Implementation of Computer-Mediated Communication Through a Social Network Service in a Japanese University

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This paper reports on the use of Multiply.com, a social network service (SNS) on the Internet, as a computer-mediated communication (CMC) tool for pedagogical purposes in ‘English as a Foreign Language’ (EFL) classes. The general outcomes reported by the educators were positive. Some of the benefits observed were improvements in participation, motivation, student autonomy and authentic student-to-student communication. The registration process, individual utilization of the site and the teachers perceived outcomes and observations of classes at a private Japanese university are described. It was found that the use of CMC was beneficial for teachers and students and adaptable for different teaching styles and environments. It is suggested that CMC could be easily incorporated into a variety of teaching contexts.

Key words: Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Social Network Service (SNS), English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

In the last two decades, the use of computers as a medium of communication has led to its application for pedagogical purposes. In teaching and learning environments for second (SLA) and foreign (FL) language acquisition, computer mediated communication (CMC) has been utilized in numerous ways. Research into the use of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has pointed to positive outcomes concerning weak or less motivated students. On this premise, the Multiply.com site was implemented by three instructors for compulsory English classes in a private Japanese university.

Benefits of CMC for Language Learning

Several benefits have been reported on the application of CMC for language learning. Early studies by Kelm (1992), Beauvois (1992), Chun (1994), Kern (1995) and Warschauer (1996) reported on the use of computer-assisted classroom discussions (CADC) using synchronous modes of communication (SCMC) against face-to-face classroom discussions. The similarities of SCMC to oral interactive discourse, was seen as comparable to face-to-face discussions and therefore a facilitator for communicative competence.

In another study, Sotillo (2000) investigated the discourse functions and syntactic complexity from learner output of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) and synchronous discussions of English as a second language (ESL) university students in an academic writing class. ACMC was seen to be a facilitator for more reflective, cognitive thinking that allows for the focus of form and meaning.
of language output and input. ACMC, allows time for processing language input and output and thereby facilitates extended use of language that in turn may lead to improved learner interlanguage.

In an attempt to increase interaction and motivation, Cummings (2004) reported on implementing CMC with Japanese university students who were described as ‘unmotivated, passive and resistant to studying English’ (p.25). Cummings found that there were attitudinal changes towards writing, learning English, accuracy and increased peer communication as well as changes in the instructor’s attitude towards students. Furthermore, students wrote more than was required.

All of the above studies reported on increased and equalization of participation that could be beneficial for shy students, students lacking motivation, and experiencing difficulties learning the target language. In addition, increased language production, freedom to express ideas, and increased complexity of language were noted.

Although face-to-face discussions may take place in class time, students have the option to use CMC within class time or after the class session. This allows students to choose methods of interaction according to individual preferences and encourage student autonomy and responsibility for language learning.

**Multiply.com**

The Multiply.com website was chosen because of the various applications available and the simplicity of its design, concept and general usability. Multiply.com is a social network service (SNS) that also allows the creation of group sites for public or private viewing. It also allows the individual student to create a web page that includes features such as blog, notes, a calendar schedule, a review, video, music, photo, recipes, hyperlink, contacts and guest book sections. Additional sections may be added and skins for the site may be uploaded to customize the look of the page. The ‘classic’ skin design was chosen for its simplicity and light background.

Registration can be done in either English or Japanese. After registration, a confirmation e-mail is sent from Multiply.com to the registered e-mail address. The confirmation e-mail provides a link to fully activate the website. If the link is not ‘clicked on’ some functions may be limited.

The use of this site was intended as an alternative to commercial managed learning environments (MLEs) such as WebCT and Blackboard that are publicly available for a fee. There are also some MLE-type applications that have been developed by individual higher education institutions such as Merlin (University of Hull), ReLaTe (University of Exeter and University College London) and the Open University’s Lyceum system (Hewer & Shield 2001). These learning environments incorporate course materials, links to external resources, CAL exercises, CMC tools, computer-based assessment and learner tracking tools. Although the Multiply site does not incorporate all the tools available in the commercial MLEs, it does provide the basic tools that can provide CAL exercises from external sources, the note section that can be used as bulletin boards, the review sections that allow for feedback and the blog section that can provide asynchronous written and oral discourse.

