them or ignore them and write something else related to the topic, even if it's just one sentence.

This week's topic: accidents at home.

Questions related to the topic:

1. What is the most dangerous thing in your home?
2. How could your home be made less dangerous?
3. Where do you keep the first aid kit in your home? What is in your first aid kit?

As was the case with the previous semester, these instructions were also provided in Japanese with the hashtags “#English” and “#EnglishLounge.” Also as with the previous semester, I provided the first reply to the posting to model an example answer for students:

I think stairs are the most dangerous thing in anyone's home. Many of my family members, including myself, have been injured in falls on stairs. For example,

when I was 2, I fell down the staircase to the basement in my house and had to go to the hospital because I hit my head on the cement floor. Later, when I was in elementary school, my uncle slipped on our front steps and dislocated his shoulder. More recently, my father who is elderly slipped on the stairs at my brother's house and broke his arm. Certainly, stoves and electronic appliances can be dangerous but in my experience stairs are the most dangerous things in a home.

3.4.2. The English Lounge: Second Semester Results.

Similar to the first semester, 14 unique users made comments in the English Lounge during the fall semester. In total, 56 posts were made, which was less than the previous semester ($N = 92$). Although two students from the previous semester who posted regularly accounted for almost 50% of student posts this semester as well, repeat engagement with the English Lounge was much better, with 9 of the 14 users making multiple comments over the semester. All student responses to the prompts directly answered at least one of the questions included in the prompts, which seems to indicate that the inclusion of the guiding questions this semester was helpful in increasing student engagement with the English Lounge.

3.5. The English Lounge: Third Semester

3.5.1. The English Lounge: Third Semester (Spring 2024)

The third semester followed the format of the previous two semesters with a weekly topic followed by three related questions posted in both English and Japanese. As before, I modeled a response as the first reply to every post. An example of an English Lounge posting from the third semester is as follows:

Welcome to the English Lounge! My name is Jared and I manage the English Lounge. The English Lounge is a space where you can relax and practice your English without fear of making mistakes. Each week, I will post a topic to talk about in English. Feel free to reply in English with as much or as little detail as you are comfortable with. You can also get extra English practice by replying to other people's posts. The questions are just ways to get the conversation started. You can answer any of them or ignore them and write something else related to the topic, even if it's just one sentence.

This week's topic: abbreviations and acronyms.

Questions related to the topic:

1. "Scuba", "modem", "radar", "laser" and "NATO" are all acronyms. Do you know what they mean?

2. Do you use a lot of abbreviations when you text message someone or post online?

3. Do you have a favorite abbreviation or acronym?

My model response to this post incorporated Japanese for the first time:

In both English and Japanese, it is common to abbreviate expressions. For example, in English ASAP is an abbreviation for “as soon as possible.” In Japanese, 「あけおめ、ことよろ」 is an abbreviation for 「明けましておめでとうございます。今年もよろしくお願いします。」 I think abbreviations can be convenient but sentences get confusing when you abbreviate too much.

3.5.2. The English Lounge: Third Semester Results.

Student participation in the third semester of the English Lounge were similar to previous semesters. In total, 12 unique usernames contributed a total of 75 posts to the English Lounge, less than the first semester (N = 92) but more than the second semester (N = 56). As with the previous semester, two users who posted regularly compromised almost 50% of the posts made. Long-term engagement with the English Lounge, however, was similar to the second semester, with 7 of the 12 users commenting across multiple topics over the semester.

4. Discussion: Analyzing the Impact of the English Lounge

The purpose of the English Lounge was to provide students at the university with a safe, online place to practice their English skills. An SNS activity was decided upon due to Japanese university students’ likely familiarity with SNS platforms^{2) 3) 11)} as well as their preference for online communication that is both anonymous and limited in who can access the messages^{4) 5)}. On the one hand, the activity seems to have been moderately successful, with roughly the same number of students engaging with it each semester, and several students repeatedly posting in the English Lounge across the entire semester. However, in light of the fact that about 4,000 students matriculate at the university, the handful of students who did engage with the English Lounge represent just a fraction of a percent of the total student base. There are several potential reasons for this.

First, not all matriculated students engage in the University Community SNS. As a fully online university, roughly half of students are adults who are trying to obtain their college degree while working full-time. Many of these students are simply too busy to engage in social activities in the University Community, even if they want to.

Another limitation is that the level of the English Lounge posts may have been

beyond the level of most of the matriculating students. As mentioned previously, students at the university mostly range in ability from CEFR A1 to B2 levels. Although scaffolding in the form of Japanese translations of the content was provided with each English Lounge post, there is a strong Japanese cultural taboo against making mistakes, particularly when it comes to English language learning¹⁵⁾. Despite my assurances that users could post without fear of making mistakes, given that the majority of replies to the English Lounge posts were at CEFR B1 and B2 levels, it could be surmised that lower proficiency students were too daunted to attempt replies in English.

Nevertheless, over the course of three semesters, a total of 31 unique students posted a total of 223 comments to the English Lounge, which seems to demonstrate a moderate level of engagement with the activity from those inclined to interact with it. Furthermore, there are extremely few extra-curricular avenues for these online university students to practice their written English. Therefore, the English Lounge is a valuable resource for those students looking to practice their English writing in an authentic communicative situation. For these reasons, I will continue to post the English Lounge in the coming semesters, though I may adjust the difficulty of the topics to entice more students to participate.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have described how an SNS English-language extracurricular activity was implemented at a fully online Japanese university. An SNS activity was chosen due to students' likely familiarity with the format, as well as the benefits and affordances SNS has been shown to have for English-language learning in the research literature. The extracurricular activity provides students with a safe space to practice their written English in an anonymous setting with a limited audience. While only a few dozen students interacted with the Global Lounge over the three semesters the English Lounge has been active, modifications to how the activity was conducted have successfully increased repeat engagement with the activity. Still, there is room for improvement as the activity seems to be too daunting for beginner-level students. Hopefully, future adjustments to the difficulty level will persuade more students to participate in the English Lounge SNS activities.

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日本のオンライン大学における 英語学習 SNS 活動の実施

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概 要

本稿は、日本のオンライン大学において SNS プラットフォームを活用した、現在進行中の課外英語学習活動のデザインと実施について説明する。まず、SNS を英語学習に利用することに関する文献を簡単にレビューし、この活動の根拠を示す。次に、活動が実施された際の事例を用いて、活動内容を説明する。最後に、過去 3 学期にわたる学生の参加状況を振り返り、この活動の成果を分析する。

キーワード：英語学習、オンライン学習、課外活動、教育における SNS、
学生のエンゲージメント