**Equipment and General Background on PC Use**

All students are provided with laptop computers and a university e-mail address at the beginning of
their academic studies. WIFI connection network (wireless connections to the Internet) is also available throughout the institution.

First year students have varying levels of experience using computers in their first academic term, however they are provided with tutorials in the use of computers and a computer help desk is available. By the second year, students are expected to have gained comprehensive knowledge in the use of computers.

Teachers’ Reports

The following section will be divided into three reports, A, B, and C which cover the descriptions of the participants, the processes involved in registration to the site, the instructors’ utilization of the site features, together with the instructors’ observations on any perceived negative or positive aspects resulting from the use of Multiply.

Report A

Participants

Two classes (hereby referred to as class I and II) in the first year English Shower curriculum of the speech presentation skills classes registered to the Multiply website. The majority of the students were 18 years old. Class I consisted of 23 students, 6 female and 17 male. Average TOEIC score was 125 to 150 points. English speaking ability varied but the level was low to basic. Class II consisted of 22 students, 3 females and 19 males. The average TOEIC level was slightly higher ranging from 150 to 200. The motivation levels of students were higher in Class II perhaps due to the start of the first term. In class I there was a mixture of motivational levels but predominantly low because of the lack of basic English skills. However some students were able to express themselves in English including one student in class II who had a multicultural background.

Registration Process

Most of the students had used the Internet and e-mail through computers at home. However the majority used mobile phones for web-mail and the Internet. Registration of the new Tama e-mail address had been completed but some had not yet accessed the e-mail facilities. This delayed the registration procedure for some students in class but was completed later. ID names were allocated for easy recognition but passwords were at the students’ discretion. The process of registration was done in English with the use of a projected image of the computer screen. Each student was then invited to the private class group page that was created.

Utilization of Site

The class page featured a welcome section. Students’ homework and deadlines were input weekly into the blog and calendar schedule section. Tag headings such as ‘homework’ or ‘speech test’ appeared at the top of the page in the welcome section. In the notes section information about the course and example speech models were posted. Links were also added to other Internet sites that would help students with their English studies.

Photographs of each student were uploaded into the photograph section and students were instructed to then transfer their photograph onto their profile picture section. Most students were able to do this alone or were assisted by other students. On the class site, members of the group could be seen in the section at the bottom of the homepage. They were easily identifiable with their pictures and names.

The students were encouraged to use their own page as an e-portfolio. A weekly blog and book
reviews of the reading marathon were input into their own page. The writing homework was hand written to discourage the use of computer translation software but their final drafts were input into their blog section. The reply feature of the blog section included an audio or video recording application so this was utilized to give a model speech recording of their final draft. Errors were corrected verbally and students were told to listen and rewrite a new draft. After each speech test, students were told to write a message in the guestbook section of their favorite speaker for homework. Listening homework from the text’s DVD was also uploaded into the music section. In addition, students were invited to the teacher’s personal site. Each time a student checked any section of the site there was a record of their visit.

_Instructor’s Observations_

Overall the outcome had positive results. Three of the students in Class I wrote a weekly blog even after the term had ended. Two of those students were shy and did not often contribute in class unless asked to do so. Some of the students used the page as a personal website adding their own photographs. Surprisingly there were a number of students who were not familiar with computers and registration procedures. However the students who were competent in computer operating skills took the initiative to help the students who had problems with the registration process or uploading of photographs. The course had also required students to keep an A4 size file portfolio of any written work and worksheets throughout the term. Although most of the students managed to produce files for their work eventually, a proportion of them did not. At the end of term the files had to be checked and graded which was time consuming and impractical unless done within class time. The Multiply site enabled students to create an e-portfolio of their work and grading could be done easily by looking at their sites via the computer. The weekly blog revealed quite personal feelings and information about the students’ private lives however it provided a way for students to empathize and relate to each other in the new class. There was increased collaboration and interaction between students with students stronger in IT skills enthusiastically assisting weaker students in class. The website provided the students autonomy in how they expressed themselves through the medium of the computer. Furthermore the process of using the site utilized English skills that were authentic and relevant to the needs of today.

_Report B_

_Participants_

The class consisted of 15 students, 2 females and 13 males aged approximately 19 or 20 years old. Their average TOEIC scores were about 150 to 250. The students’ motivational levels appeared to be low at the beginning of the term. The syllabus was intended to enhance students’ English language abilities and awareness of language used within business environments. The main goal of the term was a business presentation proposal for a new product instigated by the students. During the term, students wrote sections of their presentation speech and also completed a number of language learning tasks. These tasks included weekly vocabulary tests, weekly language worksheets, book reviews, and work on the physical elements of making presentations.

_Registration Process_

The second year students had experience using computers during the first year and hence signing on to the Multiply site took from approximately half an hour to an hour for all students. Any students who had lost track of their university mail ID and passwords
had to complete registration after class time.

Students registered for their own web page and were invited to the class website by the teacher. Some students invited the teacher and then became members of the group site. The students' IDs consisted of their first names and one letter from their surnames together with the class number.

**Utilization of Site**

The top of the homepage was used as a brief message area from the instructor with tags for students to check on up-coming events. The notes section was used to post reminders or any changes in due dates for assignments and tests. The calendar was posted with all assignment due dates and events.

The blog section was initially intended for students to interact with each other regarding joint assignments, it was also used as an asynchronous mode of communication for feedback on written drafts between students and the instructor. Although the instructor encouraged group discussions on individual sites it is not known to what extent this was utilized. The review section on the class homepage was allocated for the submission of all book reviews. Relevant video clips and podcasts were posted on the video section for students to study outside class time or to be used with class activities. Finally, the links section provided web links to useful sites.

Students were required to post any assignments onto the class website and not onto their individual sites in order to efficiently assess assigned homework.

**Instructor’s Observations**

The initial intention of using Multiply was to encourage the group discussion tasks after class time if necessary and for co-operative writing tasks. Some students were slower than others in researching and writing reports, however, using CMC allowed these slower students to work outside class hours and report their findings to their group leaders. This also, allowed the ‘group leader’ time to consider and transcribe everyone’s ideas into one written text. Most of the groups took advantage of this facility and submitted written drafts more times than required.

The site provided the students with updated information on the required assignments and up-coming events which seemed to assist students who had lost their notes or were absent from class to check the required homework for the following class. The ability to give individual feedback by either using the guestbook section or personal message section of their individual sites was advantageous as this saved time in class. The extra time was used for activities that required the presence of the instructor such as advice on the physical elements of the speech performances.

Book reviews and assignments were posted onto the class page that encouraged students to keep to deadlines. In addition, flexibility to access assignments at a time and place suitable for the instructor was a positive factor and relieved the constraints of physically transporting or filing papers.

Four of the five groups appeared to show a positive attitude towards the presentation project throughout the term, whereas in previous years, students tended to lack motivation in the project.

**Report C**

**Participants**

The group consisted of 39 students 30 male and 9 female. The majority of the students were 18 years old. Students in this class (hereby referred to as class III) were repeating the previous semesters course for reasons of disqualification due primarily to too many absences or failure of the course. Class III students’ TOEIC scores covered the whole spectrum for English Shower students ranging from 125 to 500. For the same
reason speaking ability varied markedly from low to high intermediate. Motivational levels of students were also widely different, including one student who had studied in the US.

**Registration Process**

Students were instructed to open two browser windows on their PC. One was opened to the Multiply page, the other to their University e-mail account. They were then guided through the process demonstrated step by step with the use of a projected image of the computer screen. ID names were allocated using first name, family name and class IDs were used to facilitate easy identification of a students' group by the teacher. At the final stage of the process, after the Multiply system had sent a confirmation e-mail to the students university e-mail account, students then clicked on the link activating their Multiply account. Then students were instructed to 'invite' the teacher to become their contact.

**Utilization of Site**

The class page included a welcome section from the teacher. The calendar section served a dual purpose. Firstly it was used to notify students of upcoming important dates, assignments and deadlines. Secondly it was used as a diary of lesson content and homework as a reminder to students who had attended and for any students that had been absent so they could see what had been missed and come prepared to the next lesson. The notes section included a reading marathon blog entry template that students copied and pasted into their blogs each week filling out their reading marathon data of pages read that week, and total pages read. Even if no pages had been read, students had to make one reading marathon blog entry per week. The music section was renamed as listening and class listening activities were uploaded to the site. Students were able to copy and paste the assignment from the group-page blog into theirs, and then begin the listening task from their PC using headphones, allowing students to work at their own pace, replaying the material if necessary. Extension activities were also posted in the group page blog for higher-level students who completed the task in a shorter time. In-class writing tasks were accessed from the group page blog. Students were made aware of the start time for the assignment and informed of the allocated amount of time available to complete the task. Extension and follow-up activities were also posted as described previously.

Students’ guest book sections were used from student to student to leave messages and feedback after each member had given their speech in front of the class. After viewing videos of previous semesters speeches students’ blogs were used for asynchronous discourse with each other, and in a question and answer format with the teacher. This was conducted in-class with time limits for students to answer the questions.

**Instructor’s Observations**

The start and completion of an assignment were permanently time stamped in the Multiply blog hence students and teacher were able to see exactly what was produced in the allocated time; a valuable tool for self reflection and grading. The viewing history feature allowed the teacher to monitor detailed student activity on the system. The use of the reading marathon weekly blog entry from the notes section of the group page forced students to record and reflect on their page count, encouraging self-study skills and personal accountability. The grading of this section of the curriculum was made easier and more accurate as there was no possibility of the students losing reading marathon sheets during the semester.

The use of a personal web page instead of a portfolio gives not only ‘permanent ownership’ of
material to the student, but the Internet, as noted by Crystal (2000) and encourages a more relaxed approach to the written word. Student-to-student interaction using the guestbook section to comment and give feedback on in-class performances was productive and more candid than expected from typically inhibited Japanese students in face-to-face interaction. It is hoped that students will continue to use their sites after the completion of the course to keep in touch with each other, as a record of their course work and as a source of recreation.

The use of the calendar section for class content promoted more student responsibility in preparation for the following class after absences and to plan ahead for upcoming assignments and deadlines. A similar improvement with the reading marathon participation was also noticed on previous semesters.

The flexibility provided by using a Multiply site for each group, with extension/follow-up activities, extra material and resources is beneficial to the teacher, motivating to the students in any level of class and especially in a class with a wide range of language abilities.

Conclusion

The implementation of CMC and CALL through the Multiply.com website in the university classroom resulted in beneficial outcomes for both teachers and students. Most notably, for students was the increased collaboration and interaction in completing language tasks and also in non-language related activities such as the registration process and utilization of the site. Contact between teachers is limited so utilizing the interactive features of the Internet facilitates collaboration and communication to share teaching ideas and information easily. A wealth of resources is also readily accessible on the group sites for both teachers and students to compliment and enhance course materials. Students, during the course of the semester, maintained and operated a real webpage in English, a skill that will be useful for their future. Students are able to participate in meaningful activities through electronic media that is more importantly a relevant and authentic use of contemporary English. Furthermore in research and studies to date (Althaus, 1997) has shown that supplementing face-to-face discussions with on-line interaction can enhance the traditional classroom environment.


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